

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:00:12	Jordan Morris	Host	I'm Jordan Morris. It's <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:00:14	Music	Transition	"Huddle Formation" from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jordan speaks, then fades out.
00:00:21	Jordan	Host	Gene Luen Yang is a cartoonist and graphic novelist. Four years ago, Gene won a MacArthur Genius Grant—an honor that isn't given to many comics creators. That same year, the Library of Congress named Gene as its ambassador for young people's literature. He's written a lot of critically acclaimed graphic novels. <i>American Born Chinese</i> , <i>Boxers &amp; Saints</i> , and <i>The Shadow Hero</i> , just to name a few. These days, Gene's working at DC Comics as a writer for <i>Superman</i> . His latest work for DC can be found in the new graphic novel, <i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> —a book where, um, Superman smashes the KKK.
			Not too long ago, though, Gene was a teacher. He taught computer science at Bishop O'Dowd High School, in Oakland California. The school was known for its basketball program. And while Gene wasn't exactly a sports guy, he soon took an interest in the team. He got to know the coach and the players, and he wrote a graphic novel about it. <i>Dragon Hoops</i> follows the year he spent observing the high school's basketball team and their road to the state championship. But it's also sort of a memoir. That year, at Bishop O'Dowd, would end up being his last when Gene took a full-time gig at DC Comics.
			<i>[Music fades in.]</i>
			Anyway, both books are great, and we're thrilled to have Gene on the show. Let's get to the interview.
00:01:33	Music	Transition	Relaxed, percussive transition music. Music plays underneath the dialogue, then fades out.
00:01:38	Jordan	Host	Gene Luen Yang! Welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:01:41	Gene Luen Yang	Guest	Thank you. Thank you, Jordan. Thank you for having me.
00:01:43	Jordan	Host	Let's start at the beginning, shall we? I would love to hear about how you first took an interest in comics. Was it—you know—alternative comics in high school? Was it superhero comics in the drugstore, when you were a kid? Do you remember the first time you encountered them?
00:01:59	Gene	Guest	I remember the exact first issue that I bought. It was <i>DC Comics Presents #57</i> , starring Superman and the Atomic Knights. My mom bought that comic for me off of a spinner rack at our local bookstore. It was, like, a mall bookstore. So, they don't really have these spinner racks anymore, but for younger listeners, it's a wire-frame rack that would carry a month's worth of comics that would sit in the corner of almost every bookstore in America, back in the '80s.

00:02:27 Jordan Host Do you remember why you picked it? Had you seen a *Superman* cartoon on TV or something like that? Or, you know, was it just the least expensive one?

00:02:36 Gene Guest To be honest, I didn't pick it. My mom picked it for me. I had actually had my eyes set on another comic that had The Thing—that big rock monster from *Fantastic Four*.

00:02:47 Jordan Host Oh yeah. "It's clobberin' time," sure.

00:02:50 Gene Guest Yeah! "It's clobbering time!" Exactly!

[Jordan laughs.]

That's the comic I wanted. But she thought The Thing looked too scary. So, she bought me *Superman*, instead, because—you know—Superman is, like, this big, blue boy scout. He's super safe.  
[Laughs.]

So, that's the one I got. I was—I was not happy about it, but that comic did blow my mind, because it was about the atomic bomb. You know. And this is '80s, everybody was thinking about the atomic bomb.

00:03:14 Jordan Host Was that something you were scared of, as a kid? Did you see stuff like that on the news and—was this, like, speaking to an anxiety that you had?

00:03:22 Gene Guest Oh, absolutely. I think pretty much my entire class, right, at my elementary school, was scared of the bomb. I think every kid who grew up in the '80s had some sort of, like, nuclear nightmare anxiety.

00:03:36 Jordan Host [Chuckles.] I'll admit, I read a fair amount of DC comics, and I have not heard of the Atomic Knights. Have they—have they stayed in the continuity or are they just a product of the '80s?

00:03:46 Gene Guest They are super obscure. I think they're still around. I mean, both DC and Marvel, they are really good at keeping their really obscure characters alive, at least in the background of their big titles. And the Atomic Knights are this group of superheroes who dress up like medieval knights and they ride these giant, mutated dogs to fight crime.

00:04:08 Jordan Host Oh, cool. Yeah! That's due for a reboot, if they haven't done it yet.

00:04:11 Gene Guest I agree. I totally agree.

00:04:14 Jordan Host Do you remember first having the thought, "I should try this"? You know, how did you—do you remember the thought process when you went from, "This is something I enjoy with my leisure time" to "I should try and do this"?

00:04:27 Gene Guest Oh, it was—it was within weeks of getting that *DC Comics Presents*. I think that's actually one of my favorite parts of comics. That's one of my favorite aspects of the comics medium, is—you know, the dividing line between who's a reader and who's a creator—it's just really easy to cross. Back in the '80s, if you were a kid who wanted to release a music album, you really couldn't do it. If you were a kid who wanted to make your own movie, you really couldn't do it. But you could make your own comic. You know. Anybody can make their own comic, and that's exactly what I did. I had a best friend named Jeremy, in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, who had been collecting comics for years, at that point. So, right after I got my first comic book, we started talking comics and then—within a couple weeks—we were sitting down, at the lunch table during lunch, drawing our own comics. And we use to get his mom to xerox them

and we'd sell them at school, for 50 cents apiece. I think we made, like, 8 bucks. It was...

00:05:19 Jordan Host That's pretty good!

00:05:20 Gene Guest That was the beginning. That was the beginning of my comic book career.

00:05:23 Jordan Host Do you remember what those early comic books were about?

00:05:26 Gene Guest They were mostly superhero comics—just, like, knockoffs of some of the most popular superheroes of the time. I do remember doing a comic called *Trans-Smurfs*, which was a combination of the *Smurfs* and *Transformers*. And they were these, like, robotic Smurfs who could turn into robotic fruit. I don't know why I thought that I was awesome. But—*[laughs]* that's what that—

00:05:46 Jordan Host I mean, I kind of agree, actually. I don't know why I think that's awesome, either. But it kind of is. So, you have—it sounds like you've been reading DC comics since you've been reading comics, and you have done a fair amount of work with *Superman*. So, I think when I talk to other comics people about *Superman*, there are a lot of people—especially people my age—who, like, have a little bit of trouble getting into the character. You know. Maybe they think he's a little corny or he's overpowered. What about the character resonates with you?

00:06:25 Gene Guest Well, first, I am one of those people. You know, especially when I was a kid. I totally thought Superman was corny. I never would have chosen a *Superman* comic as my very first comic book. My mom did that for me. You know? And I just thought, back then, out of all of the superheroes out there, he was the most boring one. And now, I also have to admit even though I work for DC Comics, now, when I was a kid I was much more of a Marvel fan. For whatever reason. You know, Spider-man and the Hulk just seemed so much cooler than Superman and Wonder Woman. I think Batman might have been the only DC comic section—that was the only DC hero that seemed cool. But as I got older, I realized my parents are immigrants. My parents came to the United States from Asia in the late 1960s and they are super corny. *[Laughs.]*

They, like—as a kid, I just thought they were such dorks, you know? And I was always, like, kind of ashamed that some of their dorkiness had rubbed off on me. You know, I'd inherited some of that corniness. And it was the same corniness that I saw reflected in Superman. And, eventually, I made that connection. Like—that connection kind of—kind of solidified, in my head, as I got older and as I began to realize, maybe, why my parents were corny. And I also began to realize how heroic their lives actually were. You know, it's just not easy to move to a completely different country to create a brand-new life for yourselves and your children. I think it kind of renewed me—not even renewed. It kind of sparked a respect for Superman in me, as well. I feel like, in a lot of ways, Superman reflects my parents' experience.

00:08:10 Jordan Host Yeah! Talk a little bit more about their experience and how it lines up with the character.

00:08:16 Gene Guest Well, my parents came to the United States for graduate school. After they graduated, they got these jobs. They worked really hard. They kept their heads down. They didn't really complain a lot—at least, in a public environment. You know. And I think a lot of that was because part of them, like, they're kind of afraid to make a ruckus or make a fuss, because they were worried that if they did

not act like the perfect citizens, that people would question their citizenship. I know, just from talking to them, that they did face some racism, after they got here. And I think the way they dealt with that was by trying to be the perfect citizens. As perfect as they could be.

I think Superman is the same way. You know. Superman is an immigrant. He's from this planet, Krypton. A foreign culture. I think part of the reason why he acts like this big, blue boy scout—this perfect citizen—is because he also doesn't want people to question their citizenship.

00:09:18 Jordan Host What did your parents think when you first started making comics professionally?

00:09:24 Gene Guest They were not, uhh, super happy about it. I think—I would say this, actually. I think my mom has always had artistic inclinations. So, she was always more supportive. Her rule was, "As long as you have health insurance of some kind, you can do whatever you want."

00:09:42 Jordan Host But my dad—my dad—  
[Chuckles.] That's a—that's a very "mom" move. That's a very "mom" move.

00:09:43 Gene Guest Yeah. It was, wasn't it? [Laughs.] But my dad was much more "doctor, lawyer, engineer" in his thinking, you know. And he was—he was really unhappy about it. And then, when I started making money at it—it was about ten years in that I started making money at it—that changed their minds somewhat. That changed my dad's mind, somewhat. But I think they struggled with it all the way through. Because it was just so different from what their expectations were, for me and also from their own life experience.

00:10:18 Jordan Host We'll wrap up with Gene Luen Yang after a quick break. Stick around. It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

00:10:26 Promo Clip **Music:** Acoustic guitar, keyboard, and drums.

**Sam Sanders:** Hey, y'all. I'm Sam Sanders, host of it's been a minute. There is a lot going on in the world. So, on my show, my guests and I make sense of the news and culture through conversation. It feels like we're living in three movies at once. [Laughs.]

**Speaker 1:** That's a good way to put it.

**Speaker 2:** It feels like a Mike Judge movie. It feels like a Spike Lee movie. And it feels like a Michael Bay movie. [Laughs.] Like!

**Sam:** Every Tuesday and Friday. Listen and subscribe now to *It's Been a Minute*, from NPR.

00:10:55 Promo Clip [Music fades out.]  
**Music:** Fun, cheerful, soft music.

**Benjamin Partridge:** If you're looking for a new comedy podcast, why not try *The Beef and Dairy Network*? It won Best Comedy at the British Podcast Awards in 2017 and 2018. Also, I—

[Audio suddenly slows and cuts off.]

**Speaker 1:** There were no horses in this country until the mid to late sixties.

**Speaker 2:** Specialist Bovine Arsefat—

**Speaker 3:** Both of his eyes are squids' eyes.

**Speaker 4:** Yogurt buffet.

**Speaker 5:** She was married to a bacon farmer who saved her life.

**Speaker 6:** Farm-raised snow leopard.

[Strange electronic audio.]

[Beginning audio returns]

**Benjamin:** Download it today. That's the *Beef and Dairy Network* podcast, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org). Also, maybe start at episode one. Or weirdly, episode thirty-six, which for some reason requires no knowledge of the rest of the show.

00:11:35 Jordan Host

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jordan Morris, in for Jesse Thorn. My guest, Gene Luen Yang, is a cartoonist and graphic novelist. He's written the books *American Born Chinese* and *The Shadow Hero*. He's got two new books out. *Superman Smashes the Klan* pits America's favorite superhero against the KKK. The other book, *Dragon Hoops*, is a memoir about his time as a high school teacher in Oakland, following his high school's basketball team. Let's get back to our conversation.

Your new graphic novel, *Superman Smashes the Klan*—I read it's actually based on a radio serial. Like a *Superman* radio serial that aired in, like, 1946? How did you hear that and what made you think it would be good inspiration for a comic in 2020?

00:12:18 Gene Guest

Well, I first heard about it from this book called *Freakonomics*. So, *Freakonomics* is this, like, national bestseller. And they spend an entire chapter on the storyline from 1946, on the *Superman* radio show. And in that storyline—it's called *The Clan of the Fiery Cross*. It has 16 episodes. The man of steel actually faces off against this group of hooded bigots. And the inciting incident of the entire story is a Chinese American family moving into Metropolis, and this group of White supremacists essentially get really worked up about it. They feel really threatened, so they burn a giant wooden cross on this family's lawn. After reading that, in *Freakonomics*, I was intrigued for a whole bunch of different reasons.

One was that, supposedly, this fictional story about a man in a red cape actually had a real-life effect on the real-life Ku Klux Klan. So, after being portrayed as these bumbling bigots on a children's radio show, the real-life Klan actually experienced a huge drop in their membership. The other thing that really fascinated me was that at the center of the story is a Chinese American family. So, as I said, I've been reading *Superman* comics since I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I just don't remember that many characters who look like me in those pages. You know. So, I always wondered why. Why did the writers

of that show, way back in 1946, choose a Chinese American family to be at the center of the story?

So, when I started talking to DC Comics about what I might do next for them—the project that I’d worked on for a couple of years was coming to an end and we talked about this. So, I proposed doing an adaptation. And then I got to team up with this art team named Gurihiru, out of Japan. They are elite comic book artists. And a legendary letterer by the name of Janice Chang. And we adapted this story from 1946 to comics, for the very first time.

00:14:18 Jordan Host

Something that you changed for the story—a few things, but one of them is, instead of calling the group the Clan of the Fiery Cross, you call it the KKK. And—I mean, I think, like, comics have kind of a rich history of using, kind of like, you know, vague... but obvious stand ins for hate groups. I’m thinking of, like, Hydra, in Marvel comics. But you explicitly made this the KKK. What was that decision like and why did you think it was the one to make, as opposed to, you know, creating a fictitious, more comic book-y group?

00:14:55 Gene Guest

Well, in the story itself, we actually do call it the Klan of the Fiery Kross. But we changed the ‘C’ in clan and the ‘C’ in cross into ‘K’s. But the—in the backmatter we referred directly to the Ku Klux Klan. You know, from what I’ve read about that original radio show, the reason why they didn’t use the actual name, Ku Klux Klan, was because—in some parts of the country, back then—the Klan was a legally recognized entity. So, they didn’t wanna run into any sort of legal issues by doing that. But then, in the story, there’s just no mistaking it. It’s obvious who that radio show is talking about. In our version, we did wanna draw a more explicit parallel to the real life Ku Klux Klan, because we’re hoping that the fictional story about Superman fighting these racists will lead young readers to investigate the real life story that inspired it.

00:15:54 Jordan Host

Let’s talk about the version of Superman that is in this book. Something that’s kind of surprising is that he doesn’t have all the powers that you associate with Superman. Like he doesn’t fly. He runs across telephone wires. And, yeah, and some of the other, you know, powers that we’ve come to associate with Superman aren’t there. Why did you choose this particular powerset to give to him?

00:16:18 Gene Guest

Well, some of that is historical. At the very beginning, you know—*Superman* debuted in 1938, in the pages of *Action Comics #1*—and at that point, he was really just this glorified circus strongman. He didn’t really have any of those supernatural powers, you know. He was super strong. He was invulnerable and he could jump really high. That was about it. He didn’t—he wasn’t—he couldn’t fly. He couldn’t shoot heat vision out of his eyes. He didn’t have any cold breath. All that came later. So, within the context of the story, I felt like that was a great way of talking about how—you know—immigrants and the children of immigrants, sometimes we feel like we have to hold a part of ourselves back just to—just to fit in.

I talked about my parents, earlier. You know, my parents—they, in a lot of ways, by not causing a quote/unquote, “ruckus”, they were holding a piece of themselves back. You know. They were—they had legitimate concerns, but by not voicing their concerns, they were almost, like, being half of themselves.

00:17:25 Jordan Host

So, *Superman Smashes the Klan* is a, you know, self-contained graphic novel. But you have also written just the mainline, monthly

00:17:40	Jordan	Host	<p><i>Superman</i> comic. What's different about the workflow of those two projects?</p> <p><i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> is part of this brand-new line, at DC Comics. It's a line for young readers. And I'm incredibly, incredibly excited about this line. Because it really is this bridge between traditional, monthly superhero comics and graphic novels. Now adays, the vast majority of kids are reading graphic novels. So, it's a way of bringing the comics that I grew up with—these <i>Superman</i>, superhero comics—to a new generation of readers and fans. One of the big differences that I found, between writing for the young readers line and writing for the main—the quote/unquote, you know, “main” <i>Superman</i>, superhero universe at DC Comics—is that, in that main universe, there are lots of continuity concerns. You have to make sure that the stories you write are not contradicting stories that came before and they're also not contradicting stories that are told simultaneously and other books that are being released in that same month.</p>
00:19:01	Jordan	Host	<p>It's fun. It's fun, because it feels like you're working in a big family. But at the same time, you don't have as much freedom. You don't have as much creative elbow room. With all of the books in the DC Young Readers line, we can play with those elements. You know. We can play with those traditional elements from these decades old superhero stories and maybe present them in a new light.</p> <p>I would love to hear about how DC first approached you for these <i>Superman</i> projects. I think your work, up until recently, has been maybe what people would describe as, like, indie comics or graphic novels. How does one of the biggest comic book companies in the world approach someone to write?</p>
00:19:21	Gene	Guest	<p>Yeah, it was—it was kind of a shock! I just got a call from my agent, one day. And she told me that she had had lunch with somebody at DC Comics—one of the higher ups—and they were wondering if I was interested in writing <i>Superman</i>. So, I... I said yes! It—you know... it was a little bit of a process, because I was a high school teacher at the time. I really loved being a high school teacher. I had had the chance to write for mainstream superhero comics before that, but I'd always turn down those chances because it would mean that I would, you know, have to step away from my teaching job. But when this offer for <i>Superman</i> came up, in a lot of ways I just didn't feel like I could say no to it.</p>
00:20:05	Jordan	Host	<p>Yeah. I think that's a good segue into talking about your new graphic novel, <i>Dragon Hoops</i>. And there is an autobiographical element to <i>Dragon Hoops</i>. All of this stuff you mentioned is part of the narrative—you getting the call to write <i>Superman</i> and you, as a teacher. But to get into talking about that, I wanted to talk about a very—a very funny scene that happens at the beginning of <i>Dragon Hoops</i>. And that is you getting a shipment of your new graphic novel, at your home, and your kids being kind of unimpressed with it. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Um, is that based in reality? Do your kids think it's cool that their dad makes comics?</p>
00:20:48	Gene	Guest	<p>Uhh, yeah that's—that's pretty much based in reality. So, my wife and I, we have four kids. Our oldest is 16. Our youngest is 8. And I think they think it's okay. They think it's—they think it's okay that I write comics, but I am definitely not impressive, in their eyes. I have such an easier time impressing their friends than I do them. I just had this conversation the other day. Like, two days ago with my 8-</p>

year-old. I asked her, kind of pointedly, who her favorite cartoonist was. And she said, “It’s Raina Telgemeier.”

*[They laugh.]*

I—it’s hard to disagree with that one. It’s hard to disagree with that one. But then I was like, “So, where am I on the list?”

And she goes, “Dad. You’re not even in the top three.”

*[They laugh.]*

So.

00:21:30	Jordan	Host	Hopefully top ten, I would imagine!
00:21:32	Gene	Guest	Yeah. Maybe! Maybe top ten, if I’m lucky. But my kids are not impressed. Not in the least.
00:21:38	Jordan	Host	You did most of the art and wrote the script for <i>Dragon Hoops</i> , and you mentioned on <i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> , you work with the art team Gurihiru. How do you make the decision whether or not you’re going to draw the book you’re writing?
00:21:54	Gene	Guest	Yeah, there are some projects where I handle both the writing and the art, but even when I handle the art, it’s just the drawing part. I don’t do my own coloring. So, I worked with a colorist named Lark Pien. We’re longtime friends. She’s absolutely amazing with color. At the beginning of a project, I’ll think about whether or not I can handle the art chores, first. Like, for <i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> , I just can’t draw like that. You know. I wanted that book to feel like this amalgamation of those old Fleischer Studio cartoons. And, like, manga. You know. And there’s no way I could pull that off. And Gurihiru, they are among the best in the business. So, I’d worked with them on a couple other projects before. I knew they would be perfect for it. So, I feel really lucky that they said yes.
			But then, for <i>Dragon Hoops</i> , I knew that this was gonna be a really personal story. It was gonna be about real people. It would be my first nonfiction graphic novel. I’m friends with the people who are in the book. And I just felt like I needed that control to be able to tell the story correctly.
00:22:55	Jordan	Host	Yeah. Well, let’s get more into the actual story of <i>Dragon Hoops</i> . I think the very first line of <i>Dragon Hoops</i> is you—is a—it’s a cartoon of you saying, “I’ve hated sports ever since I was a little kid. Especially basketball. And this is the story of a high school basketball team.” Is that an exaggeration? Before setting out to write this, did you actually hate sports.
00:23:18	Gene	Host	<i>[Interrupting.]</i> Nope! I hated sports. I hated sports.

*[Jordan laughs.]*

I remember telling my old college friends that I was doing this book about basketball and they were like, “What?! Have you lost your mind?!” ‘Cause when we were in college, you know, whenever they would turn on the sports highlight, during the—during the evening news, I would always be, like, really annoyed. You know, I just didn’t understand why sports were important at all.



I would always argue with them, “You know, sports don’t really have anything to do with real life. I don’t know why you all are so obsessed with this. And a lot of that was rooted in the fact that I just sucked at sports, when I was a kid. But after following this team for a season, I have completely changed my tune about that. I really do think, now, sports are intimately connected to the rest of life. What happens on the court and on the field has—often has these big ramifications to what happens off of the court and off of the field.

00:24:13 Jordan Host

Where did the germ of the idea come from? Do you remember the moment where you thought, “Maybe there’s a book in this”?

00:24:19 Gene Host

Well, you know, basketball had been slowly invading my life before I began working on *Dragon Hoops*. Our 16-year-old, he is going into his senior year, now, but back when he was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, he joined his school’s basketball team. So, I started having to go to these basketball games. And then, you know, the Jeremy Lin run happened at around the same time. You know, as an Asian American, I was very interested. But I was also very annoyed that I was interested. I was like, “Why do I care all the sudden? Just ‘cause there’s this guy who looks like me on the court.” And then these books started coming out that were getting all sorts of critical attention. I think the biggest one was *Crossover* by Kwame Alexander. I read that and I loved it. And I also couldn’t understand why that book was able to make me care about a sport that I’d never care about before.

But the big thing was, at the beginning of the 2014/2015 school year, on that campus—where I was teaching—everybody was talking about basketball. They were specifically talking about the men’s varsity team. And it seemed like there was a story there. So, I sat down with Coach Lou Richie—the head coach of that team. We’d been on the same campus for a decade, but we weren’t really friends. And at the end of that conversation, I knew I had to do a book about it. He just told me this crazy story, from when he was a teenager. You know. And that story that he told me ended up being chapter one, in *Dragon Hoops*.

00:25:43 Jordan Host

Talk about the decision to use real people. I mean, I imagine there’s a version you could do of this where you, you know, use real people for inspiration and make up a fictional sports team who comes from behind and takes it all the way, in the end. What was the decision like to do this as kind of a documentary?

00:26:02 Gene Guest

I did debate that. At the beginning of the project, I did debate whether I should fictionalize or not. But as the project went on, I realized that a lot of what was most interesting about that season was rooted in reality. And a lot of the stuff—like, if I had put it in a fictional book, it would seem like a narrative convenience. You know? Like, I don’t—I don’t think it would be believable. It’s only believable because it actually happened, in real life. Like Couch Lou’s story from when he was a kid. I think if I had written as fiction, the audience—the reader would roll her eyes, because it would just seem too convenient for the sake of the story. And same with how the book ends. I think if I had ended that book like that, as a fictional story, the reader would roll her eyes. It just seems too convenient. It’s not even perfect, it’s just too dramatic of an ending, right?

But that’s actually how the real story played out.

00:27:02 Jordan Host I'd love to hear more about the interview process. You know, the—kind of the making of the comic is part of this comic, and it shows you—you know—sitting down with the players and the coaches and kind of getting their stories. Is that how it happened? Was it kind of a traditional, face-to-face interview?

00:27:22 Gene Guest Some of those interviews were. So, when we would—I traveled with the team. Coach Lou was good enough to always book me a bus ticket or a plane ticket, so that I could travel with the team. And often, on those busses and on those planes—in those airports—I would sit down with different players to talk to them about their experiences. But there were other interviews that are portrayed as face-to-face in the book that actually happened over the phone or over text. I portrayed them as face-to-face just because I felt like it read better, as a comic. You know? In the beginning, when I first proposed the book, I actually told my publisher it would around 200 pages. I would focus primarily on the coaches and the players. I was not planning on putting myself in that book, at all. You know, I thought that the interview portions would just show the interviewee. It wouldn't show me, at all.

But as the project went on, I felt like I had to put myself in the story just to be real about the weaknesses that I had, as the teller of the story. The more I got into that season, the more I realized, "Man, I have a lot of holes in my basketball knowledge." And I felt like I had to be real about that, with the reader. And the other thing is, you know, I grew up in the suburbs. My childhood experience definitely overlapped with the experiences of some of the players on that—on the team. But there were some other players that grew up in rougher neighborhoods, and their experiences, coming up, were just not something that I felt like I could understand emotionally, or even had a right to. And I felt like I had to be real about that, as well.

00:29:02 Jordan Host So, in the book, it's not—you know, it's not just about the kids on this basketball team. You also kind of go through a very personal journey in this. Yeah, talk more about, kind of, where you were in life—you know, when the story of this book starts and what the decision was like to include that story.

00:29:21 Gene Guest Well, I am a very anxious person. You know. I'm a really, really anxious person. I think my brain always goes to the worst-case scenario. My wife thinks that it's related to my job, because when I'm writing *Superman* comics, I'm always trying to come up with worst case scenarios for him to get out of. But my brain just naturally works that way. So, when this offer from DC Comics came up, I was excited about it. I really wanted to do it. But I was also really freaked out about it. And, at the same time, I was following this basketball team, right? And I really do think that following this basketball team did affect my decision to leave my teaching job to write comics for DC.

I don't know if I would do—would have done that. If I hadn't been following this team, I don't know if I would have done that. I don't know if I would have had the courage to do that. One of my theories about sports in general—and basketball, in particular—is that people watch these games, we watch sports, because we want the courage that we see on the court or on the field to bleed into us. You know? When we watch a player step into uncertainty, on the

field, we want to have that same courage to step into uncertainty in our actual lives. And I really feel like, during that season, that actually happened for me.

Watching—I remember watching this one game. It was televised on ESPN. It was against Ben Simmons at Montverde, in Florida. And the youngest kid on the team, his name was Elijah Harding. He's 14 years old. And in front of these ESPN cameras, he steps out onto the court—you know. He goes into the game. He gets the ball in his hands. He does this jumper over a player that is a head taller than him and it goes in. And the whole thing was just like—I mean, it was like his—he had ice in his veins, you know what I mean? He wasn't nervous at all. And maybe he was inside, but I couldn't see it. And I remember looking at that and thinking, "Man! You know, I'm like twice—over twice as old as this kid is, and I don't know if I have that in me. And I kind of wish I did." You know?

So, it inspired me to look into my life as a cartoonist, as an adult, and think. You know. Where are the places of my life where I could show a little bit more courage?

00:31:42 Jordan Host

So, you kind of went into this project hating sports. Are you still a basketball fan? Do you watch basketball on TV and follow your local teams?

00:31:54 Gene Guest

I do. I do follow basketball, still. I follow the Dragons, through Coach Lou. Coach Lou and I are pretty good friends, now. We text each other all the time. And then I also do follow the MBA. So, I live in the Bay Area. Our local team is the Warriors. This year has not been our year. I know this is a controversial thing to say, I but I think there's a San Francisco curse—that the Warriors probably should not have left Oakland. Uh, but I do follow it. You know, and I think one of the reasons why I follow the MBA is 'cause I realized sports is just like this other narrative tradition. You know? I'm—I grew up with superhero comics, which is one narrative tradition. And sports are another one.

And a great example of this is, in this current season—well, the season that just got postponed and possibly will continue during the summer—a great story was building up around the Lakers. You know? I'm supposed to hate the Lakers, because I'm from the Bay Area. But I can't help but be intrigued by them, because of the narrative that was kind of forming around that team, during the 2019/2020 season.

00:33:04 Jordan Host

So, we're recording this interview in June of 2020 and, you know, corona virus has effected everyone and really changed a lot of things. And I was noticing that the San Diego Comicon is going online only, this year. And I was thinking about having this conversation with you and wondering if, you know, that part of comics making is something that you've been missing, this year. The going to cons and signings and stuff like that. Or is that stuff that, you know, is just kind of loud and crowded and you would rather be at home writing and drawing?

00:33:45 Gene Guest

It is loud and crowded, but I do miss it. *[Chuckles.]* I do really miss it. I think that comics can be very lonely work. I spend most of my time in front of my computer or in front of my drawing board, and it is nice to actually meet fans in real life. I wonder. I worry about when we're gonna be able to do that, again—when we're gonna be

able to have a convention, again. When we're gonna be able to gather as, like, a comics-loving community again. So, we'll see. We'll see how things go.

00:34:15 Jordan Host Were those types of events something that you attended, as a kid? Or was that something that you started doing once you became a professional?

00:34:23 Gene Guest I did it as a kid, yeah. I went to local comic book conventions. I think I did my first one maybe in late junior high or early high school. And it was amazing. I remember meeting Jim Lee at a comic book convention.

00:34:39 Jordan Host Oh wow, yeah. That's a big one.

00:34:41 Gene Guest Yeah! Yeah, he's my boss now!

*[They laugh.]*

00:34:44 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Jordan:** Cool!

**Gene:** At DC Comics!

00:34:45 Gene Guest But when I was a kid, I lined up to get his autograph, you know?

00:34:48 Jordan Host That's so funny.

00:34:59 Gene Guest My bother—so, my brother is a doctor, now. When we were kids, we went to this comic book convention where we lined up to get Jim Lee's autograph, and after the autograph session my brother went to the bathroom. And he actually got to pee next to Jim Lee. And he was like in—I don't know—4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and to this day we still talk about that.

*[They laugh.]*

00:35:15 Jordan Host How he used the bathroom next to Jim Lee, when he was a kid.

00:35:19 Gene Guest Well, Gene Luen Yang, thanks so much for joining us on *Bullseye*!

00:35:22 Jordan Host Thank you for having me! It was a pleasure to be here.

00:35:33 Music Transition That's Gene Luen Yang. His new books are *Superman Smashes the Klan* and *Dragon Hoops*. They're both as brilliant as they are different, and you can order them from your local bookstore, now.

00:35:35 Jordan Host Upbeat, percussive music.

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is produced out of the homes of me and the staff of MaximumFun, in and around the greater Los Angeles area—where there is a guy on my street, now, that I see when I'm out taking a walk who is a very handsome man who also is constantly juggling. He's just a delight to see. And I don't know his name, but I call him Juggle Hunk. And yeah! I guess I just never thought that jugglers could be so attractive! You learn something new every day.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio is our associate producer. We get help from Casey O'Brien and Jordan Kauwling. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song's by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

You can also keep up with the show on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. And I guess that's about it! Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

00:36:42 Promo

Promo

**Speaker:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*[Music fades out.]*