

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.
00:00:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:20	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. There’s a new novel out. It’s called <i>Red Pill</i> . It’s written by our next guest, Hari Kunzru. <i>Red Pill</i> is a little bit satire, a little bit of a comment on politics today. It’s also a gripping thriller. Without giving up too much, here’s the setup: the book’s protagonist is an unnamed narrator. He’s writer in Brooklyn, married with kids, and in the back of his mind he can’t shake this feeling that something bad is about to happen. He doesn’t know what. He doesn’t know what he can do about it. But the growing terror is beginning to consume him. He gets a job in Berlin, a writer’s residency. The time alone only invites in more demons. Is he being watched? Is there an evil growing in the world? To the west, he sees Nazi ruins, to the east, the Stasi Museum.  It sends him on a journey around the internet to reactionary message boards and old blogs. Then it sends him on a journey around the world—into stone huts in Scotland and Parisian hotels. And by the end of the book, you—the reader—start to wonder if his fears were justified. Now, obviously, this isn’t light reading. But it’s compelling. Our correspondent Carrie Poppy was taken by the book, so she was very excited to get to talk with its author.  <i>[Music fades in.]</i>
00:01:40	Music	Transition	Here’s Carrie Poppy’s conversation with writer Hari Kunzru. Relaxed, lightly jazzy music.
00:01:46	Carrie Poppy	Host	Hari Kunzru, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:01:48	Hari Kunzru	Guest	Thanks for inviting me.
00:01:49	Carrie	Host	Oh, of course. So, I’ve just finished your novel last night. So, I’m still in an anxiety spiral.  <i>[They laugh.]</i>
00:02:25	Hari	Guest	So, <i>[laughing]</i> this novel is about a male writer who travels from New York to Germany for a writing fellowship, in 2016. And I’m sure this is just a coincidence and you haven’t even thought of it, but—um, <u>you’re</u> a male writer! From New York. Who went to Germany, in 2016. And our narrator actually experiences a psychological break while he’s there. So, my first question is: Hari, how are you doing? I’m—I’m holding up okay. Thanks. I think I can say that. Yeah, I mean, my experience in Germany wasn’t exactly the character in the novel’s experience, but it was—it was close enough. I actually went with my wife and two-year-old son. And so, it wasn’t the story of being away from home and kind of collapsing into a sort of psychological disaster. But it was—it was a strange time, actually. And it was—it was a very cold time, mostly. I have to say, Berlin in

			winter has a kind of cold that even if you think you're hardened up by New York, you know, you really haven't understood anything until that wind that sort of comes all the way from the Urals kind of starts piercing your outer clothing.
00:03:18	Carrie	Host	Just cold in the physical sense. Or was—is there something sort of left over from history, you think, that's sort of coloring your experience there?
00:03:26	Hari	Guest	Well, that's also a thing about Berlin, too—is it is a city where it's very hard to escape history. It's present all around you. And—you know, you walk through the center of town, through districts like Mitte and you look up and there are .50 cal machine gun bullet holes in the walls, leftover from the war. And you look down at the street and there are little brass cobblestones with the names of Jews who were deported from particular buildings. So, you know, you're always very conscious of that. And where I was staying, and where the book is set, out in Wannsee in the sort of western suburbs of Berlin. There's a lot of echoes, too. I mean, if people know that name, it's because of the Wannsee Conference, where the final solution was decided on, in 1942. So, it has a very sinister resonance from that point of view.
			But it's also got a lot of other historical aspects. It's—the grave of the writer Heinrich von Kleist is there, who was somebody who got very mixed up in my novel and in my experience of being there. 18 <sup>th</sup> century writer who died by the lake in a suicide pact.
00:04:40	Carrie	Host	He plays a very present role, in the novel. Sort of—I don't even think the word “inspiring” is quite right.
			<i>[Hari laughs.]</i>
			But sort of inspiring our narrator. Sort of taking up purchase in his brain. Um.
00:04:54	Hari	Guest	I feel like I should apologize to you, at this point. I feel like I've damaged you in some way.
00:04:59	Carrie	Host	<i>[Laughing.]</i> Oh no! We're only a few minutes in!
			<i>[Hari laughs.]</i>
00:05:04	Jesse	Host	You're listening to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is the writer Hari Kunzru.
00:05:09	Carrie	Host	Hari, would you read from your book—on page 171, we are at a point where our narrator has met Anton. And perhaps you can describe who he is.
00:05:21	Hari	Guest	So, Anton is the guy we've been talking about. He's the showrunner of this show called <i>Blue Lives</i> , which is a—which is a cop show. It's about this sort of special group of cops who have kind of become as bad as the criminals they're supposed to be chasing. Everybody is involved in kind of a high stakes competition with everybody else. And our nameless hero, who thinks of himself as somebody who wants to think about elevated things actually gets more and more obsessed with this view of the world and what it—what it means.
			The passage I'm about to read is—starts with Anton speaking. And they're having a conversation about these kind of—these characters who do the dirty work for society.
00:06:11	Clip	Clip	“Go ahead. Call him names if it makes you feel better. But you rely on him. You know you do. You fear and hate him for doing

something that you can't do, that you secretly know has to be done. Society needs fear. It's our dirty little secret."

The argument got confused. I said that what Carson did was morally wrong, and Anton accused me of being "one of those people". So, I asked, "What kind of people?"

And he told me, "The kind who say 'morality' when they mean 'politics', and 'politics' when they mean 'morality'." Most of what I call politics was, in his opinion, just squeamishness. There were people who acted and people who wrung their hands and behaved as if they were going to act at some point in the future, once they'd sorted out what was moral and what wasn't. Their so-called morality was just paralysis. In truth, they'd delegated their power of action to others: men who weren't frozen rabbits, who could do what needed to be done.

I told him he sounded like every other writer guy: secretly fretting that he wasn't a man of action. If he really wanted to be a fireman or whatever, why didn't he just go and fight fires instead of making TV shows?

00:07:28 Carrie Host

This passage really struck me, because I think I feel a little indited by it. *[Laughs.]* I think it is quite easy to spend a lot of our time figuring out what the best thing to do is without ever getting to the best thing.

00:07:44 Hari Guest

I think that's so true. You know, the human condition is that we're always thrown into the middle of things. You know. We arrive in the middle of something pre-existing. We have to kind of make our way never really able to kind of clear a space and work out how to proceed before we proceed. And I think it may be a sort of disease of professional writers and talkers and commentators that we imagine that it would be possible to sort everything all out correctly before we did anything. But in truth, you know, life is very, very messy.

So, to that extent, Anton the spokesman for the cynical man of action really has won over the narrator. And this is a thing that happens sort of again and again, in their relationship. The writer thinks he's sort of superior to this other guy, that he's gonna be able to refute this view of the world. But actually, he feels indited himself. He feels very targeted by it.

00:08:44 Carrie Host

I wanna talk to you a little bit about your writing process. When you started writing this novel, is this what you expected or did it surprise you, as it came about?

00:08:53 Hari Guest

I started before I went to Germany and the starting point, for me, was about the feeling of being watched. And I'm very interested in what the experience of surveillance does to our sense of self, because—I mean, we have come to expect, as I say, that we're almost always at least potentially being watched. And that causes us to govern our behavior in certain ways. And privacy is very essential to freedom, in a certain way, in that—I mean, we always have the choice when to come forward out of our privacy, into the public's fear. And what—you know, in theory we should have the choice about sort of what expressions of ourself we make public and that we—you know, I think of privacy as a sort of—sort of sandbox, really. Like, where we can experiment, and we can try

things out and we can kind of work out what we feel about things without having to be judged by others.

But that space of privacy really is shrinking considerably, and I wonder what that does to our sense of ourselves, as human agents and as free agents.

00:10:01 Carrie Host

Did you then—were you writing this as sort of a way of working those thoughts out or a therapeutic process? Or was it more, “I have a message to get out.”?

00:10:11 Hari Guest

Look, I think every—I mean, certainly for me, every book has a kind of—has a sort of public facing side and then a private facing side. I mean, I need to write a book. I’m often not sure quite why certain things go together or what the question is I’m trying to answer. But, I mean, certainly I wanted to go through these feelings, myself, because I have a sort of anxious sense of the present moment. I have a sense that we’re perhaps not actually catching up to the full consequences of the sort of technological and cultural changes that are happening. And into that situation, I wanted to put a character who’s kind of quiet like me, but is maybe a little more invested in certain slightly old-fashioned, kind of pompous writer stuff about the sort of nobility of his sort of poetic experience of the world.

He’s a—you know, he’s a slightly parodic version of me in that—in that sense. And so, I kind of started off just experimenting with that character and kind of putting him into those situations and then—I mean, then Anton turned up as a sort of antagonist in the story. And I realized that there was a particular kind of force in the culture that I wanted to represent through Anton. You know. I mean, there are a lot of Antons around. There are—you know, especially on the internet. I mean, there—you know, you kind of come up against Anton-ish thinking in all sorts of ways. And it’s a kind of battle that we’re having in the culture at the moment, between cynicism and idealism, between certain sorts of feelings about the human, about—you know, more broadly, like what—the meaning of things like human right and empathy for others and especially empathy for sort of distant people.

Like, what does charity mean? Who do—to whom do we have obligations? All these political questions that we’re fighting out at the moment. And there were—you know, through a novel you can kind of stage these things. You can kind of—you can set people going and listen to them talk to each other and try and step back as much as possible, in some ways. And what happened to me when I was writing this was that Anton’s point of view kind of became very forceful. And so, in a sense, the writer at the center of it does find himself getting red pillled by Anton.

00:12:30 Jesse Host

We’ll finish up with Hari Kunzru after a quick break. Stay with us. It’s *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:12:38 Promo Clip

**Music:** Mellow synth piano plays in background.

**Brea Grant:** Hey! I’m Brea Grant, an e-reader who loves spoilers and chocolate.

**Mallory O’Meara:** And I’m Mallory O’Meara, a print book collector who will murder you if you spoil a book for me.

**Brea:** And we're the host of *Reading Glasses*, a podcast designed to help you read better.

**Mallory:** Over the past few years, we've figured out why people read.

**Brea:** Self-improvement.

**Mallory:** Escapism.

**Brea:** To distract ourselves from the world burning down.

**Mallory:** And... why they don't.

**Brea:** Not enough time.

**Mallory:** Not knowing what to read.

**Brea:** And being overwhelmed by the number on their TBR list.

**Mallory:** And we are here to help you with that. We will help you conquer your TBR pile... while probably adding a bunch of books to it.

**Brea:** *Reading Glasses*.

**Mallory:** Every week—

**Brea:** —on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

[*Music fades out.*]

00:13:21    Promo    Clip

**Music:** Ominous, rhythmic music.

**Rodney Carmichael:** I'm Rodney Carmichael.

**Sidney Madden:** And I'm Sidney Madden.

**Rodney:** And on our new podcast, *Louder than a Riot*, we trace the collision of rhyme and punishment in America.

**Speaker:** We were hunted by police. We were literally, physically hunted. You'd be standing on the corner, drug squad would pull up, everybody would run.

**Sidney:** New, from NPR music. Listen to *Louder than a Riot*.

[*Music fades out.*]

00:13:47    Jesse    Host

It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest, Hari Kunzru, is an award-winning novelist. He's written the books *Gods without Men*, *Transmission*, and the new book *Red Pill*—which is a thriller set in New York, Berlin, and the dark web. He's being interviewed by our friend, Carrie Poppy. Carrie is the host of the Maximum Fun podcast *Oh No! Ross and Carrie*. Let's get back into their conversation.

00:14:09    Carrie    Host

Privacy is a major theme in this story and the main character comes to understand that he's being watched at the Deuter Center, where

00:14:52 Hari Guest

he has this fellowship. But that actually becomes a sort of less profound form of surveillance that he's under, because this white supremacist—to put, perhaps, maybe not too fine a point on it—Anton, he is—as you said—sort of challenged his views and now he's sort of living in his brain and that becomes its own sort of form of surveillance. And it made me wonder what you think is the biggest threat to our privacy, these days. Is it these outside forces or things living inside us?

Well, I think it's a kind of unholy combination of both, to be honest. It's—I mean, at one point, you know, I have the central character quote this—or sort of paraphrase this little bit of Jean Paul Sartre. And Sartre is thinking about privacy and thinking about freedom and he says, “Imagine a peeping tom who's looking through a keyhole in a corridor. And as he's looking, he's totally focused on this sort of sexy scene that he can see through the keyhole. And he's totally comfortable with himself and then as soon as he hears a noise, as soon as he thinks someone else might be in the corridor observing him, all that collapses and he's terribly conscious of himself and he's terribly conscious of the shame of what he's doing.”

And so, I mean Sartre writes something like, “All his freedom has instantly been ebbed away, instantly sucked away.” And this is—peeping tom or not—this is the—this is the kind of consequence I'm interested in, about that feeling of potentially being watched. You know, I mean, I'm still not quite comfortable. *[Stammering.]* Well, I mean, I'm not at all comfortable with the idea that I go to my friend's houses and there's an Alexa sitting there, open and online, and that—you know, you say some word and suddenly a pizza appears.

*[Carrie chuckles.]*

And, you know—or a SWAT team, or whatever it is. And this kind of inhibition that comes from that, I think is a sort of—has reduced the sphere of our freedom. And of course, a lot of this book—I mean, I found I tend to write about doubles. I have a weird thing about doubles that—had I gone to therapy instead of writing books—I might know what it was by now. But I mean, Anton becomes a sort of psychic double or the—of the narrator. He's the sarcastic commentator, the person who's the voice in the narrator's head who's laughing at him and his various attempts to make his way in the world. So, it becomes this dialogue where the real Anton isn't there. The real Anton is elsewhere, making his TV show. But he's also, you know, as he gets put at one point in the book—he's living rent-free in the narrator's head. He's become this—a sort of, almost like a bit of the narrator's personality has kind of split off and become Anton and is constantly commenting and jeering.

And I think that's another thing about human freedom and about trying to kind of be in the world in a happy and comfortable way, is that—you know, if you're acting for yourself and you're confident about that, that's one thing. But if you're acting because you think you're wishing to appear a certain way to the invisible audience of your actions, you know—we all have these kinds of audiences. These kind of—the “they” that we think we're in conversation with. But it's almost always a sort of negative energy in our lives.

00:17:50	Carrie	Host	<p>Well, it's interesting you mentioned opposites. I know you have—I guess, you didn't say opposites. You said more twins. But you have a new podcast that is about own. So, what draws you to that topic? <i>Into the Zone</i> is—yeah, it's a show about opposites and borders. I mean, I got very interested in the big kind of conceptual oppositions that we use to organize the world. You know. The life and death, public and private, native and migrant. These kind of ideas. And I got interested in whether they're always as real easily distinguishable as we think. I mean, the classic one is life and death. If you ask a biologist to define life, they can—you know, they can kind of get a certain way along with what a living thing needs to be able to do. You know, take in food, grow, and so on. But an actual hard and fast definition of life is a very philosophically difficult thing. There is a sort of grey area. And right now, in the world of course, we're living completely in that grey area. 'Cause the sort of thing that sits right on that border is a virus. You know. A virus is not fully alive, 'cause it needs the reproductive mechanism of its host's cells in order to make copies of itself. So, it's neither not living or quite living. It's an uncanny thing that kind of lives in that grey area.</p> <p>And yeah, I mean, a lot of these stories that I tell in the podcast are kind of personal stories as well. I end up at Stone Henge asking whether I could be a druid, whether my Indianness precludes me from a certain sort of English, national identity. And I do—there's a—there's an episode where I revisit some of the—some of the stuff from Berlin. And you mentioned very briefly that there's a character who used to be a punk musician, in the '80s in east Berlin. And one of the things I found in Berlin was that the Stasi—the secret police—were absolutely terrified of the—of an emerging, kind of teenaged punk movement in the early '80s. And they devoted a lot of energy to sort of squashing it. They were convinced it was a sort of western plot to undermine the state.</p> <p>And so, I went back and I found one of the sort of first generation of east German punks who was sort of 16 and just—he would get arrested every time he walked out of his house for having spiky hair and ripped clothes. And he, you know, he told me about this kind of cat and mouse game he played with the Stasi interrogator and why the interrogator thought he was a much more sophisticated political creature than he actually was and then accidentally started giving him this education in anarchism and all these other dissident political philosophies. So that's a—that's a fascinating story and that is about what happens when the state tries to kind of reduce your sphere of privacy. So, it was another way of kind of going over the same sort of material that's in the novel.</p>
00:18:02	Hari	Guest	
00:20:46	Carrie	Host	<p>So, there's so much dialogue these days—or at least, many monologues [<i>laughs</i>] these days—about whether we should engage with people who have extremist views. Right? And your book seems like an argument sort for both positions? You know, the main character is exposed to this sort of social Darwinian viewpoint and that grows inside him like a virus. But also, the white supremacist character, Anton, is sort of emboldened and strengthened by having been rejected by a certain segment of society. So, I'm curious where you fall in that conversation.</p>
00:21:28	Hari	Guest	<p>Well, as you say—as you detected—I mean, I—I'm with sort of both sides on that, really. I mean, I think there's a sort of dignity that we</p>

confer on marginal and extreme people by getting too worked up about them and profiling them in *The New York Times*. I mean, there was a period where I—which was, I found, just profoundly annoying—when it seemed to be—you know, I couldn't open my browser without finding another major publication who tracked down some little dude from the traditionalist worker's party and was asking him, in all seriousness, about whether he thought 6,000,000 people died in the shower.

And I mean, that is a sort of elevation by the media for the sake of kind of titillating the readers with, you know, "Lookie, here's a real-life Nazi. Check him out!" And that does no service to anybody, because they're not serious people and they don't deserve that kind of attention. Having said that, there's been a failure to engage certain sorts of ideas online, and I think that has given those ideas a kind of currency and an oxygen. By that I mean that, you know, there's a sort of mainstream liberal position that—for example—race is not real and any appeal to race is automatically out of bounds. And that position is kind of more, you know, you look at actual kind of contemporary genetics and it's all bit more complicated than that.

And the fact that this sort of just—rather slightly ignorant dismissal by humanities types, in the media, has opened a space where kind of opportunist people on the right can say, "Oh, well, the mainstream media's lying to you. They're suppressing the truth. They're suppressing certain sorts of ideas." And, you know, I think it is important to at least learn what the positions there are and what kind of arguments are being put forth, from the—from the far right. I mean, I've—I mean, ever since I got an internet connection, which is a very long time ago, I have sort of had a—you know, an occasional—I don't know. I don't know whether to call it a hobby. I don't—it's not really a hobby. But it's a—I lurk on far-right sites and read their material and actually, you know, if they're referencing some book or some set of ideas, I go and take a look.

And my sense of it is that there has been a kind of massive growth in the sort of vibrancy of what you would call far right culture in the last decade or so. When I was, you know, starting out doing this in the '90s, I mean, it was just a—it was a fairly tired, old set of tropes and these kind of skinhead types banging on about Rudolf Hess and, you know, and the Nazis and sort of—I mean, all this—you know, the same stuff that had been around for years and was very worn out and was very kind of unlikely to, you know, recruit many new people to the cause. And then, you know, cut to 2015 and you have this sort of meme culture and this pose of sort of fun, ironic—you know, they were the ones with the jokes and the—and the libs were the crying ones who, you know, who had no sense of humor and who were triggered by, you know, the slightest challenge to their worldview.

00:24:51	Hari	Guest	And all this has kind of grown up in a space where there has been a sort of absence of address and an absence of kind of visibility for, I think—for a lot of especially disaffected young men who've turned to this ideology as a way of kind of framing their lives.
00:25:12	Carrie	Host	Well, I hate to end it there, so.

[They laugh.]

00:25:15	Hari	Guest	Uh, Hari— Let's think of a cheery last question.
00:25:18	Carrie	Host	[Laughs.] Um, what's your favorite animated movie?
00:25:23	Hari	Guest	Aw, well—I'm a Miyazaki fan. That's for—that's for sure. So, I'll say <i>Spirited Away</i> .
00:25:28	Carrie	Host	A wonderful choice. [Laughing.] Hari Kunzru, thank you for being on <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:25:33	Hari	Guest	Oh, thank you so much.
00:25:35	Jesse	Host	Hari Kunzru, interviewed by Carrie Poppy. <i>Red Pill</i> is the name of his new novel. Hari is also hosting a new podcast, called <i>Into the Zone</i> , where he talks about Stone Henge, the history of surveillance states, and of course, Lil Nos X. Carrie Poppy, our interviewer, hosts the podcast <i>Oh No! Ross and Carrie</i> , a very special show where she and her co-host, Ross Blocher, investigate spiritual and paranormal claims by doing them. They've joined Scientology, drank alchemical potions, they even took an ice bath.
00:26:11	Music	Transition	Thumpy, upbeat music.
00:26:13	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is produced out of the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where my nine-year-old daughter has decided to start freezing plastic spiders into ice cubes. Gotta remember the reason for the season.
			Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kawling are our associate producers. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to that wonderful band and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use their music on our show. You can also keep up with the show on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Just search for <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> .
00:27:03	Promo	Promo	And I think that's it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off. <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.

[Music fades out.]