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## Review: Women Who Kill

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**Ingrid Jungermann's** debut feature *Women Who Kill* is a suspenseful yarn about a commitment-phobic lesbian who might be dating a serial killer. But the film, which won Best Screenplay at this year's Tribeca, also offers a sawy satire of Park Slope lesbian culture and a salient critique of fear of intimacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not to mention, this picture is a font of useful, practical, everyday advice, from inconvenient corpse disposal methods to the etiquette of dildo-gifting at lesbian bridal showers (it's more complicated than you think!).

The film opens on a black screen, overlaid with the audio of a true crime podcast about notorious female serial killers. Today's debate: Which killer is sexiest? The leading contender is Josephine *The Clipper* Walker (**Jacqueline Antaramian**), a serial killer who clipped her victim's fingernails before stabbing them to death. The podcast, fittingly called *Women Who Kill*, is co-hosted by neurotic, sharp-tongued, commitment-phobe Morgan (**Jungermann**) and affectionate,



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bisexual, slightly-less-neurotic Jean (**Ann Carr**), who's also Morgan's roommate, best friend, ex-girlfriend, and partner in codependency. The film is inspired in part by Ms. Jungermann's own life, as well as her web series "The Slope," which aired from 2011 to 2012. The web series and film explore similar themes, such as Park Slope culture, the rule of the food co-op, fear of commitment, and intricacies of the LGBTQ community.

As Morgan and Jean breezily banter about a local hardware store being "the one-stop shop for any of you looking to get that dead body off your hands," a few things are instantly clear. First, these two are sentence-finishingly codependent "two halves of a hive brain." Second, these women love to think dark, push the envelope, and make people uncomfortable, far more so than your typical Park Slope yuppie. And third, the film, like its two leading ladies, revels in black comedy, savage deadpan, and unrelenting gallows humor.

Morgan and Jean's undeniable chemistry, breathless repartee, and similar interests (they co-host the same warped podcast after all) will first have viewers convinced they're a couple, and then confused about why they're not. "Women Who Kill" spends a good chunk of its running time exploring this question and suggests that some people have a greater need for mystery than intimacy.

Morgan decides that her attachment to Jean is unhealthy, and they need space "a fair conclusion given where their codependency and mutual obsession with the macabre eventually leads them." Her attention soon turns to enigmatic, beautiful Simone, played by **Sheila Vand**, best known for her breakout turn in 2014's convention-defying vampire drama "A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night." Vand is on her game here, portraying Simone as a series of contrasts: seductive, yet awkward; magnetic, yet needy; vulnerable, yet threatening.

Morgan is drawn to Simone for her inscrutability as much as her beauty, causing her to break the hallowed code of the Greene Hill Food Cooperative and swipe Simone's number off a work shift signup sheet. As things between Morgan and Simone heat up, Simone craves intimacy, offering to show Morgan the contents of a secret, ritualistic box "a symbol of Simone's essential exoticism and mystery." But Morgan chooses ignorance, preferring to see Simone as sexy and strange, rather than getting to know the real her. This speaks to Morgan's inherent self-centeredness and tendency to see people as tangential to herself, including her close friend, confidante, and love guru Alex (**Shannon Patricia O'Neill**). Alex is a blast of energy each time on-screen, thanks to O'Neill's natural charisma and unabashed crassness. Alex's penchant for shouting obscenities in public and setting Morgan straight with tough talk belie her decency and vulnerability. Alex's impending nuptials to loyal, levelheaded Kim (charmingly played by **Grace Rex**) provide a welcome subplot, pathos, and a window into Park Slope's lesbian community.

Nowhere are the LGBTQ politics more trenchant, mortifying, and informative than at Kim's bachelorette party, when poor Simone steps in it by giving Kim a flesh-colored dildo. Simone learns from an understanding lesbian that "if you had to bring something penetrative, it was supposed to be a neon color," and gets scolded by a far angrier lesbian that "realism implies that lesbian sex isn't real sex unless there's a penis involved!"

As Morgan and Simone get serious and plan to move in together, Jean's jealousy and morbid sensibility kick into high gear, causing her to investigate Simone. This being a movie, Jean naturally finds discrepancies in Simone's story and hints that she might be the daughter of condemned killer Josephine "The Clipper" Walker. Before long, Jean shares her suspicions with Morgan, and the two are worked into a frenzy, convinced that Simone is the real Clipper, and Josephine merely took the fall. Is Jean's paranoia motivated solely by her fear of losing Morgan? Is Morgan's



sudden distrust of Simone provoked by the major step they're taking in their relationship? Or have Morgan and Jean's years of obsessing over female mass murderers uniquely prepared them to spot one who enters their orbit?

Women Who Kill asks hard questions about how well we want to know our partners and how much intimacy is too much, without providing any trite, fixed answers. Morgan's doubts about Simone come in response to legitimate clues found by Jean, indicating that Simone has not been truthful. But is it really a coincidence that Morgan suspects Simone of being a toenail-obsessed killer right after discovering her irksome habit of clipping toenails on the bed? "Tonight I saw a different side of her, and I've been feeling sick ever since," Morgan chokes out, describing the harrowing nail-clipping-in-bed incident. "Was it a vulnerable side?" Jean asks, adding, "You get sick to your stomach when people are needy." Morgan cuts the conversation short with calculated cruelty, "I'd rather be with somebody that scares me to death than somebody that bores me to death," referencing her time with Jean. But Morgan's nasty remarks also echo a sentiment experienced by many once the initial flush of passion wears off. Morgan proves herself capable of greater insight when truly pressed by a disturbing newfound confidante: Lila Childs (**Annette O'Toole**), a convicted serial killer Morgan previously interviewed on her podcast. Morgan explains to Lila why she's no longer with Jean, in brutal and simple terms, "She makes me feel like the person that I am, and I don't like that person very much."

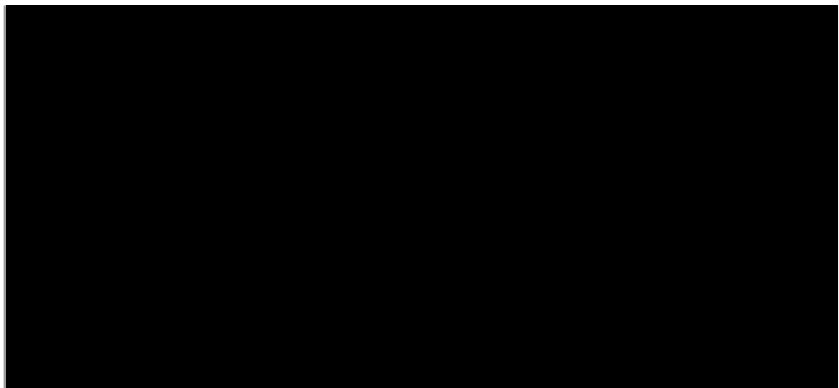
Much like The Slope, Women Who Kill explores the sometimes nebulous place of bisexual women in the lesbian community. Jean, who's bi, constantly feels compelled to defend her interest in women and capacity to have a relationship with one, while Morgan doesn't do much to persuade Jean that such assurances are unnecessary.

And much like The Slope, Women Who Kill isn't shy about skewering Park Slope culture. Anyone who's spent time in the Slope is familiar with the vegan-shots, the food co-op, the lush parks, the ironic t-shirts, and the "artiness" of it all. Jungermann captures all this in vivid detail, particularly the obsession with rules, regulations, and work shifts at the co-op. Morgan getting Simone's number off a sign-up sheet is an act encouraged by Simone but might seem romantic on its surface, but in the world of Park Slope, it's grounds for blackmail. "Happy food, happy people," offers the co-op's principal slogan, but Jungermann presents it as low-grade tyranny, typified by overbearing Greene Hill manager Grace (played with fascist flair by **Deborah Bush**).

The filmmaking, editing, and cinematography are smooth and capable. Jungermann captures Morgan and Jean's codependency by framing them in tight two shots and long tracking shots, along with well-chosen *mise-en-scène*, lingering on Morgan and Jean's similar bags, drinks, and clothing styles. The slyly winking camera knows how to get a laugh, smash-cutting from Morgan and Jean's decision to spend less time together to their stroll the following day, matching coffees in hand. Jungermann also uses the resonant, repetitive image of a dark, ominous tunnel, through which Morgan literally must travel to pursue Simone. But the tunnel is also figurative, evoking Morgan's (and our own) dread of intimacy and peeling back the unknown.

But one doesn't need to be a Park Slope resident or connoisseur of its particular milieu to enjoy a film that's smart, irreverent, suspenseful, and consistently funny from start-to-finish. Women Who Kill, one of Tribeca's true highlights, ultimately serves up a poignant meditation on intimacy, a fresh point of view, and a vibrant, new filmmaking voice.





Women Who Kill D Trailer

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