

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.
00:00:19	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. My first guest this week is writer Susan Orlean. And if I’m reading my notes right, this is her third time on the show, a rare honor—perhaps the greatest honor which can be bestowed on any writer. Susan just wrote a book called <i>On Animals</i> . It’s a collection of essays about—well, animals and how we live with them. The animals we eat, the ones we call companions, pets, movie stars, coworkers. She writes about donkeys, dogs, tigers, whales.
			Susan has been writing about animals intermittently for pretty much her entire career. She’s covered backyard chickens in <i>The New Yorker</i> . She wrote <u>the</u> definitive book on the famous dog, Rin Tin Tin. In fact, the very first thing she wrote at just six years old was an illustrated story about a pigeon. Susan Orlean is like the smartest friend you know holding court at a party, telling you amazing stories that she learned by just—I don’t know, I guess going around and asking questions.
			<i>[Music fades in.]</i>
00:01:32	Music	Transition	We’re thrilled to welcome Susan Orlean back to <i>Bullseye</i> . So, let’s get into it.
00:01:38	Jesse	Host	Dreamy, cheerful music interspersed with cheering. Susan Orlean, welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m so happy to have you back on the show.
00:01:42	Susan	Guest	I am thrilled! Absolutely thrilled.
00:01:45	Jesse	Host	What animals do you have in your life right now?
00:01:48	Susan	Guest	I have a measly array at the moment. I mean, compared to what in my fantasies I have. I have—
			<i>[Jesse laughs.]</i>
			I have two dogs and a cat.
			<i>[Jesse affirms.]</i>
00:02:14	Jesse	Host	And that’s—you know, it’s not—I mean, it’s more than maybe the average person, in terms of species. But it’s nothing compared to where I was at my peak. I immediately imagined you like drawing, in a middle school composition book, pictures of the menagerie you would like to have.
00:02:21	Susan	Guest	<i>[Laughs.]</i> Right. <i>[Laughs.]</i> I’m sure I did a lot of that. I—you know how when you’re a kid, you get good at drawing one thing. And I perfected drawing a horse. And still to this day when I doodle, I draw a horse and it’s exactly the way I learned how to draw it probably when I

was six. I think I've improved a little, but that's my doodle is a horsehead.

00:02:48 Jesse Host Were you a horse child? I was gonna say a horse girl. There must be horse boys, but there's—

00:02:53 Susan Guest There are more horse girls, I think. But there are horse boys for sure. I was definitely a horse girl. I rode from the time I was pretty young really avidly, even did a little showing, jumping—which now, when I think of it, gives me a heart attack to think that I was riding horses over these high fences. *[Chuckles.]* I mean, seriously. I shudder when I think about it. I was really passionate about riding and desperate to have a horse, which my parents just put their foot down. It was not to be. But I rode a lot and when I think now about the hours *[chuckles]* that my parents spent driving me—you know, it was probably about a half an hour away to my riding lesson. And sitting there—because there was no point for them to come home.

Luckily, my mother knitted. So, she would come out with her knitting and just park herself and I would ride for an hour and groom the horse for a half an hour and then drive back home. I mean, it was pretty generous of them to do it.

00:04:03 Jesse Host You've been writing magazine features for quite a long time. At what point did you realize that you could make an entire book out of ones that you had written about animals?

*[They chuckle.]*

00:04:13 Susan Guest You know, it's so funny! I mean, I've been writing about animals practically since I began writing. It's a subject that I've always been attracted to, because I like animals and I think that there are great stories that you can get at through animals, since obviously there's always a human story. In even the wildest of animals, there's a human story there. During the pandemic, you know, in one of these meditative moments of thinking, "What has my career amounted to?" And I think all of us have had those kind of profound assessment moments during this strange time.

00:04:59 Jesse Host Yeah, I decided to just go full cryptocurrency. I'm only doing crypto from here on out.

00:05:01 Susan Guest Yeah, well, that—*[chuckles]* that was my other option. Well, I couldn't decide whether to just go full on day drinker or—

00:05:09 Jesse Host Uh-huh. *[Laughs.]* And just lean into your troubles.

00:05:13 Susan Guest Yeah! Just go for it! But my—the one story I wrote during the pandemic for *The New Yorker* was a story about this terrible virus that is now a worldwide pandemic that is—it's a virus that kills rabbits. It was a really interesting story and the parallels with COVID were just uncanny. And of course, it made the story more resonant because we were living in the world of viruses being the only thing we were thinking about and talking about. And I thought, how interesting that in looking for a story to write during COVID, I end up writing a story about animals. Plus, I had just gotten a puppy. Like 99% of the American population I, during COVID, thought, "I need another dog."

I think something clicked then. And I started going back through my archives at *The New Yorker* and also a few other magazines that I've contributed to, and it added up to a book! It suggests, number one, that I've been writing a long time and a lot. *[Chuckles.]* And secondly, that this is a subject that I've returned to consistently.

Each story is so different that I think it hadn't dawned on me 'til I sat with them all in front of me that, oh, I do keep going back to this idea of the animal world. Because there's a huge difference in writing a story about donkeys in Morocco and tigers in New Jersey. The fact that they're both animals—the narrative arc of each story is extremely different but the idea of getting into a universe through the lens of some animal interaction is one that I've returned to over and over.

And it really—it took me one minute to just click on the archives in *The New Yorker* and my own clips and have a book length collection of stories.

00:07:30 Jesse Host  
00:07:33 Susan Guest

Did you read them all right away?

Slowly. I'm not a big reader of my own work, because I'm always afraid that I'll read it and think, "Ugh, god, why did I use that word?! And I should have redone this sentence." I'm just—I'm very critical. So, once the story's published, I think, "Don't read it again." Because now it's out in the world and I can't change it. So, for most of these pieces, sitting down to read them for the collection was the first time I'd ever read them since publication. Because a lot of them had been published quite a long time ago, I really read them with fresh eyes, which was a huge advantage, frankly. Because I did want to go through and polish them all and editing with that sort of arm's length perspective is really easier than when the story is freshly on the page.

00:08:32 Jesse Host  
00:08:35 Susan Guest  
00:08:37 Jesse Host  
00:08:39 Susan Guest

Were you surprised by themes that you saw?

Very much. Very much.

I mean, like besides just they're all about animals.

Right. But I think that the theme of what does being wild mean and what do we owe to the animals that work for us—there were definitely themes that were consistent throughout the stories. What does are interaction with animals reveal about who we are? Which, obviously, is the most compelling. I mean, what is—what is the reveal that you get about people through the way they interact with animals?

And it was—you know, my book before the library book was my biggest investment in the story of animals, which was the profile of Rin Tin Tin—the Hollywood icon. And so, I had done a lot of thinking about what our relationship with animals reveals about our humanity. And one thing that I kept going back to was that it is almost a basic component of being human is having empathy for animals.

00:10:00 Jesse Host

Well, I think a lot of the stories in your book are about the kind of awkward interfaces between our different kinds of relationships with animals. Right? Like animals wild and apart from us and as a symbol of being wild and apart from us, animals as being domestic as being our friends, and animals as being domestic as working for us and the weird interrelationships of what happens when a tiger is your pet! *[Chuckles.]*

00:10:34 Susan Guest

Right! And—right. Exactly! I think that there's certainly interesting stories about pets that are just pets and working animals that are just working and wild animals that are purely wild. I think these stories tend to go into those liminal spaces where you have animals that have straddled these categories. And actually, one of the pieces in the book that I think really captures that is the story of

Keiko, the whale who played *Free Willy*. I mean, what could be more wild than an orca? But this is an orca who was captured as a baby, lived in aquariums, was a Hollywood star, and then there was this massive effort made to repatriate him to the wilderness.

So, the entire saga of his life was that awkwardness of what's wild, what's tame, what's a pet, what's a beast that lives entirely apart from us, and what do we do with these animals that have fallen in between? And that may be the most consistent theme, is that grey area where things get confusing. What do we owe to Keiko once he's been captive, since he was a newborn and then starred in a movie? And then suddenly it's like, "Wait! He's a wild animal! We've gotta send him back into the wilderness." And that's never gone all that well either. And in the case of Keiko, it absolutely didn't go well. So, it—you know, we sort of fumble through our relationships with animals and certainly with our pets, we're pretty clear. Although even that can get confusing.

I can't tell you the number of times people have had a beloved dog who has reached a certain age and has massive health problems that will require a lot of expense and people struggle. Like, what's the moral thing to do? Should I spend \$10,000 to treat my dog's lymphoma? Or is that crazy? Am I—have I entered, you know, some weird state of overindulgence of an animal? And yet, your love for your pet is really genuine! And deep and profound! So, it's—we're confused! And we'll always be confused.

This is the equivalent of Martians having arrived on earth. It's—in many different—from many different planets. We've got these species that we think we understand, and we can communicate with to some degree. They have their own culture. They have their own language. We're coexisting with them, but we don't exactly know how to do it. And it's fantastically interesting.

00:13:53 Jesse Host

The other day, I was talking to the great Emily Heller, who hosts a show here at Maximum Fun and is also a television producer—writer and producer. And she has a dog that's getting up there and she told me that she went to the veterinarian and said [*chuckles*], "I'm rich and I don't have any kids. Make my dog live forever."

00:14:16 Susan Guest

Oh my god.

[*Jesse laughs.*]

I suspect she's not the only one. And actually, somebody just told me that a big deal Hollywood producer has cloned his dog multiple times and he has multiple houses. I don't know if this is apocryphal or real, but he cloned his dog and has one of each clone living in each house.

00:14:43 Jesse Host

Like he—like as though it were his favorite type of toaster oven.

00:14:46 Susan Guest

Well, exactly! Like the Cuisinart is really good, so let's have one in each of our houses. [*Chuckles.*] And I mean, it's so crazy! And yet, you know, I hesitate to pass judgement on what people do with their relationship with their—certainly with their pets. I feel like I'm not in a position—maybe none of us is in a position—to make a judgment. And if you feel that you wanna spend every penny you have to help your dog's health, it's not for me to judge that. It is for me, as a journalist, to write about it and to think about it and maybe present it

just as a parable about what we care about and what we're willing to do, emotionally, for other species. I think a lot of people find it easier to respond to animals than to people who have needs, but we don't keep people as pets, either.

So, it's just—it's a fascinatingly complex subject that is eternal. It's been with us—I mean, human civilization wouldn't exist if it weren't for animals. So, we have marched through time with them in the most intimate way. That's why I think it's not easy for us to detach. And there's nobody on earth who—they could be—they could hate animals or have zero interest in animals, it's still part of their life. They could be a vegan and have no interest in pets or animals, but they are part of human civilization, no matter what your personal feeling is about them.

00:16:43 Jesse Host

I mean, this didn't occur to me until I was preparing for the interview this morning, but you know, last year you became an internet celebrity because you spent a day tweeting about how drunk you were. *[Chuckles.]* And how awful the pandemic is and also how there wasn't any good candy in your house.

*[Susan laughs.]*

And one of the themes of those drunk tweets was, "How come I can't find my cat when I need it?"

*[They laugh.]*

00:17:16 Susan Guest

"I'm having an existential crisis and the cat is missing."  
And I promise you, every person who has a cat could sympathize with me. Because cats just do their thing and—you know, I was sprawled in bed having had too much rosé and feeling very sorry for myself and I thought, "Well, at the very least, my cat should hang out with me." And this is part of what makes cats so interesting, is you can't compel them to do anything. In fact, one of the funniest things I've ever seen in my life was a performance of trained cats. And if you have a cat, to see cats respond to commands is the wildest thing in the world. I mean, dogs—we all know that dogs are very trainable. I mean, my dog—you know, if I spend five minutes, I can teach him a trick or teach him some behavior. Cats forget it. I mean, they don't give a damn. And seeing this cat performance, I thought, "I have never seen anything more astonishing in my life!"

And these were just—I think they were cats from a rescue. It's called Acrocats, I think.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

And, you know, these are intractable animals who have their—absolutely have their own minds. So, seeing them perform—to me—was a little bit of a miracle and also I couldn't stop laughing, honestly.

00:18:53 Jesse Host

You know that show business adage that you should never follow children or animals?

*[Susan confirms.]*

My friend, Al Madrigal, once booked this benefit comedy show and had all these brilliant comics on it—Maria Bamford was on it, Al was on it. Lots of brilliant comedians. And there was a dog act—a non-comedy dog act in the show. It was this man who trains rescue dogs, he and his daughter train rescue dogs. He’s best known as the guy who trained the dog on *Frasier*.

*[Susan hums in understanding.]*

Who, I think, was actually a dog—like a particular dog on the run of the show. And, uh. *[Chuckles.]* I was like, “What is this? Why is there a dog act on this show? Like this is ridiculous. We’re trying to have high art standup comedy here. Maria Bamford is on this show.” And this dog act came out and did dog tricks for 15 minutes and I was like, “Okay, I guess the only form of performance I wanna see from here on out and the rest of my life is dogs doing dog tricks, because that was the greatest thing I’ve ever seen!”

*[They chuckle.]*

00:19:58 Susan Guest

Isn’t that amazing?! I mean, there’s something that you can’t put your finger on it. And you just can’t explain what it is, but there’s a marvelousness to it that is just jaw dropping. And of course, it’s amazing that people are so good at—I mean, a lot of credit goes to the trainers, but it’s still something you cannot believe. That was actually one of the really significant things in Rin Tin Tin’s popularity, is he did live performances. So, besides being a star of silent film, which is really what kicked off his career, he toured the vaudeville circuit, and he was an incredibly well-trained dog and would perform for ten or fifteen minutes and people were awestruck. And it enlarged his fame immeasurably. And I do think part of it is you see an animal in a movie, and you always think, well, there’s some way that they’re making this happen that’s not just purely a person saying, you know—giving a command and the dog understanding.

Seeing it in person, you’re blown away. And maybe that’s part of this too, is that it is a testament to the fact that we really can communicate with an animal. That across species, without the benefit of language, you can show a behavior and train an animal to do that behavior on command. I think it’s sort of incredible! I mean, when my—even when my dog sits when I say sit, there’s a little tingle that I get that we just communicated. I asked him to do something, and he did it. He understood what I meant when I asked him to do it. And feeling your—the intelligence of an animal and the intelligence of a human meeting in some space that we don’t quite know is remarkable. I mean, when I see a seeing eye dog on the street, I could sit and weep. I feel like it is so magical—and obviously it’s huge work and training and it’s not magic, but the idea that a dog will do the work is magical. The idea that they’ve listened, and they’ve comprehended, and they think, “Alright, this is my job now. I’m gonna help you cross the street or navigate the subway.

00:22:57 Jesse Host

Boy! I mean, I think that’s astonishing!  
Even more with Susan Orlean after the break. Stay with us. It’s *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:23:05 Promo Clip

**John C. McGinley:** Hey, kid. Your dad tell you about the time he broke Stephen Dorff's nose at the Kids' Choice Awards?

*[Audience laughs.]*

**Music:** Upbeat, funky rock.

**Andrew Reich:** In *Dead Pilots Society*, scripts that were developed by studios and networks, but were never produced, are given the table reads they deserve.

**Will Forte:** When I was a kid, I had to spend my Christmas break filming a PSA about angel dust. So yeah, being a kid sucks sometimes!

*[Audience laughs.]*

**Andrew Reich:** Presented by Andrew Reich and Ben Blacker. *Dead Pilots Society*. Twice a month on MaximumFun.org.

**Echoing Background Voices:** *Dead Pilots Society...*

**Sage Ryan:** You know, the show you like. That hobo with the scarf who lives in a magic dumpster?

*[Audience laughs. Scattered applause.]*

*[Music fades out.]*

**John Hodgman:** ...*Doctor Who*?

**Sage Ryan:** Yeah!

00:23:47 Jesse Host

*[Audience laughs and applauds as the clip fades out.]*  
Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is writer Susan Orlean. She's on staff at *The New Yorker* and she's the author of *The Library Book*, *The Orchid Thief*, and a biography of Rin Tin Tin, among others. Her latest book is called *On Animals*. It's a collection of essays Susan has written about humanity's complicated and messy relationships with our furry and not furry friends. Let's get back into our conversation.

In this interface between people and animals, there are a lot of different forms of relation. You know, you wrote a book about Rin Tin Tin, and he was both a dog—or a series of dogs—who had dog qualities, which is to say, they've been bred and evolved over thousands and thousands of years to be something that people think is cute so that they'll give them scraps around the campfire or whatever. Right? They have real relationships with human beings that are interactive, that are more than just their evolution to make them cute. And for those dogs who were Rin Tin Tin onscreen, they were not only enacting the things we like most about dogs, they were also enacting human things! You know, it's been a while since I've seen a Rin Tin Tin movie, but I watched a Benji movie recently.

00:25:37	Susan	Guest	<p>Benji does a lot of dog stuff! But Benji does a lot of stuff that is more human than any actual dog does. <i>[Chuckles.]</i></p> <p>Right. And you know, there was a period of time in Hollywood where dog movies were enormously popular. Rin Tin Tin was the number one movie star in the '20s when he was making these silent films. And one of the great values that an animal on film has is that they aren't human. You have a hero in a movie that's a human. I am watching that, and I think, "I don't like that guy's ears or he's a different race than I am or why is it always that it has to be a man who's the hero? Or you know, this guy—"</p>
00:26:19	Jesse	Host	<p>"Ugh! A mustache! Creepy."</p>
00:26:20	Susan	Guest	<p>Yeah! Exactly! And you have a well of feelings about other people. He looks like your dentist. He—whatever. And an animal comes on and there's a way that you can respond to the pure heroic behavior or the pure rascally behavior without projecting all of those inevitable feelings. I do think that's why there were so—I mean, there were dozens and dozens of dogs starring in silent film. Also, there was a very important fact, which is that in silent film, our capacity for language is canceled out. So, there's no reason a dog can't be a star of a movie when there's no language required. So, at that point dogs were on the same plane as people in film.</p>
00:28:11	Jesse	Host	<p>I do think, though, that there was a simplicity to the relationship and that is very true—it continues to be true that there is a simplicity that we can feel about an animal that is just harder to feel about a person, whether it's onscreen or actually in person. We come with so many preexisting feelings about other people. And you could say, well, it's more complex, it's more real, it's more—richer and so forth, but you have the opportunity to project onto an animal in a very direct way that's not complicated by all these other feelings. There's a great book by Scott McCloud, called <i>Understanding Comics</i> that is a sort of guide to understanding and interpreting comics and why they matter. And there's this sequence that illustrates why comics are aesthetically, visually abstracted that shows a protagonist with varying levels of detail in their depiction. And it illustrates completely vividly—you immediately understand why you relate so directly to Charlie Brown, who is four lines <i>[chuckling]</i> or whatever. You know? Like, in that simplicity, we are able to see ourselves and we're able to make a much more direct connection than in a depiction of a character that is more ornate or more detailed.</p>
00:29:26	Susan	Guest	<p>And I feel like animals, especially pets—and among pets, probably especially dogs and similarly but differently cats—are like the emotional equivalent of that. Like we can see the broad outlines of their emotional lives and that's enough for us to build very deep empathy.</p> <p>Absolutely! And I think that that's at the root of it: the fact that they are both individuals with real substance but that our ability to fill in is endless. You know, our ability to project. I mean, I would say most people love their pet in a more singular way. I mean, this will sound outrageous, but they have a pure, uncomplicated love for their pets whereas their feelings for their children are obviously deeper, but more complicated! Your kid can be a pain in the neck, or you can be frustrated or wish—you know, you have so many feelings about your kids. And at the end of the day, this—I'm not saying in quantity</p>



you love your pet more than you love your kid, but the simplicity of the way you can feel about the pet—it's almost a relief. It's just—I mean, it's probably because they love you back in such a simple way. They don't get mad at you. They don't fail to make their bed or—you know, it's just so unadorned.

I think this is why, you know, there's so many studies saying people with pets have lower blood pressure, because there aren't that many things in our lives that we can feel have that direct, uncomplicated delivery of emotion. There's your dog. Your dog greets you at the door, licks you, you're happy, you feel great. There you go! It's done! And whereas with your spouse, your kid, your friend, it's never so simple and it doesn't mean it's not rich and fulfilling, but it's not simple! I don't think any of us have simple feelings about other people. That would be kind of odd, I think. I mean, I don't think we're wired that way. I think we're wired to have a million receptors for our relationship with people. Whereas with animals, it's like one giant receptor. And certainly, my pets react to me in the simplest, most singular way. Which is they love me. I pick up my dog, Cocoa, who's too big to do this with—like a football. Like, the way a running back carries a football like on the Heisman trophy.

00:32:00 Jesse Host

*[Susan laughs.]*

And I also hold her upside-down with her feet up in the air. I cradle her with her feet up in the air like a little upside-down baby. I love doing that.

00:32:19 Susan Guest

00:32:20 Jesse Host

I love doing it too. I don't know how she feels about it. Mixed. Tolerant. Do you do any dumb stuff with your pets?

00:32:29 Susan Guest

I do. I don't go down the funny outfit routine at all. In fact, I cringe at that 'cause I feel like it's very undignified. But no matter how hard I try not to do this, I do babytalk them. I think it's almost unavoidable. I don't do it consciously, but I absolutely do it. I'm the queen of calling my dogs by different names and finding it unbelievably funny.

*[Jesse snorts a laugh.]*

00:33:09 Jesse Host

00:33:13 Susan Guest

And, you know, there's just—there's a lot of wordplay with my pets! I'm sorry, Susan, I'm gonna need to hear the names.

Well, my new dog—my puppy is named Buck. You can imagine, he goes by Buckles, Bucket, Mr. Buck, Baby Dog, Spot, Spreckles, Fredo, I mean, it's just endless.

00:33:29 Jesse Host

*[Laughing.]* Is there any other characters from *The Godfather* in there?

00:33:32 Susan Guest

*[Chuckles.]* Right. Really Michael. No.

*[They laugh.]*

00:33:37 Jesse Host

00:33:39 Susan Guest

And Dog Number 2. And then occasionally Dog Number 1. Cannoli.

And my husband'll say to me, "Go get Dog Number 1." And then I have to say, well, wait—I'm forgetting now which one is Dog Number 1? My big dog, who's 11 years old, her name is Ivy. And you know, every girly name. Ivory is a regular name for her. But you

00:34:14 Jesse Host know, we just call her Baby Girl, Mrs. Dog. Mrs. Dog is the most  
00:34:16 Susan Guest common. I think we call her Mrs. Dog more—and sometimes Miss  
Dog, but Mrs. Dog generally—more than we call her by her name.  
Never Ms. Dog. She's not a—  
No! We've never done Ms. Dog! She's Mrs. Dog! I guess she's old  
fashion. It's like a source of endless amusement to me. I mean, we  
so rarely call them by their actual names. My cat's name is Leo and  
we do call him Leo occasionally. But there's a lot of Kitty, Kitty Cat,  
LeLe, you know, every version of Leo you can think of. I would say  
that's a—and also, I talk to my dogs a lot. And I noted this the other  
day, which struck me as so odd but then I posted it on Twitter  
'cause I thought, "Am I crazy?" But I'm constantly saying hi to my  
dogs. Like I'll come into a room, and I'll say hi to them. And I'm not  
sure they need me to say hi.

*[Jesse wheezes into laughter.]*

It's just like this impulse where I'm—I just walk in and say hi. Or I  
see them in the—you know, we're in the same room and I greet  
them. And I was relieved that so many people said, "Same here.  
Same." There's some *[laughing]*—some weird impulse to constantly  
be saying, "Hi, dogs! Hi, dogs." All day long I'm saying, "Hi, dogs."  
So, there's a lot of silliness. And maybe that's one of the functions  
of a pet is you can be silly and goofy and babyish. And I mean, my  
god, my son is 16. He'd wring my neck if I spoke to him in baby talk  
and I do call him nicknames, but you know, I don't call him Mr. Boy.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

00:36:04 Jesse Host Although, that's kind of a good name, now that I think about it!  
Yeah, it is a good name. You wrote a profile of a dog that's in this  
book. It's a show dog, so it's a sort of weird kind of working dog.  
And a lot of these pieces about animals are about the people that  
surround them. And while there are people that surround this dog,  
the piece really is about the dog. And in fact, it is so about the dog  
that I wondered whether you decided that you were gonna write a  
celebrity profile, only it's about a dog. *[Chuckles.]*

00:36:39 Susan Guest Well, that's the way I approached it, absolutely. And I'd started  
thinking, "God, what a—what a weird life that must be, to be a top  
competing show dog." Or I should say, I wonder what that life is  
like. But I approached it exactly the way I would approach a  
celebrity profile of a—of a human. And it's really hard to write about  
animals without writing about the people around them. And a show  
dog literally has a posse. I mean, you—

00:37:14 Jesse Host There's a person in charge of chalking its white spots.  
00:37:18 Susan Guest Right! And using oil to make its nails shiny and its nose shiny. I  
mean, they are the Linda Evangelista of the dog world. They're  
really managed and handled. They have an owner, but they live  
with their handler. It really is a kind of fascinating experience. And  
part of what I was curious about is: is there still, at the bottom of all  
that, a dog? A dog who likes to chew on bones and play in the  
backyard. And so, that became part of my interest. At the end of the  
day, does he have a chew toy that he likes? Does he still have dog  
behavior even though he's worth hundreds of thousands of dollars  
and is pampered and, you know, is a stud and gets to have sex all  
the time for money?

And that was actually interesting, because I did feel like I saw him as a dog. And he was also weirdly genuinely charismatic. There was something about him, which is so funny. Because if you go into a room, you can pick out who's the movie star. There is a radiant quality to people—or maybe they become a star because they have a radiant quality. Maybe that's a better way to put it. But there's something that you feel immediately, a kind of electric field around people with that sort of celebrity. And I thought, "Well, that's not gonna be the case with a dog."

*[Jesse laughs.]*

And yet, first of all he was beautiful. Even though it's a breed of dog that I didn't have an interest in. He's a boxer and that's—I've never thought about boxers much or cared for them particularly. But he was gorgeous and in perfect physical condition and just a beautiful animal. But he had charisma. He had some ineffable quality that was star quality. That, I thought, was amazing. That was the big surprise for me, was thinking, "Oh my god! I feel the way I feel when I'm around a movie star!" I was like a little bit kind of starstruck! My god! This dog! And I completely fell in love with him. He was also a very charming, fun, cute dog. But he was a star. And it was such a fun story to do. You know, I always have a kind of soft spot for dog shows, even though they're kind of crazy and on some moral level, I'm not so sure it's a good idea.

But they are a phenomenon that is kind of irresistible. And partly, I think we all watch because the people are so much fun to watch. But you know, these beautiful dogs in all different shapes and sizes and colors—so, it was really fun to sort of dig into that world, but also to try to say, "Who is Biff? Bottomline, who is Biff? What does he care about? What does he like to do? What is he like on his time off?" Exactly the way I would have written about a celebrity.

00:40:49    Jesse            Host

I watched a video of the baseball legend Barry Bonds with his dogs—which are show dogs. I think hounds, if I remember correctly, but I might be forgetting. And I thought, here's this man whose entire public persona is defined by having cheated at the thing he was best at in the world. And when I say best at in the world, not the thing he did best, the thing he did better than anyone else in the world, even before he started cheating. And you know, some combination of very reasonable grievance and sensitivity to grievance and deep sadness and loneliness. I mean, I've never met the man, but these are the things that at least from the public you see.

And I thought, well of course he loves these dogs. Like every other person he's ever interacted with in his entire life since he was the son of a near Hall of Fame baseball player... saw him as all these things. This guy's son, a Black guy where there's rich White people around, like you know, not friendly enough. You know? Not all these things that they saw him—too rich! You know? Like all these things that they saw him. Dog sees him as a dog.

*[Susan agrees.]*

00:42:25	Susan	Guest	<p>In the way that a dog sees anyone—which is like, “Are you feeding me and being nice to me?” <i>[Chuckles.]</i></p> <p>Right! In which case, I’ll be nice to you. And I don’t—I mean, I do think, for people who grapple with... the public perception of who they are, it must be an enormous relief to have a pet who’s just go this primal relationship with you. I also think, you know, a lot of celebrities are owners of show dogs. I shouldn’t say a lot, but there are other celebrities who are owners of show dogs. And in general, I think—and I’ve always been very interested in this human desire for perfection of creating the perfect model of something. And certainly, that is the case with breeding purebred dogs. That—</p>
00:43:22	Jesse	Host	<p>And with Barry Bonds in every aspect of his life. <i>[Chuckling.]</i> Right?</p>
00:43:25	Susan	Guest	<p>Right! Right. And that—you know, and then something that’s interested me also is how do you apply that desire for perfection to living things? And that was a lot of what drove me with <i>The Orchid Thief</i>, was this fascination with people who had a passion for the perfection in something that’s inherently imperfectible—which is a living thing. You—because it could be perfect for on second, but then the nature of time enters into the picture, and you can’t—you could never freeze a living thing in its moment of perfectibility. So, by definition it can’t be perfected. And I think that’s why there’s this yearning and desire that is unrequitable. You know, to have the perfect orchid, the perfect dog. It’s never gonna happen!</p>

I mean, unless you literally stop the march of time, no living thing could ever be perfect and remain so. I mean, it would be a lot easier to collect Hummel figurines or pocket watches. You know, you get the—like a really good one and it’s not gonna change. The nature of desiring perfection in a living thing is setting yourself up for a kind of eternal pursuit. It can’t be satisfied. And I found that very interesting.

00:45:12	Jesse	Host	<p>We’ll wrap up with Susan Orlean in just a bit. Susan just moved to Los Angeles from her home in upstate New York, which meant she had to part with a lot of her farm animals. We’ll talk about how that felt in just a minute. It’s <i>Bullseye</i>, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.</p>
00:45:29	Jesse	Promo	<p>This message comes from NPR sponsor Odoo.</p>

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00:46:03	Promo	Clip	<p><b>Music:</b> Upbeat, fun music.</p>
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**Lisa Hanawalt:** I’m Lisa Hanawalt.

**Emily Heller:** And I’m Emily Heller.

**Lisa:** Nine years ago, we started a podcast to try and learn something new every episode.

**Emily:** Things have gone a little off the rails since then. *[Chuckles.]*  
Tune in to hear about:

**Lisa:** Low stakes neighborhood drama.

**Emily:** Gardening!

**Lisa:** The sordid, nasty underbelly of the horse girl lifestyle.

**Emily:** Hot sauce!

**Lisa:** Addiction to TV and sweaty takes on celebrity culture.

**Emily:** And the weirdest, grossest stuff you can find on Wikipedia.org.

**Lisa:** We'll read all of it no matter how gross. *[Laughs.]* There's something for everyone on our podcast, Baby Geniuses!

**Emily:** Hosted by us, two horny adult idiots.

**Lisa:** Hang out with us as we try and fail to retain any knowledge at all.

**Emily:** Every other week on Maximum Fuuuun.

**Music:** *Baby geniuses, tell us something we don't know!*

*[Music ends.]*

00:46:46 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Susan Orlean. Susan is the author of *The Library Book*, *Rin Tin Tin*, and *The Orchid Thief*, the last of which was turned into the acclaimed movie adaptation. She's also a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Her newest book is a collection of essays called *On Animals*. It's available now. Let's get back into our interview.

You live here in Los Angeles. For many years, you lived both here in Los Angeles and in a house in relatively rural New York where you had—among other things—chickens that you write about in the book but also other animals. You no longer live there. You sold that house last year. So, what was it like to give up the fantasy of living among animals? *[Chuckles.]*

00:47:44 Susan Guest Well, that and that really was a huge piece of that experience, because we had a lot of land and really no limit to what kind of animals we might have!

00:47:58 Jesse Host My aunt lived in a place like that, like a—she was a paramedic and firefighter. But like she lived on a kind of farmy house, and it was just like, "Oh yeah, I got some goats. Just got some goats last week. Somebody had some extra goats. So."

00:48:13 Susan Guest Well, and that is how it happens! I mean, I remember one day going to CVS to get shampoo and on the drive home, someone had a sign out saying, "Guineafowl for sale."

*[Jesse laughs.]*

00:48:28 Jesse Host And I pulled over and got some Guineafowl. And I came home—Excuse me, what's Guineafowl? I'll take four.

00:48:30 Susan Guest Right—well, that was a little bit of what it was like! I mean, I didn't—I didn't have a preexisting interest in Guineafowl. I had never thought

about getting Guineafowl. But I saw the sign, I had room. I had a coop. I got my shampoo.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

And I figured, well, the guineafowl can probably eat the chicken feed until I do a little research on what else they need. I came home. My husband said, “Oh, you get your shampoo?”

And I said, “Oh yeah, and some guineafowl.”

And he was like, “Yeah. Well. That’s what it’s like when you live in the country.” It happened all the time. And I think there’s a looot of accidental animal acquisition, whether—I mean, I ended up with ducks because my next-door neighbor was gonna be gone for the winter and they had ducks and they said, “Can you—you know, can you keep the ducks at your house over the winter?”

And I said, “Yeah! Sure! Of course!” And then they never came to get them. So, then I had ducks. I mean, there’s a lot of animal commerce in the country. And for me, a suburban girl, it was this fantasy come to life that—and I was never cavalier about it. I mean, you take on an animal, you damn well better be prepared to take care of it. And I was gonna get a donkey, ‘cause that’s my true wish is to have a donkey. And then someone said to me—

00:49:57 Jesse Host

*[Chuckles softly.]* I think we all have that wish in our heart—to have our own donkey.

00:49:58 Susan Guest

Well, I think it’s a pretty common desire! To have a donkey. And then a friend said to me, you know, “Just bear in mind, they live—they can live easily to be 30.” And I thought, woah. That’s a huge commitment. I’ve gotta think about this! Because maybe we won’t be here fulltime for 30 years. And I don’t wanna be in a position where I then have to find someone to take a donkey. And I really—I resisted a lot because of just some common sense, but it’s very—if you have the space, it’s sort of intoxicating. And you’re around animals all the time. And I started with four chickens and ended up with about 20, because there are so many beautiful breeds of chicken! And suddenly, someone says, you know, “I’ve got some—you know, bard whatever.” And you think, oh! Well, I’d kind of like one of those. They’re really pretty, or—

And to go back to your question, it was—it was really hard to make the decision to sell the house. And it wasn’t only because we love the house and love the area, but it was giving up that type of living situation where animals were going to be woven into the everyday texture of living there. It was—it was really tough. It was—I mean, it was a wise decision that we’ve never regretted. And we knew that it was the right thing to do, but it definitely was ending a particular arc that I can’t really reproduce right now, where I live.

00:51:54 Jesse Host

What are you gonna do now? When you need to see some goats?

00:51:59 Susan Guest

Well, I almost got a goat when I lived in New York. And the person who helped us take care of our property said, “Oh my god! Don’t get a goat! They’ll eat your car. They’ll eat—they’ll literally eat everything.” And he—

00:52:14 Jesse Host

*[Yelling.]* That’s why you get a goat!

00:52:15 Susan Guest

To eat your car!

00:52:16	Jesse	Host	Because they eat tin caaans!
00:52:19	Susan	Guest	Absolutely. Actually, goats are being used increasingly to do brush clearance. And so, they've become very important in wildfire prevention, because it's all that brush on the ground that really fuels fires. So—and it's very hard to clear that stuff, but not if you have a herd of goats! And there are people now who rent a herd of goats and they come in and they literally clear an area. They eat like mad. They'll eat everything. They won't eat a tree, but they'll eat all the brush on the ground.
			So, I mean, I love animals that have jobs. I'm very interested in that. And I love that there are certain jobs that animals do better than anything we can devise, technologically. Dogs are being trained to detect COVID and dogs still can detect scent better than any machine we've ever devised. I love that! I think that means that there's still something wonderful that exists in the animal world that we can't simply program past. The fact that goats may be the best tool for clearing brush—I think that's so wonderful! I love the idea of it. And they are probably better at doing that than whatever machinery you can drag into a forest and cheaper, probably, since they just wanna eat the brush. You don't have to pay them.
00:53:04	Jesse	Host	Yeah, just gotta be careful not to leave out any cans of beans.
00:53:07	Susan	Guest	Right. Or your car. We—we have to—
00:53:09	Jesse	Host	Yeah. Protect your beans.
			<i>[Susan agrees.]</i>
			Is there any type of animal that you would like to meet or pet that you haven't met or petted?
00:53:19	Susan	Guest	Oooh. No! Well, there are a lot of wild animals that I would love to play with that, because that's the wrong thing to do, will never happen. But I recently was looking at some video of giraffes. In particular, their lips that look especially soft and fuzzy. And I started having this yearning like, "I want—I wanna pet a giraffe and I want a giraffe to eat out of my hand so I can feel the lips of a giraffe." <i>[Laughs.]</i> I don't know! Maybe other people don't have these daytime fantasies. But I really just felt like I want to touch a giraffe so badly! And maybe it could happen? I mean, a giraffe that's already in captivity, I would feel okay about handling, but—
00:55:13	Jesse	Host	Susan, great news, LA Zoo—you gotta hold it up in the air, but they'll eat it right out of your hand.
00:55:21	Susan	Guest	Is that true?!
00:55:22	Jesse	Host	Yeah! You gotta go during the special time. I'm not just saying you can go out there and feed the giraffes any time you want, but there's special giraffe feeding time.
00:55:30	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	<b>Susan:</b> I'm on it.
			<b>Jesse:</b> I did it with my kid!
00:55:31	Susan	Guest	I'm on it. I mean—
00:55:33	Jesse	Host	I just changed your life, Susan.
00:55:34	Susan	Guest	Yeah! I gotta go. I gotta get over to the zoo!
00:55:38	Jesse	Host	Okay, well, Susan, I so appreciate you coming on the show. It's such a wonderful book and I think you know how much—the incredible regard with which I hold your work and you, as a person. So, thank you very much for making the time.
00:55:50	Susan	Guest	Thank <u>you</u> ! Thank you. It's a real treat.

00:55:53 Jesse Host Susan Orlean. Her book, *On Animals*, is fantastic. So great. What a delight it is to read a new Susan Orlean book. You can buy it at your local bookstore or online. Our thanks to Susan getting vax'ed up and coming into our studio for this conversation. She is the best.

Hey, listen. I don't—I wanna be clear, I do not benefit from this financially at all, but some years ago, Susan came to our conference, Max Fun Con, and she gave a talk about how to talk to people—about how she finds stories. And it was absolutely incredible, absolutely transformational for me—in terms of how I think about journalism. And I think even if you're not a journalist, you might feel the same way. She's a really remarkable reporter and person and we put that talk up on YouTube and I think Vimeo, as well. So, if you search for Susan Orlean Max Fun Con, you can watch it for free and I just think you'll learn so much.

00:56:53 Music Transition  
00:56:57 Jesse Host

Relaxed, jazzy music.

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where, at the suggestion of a Twitter user, I wrapped a piece of audio equipment I have called a Cloudlifter in copper tape, and it really knocked out the buzz I had on my microphone! And plus, now my Cloudlifter sort of looks like C-3P0 or something.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer, Kevin Ferguson. Our producer is Jesus Ambrosio. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation", recorded by the group The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it.

00:58:02 Promo Promo You can also 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.  
**Speaker:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*[Music fades out.]*