Note: Episodes of Outside/In are made as pieces of audio, and some context and nuance may be lost on the page. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors

**Taylor Quimby: Commence obligatory introduction in 3…2….1… Go.**

**Nate Hegyi: Hello and welcome to Outside/In, I’m Nate Hegyi.**

**Taylor Quimby: I’m Taylor Quimby.**

**Nate Hegyi: And today, we are starting the show with a little bit of history.**

**Sort of.**

[TV channel changing sound]

TV clip: The History Channel. Call your cable operator today, and begin your historic journey.

**Nate Hegyi: When it launched in 1995, the History Channel was - ostensibly - about history.  They had features on the Titanic, the Hindenburg disaster. And lots and lots of stuff about World War II.**

Clip: On April the 20th, the front had reached the outskirts of Berlin…

**Taylor Quimby: So much in fact, that early critics called it “The Hitler Channel.”**

**Nate Hegyi: I think I actually watched one that was just about Hitler’s german shepherds.**

**Taylor Quimby: I’m not surprised.**

**Nate Hegyi: And, broadly speaking, the audience this type of content attracted skewed older, white, and male.**

**People who often share a narrow interpretation of history, and what some might call a “traditional set of values” around masculinity, national identity, and family.**

Clip: The pioneers face incredible hardship. But their battles forge the American character. And build the new American nation.

**Taylor Quimby: Over the years, The History Channel - now just called History - has continued courting that same core demographic… Even as they produce fewer  Ken Burn’s style documentaries and more and more reality television.**

**Shows like Ax men, about loggers.**

Clip: “Yeah, jack ‘em out on this flat right here.

**Nate: Forged in Fire - a competition show for blacksmiths.**

Clip: “Tips coming right in there now.”

**Taylor Quimby: And Ice Road Truckers, a show about… ice road truckers.**

Clip: Getting started again on this hill could send Alex sliding down the mountainside…

**Taylor Quimby: At first blush - the hit TV show Alone, seemed a lot like History’s other offerings.**

[cue: open theme and narration]

**Nate Hegyi: The premise is incredibly straightforward.**

Narrator: 10 participants will fight to survive the arctic for longer than Alone history.

**A group of 10 men - and it first, it was only men - are dropped into a remote wilderness. Unlike other reality TV, each contestant is truly alone. There aren’t any camera crews or producers lingering in the shadows to step in and say “cut”. They film themselves with tripods and go-pro cameras**

**Taylor Quimby: And whoever survives the longest wins as much as one-million dollars.**

Clip: “It looks like frostbite!” Narrator: Alone, million dollar challenge. “They’re surrounding my shelter” [bear growl]

**Taylor Quimby: It was, at its inception, a pretty macho premise. Man versus nature, and all that jazz. But since then, it’s blown up. People LOVE this show. For a time, the 8th season was second only to Stranger Things on Netflix’s public rankings.**

**And that may be because, unlike History’s other shows, Alone has evolved into something a little more interesting.**

Clip: “Not everybody gets the chance to look in the eye of the animal you’re about to eat.”

**Something that seems that has attracted viewers outside the History Channel’s usual demographic…**

Tracy Clark-Flory To like to look at these women and be like, wow, like they're amazing. And I could also be like them.

**It’s a show that maybe has something interesting to say. Whether it means to or not.**

Eric Martin: Why is it entertaining and what is the message of the show?  I think it's posing this question. What are people willing to do? To get ahead?

[theme]

**Nate Hegyi: Today, on Outside/In… We’re doing a little pop culture criticism with two people who’ve plumbed the depths of History’s ongoing reality TV competition, Alone.**

**Taylor Quimby: Writers who have asked,  “what does this show say about our relationship with nature? About gender, and class?**

**Nate Hegyi: And how should we feel about a show where contestants face starvation, frostbite, and literally even death?**

[contestant sobbing]

[mux fades]

Tim Madsen [ season 8]: Holy [bleep]. It’s on. The heart’s beating.. I’m so excited.

**Taylor Quimby: So once you’ve seen a few seasons of Alone, you start to realize that there is a very formulaic arc that plays out every time.**

Tim Madsen: Holy crap. I’m on Alone!

**It starts with the drop-off… where each contestant is plopped by boat or chopper onto a remote patch of wilderness.**

Theresa Emmerich Kamper: The site is gorgeous! It’s absolutely fantastic.

**Nate Hegyi: Each contestant gets a handful of survival items, cameras and batteries, and a sat phone they can use to “tap out” if they get hurt or decide to give up.**

Theresa Emmerich Kamper: Tell you what. As soon as that helicopter leaves. It gets quiet.

**Nate Hegyi: And at this stage, it does actually feel like a show about wilderness survival. People have a limited time to invest in food gathering, or building shelters.**

**Taylor Quimby:  You might get to see a stone age historian experimenting with special techniques for surviving the winter.**

Clip: I want to make a pit house because they’re incredibly warm.

**TQ : Or meet someone who is using a bow and arrow to prioritize big game.**

Clip: Shelter, fishing, and hunting. Those are my three goals.

**Nate Hegyi: Or see people talking about how to supplement their diets with edible plants, or bugs.**

**Taylor Quimby: There’s like an obligatory ant eating scene in every season.**

**Nate Hegyi: Someone is eating ants.**

Clip: They taste like pine-nuts. They’re delicious!

**And all of that might give you the impression that surviving alone in the wilderness is pretty doable - if not somewhat easy.**

But I think at first I really thought I was going to see these experts applying their expertise, and I thought everyone would make it 100 days in the woods.

But it turns out that's not what happens.

**Taylor Quimby: This is Eric Martin, our Alone TV critic for the first half of this episode.**

**Nate Hegyi: Eric teaches composition and critical thinking in a desert valley north of Los Angeles.**

**And after getting hooked on the strangeness that is Alone, he wound up writing an essay for Medium, asking, “What is this reality TV show really about?**

**So Taylor and I called him up to chat.**

Nate Hegyi: So what do you think sets alone apart from from those other shows, those other reality TV shows.

Eric Martin: Well, in thinking about this, I think one thing is, is that the Kardashian style reality show really is about a specific kind of catharsis, right? Where you get to watch, watch people behave badly.

          Courtney: I will literally, I will literally [bleep] you up.

 And it's you know, you get to point your finger at all the most venal and superficial aspects of our culture and say to yourself, that's not me. You know, at least I'm not that person. Right. And that's I think, what we get out of those shows, at least in part. But when you watch Alone. You're not supposed to separate yourself from those people, at least at first. It doesn't seem that way. It seems like you're supposed to relate to them and want to put yourself in their shoes. And I think that is different.

[pause, ambi rises]

Biko Wright clip from Alone: [Singing] My passions are music and the wilderness. I’m in a pagan folks band and a metal band.

My fiance just came back from her first ultrasound. My fiance is pregnant with twins. The $500,000 would allow me to give my family and twins that are on the way a good life.

Eric Martin: They're drawn as family characters. They're all given a background. And that background is, I think, intentionally shaped to let you know that these are just normal people. They're not a Kardashian style person. They're not they're not rich and famous. And they're also not in it for the drama. Right. They're in it for much more pedestrian reasons, I think.

And so for that, it seems like it is relatable. They're all people like us who just happen to have training in survival skills and who happen to want to spend three months alone in the Alaskan wilderness.

Nate Hegyi: I mean, you mentioned the kind of that pedestrian level or seemingly pedestrian level. So how do you how do you see money? Money? How do you see money factoring into a loan?

Eric Martin: Well, it's interesting to hear them on the show talk about the money. It's going to change their lives. But one thing that's really notable is that you've got a set of people who are drawn from the margins of society. So people who do homesteading, people this kind of niche lifestyle in one way or another. And what they're going to do with that 500,000 is buy a house. They're going to jump into the mainstream.

You might think that they're going to just use the money to completely escape.But I have not seen any character say that that's what they were going to do with that money.

[mux]

[mux swells and fades]

**Nate Hegyi: And that class aspect to the show - evolves as time goes on. Because inevitably, in every season, the optimism of the first few days begins to sour. The weather starts turning… calories are in short supply… and the “reality” of this particular type of reality TV really sets in.**

Eric Martin: The show at first says that it's about survival. But then after you watch just two episodes, it becomes a show about hunger. Right. And everyone is hungry all the time. And I think the show uses hunger then as a metaphor to suggest that these people that volunteer for the show, they are hungry for something that society can't give them. Right.

If they if they stay at home and work their work a day lives, then they're not going to have a chance to get ahead. There is no path forward. And I think these people are selected from a group of survival experts. But they’re also survival experts that are lower middle class that live on the bubble, and who feel that whatever capitalism represents, whatever it offers… it doesn’t offer a way forward.

[mux]

Barry: As a kid, my family was homeless. We lived in a van in a mall parking lot. My father stolen potatoes to feed us in the van.

Eric Martin: There's one guy in season six. When he's introduced on the show, he's talking about his background. But he says that he's got a child, a newborn child, and he plans to leave that child and be in the woods for 100 days. And he says, I'm going to be away from her for longer than she's been alive.

And so he thinks that this is a good idea. He's going to change the life of his family by leaving and taking a big risk and maybe living in the woods alone for 100 days or maybe dying in the woods.

And with that particular character, this very character. He's consistent about that.

Eric Martin:We meet him in the middle of the season and he comes back one day after he he's been hungry and he's been hungry for days

Barry: I feel weak today. This is the longest I’ve ever been without food.

Eric Martin: …and he's gone fishing. He catches a fish and

.         Barry: Yeah baby… ugghhh no!

Eric Martin:Then he loses the fish. It jumps off the line.

Barry: That was a nice size [bleeping] fish.

 And he starts reflecting on his reason for being in the woods.

Barry: This is the most important thing I’ve ever done for my family. I know it’s gonna get tough out here, it’s going to get boring and cold. I’m gonna get hungry. But my kids deserve a good start. If that means I’m going to have to suffer for it, I’m just going to have to suffer for it. For the right amount of money, I would die for my family.

Eric:  If the money was right, I would die out here for my family. And I just can't imagine any other reality show having a character say things that are so extreme.

[mux]

**Taylor Quimby: One of the most interesting things about the whole “I’m doing it for my family” thing on Alone, is that at first it’s a reason to stay… But then, it’s the reason to go.**

**And sometimes, when contestants - especially dads - start talking about how they miss their kids, it’s sometimes a signal that they’re getting ready to tap out.**

**Nate Hegyi: Like, in order to justify quitting - they have to make the same argument they do for why they go in the first place: Because my family needs me.**

**So the show ends up, a lot of time, reinforcing that traditional message about nuclear families - that society is the only place we can make it.**

**Taylor Quimby: Which is the opposite of what some of them say going into the whole thing.**

[mux swell and fade]

**Taylor Quimby: That surviving alone in the woods is not easy becomes increasingly clear when each season reaches the third act – which I call the endgame –  where most of the competitors have called it quits, and those remaining are in the process of starving to death.**

**Nate Hegyi: And we’re just watching.**

Kieylyn: Good morning. It’s cold. And it’s all good.

**There’s another fishing scene in the 7th season, that will always stick with me. This amazing woman named Kieylyn Marone, an off-the-grid expedition guide in Canada - she is 49 days into her stay, by herself, trying to ice-fish on this huge lake in the Arctic. And she’s trying to ice-fish.**

          Kieylyn: Got my probing hook. Guess I’ll sort of just drag my axe.

**She’s set up this go-pro a little ways off, so you’re sort of watching this view of her from a distance,  you, bent over a hole fishing. It looks absolutely frigid.  And then the music starts rising…**

[kielyn sobbing]

**She pulls out this huge silvery fish, falls backwards onto the ice she is so excited.**

[sobbing]

**Nate: I literally got chills just listening to that.**

Kielyn: Getting this fish is probably the happiest day of my life since my wedding day.

**Nate: I don’t think I’ve ever reacted that strongly to something like that in my life. And it’s one of the big reasons why Alone is so I think compelling is seeing someone have that kind of emotional, deep reaction.**

**I mean the highs, when people are starving and something goes right… The highs are super high. When they don’t, the lows are equally low.**

Doctor: We are worried about possible complications. And we’re worried if you continue you may do permanent damage to your heart.

Barry: I don’t want to do that. My family would rather have my alive, right? At least I can say I gave it hell.

**Taylor Quimby: So nobody has died on Alone.**

**Nate Hegyi: Yet.**

**Taylor Quimby: Yet. And I have learned that, even though there is no prize for coming in second place, but former contestants have said that they get a weekly stipend for all the work they do filming and whatnot.**

**But there’s still something deeply uncomfortable about being a voyeur to this kind of suffering.**

**Nate: Oh absolutely, it reminds me of watching sports. Like if you’re watching a hockey game and someone gets slammed into the boards, and they get a real bad concussion and they’re on the ice. And it switches from oh I’m watching this entertainment, to like oh man. I hope they’re OK. That’s going to have lasting impacts.**

**Taylor Quimby: It’s deeply uncomfortable to me as a viewer.**

Eric Martin: I prepared a syllogism for you guys about the show.

Taylor Quimby:Oh, please. Please.

Eric Martin: I'm sure. Sure. Okay. So. So. My suggestion is that this show has a thesis. So Proposition A: Society provides the one and only path to allow sustained happiness. Civilization gives us that chance. And so without society, there is a guarantee of suffering.

Taylor Quimby: Okay.

Eric Martin:Proposition B in the show. Many people experience society as oppressive and don't find the moral, spiritual or practical path to happiness living in society. So if A is true, society is what feeds us. And B is also true. You cannot find happiness in society. Then what is the conclusion of the show?

Taylor Quimby:  Gosh. You know, we're used to asking the questions.

Nate Hegyi:I know you're not supposed to ask us questions.

Eric Martin: Oh, it's I think it's a it's a dark it's a dark conclusion.

[mux]

**Nate Hegyi: So we’ve talked about what Alone says… but what isn’t being said? What’s being edited out?**

Tracy Clark-Flory: There's so much talk about diarrhea and vomiting, and there is not a single mention of a woman having her period.

**Nate Hegyi: That’s coming up, after a break - but before we go, are you a fan of Alone? And if so, why?**

**Taylor Quimby: We threw that question out to our private Facebook group.**

**Jeanne said that as a dietician, she’s fascinated by the ways they cope nutritionally”**

**And Susan says she loves how it’s not always the biggest baddest guys who stay the longest, but the people with the joyful attitude.**

**Nate Hegyi: More on that last point coming up - in the meantime, if you want to join the discussion, and the group, there’s a link in the show notes.**

**Be right back!**

[mux swell and fade]

**BREAK**

**Nate Hegyi: Welcome back to Outside/In, I’m Nate Hegyi.**

**Taylor Quimby: I’m Taylor Quimby.**

**Nate Hegyi: And today we are talking about the reality TV competition show, Alone.**

**Taylor Quimby: Alone is made by History, formerly The History Channel, but a lot of people – like me – were first introduced when the 7th season was picked up by Netflix a couple years ago.**

Tracy Clark-Flory I mean,  I've grown up on reality TV. But I think what it was for me with Alone was that I came to it in the midst of the pandemic

**Nate Hegyi: This is Tracy Clark-Flory, a journalist and author who wrote an article about women and  Alone for Jezebel, and our second critic for the day.**

Tracy Clark-Flory Like at the very worst point where I was stuck at home with my kid with no child care working full time.

**Nate Hegyi: For Tracy, there was something mesmerizing about watching the women on the show.**

**It was like she simultaneously relating to and jealous of the contestants who were roughing it out there in the woods.**

Nate Hegyi: Did you binge it?

Tracy Clark-Flory: I binged it hardcore. Like I think I watched like I really think I watched seven, six or seven seasons in the matter of a couple of months.

[mux]

**Nate Hegyi: History started having women compete on Alone in the second season - no contestants as far as I know have self-identified as non-binary or trans.**

**But I think for a lot of people, watching how contestants conform to or defy gender stereotypes is one of the most fascinating aspects of the show.**

**Taylor Quimby: And Tracy has pointed out that the producers actually seem to purposefully undermine gender stereotypes in the editing that they do.**

**For example, one competitor in Season 6, his name is Tim Backus…**

Tracy Clark-Flory:  He really starts out the show strong with a lot of commentary, making fun of, you know, the, quote, unquote, tree huggers on the show,

Tim Backus: We got some wood nymphs and forest sages in this group, like LARPing. Magic spells or whatever.

Tracy Clark-Flory Very belittling. And then shortly thereafter ends up really seriously injuring himself and has to tap out. And I believe it's like the first episode.

Tim Backus: Boy that hurts. Dammit! Fell backwards, knee bent the wrong way, same way I hurt it back in…

Tracy Clark-Flory: And so there are moments in the show where the editing like really sets up that absurdity of like that kind of masculine bluster and then the downfall.

**Nate Hegyi: By contrast, some of the people Tim is mocking - the so-called “tree-huggers” have really excelled on the show.**

Tracy Clark-Flory: So in the seventh season in the remote Arctic, there's this character, Caleigh Russell. And to me, she's like this dream camp counselor. Like she’s waking up in the remote Arctic every day in this hut she built by hand, and it’s freezing outside, and every morning she has the best attitude.

You can see how much how she connected to the environment that she was in and felt a part of it, and one instance of that that I really loved was that she had caught a rabbit in a trap.

Callie: There’s a rabbit in one of my snares! Oh my god…

Tracy Clark-Flory: … and was bringing it home to eat. And it was it was dead. And she just sort of like softly petted it and said…

          Callie: Alright. Let’s get you home.

Tracy Clark-Flory: And it was this sweet and tender, sense of gratitude about the whole thing.

Callie: White as the snow, sweet, sweet little guy.

**Nate Hegyi: Even though she didn’t win, Calleigh was the last person that season to get pulled out, at 89 days, for frostbite on her toes.**

**The person who did win that season was the only other person on the history of the show to last longer.**

Callie. There’s another rabbit! Three rabbits! Oh my gosh.

Nate Hegyi:  Alone, as you kind of said, I mean, part of it is that idea of like an escapist fantasy or it's it's very much like this relation, this person's relationship with the natural world around them. But, you know, at the same time alone is still competition show. Right. How do you see gender factoring into the actual competition?

Tracy Clark-Flory: Yeah. I mean, it's it's it's tough. It's hard to make any sort of broad generalizations about it. I know that, like when I wrote my article about this show, I think it was like I think I'd only looked at the sort of the stats for the competitors up through season seven. And it was kind of interesting to note that women on average lasted longer than men. And I don't know if there's anything to be made of that. Up to that point, only men had won the show.

You know, and so, I mean, I think it's kind of interesting to to to. I think that a lot of the women that I spoke with from the show had observed that they thought at the very least, that women's and men's socialization around gender roles and emotions specifically comes into play, because women obviously are encouraged to be much more in touch with their emotions and capable of talking about their emotions and accessing them and reflecting on them. And men are encouraged to do the opposite.

And when you're in the remote wilderness, you are having to face yourself and your demons, past traumas, all of these things come up.

Kieylyn: You know my dad said, before I left, “You’re never really alone. But I feel alone. I’m sorry Dad.

Women who are socialized to be in touch with their emotions and process them and feel comfortable with crying, are probably at a better in a better position to be able to process that stuff, some of which they might have already processed. And men who have not been supported in that emotional experience are probably coming up against a really formidable challenge.

Contestant: Anybody can judge me all you want. You are not out here doing it. You’re [bleeping] sitting at home right now. You’re not out here. You’re not out here! Who are you to judge.

Taylor: What do you think gets totally scrubbed out?

Tracy Clark-FLory: One of the major things that is never mentioned on the show, at least through the first eight seasons that I've watched, is. Periods like there is so much talk about bodily functions, there's so much talk about diarrhea and vomiting, and there is not a single mention of a woman having her period on the show. And like when you're surviving in the wilderness, like with very little supplies, like this is a this is a relevant part of your of your experience. And it's like just as relevant as any of the other sort of like mundane things that they go into great detail about. And so there's this way in which, like the exclusion of periods from the show like casts that as other.

Nate Hegyi: Right. Like your typical 65 year old conservative white guy isn't going to want to hear about periods. Even though you spoke with a contestant who said that they had a period, other period, like half the time they're out there really painful cramps and they're having to deal with that like on top of everything else.

Tracy Clark-FLory: Yeah. And it's like this is like this is like a major part of this person's experience that is not getting even a single second of airtime.

**Taylor Quimby: Quick update to this point, Nate - after this interview, I did hear that a recent season of Alone did actually include some conversations about menstruation.**

**Nate Hegyi: This was after Tracy’s article came out?**

**Taylor Quimby: Yeah.**

**Nate Hegyi: Nice, well we won’t make any assumptions but that’s pretty great.**

**Taylor Quimby: But I think - even if the producers of the show are thinking more about how gender is depicted, or not depicted on the show - Tract says there are fundamental aspects of the experience that are different for women, that have nothing to do with how it's edited. They are baked in o the circumstances.**

Taylor Quimby:  How did the experience change for you as you were binging through these seasons? Like, what did you start to notice that you didn't have first?

Tracy Clark-Flory: I think the thing that started to emerge for me was that I realized that. As I fantasized about becoming one of these women on the show and like weaving a gillnet or, you know, putting on some camo rain boots. This the thing that got in the way of that kind of escapist fantasy was not like any of the actual very real wild threats that they were encountering on the show, like bears or mountain lions.

It was encountering a man in the woods. Like when I thought about… is it safe? It means something different for women to go out into the world and into the woods on their own.

And for, you know, some of these seasons, like, you don't see people on the show, but they are there off camera. Like there are fishermen on their boats off the coast, like…

Taylor Quimby: LIke the idea of it being an actual wilderness, is as always, an illusion. They show these vast landscapes but it doesn’t mean they’re actually unpopulated.

Tracy Clark-Flory:  No, and so that fear for the women on the show is very real. And actually interviewing some of them for the article that I wrote, they every single one of them mentioned that that's what they were afraid of like. And they were actually there contending with mountain lions and bears. For me the bigger picture thing that emerged as I was watching it was how you can go off into the remote wilderness and still not be able to escape that gendered baggage that comes with being alone as a woman in the world.

Nate Hegyi: Thanks for chatting with us.

Tracy Clark-Flory Yeah, thanks so much! This was fun.

**[mux]**

**Nate Hegyi: This episode was produced by Taylor Quimby.**

**It was edited by me, Nate Hegyi, and Rebecca Lavoie.**

**Additional editing help from Justine Paradis, Jessica Hunt, and Felix Poon.**

**Rebecca Lavoie is our executive producer.**

**Taylor Quimby: And just curious, is there another TV show, or movie, or book that you’d like to see us tackle on the show? Our pop-culture criticism game is somewhat infrequent, but there’s probably plenty of fodder out there we’re not paying attention to.**

**Nate Hegyi: We’ve got links to Eric and Tracy’s articles about Alone at our website, and in the show notes - along with more on how you can support the show, or subscribe to our FREE newsletter.**

**Taylor Quimby: Join the rest of the cool kids.**

**Nate Hegyi:  Music for this episode by Blue Dot Sessions, The New Fools, Guy Trevino and Friends, Ambientalism, 91 nova, and Sarah the Illstrumentalist.**

**Our theme is by Breakmaster Cylinder.**

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