

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:11	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team.
00:00:19	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. Michael Ian Black maybe has one of the most varied resumes in comedy. He was of course a founding member of the comedy groups the State and Stella. He’s a beloved TV host and panelist. He’s acted in dozens of movies, appeared on even more TV shows and podcasts. He’s also a prolific writer. Since 2009, he’s written almost a dozen books—some for children, some for grownups. And then there’s his latest, which is kind of for both. <i>A Better Man</i> is, as the title calls it, a mostly serious letter to his son who’s college aged now. In it, Black talks about his own childhood and the lessons he wishes he’d been taught—the stuff you’d expect to see in a memoir. But then he digs deeper, asking what it means to be a man in today’s world. He talks about mass shootings and suicides, both of which are disproportionately committed by men. He talks about toxic masculinity and what it means to be a man in its absence.
			Our good friend and guest host, Carrie Poppy, recently read the book and she was so compelled by it, she decided to bring Michael on <i>Bullseye</i> to talk about it. So, without any further ado, let’s get into it. Michael Ian Black in conversation with Maximum Fun’s own Carrie Poppy.
00:01:30	Music	Transition	Relaxed music with light vocalizations.
00:01:36	Carrie Poppy	Host	Michael Ian Black, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> !
00:01:38	Michael Ian Black	Guest	Thank you. It’s lovely to be on <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:01:40	Carrie	Host	Oh, good! Oh, are you a <i>Bullseye</i> fan?
00:01:42	Michael	Guest	Of course! Well, I—you know, I go way back with Jesse. Years and years.
00:01:46	Carrie	Host	Nice. Well, we’re here to talk about your new book, <i>A Better Man</i> , which is a sort of open letter to your son and then also maybe, by extension, a letter to all young men—or at least, all young American men. And so, maybe you can tell me how this went from being a letter to an op-ed to a book.
00:02:08	Michael	Guest	Well, it really started as a Twitter thread, of all things. After the Parkland shootings, in Florida—it was a high school shooting, which I guess—I mean, I know is the worst high school shooting in American history, but not the worst school shooting in American history. That distinction belongs to Sandy Hook Elementary School, which is about half a dozen miles from my house. When Sandy Hook happened, it obviously shattered the town right next door to mine and the ripple effects were clearly felt here, as well. And I became radicalized, maybe, wouldn’t be too strong a word, against the gun industry and against politicians who enable the gun industry and have spent a lot of my public voice speaking out against gun violence. So, when Parkland happened—oh, and I should mention of course, my two kids were in elementary school at the time. When Parkland happened, they were in high school and, you know, it was

a familiar moment for me, being exhausted and sad and angry about this gun violence.

And I just started writing a Twitter thread about it, which asked the question that I just hadn't heard anybody asking. I hadn't been asking this question, either. And the question is: why is it always boys and young men pulling the trigger on these crimes? And it seemed—you know, it was such a kind of obvious question. Maybe too obvious, because we just all kind of know as humans that men and boys are responsible for the overwhelming amount of violence around the world. So, that was the Twitter thread. Like, what's going on? Why are we like this? Not expecting to do anything really other than just shouting into the void, as I often do.

00:04:13 Carrie Host
00:04:14 Michael Guest

[*Chuckles.*] Yes. As Twitter is perfect for.

And the *New York Times* asked me to write an op-ed. Well, that's what we do, on Twitter. We just yell. We yell about things. And if we're lucky some Russian somewhere engages us.

00:04:27 Carrie Host
00:04:31 Michael Guest

[*Laughs.*] But in this case the *New York Times* engaged you.

Yes, the *New York Times* engaged me. They asked if I wanted to write an op-ed about it. And I said, "Not really. I mean, I don't know how to write an op-ed. I don't know—I'm not qualified to write this op-ed."

And they said, "Yeah, but we're the *New York Times* so you should right an op-ed."

And I was like, "Alright."

So, I did write the op-ed. They published it. And, as a result of that, a publisher contacted me and asked if I wanted to write a book about the subject. And again, I said, "Not really. Not—no. I'm not really—I'm not qualified. I'm not—I don't know that I'm the best candidate to have a big conversation about masculinity in the culture." And I was afraid that—I was afraid that it would look like I was just another celebrity—and I use that term very loosely—getting on a soapbox and preaching to people who didn't want to hear that person's opinions. I was really cognizant of that. You know, I just felt like—god, like I—it drives me crazy when people I know from television and movies adopt an issue and do I really wanna be that person? Just spouting off and bloviating? And I said, you know, I said it to my publisher. You know. I said that. Or the person who would become my publisher. The woman. Lovely woman named Betsy Gleick.

And she said, "I totally get that. That makes a lot of sense to me.

[*Chuckles.*] But there's two arguments favoring you doing this. One is you are a writer. You have written books before. This wouldn't be your first book. You've obviously thought about this issue a fair amount." Which is true. I have. "You have a son who is—who could benefit from this. And you could maybe speak to an audience that isn't hearing this message from the more kind of academic and gender theory points of view." And then she—and then her final argument was, "Well, why not you?"

And I was like, "Yeah, I don't know. Why not me?"

[They laugh.]

00:07:10	Carrie	Host	So, I thought about it. Like, I really wrestled with it. And ultimately, the reason I decided to do it was because I'm—in my life, I'm governed by a few guiding principles, in terms of whether or not to do a project. The first most obvious one is, "Will I make a lot of money from this?" And the answer to that—the answer to that question was no, you will not.
00:07:15	Michael	Guest	Mm. So, then you closed the project and that's why there's no book! <i>[Laughs.]</i> That's right! The second question is, "Will it be fun?" You know, if you're not gonna make a lot of money, will it be fun? And the answer to that question was probably not, no. It doesn't seem like fun. It seems like it'd be a lot of hard work and I don't know that I could do it anyway. And the third question—which ended up being the most important one was, "Does it scare you?" And it did. A lot. And it was the—it was the yes to that question that made me decide to do it—to move—to decide to move towards something that I was emotionally engaged with even at that—even if that engagement was basically terror.
00:07:56	Carrie	Host	Interesting. So, that's actually reminding me of a part in your book where you're talking about this pressure—maybe some deserved, some not—that we put on men to be the one who goes down the stairs in the middle of the night into the darkness and faces the potential intruder. And of course, the intruder usually ends up being your cat or something. But! Nevertheless, you're the ones who are sort of sent out into the darkness. And it sounds like that was kind of the approach you took to this book. "Well, I'm gonna send myself out into the darkness." But it's more of a sort of intellectual darkness.
00:08:32	Michael	Guest	Yeah. And in fact, I think I end that chapter by encouraging my son to step into the darkness. You know? Find those opportunities in your life where, you know, you don't know what that sound is. And it might be worth going to check it out even though it terrifies you.
00:08:48	Carrie	Host	Yeah. Is that advice you'd give to your daughter as well?
00:08:51	Michael	Guest	No, I don't give advice to my daughter.
00:08:52	Carrie	Host	Oh, that's fair.
00:08:53	Michael	Guest	She's just a girl.
00:08:54	Carrie	Host	Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, fair enough.

[Michael laughs.]

00:08:56	Michael	Guest	Does she speak? <i>[Chuckles.]</i> <i>[Laughing.]</i> Yeah, of course! Of course, that's advice I—you know, I—the book is written to my son. I mean, it's called <i>A Mostly Serious</i> —the subtitle is <i>A Mostly Serious Letter to My Son</i> . But it is, I hope, equally applicable to my daughter. There's a lot—there's a lot that's about her, in the book, as well.
00:09:17	Carrie	Host	You know, let's talk a little about the concept of books that are also letters. So, I feel like in letter writing there's obviously, usually the implied privacy of the writer. And in some cases, the implied privacy of the recipient. And with open letters or books that are letters, you know, you're getting into like a greyer area there. And it made me wonder did you talk to your son about, "Well, I—you know, this is a letter to you. Are you okay with everybody reading all my sort of intimate thoughts as they are directed to you?"

00:09:55 Michael Guest Yeah, of course. And he responded in the way that I think most 18-year-old boys respond to questions directed at them, which is to say, “Yeah, whatever.”

[Carrie laughs.]

00:10:11 Carrie Host That was basically his reaction. I’ve heard you say elsewhere that your son hasn’t—hasn’t read the book yet. And—is that still the case?

00:10:19 Michael Guest It’s sort of the case.

[Carrie makes several sounds of interest.]

00:10:25 Carrie Host He has read some of it. Some of it. What’d he think?

00:10:26 Michael Guest He doesn’t love it. *[Laughs.]*

00:10:28 Carrie Host Oh, he doesn’t love it?!

00:10:29 Michael Guest He doesn’t love it. No. No.

00:10:30 Carrie Host Aww. Tell me about that.

00:10:34 Michael Guest Well, the—I think there’s a couple things at play. The first is, and I’m interpreting this as a good thing, he’s like, *[using a stereotypical apathetic teenager voice]* “It doesn’t sound like you. You’re not—it’s not like you’re really talking to me. It’s like you’re being writer-guy.”

And I’m like “Yeah, it’s a book, dude. It’s a book.”

[Carrie chuckles.]

You know? And I think—you know, if you’re—if you live with somebody and you hear them speaking to you day after day after day, yeah, I can understand that. Like, it is—it is a little more writerly than if I were speaking to him directly. But also, I suspect—although he has not confirmed this for me—that he’s not that comfortable reading his father’s innermost thoughts about him and about life and about masculinity. You know. I think it might be a little bit TMI for him.

00:11:20 Carrie Host Oh, interesting. Well, let’s hear a little bit of your book! We have a passage that’s about when your son was first born and what that experience was like for you.

00:11:31 Michael Guest Sure. This is from the chapter entitled “Some Guy”.

“It would be easy to tell you how over the moon I was when you came into our lives, but that’s not true. I didn’t fall in love with you or your sister at first sight. Maybe I’d fallen for the myth that the mere sight of one’s offspring sets to swooning the new parent’s heart. That didn’t happen for me. My friend Rob has three children—two girls and his youngest, a boy. When his son was born, he joked with me that he worried how weird it would feel to have another male among the women with whom he lived. ‘So, now there’s gonna be some guy living in my house?’ he said. That’s a little bit how it felt. Suddenly, there was some guy living in the extra bedroom, some guy demanding all of our attention, some guy who loved my wife but didn’t seem that crazy about me.”

00:12:28 Carrie Host *[Chuckles.]* It’s so true. I have a friend who just had a kid recently and her daughter is just enamored of her and likes her dad just fine. And *[chuckling]* yeah, I—so, I see this dynamic and how both of my

friends, the mother and the father, are both exhausted and caring for this little girl. But the mother gets at least this reward at the end of the day where the daughter looks up to her and it's clear she's a god in this little girl's world. And it—you know, there's just something biological there about imprinting, but what's it like to be the second favorite parent to a newborn?

00:13:12 Michael Guest

Well, second favorite makes it sound like the race is close. It's not close. Like—

[They chuckle.]

It's—you know, it's second in the way that, like—I don't know, we were the first ones to land on the moon and then at some point there will be a second.

[They laugh.]

You know what I mean? Like, you're second, but yeah. I mean, it's so far behind. It feels terrible, you know, because—because, like you said, like you have all—you have all the same duties as the first-place person, but none of—none of the reward of it. So, I—you know, I shouldn't say it feels terrible, although it—I mean it does. Physically it feels terrible. But it's like I—the one smart thing that I guess I did was that I trusted that my experience was probably typical. You know? My experience was probably average. Like, whatever I'm going through, millions and billions of other new fathers have gone through too and it worked out fine for them. Like, their kids fell in love with them, they fell in love with their kids. You know. They bonded, they became dads, and like it would all workout. So, I just kind of hung on to that. I was like, "I'm sure this is normal." And as it turns out, it was.

00:14:35 Jesse Host

We have even more with Michael Ian Black still to come. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:14:43 Promo Clip

Music: Cheerful music.

Speaker: At *Planet Money*, we are also grappling with what's going on in the world.

Emily Oster: We just don't know and you're still gonna have to decide.

Speaker: So, we call up economists like Emily Oster.

Jacob Goldstein: It's like we're fighting the pandemic by having a bake sale or something. I mean, all due respect to bake sales.

Emily: *[Laughing.]* Exactly.

Speaker: Listen and subscribe to *Planet Money* from NPR.

[Music ends.]

00:15:03 Promo Clip

Music: Upbeat, sci-fi sounding music plays.

Dan McCoy: Hey! I'm Dan McCoy.

Stuart Wellington: I'm Stuart Wellington.

Elliott Kalan: And I'm Elliott Kalan. Together, we are *The Flop House*.

Dan: A podcast where we watch a bad movie and then talk about it!

Elliott: Movies like--*Space Hobos! Into the Outer Reaches of the Unknown and the Things That we Don't Know: The Movie*, and also--*Who's That Grandma?*

Stuart: *Zazzle-Zippers! Breakdown 2 and Backhanded Compliment*.

Dan: *Elvis is a Policeman!*

Elliott: *Baby Crocodile and the Happy Twins!*

Dan: *Leftover Potatoes?*

Stuart: *Station Wagon 3*.

Elliott: *Herbie Goes to Hell*.

Dan: New episodes available every other Saturday!

Elliott: Available at MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

00:15:51	Jesse	Host	Dan, Elliott, and Stuart: <i>[In unison]</i> Bye!!! It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Michael Ian Black, the comedian, actor, and writer. His newest book is called <i>A Better Man: A Mostly Serious Letter to My Son</i> . He's being interviewed by our friend and correspondent, Carrie Poppy. Carrie is also the host of the podcast <i>Oh No, Ross and Carrie</i> . Let's get back into it.
00:16:10	Carrie	Host	You know, so—speaking about parents—you also talk about your mom in this book, who had a really extraordinary life. Came out, when you were a child, as gay and took a long-term girlfriend who you lived with. And you also share that you found out that she had, at one point, been an electroshock therapy patient. And then you kind of—there's some sort of guesswork about that whole story and filling in some gaps. I wondered if you could sort of enumerate for me which parts of that story you know to be true and which parts you're kind of trying to imagine the missing parts for.
00:16:53	Michael	Guest	I interviewed my mother extensively when I was writing my last book, which was called <i>Navel Gazing</i> . And a lot of it was about her life. And she told me that when she was in high school, she didn't like being home—like so many people don't like being home when they're in high school—and she started hanging out with this couple that she used to babysit for. And the husband in the couple, you know, was a business guy and would often be away and so she became good friends with the mother in the couple. And they would just hang out, sometimes. When my mom left for college, she still sometimes babysat for that couple and one weekend she came home from college. She lived in Chicago. She went to school in Indiana. She came home from college to spend a weekend babysitting their kid or kids—I'm not sure how many there were—and when the couple returned, something happened. And my

mother ended up getting hospitalized and basically locked in a... for psychiatric reasons.

And while she was there, she was administered electroshock therapy because her parents—my mom’s parents—thought that she was gay and basically wanted to cure her of it. And that was a treatment that was performed. So, my mom says that—or said that her memories from that time were kind of wiped away and she doesn’t really know what—why they thought this, why they, you know, locked her up. What I think happened, my speculation, is that she was at college and was lonely and may have been kind of obsessive, a little bit, about this woman. And I think got it into her head—rightly or wrongly—that she was in love with her and that when the couple came back from whatever weekend trip they’d been on, my mother having been alone in this house for two days watching their kid or kids—what I think happened is she basically had some sort of breakdown where she confessed her feelings in front of either the woman or both of them and had a freak out in their home and they called my mom’s parents and they brought her to the hospital.

That’s what I think. That’s what I think is the most likely explanation. Because my mom didn’t think she was gay at the time. Or at least, she didn’t acknowledge that to herself, but maybe she did sort of say it in that moment—memory that she no longer had.

00:20:01 Carrie Host

Oh, okay. So, as she was telling you this story, she knew that that was why she got the treatment—was because of her suspected homosexuality—but she couldn’t—she couldn’t remember how they came to that conclusion.

00:20:16 Michael Guest

Yeah, she couldn’t remember the details of it.

[Carrie affirms.]

But, you know, the pieces fit together pretty well in my imagination. And if it wasn’t that I think it was something very much like that.

00:20:28 Carrie Host

Wow. I mean, what a story to hear from your mom! To make you a man, talk about your feelings, what were you feeling as your mom’s telling you that story?

00:20:39 Michael Guest

Well, it was—you know, *[sighs]* it’s just sad.

[Carrie agrees.]

You know, she—so much of her life was sad. She was a really bright woman who grew up at a time when she couldn’t realize her potential. She wanted to be a lawyer and there were certainly women who were lawyers then. But it was rare, and it required a kind of support that—and confidence that my mom didn’t have. She wasn’t allowed to be her full self, as a gay woman. So, she—you know—married a man that ultimately I don’t think she loved, had a marriage that didn’t work, entered into a lesbian relationship for 17 years which was abusive—that’s the relationship that I grew up in. Ultimately, left that relationship and then towards—you know—the latter part of her life, met somebody that was and continues to be really great and lovely and supportive and is a terrific person and was an amazing partner to my mom during the last several years of

her life, when my mom was just spiraling in health issues. Just issue after issue after issue.

00:22:31	Jesse	Host	It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Michael Ian Black. One of the images that stick out in my mind as I think about this book is you sitting down writing it and you mention that you can hear the cat finishing up the food in her food bowl and that just sort of this centeredness, this groundedness of being in a home, knowing you're okay, hearing just the day-to-day things going on around you—that that strikes you as what it is to be a secure adult or a secure man.
00:22:36	Carrie	Host	
00:23:04	Michael	Guest	I describe it as rootedness. This sense of feeling like I'm rooted to a place and rooted to an experience and I guess a time. And it doesn't mean that like I'm... that the roots are physical—although, you know, I live in this house with these people, but there's a kind of—maybe groundedness is another way of saying it. They're similar. This sense of feeling a part of this place and of these people and of this time. And that produces a kind of contentment that I didn't know, in my earlier years, I was capable of feeling.
00:23:43	Carrie	Host	Mm-hm. So, Michael, there's a moment in your book where you talk about realizing you weren't quote/unquote “behaving like a man”. Can you tell me about that?
00:23:53	Michael	Guest	Well, I mean it happens when I'm like three or four years old and I'm at a family—was invited to a party and we go and a big lab, not unlike the dog that I have now except I think black or brown, jumped on me and I just started bawling and feeling like—yeah, I was terrified. I thought the—I thought the dog was trying to eat my face. And, you know, my mom was trying to get me to calm down and I wouldn't calm down and I remember hearing somebody say something like, “Come on, kid. Be a man.” You know? And it wasn't even mean. It was just like [<i>chuckling</i>] encouraging.

[*Carrie laughs.*]

I couldn't have articulated what I was feeling in that moment, but I knew that it didn't align with who I felt myself to be. Like, I knew that I wasn't behaving like a man, but I wasn't a man. I was a boy. And I knew that even in making that request that there was something about me, as a boy, that wasn't quite aligning with who I was supposed to be as a man. And that was probably the first time I understood that my own experience of being a guy didn't necessarily match up with the way other people thought I should be, as a guy.

00:25:13	Carrie	Host	Yeah, that was one of the moments in the book where I was like, “Oh! Okay!” You know, this is a way that my childhood was very different just in terms of being a girl. I can't imagine anyone saying to me, “Be a woman,” in that scenario.
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[*Michael agrees.*]

If you said that, it would be an intentional joke.

00:25:30 Michael Guest It wouldn't even make sense, really. It'd be—because this is not a phrase that we use. We understand that girls will be women because of their biology. But men aren't afforded—or boys aren't afforded that same grace. We're not—it's never assumed that we're going to grow up to be men. And in fact, in a lot of ways even when we are men, that manhood is conditional. It's often—we often feel like it—you know, there's that phrase, "Your man card was revoked." Like, what does that even mean? Like, is there such a thing as revoking a woman card? No.

[Carrie agrees with a chuckle.]

We understand that that's nonsensical, but it's not in the case of men.

00:26:12 Carrie Host Well, Michael Ian Black, thank you so much for being on *Bullseye*.

00:26:15 Michael Guest Oh, it was my pleasure! Thank you for having me.

00:26:19 Jesse Host Michael Ian Black, everyone. His new book, *A Better Man*, is available to buy now. Support your local independent bookstore. Go get it there! You can also find Michael Ian Black on Twitter where he is maybe the smartest, funniest person on that entire dang website. Wonderful hero. And also, can I just say, *[laughing]* go—go watch the State sketch where Michael Ian Black plays the pope if you wanna know what Michael Ian Black is like when he's being dumb.

Anyway, thanks to Carrie Poppy for conducting the interview. Carrie is the host of the wonderful podcast *Oh No, Ross and Carrie*, where she and her co-host, Ross Blocher—investigate spiritual and paranormal claims by—well. By doing them! Lately, they've been learning to become exorcists. It's a lot of fun. *Oh No, Ross and Carrie*.

00:27:08 Music Transition Light synth music.

00:27:09 Jesse Host That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where you might even be able to hear the rain coming down on the windows of my home office, here. Certainly, my dog, Sissy, has heard that rain and she is curled up on my lap right now.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kauwling are our associate producers. We get help from Casey O'Brien and Kristen Bennett. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries. If you wanna hear the latest about what we're up to, you can get keep up with the show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post all our interviews there.

And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:28:05 Promo Promo Okay, Sissy, finished.

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]

