

00:00:00	Jesse Thorn	Promo	Hey, it's Jesse. NPR is doing its annual survey to better understand how listeners like you spend time with podcasts. So, please help us out by completing a short, anonymous survey at <a href="https://www.npr.org/podcastsurvey">NPR.org/podcastsurvey</a> . That's all one word. We would really appreciate your help to support NPR podcasts. That's <a href="https://www.npr.org/podcastsurvey">NPR.org/podcastsurvey</a> . All one word. Thanks.
00:00:25	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:26	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="https://www.maximumfun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:38	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.
00:00:45	Jesse	Host	<i>Bullseye.</i> I'm Jesse Thorn. My next guest this week is Keith Phipps. He's a writer who's worked for <i>The AV Club</i> and <i>The Dissolve</i> . Once, long ago, he was a regular contributor to this show! He specializes in pop culture, mainly. So, perfect for us. Keith just wrote his first book. And the subject of that book is one that is close to his heart: Nicolas Cage. And I mean, how do you write about Nicolas Cage? He is one of the most enigmatic actors in recent memory. In his over 40 years onscreen, he has performed in unforgettable classics, in arthouse indies, in blockbuster action films, in direct-to-video horror, and literally everything in between! <i>[Laughs.]</i> Every kind of thing!
			To the people on Reddit who call him the one true god, he is a human meme. He's perfect for freakout compilation videos on YouTube and cringy tribute art. To his critics, he's an eccentric goof chasing his past glory. And to his fans, he's an actor who loves to work and never fails to give his all, no matter how small or weird the part. It's not a career that fits neatly into any one box. And his isn't a story you can tell with a simple biography. So, Keith Phipps didn't write a simple biography. Instead, he wrote <i>Age of Cage: Four Decades of Hollywood Through One, Singular Career</i> . The book looks at Nic Cage's career as a story about the film industry at large. It's the saga of a risk-taking actor—maybe the most risk-taking actor ever—finding work in an environment that is less and less conducive to risk taking.
			Anyway, I'm really thrilled to welcome Keith Phipps back onto our show to talk about all this. Let's get into our interview about the one and only Nicolas Cage.
00:02:40	Music	Transition	Relaxed synth with a steady beat and low distortions.
00:02:44	Jesse	Host	Keith Phipps! Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . It's nice to see you, bud.
00:02:47	Keith Phipps	Guest	It's nice to see you too! It's been a while.
00:02:49	Jesse	Host	Congratulations on the book. Why did you want to write an entire book about Nicolas Cage?
00:02:55	Keith	Guest	Um, you know, if there was a moment of spark for it, it was seeing the movie <i>Mandy</i> . I was—I mean, I wanted to write a book. I was fishing around for like a big idea. And I wanted something that I could kind of explore a big chunk of movies. And I saw the film <i>Mandy</i> , and I realized this was someone who'd been with me most of my really conscious movie-going life. I first saw <i>Raising Arizona</i>

when I was in junior high. And it was around the same time I really started paying attention to directors and movies and what's good and what's not—you know?—beyond just simply, "That was fun." I mean, I had kind of been reading critics for a while, but like this was my first Nicolas Cage movie, my first Coen Brothers movie, my first Holly Hunter movie, John Goodman, you name. These are people who I would—whose career I would kind of keep an eye on and follow.

And Cage kind of provided a throughline to everything which I've watched and then later written about movies. And it's such a fascinating career. And I figured, if I'm going to spend a year watching the movies of one actor, it should be Nicolas Cage. Because that's fun. Right? I mean, you're never really gonna be bored. Um. So, that's kind of how—that was where the idea came from. To kind of road-test the concept, I watched a couple of sort of like, you know, "Let's find the least apparently appealing Nicolas Cage movies around." So, I chose a couple of direct to VOD things. And like, they weren't good movies, but he is interesting in them. He's—you know, this is someone who—you know, as I saw with *Mandy*—was still trying to do new things, you know, decades into his career, still capable of surprising me.

It was from there a kind of—you know, it was—you know, we were off. It was—it was—and it was a pleasure to do.

00:04:36 Jesse Host

So, let's talk a little bit about where Nicolas Cage came from. You know, I think a lot of our listeners might know that his surname at birth was Coppola, but he had an unusual relationship to that name. Were the circumstances of his childhood what people might imagine from a guy who is part of a legendary screen dynasty?

00:04:58 Keith Guest

Not really. I mean, to say he was from modest means is probably underselling it, but he would talk about how he was the guy at Beverly Hills High that didn't have the fancy car, that was surrounded by people who were wealthier than he was. And when he went to live with Francis Ford Coppola and his family for a small stretch, I think that was a shock to him as well. He likened himself to Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*. Sort of like, you know, envious of these possessions and wanting to be a part of that and that kind of motivating him early on.

So, no, I mean, he's not—yeah, he wasn't from the—he wasn't to the manor born, I guess is the way to put it. He's definitely born into a storied family, and his—you know, he received a lot of his film education from his father, who was a professor and an author and sort of a—kind of a renaissance man of sorts. But he wasn't really born into great privilege.

00:05:57 Jesse Host  
00:06:00 Keith Guest

His family of origin was also pretty profoundly unstable. Mm-hm. Yeah, his mother had some pretty profound mental illness that left her institutionalized for large stretches of his childhood. It sounds like a really difficult upbringing. And I mean, he was very close to his father, but also seems like at times a very fraught relationship, as well.

00:06:17 Jesse Host

So, how did he end up becoming an actor? You mentioned Beverly Hills Highschool. That's a place where lots of famous people—famous people to be and children of famous people who were—go

00:06:40 Keith Guest to school. Did he go there with the idea that he could become an actor? Or was it something that happened when he was a teen? You know, I don't know for sure—you know—that he ever went to that high school out of a desire to become an actor. I think it might just be where he was zoned in. That was outside the scopes of my research, Jesse. But *[laughs]*, certainly it was a—

00:06:54 Jesse Host Did he apply to any charter schools?

*[Keith laughs.]*

00:06:59 Keith Guest Did he consider private? What about parochial? Well, see, if you look at his report cards from fourth grade, you'll see an uptick. Yeah. So, that I couldn't tell you, but it's certainly a high school that produced many actors, had a very influential acting coach, and—you know—that helped kind of set him on his way. And you know, the proximity to the film industry didn't hurt either. I mean, you could leave class and audition.

00:07:22 Jesse Host He has a quality, to me, of always appearing to be trying to figure out what's going on around him. *[Laughs.]* Often, just because of his kind of pretty, sad eyes. It has a melancholic tinge. But like, even when he is making his boldest choices, it always feels like there is a little bit of him that is a little scared or a little confused, or a little worried, that gives him—even acting completely goofy—a very unusual dimension.

00:07:59 Keith Guest Yeah. When you said “big sad eyes”, I immediately went to the movie *City of Angels*, which is pretty good. I underrated it at the time. I really enjoyed it—appreciated it more when I revisited it. It is a quasi-remake of *Wings of Desire*, costarring Meg Ryan, in which he plays an angel who falls in love with a woman. And I think a figuring-it-out quality is really well represented in that film. And I think you might be onto something there, as well. There's kind of a—I guess maybe “searching” is a word that we're looking for here.

*[Jesse agrees.]*

00:08:39 Jesse Host That is a nice—it's a nice throughline to what he does. I think—I think you cracked it. Jesse, you should write a book about Nicolas Cage. *[Laughs.]* I watched this movie for this show—years ago, I watched this movie called *Dog Eat Dog*, 'cause I was interviewing the screenwriter and director, Paul Schrader. Nicolas Cage is in this movie with Willem Dafoe. And there's a moment in this movie where they're on this—I mean, this is the most graphically violent film that—one of the most graphically violent films I've ever seen. Certainly, outside of the like context of those kinds of movies where the point of it is how much blood you can spurt. And there's this moment in the film that's like towards the climax—like, three quarters, four fifths of the way through the movie, they're about to have a deadly battle. And there's just this moment where Nicolas Cage asks Willem Dafoe if he wants to go get a bagel?

*[They chuckle.]*

And what was amazing to me about it, 100% I believed that Nicolas Cage's character would like to get a bagel.

00:09:36	Keith	Guest	Yeah, that movie's a tough set. I would say that, as an admirer of Paul Schrader in general, I'd love to see Cage and Dafoe and Schrader do another movie together, because that one's kind of rough. The thing I remember most about that movie is at one point there's a strip club in it where the marquee says, "Taylor Swift lookalike contest." Or something like that. And it's like this is maybe too much of auteur's touch. Um. <i>[Laughing.]</i> Too much of Schrader in this film.
00:10:05	Jesse	Host	More of my interview with Keith Phipps about Nicolas Cage, after a quick break. Stay with us. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:10:14	Music	Transition	Relaxed synth with a steady beat.
00:10:19	Jesse	Host	It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I'm talking with Keith Phipps. Keith is a writer whose work has appeared in <i>The AV Club</i> , <i>The Dissolve</i> , on <i>Uproxx</i> , and elsewhere. He just wrote his first book, <i>The Age of Cage: Four Decades of Hollywood Through One, Singular Career</i> . It's an anthology of work about one of the most fascinating actors in the game, Nicolas Cage. Let's get back into our conversation.

Let's hear a clip from *Raising Arizona*, from 1987. This is the film that transformed my guest, Keith Phipps, into a Nicolas Cage fan—or at least a Nicolas Cage follower—for the decades to come. If you haven't seen it, he plays half of a childless couple who steal one of another family's five children—one out of a set of quintuplets. And in this scene, Nicolas Cage's character—whose name is H.I.—has had a run in with two escaped fugitives. He then brings them home, and his wife, Ed—who's played by the wonderful Holly Hunter—is obviously not super thrilled that he's brought home two criminals at 2 o'clock in the morning.

00:11:32	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:11:33	Clip	Clip	<i>[Cackling.]</i>

**H.I. (*Raising Arizona*):** Hey, I'd like you to meet Gale and Evelle Snokes. Fine a pair as ever broke and enter! *[They cackle.]* Boys, this here's my wife.

**Gale:** Ma'am.

**Evelle:** Mrs. McDunnough.

**Ed:** Kind of late for visitors, isn't it, hun?

**H.I.:** Oh, well, yeah, hun. But these boys just got out of the joint. And we gotta show a little hospitality!

**Gale:** Well, now, H.I.! Looks like you've been up to the devil's business.

**Evelle:** Hey, is that a him or a her?

**Ed:** It's a little boy.

**Gale:** Got a name, does he?

**H.I.:** Uh, so far we've just been using Junior.

00:12:18	Sound Effect	Transition	<b>Ed:</b> We call him Junior. Music swells and fades.
00:12:19	Jesse	Host	<i>[Laughs.]</i> That movie is absolutely wild! You mentioned that cartoon-like quality. What's the difference? Why can Nicolas Cage do that and not just seem like a jerk?
00:12:40	Keith	Guest	I mean, it's kind of— <i>[sighs]</i> I kind of think the same quality that makes his desire for a bagel relatable? That there's always that vulnerability to it. And that one, he just really is all vulnerability. I think some of his best performances also are people who are trying to do the right thing. I mean, I think there's a weird connection between that movie and <i>Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call - New Orleans</i> , which was another favorite of mine. But these are people who are really trying to be—the characters are trying to be better than what they are. And he really captures how much of a struggle that is, as well.
			And also, I mean just—he's just charming. I mean, you listen to—even just listening to that scene, you can—you kind of feel like this sort of— <i>[sighs]</i> you know, desire to keep his buddies happy and to appease his wife and keep everything—you know—working despite the fact that everything's on the verge of falling apart.
00:13:37	Jesse	Host	So, this is a guy who—by the time it's like the mid-'90s—has been various versions of—you know—lunky, hunky young man. He's been a sweet romantic lead. He has been a weirdo. How did he end up starring in huge action movies?
00:14:00	Keith	Guest	It's still kind of baffling to me, as someone who was watching his career at the time that that happened. I remember <i>The Rock</i> —when <i>The Rock</i> came out, it was just kind of—you know, I didn't—you know, 'cause it's hard to put my head around Nicolas Cage appearing in an action film, and yet here we have this period in his career where that's what he did, primarily. And I think—you know, it was—and he was hugely successful at it. I think it kind of helped define him for the viewing public for a while.
			How it happened? I'm not sure still. I think it just in some ways—you know, Jerry Bruckheimer and Michael Bay taking a chance on Nicolas Cage as an action star in <i>The Rock</i> .
00:14:44	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:14:45	Clip	Clip	<b>Director Womack (<i>The Rock</i>):</b> Goodspeed. If you read me, come in.
			<b>Music:</b> Hopeful orchestral music fades in.
			<b>Stanley:</b> This is Goodspeed.
			<b>Speaker:</b> Are the hostages alive?
			<b>Stanley:</b> Every one of them.
			<i>[Cheers.]</i>
			<b>Director Womack:</b> Good Speed! It's Womack. What about Mason?

**Stanley:** *[Beat.]* He's dead, sir.

**Director Womack:** How? When?

**Stanley:** Just come and get me.  
Music swells and fades.

00:15:17 Sound Effect Transition

00:15:18 Keith Guest

And it's kind of a fascinating performance, 'cause in some ways he's playing a character who is just resisting being an action star. I mean, he's—he is a nerd. I mean, he's someone who does not wanna tote a gun, doesn't even use actual curse words until late in the film! *[Chuckles.]* It's almost in some ways kind of semi-autobiographical, in that sense, where he's someone who probably himself questioned how he fit into the action film world, playing someone who was not great at fitting into the action film world. And yet, the film was a huge hit and people love it.

00:15:54 Jesse Host

So, Liam Neeson is an unusual action star. He's become one of the greatest action stars of our current time, but you can see it because he has an extraordinary face and body. You know? He is incredible to look at. He's very handsome in a very distinctive way, and has a—you know, a very unusual and distinctive kind of physicality to the way he moves. And he's also—of any performer in the history of performance—perhaps the most able to perform convicted-ness. You would never question anything that Liam Neeson said he was up to. *[Chuckles.]* You know what I mean? Whether it was—whether or not it was getting his daughter back. Right?

*[Keith agrees.]*

Nicolas Cage is a lot of different weird things. So, what of those weird things made him an action star? Or was he just in some action movies that people liked because he was in an action movie that people like a year previous?

00:17:01 Keith Guest

Hm. I mean, you have to give him some credit for—'cause they're all really unusual performances. And *Con Air* is—either he's capturing the spirit of that film, which is just, "Let's try anything," and I think he's very good at let's try anything mode. I think he fits right into that. I think that movie's kind of all over the place, ultimately. And a little wearisome. But I mean, it was back-to-back to back. I mean, *Con Air* and *Faceoff* came out within weeks of each other in 1997. And like suddenly he was inescapable. And I think it's maybe kind of a trap.

I think—I think Neeson, in some ways, has gotten himself stuck. I look forward to new Liam Neeson action films. I don't know that I watch all of them, 'cause there's so many. But it's like, you know, he is a big, sad man with a gun. You know? That's what he does now, and I think he's—you know—I don't think it's a controversial opinion to say that he could do more than that. *[Chuckles.]* And his past work has been more than that.

You know, I think Cage probably could've kept doing action films and probably made one too many. I think *Gone in Sixty Seconds* is the one that really doesn't work from that action phase, and I think it was not as fondly remembered or as—you know, definitely wasn't

			as embraced by the public at the time. But as to why he fits it—I— you know, I think it's kind of why he works in other films as well. I mean, he's delivering—he's doing what he does. He's delivering a strong performance that's kind of not necessarily what you would expect.
00:18:32	Jesse	Host	So, how did he exit that action phase to the extent that he did?
00:18:38	Keith	Guest	I mean, part of it I think was diminishing returns. Like—you know, <i>Gone in Sixty Seconds</i> wasn't as big of a hit. I think—I suspect, you know, it was partially boredom and a little bit of fear of winding up in that trap. I mean, his reunion with John Woo— <i>Windtalkers</i> in 2002—is definitely not <i>Faceoff</i> part two. It's this really harrowing war movie that—where the violence is unpleasant, and you leave it feeling that war is the worst possible thing you can do. But I mean, I think the aughts are a little odd for him. There's kind of a restlessness to it. Some of my favorite performances of his are from aughts. You know, <i>Adaptation</i> . I think <i>Matchstick Men's</i> a really good, underrated movie.
			But there's not a consistent quality to what he's doing and he's not doing any one thing. He's kind of bouncing around, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. I mean, when he does come back— you know, I think the kind of other wing of his action career is the <i>National Treasure</i> films, which I think are a lot of fun, but they're certainly not as hard hitting and more kind of big adventure movies than what we think of as action movies, what he did before. I think that was a nice spot for him.
00:18:57	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:18:58	Clip	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Inspiring orchestral music.
			<b>Riley (<i>National Treasure</i>):</b> No idea what you said.
			<b>Benjamin:</b> It means if there's something wrong, those who have the ability to take action have the responsibility to take action. <i>[Beat.]</i> And I'm gonna steal that.
			<b>Riley:</b> <i>[Chuckles awkwardly.]</i> What?
00:20:21	Sound Effect	Transition	<b>Benjamin:</b> I'm gonna steal The Declaration of Independence. Music swells and fades.
00:20:22	Jesse	Host	What's a Nicolas Cage movie from the era of miscellaneous Nicolas Cage films that—even if it isn't a great film—has a particularly great performance in it? Or even just particularly great moments in it? Like when he goes to get that bagel in <i>Dog Eats Dog</i> .
00:20:42	Keith	Guest	<i>[Laughs.]</i> Well, I mean—you know, beyond <i>Mandy</i> , which I think has a big enough cult that it doesn't need calling out, which was just a terrific film, I think—there's a movie called, <i>Mom and Dad</i> , which came out in 2017, directed by Brian Taylor, half the team behind the <i>Crank</i> movies and the <i>Ghost Rider</i> sequel, which isn't great but you know probably they work together pretty well. And it's definitely a not-for-all-tastes sort of film. It is a darkly comic, graphically violent horror movie whose premise is basically there's a community where parents are seized by this uncontrollable urge to kill their children.

He plays half of a married couple, opposite Selma Blair. I mean, it's a—I think it's a fun movie. The over-the-topness of the staging and the horror appeals to me. But you know—and Blair's very good too—but leaving all that aside, there's a scene in the middle where it's a flashback that's—where his character delivers this monologue about the disappointments of middle age, how parenthood can make you feel kind of ambiguous about—how you can feel ambiguous about being a parent. Like, it's not always—you know—a joyful experience getting older, things not working out the way you planned to, that is just so touchingly delivered. I think it's one of the best moments in his filmography.

00:22:12 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:22:13 Clip

**Brent (*Mom and Dad*):** Not exactly what I had in mind as a young dude, you know! Bright future! Everything in the world to look forward to! I mean, I was gonna grab the WORLD by the [censored] and SQUEEZE, boy! [Screaming helplessly.] Damn it, I remember that kid I used to be like it was four [censored] minutes ago! My feet barely touched the ground back then. My kill ratio was nine out of ten. I was 100% sex. And that guy, in a million years, could never have pictured this tired mother [censored] turned out to be. Fat, bald, cottage cheese [censored], the bluebonnet butter waistline with hair coming out of my ears and my nose. And my salary went from \$145,000 to \$45,000! [Dissolving into furious tears.] Yeah! Building a [censored] man cave. That's right. YOU'RE RIGHT!

00:23:03 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:23:04 Keith Guest

That's one I'm not sure a lot of people have seen that's worth seeking out. With the caveat that—you know—be prepared. Buckle up. There's some rough stuff in that film. Perhaps not quite *Dog Eat Dog* rough, but rough.

00:23:17 Jesse Host

One of the movies that you write about in the book that I have great fondness for—in the pantheon of films which are as bonkers as a bonkers Nicolas Cage performance can be—is *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call - New Orleans*, which is a Werner Herzog movie that doesn't have that much—I don't know actually what it has to do with the movie *Bad Lieutenant*.

00:23:41 Keith Guest

It has the title.

[Jesse agrees and they laugh.]

00:23:47 Jesse Host

And there are rights issues. But I think that's it. It is really—it is one of the more bonkers movies I've ever watched. Certainly, one of the more bonkers pretty successful movies that I watch. It works pretty well. [Laughing.] Tell me about that movie and how Nicolas Cage ended up in a Werner Herzog movie that was a pseudo-sequel to the movie *Bad Lieutenant* that didn't have much to do with the movie *Bad Lieutenant*.

00:24:12 Keith Guest

Yeah, I mean I think it was a matter of someone owning the rights to the name and it's a spiritual companion piece. And there's talk of doing more *Bad Lieutenants* in other cities with other international directors. So, be on the lookout for the *Bad Lieutenant* cinematic universe, I guess.

[Jesse chuckles.]



But I mean, you know, what an inspired pairing, Nicolas Cage and Werner Hertzog. I mean, two people who are very willing to try things on the fly. Like, you know, shoot things—you know, shoot a dying alligator low to the ground and have—you know—hallucinations of lizards and things like that. I mean, there is a lot of insane stuff in this movie, but I really find it incredibly moving, as well. I mean, it's one of my favorite of his performances, and really one of my favorite of his films, because it does go to those extremes. But there's something that tethers the performance and the film to some really—you know—dark, truthful explorations of addiction, of—you know—vice in the sense of someone who is just—has grown accustomed to living a selfish life without regard for others who kind of has a couple—who still has goodness in him and tries to develop that and become a better person and how hard that is.

I mean, this movie had a bonkers climax, which I won't spoil, that leads to this epilogue that's so shot through with ambiguity as to where this guy is going next and a final shot that is just completely, breathtakingly mysterious. I mean, what Nicolas Cage's character is trying to convey and the expression he wears in the last shot of the film—I couldn't tell you, but I'm moved by it every time I see that film.

00:25:56 Jesse Host

I once did an interview with Eva Mendez for television—for an Independent Spirit Award special that I was hosting. And Eva Mendez had not done a ton of independent movies at the time, but she was presenting the nominations. So, I'm sitting there with Eva Mendez—perhaps the most attractive person I've ever been in the same room with; it was very intimidating—and I'm like, "What am I gonna ask?" And she's very bright. Like, she's a sharp tack. And I'm like, "What am I gonna talk to Eva Mendez about?" I'm like, "Okay, I'm gonna talk to her about *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call - New Orleans*."

*[Keith chuckles.]*

Which she stars opposite Nicolas Cage. And I don't think I've ever seen someone's eyes light up like that. She was so thrilled to talk about *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call - New Orleans* and Werner Hertzog. And I just imagine like what an amazing thing that was *[laughing]*—these people all together making this bananas movie. And look, I'm not gonna reveal the climax either, but I'll say that there's some breakdancing in it!

00:26:58 Keith Guest

*[Laughs.]* There is some breakdancing in it. Not Eva Mendez, we should probably clarify, if anyone wants to tune in to see that. Yeah, she's really good in that. She has really good taste in projects that she's—and it was a reunion, because she's also his girlfriend in *Ghost Rider*. Which—this is—probably a little more going on in this one than in *Ghost Rider*, but clearly she enjoyed working with Cage, or at least enough to reunite with him on this.

00:27:23 Jesse Host

To what extent is Nicolas Cage batty? As a person in the real world. To what extent were you able to determine whether the stuff about dinosaur skeletons and stuff reflected just a guy who was rich and wanted to buy himself some nerd stuff and to what extent it was a genuinely eccentric man?

00:27:47	Keith	Guest	I don't know. I mean, I think it takes a certain amount of eccentricity to spend that amount of money on dinosaur skulls. But I also think if I had that amount of money, I might be buying dinosaur skulls too! It sounds cool, right?! I mean— <i>[laughs]</i> .
00:27:59	Jesse	Host	I would love to have a dinosaur skull. It would be awesome. I would settle for a sabretooth tiger skull. That's not even—that's after dinosaurs!
00:28:07	Keith	Guest	I can't claim any great insight into who Nicolas Cage is as a person. The sense I get, though, is someone who's fairly sincere about those sorts of things. I mean, you know, he enjoys—you know—buying macabre properties in New Orleans that ultimately he has to sell. And enjoys just kind of traveling the world and experiencing it. I honestly don't—I think the one real throughline I get, reading interview after interview with him—is that he is really into acting. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> So, there is—you know, that might be the real passion, but at the same time, if you're acting career gives you—if you have a fascination with weird stuff and you suddenly have a lot of money, I think—you know—you're buying dinosaur skulls and such.
00:29:03	Jesse	Host	Even more with Keith Phipps still to come. After a short break, he watched a looot of Nic Cage films while writing this book. More than anyone ever has? <i>[Laughs.]</i> It's possible! He'll tell me how doing all that research changed his opinion of the actor, and how he makes sense of his resurgent career now. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:29:27	Promo	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Relaxed ukulele.

**Jesse Thorn:** Hi, I'm Jesse Thorn, the founder of Maximum Fun. And I have a special announcement. I'm no longer embarrassed by *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. You know, for years, each new episode of this supposed advice show was a fresh insult, a depraved jumble of erection jokes, ghost humor, and—frankly this is for the best—very little actionable advice. But now, as they enter their twilight years, I'm as surprised as anyone to admit that it's gotten kind of good. Justin, Travis, and Griffin's witticisms are more refined, like a humor column in a fancy magazine. And they hardly ever say “bazinga” anymore. So, after you've completely finished listening to every single one of all of our other shows, why not join the McElroy brothers every week for *My Brother, My Brother and Me*?

00:30:20	Music	Transition
00:30:25	Jesse	Host

*[Music fades out.]*

Chiming synth with a steady beat.

I'm Jesse Thorn. This is *Bullseye*. My guest is writer Keith Phipps. He's the author of the new book *Age of Cage: Four Decades of Hollywood Through One, Singular Career*. Let's get back into our conversation.

Your book ended up roughly coinciding with a movie called *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent*, which came out this year—recently—and is, you know, the highest profile Nicolas Cage film of the last few years—in quite a while, at least as far as I can see. It is a self-aware movie in which he plays himself. So—or a version of himself. Were you worried about this movie *[chuckling]* when you were getting ready to write this book? When it hit the trades that he was gonna do this?

00:31:14	Keith	Guest	<p>I was so worried about this movie. I don't think anyone worried about this movie that wasn't involved in the movie as much as I did. <i>[Laughing.]</i> Because it was announced while I was starting to write the book. And like, you know, it's a reflection on his career. It's a reflection on his past roles. And in some ways, on changes in Hollywood. It's like, "Well, that's kind of my book. I hope this isn't like a—you know, bad." <i>[Laughing.]</i> You know? "I hope this isn't attempting something like what I'm attempting in movie form that's not good." I was somewhat relieved when I read the screenplay that I found myself chuckling with it. And then, when I saw the film itself, I was quite relieved. And I really enjoyed it.</p> <p>I think it's a really fun movie, and I think it's kind of what we've been talking about, where Cage is playing sort of a cartoonish version of himself, and that reflects in some ways some of his—you know, his career and also some of the difficulties he's experienced over the last decade. There's sort of nods to his spending habits, etc., etc., but that's not the whole movie. Because he's really getting at the character. It's kind of what we've been talking about before. There's a real sadness and need to quote/unquote "Nicolas Cage" in this film. Also, I mean, it works as a buddy comedy. He and Pedro Pascal are really fun together. I would watch—even if you take out the meta elements, it's kind of a—it's a fun comedy. You know, it's a fun buddy comedy. Those two are really good together.</p>
00:32:40	Jesse	Host	<p>Let's hear a buddy moment. So, the idea of this movie basically is that Nicolas Cage is a Nicolas Cage-like movie star named Nicolas Cage who gets a million dollar offer to go to a rich guy's birthday party. They end up having that—as you mentioned—that buddy relationship. And in this scene, Cage is talking with Javi, who's played by Pedro Pascal, about favorite movies. And Javi says one of his favorite movies is <i>Paddington 2</i>. In fact, he says that is his third favorite movie, specifically. Cage hasn't seen the movie, so they sit down and watch it together.</p>
00:33:17	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:33:18	Clip	Clip	<p><b>Nicolas Cage (<i>The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent</i>):</b> <i>Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Paddington 2.</i> Connect those dots. I mean, I don't wanna be a snob, but—</p> <p><b>Javi:</b> I cried through the entire thing. It made me want to be a better man.</p> <p><b>Nicolas:</b> BULL[censored]. C'mon! <i>[Laughs.]</i></p> <p><b>Music:</b> Tender piano.</p> <p><b>Nicolas:</b> <i>[Sniffling.] Paddington 2</i> is incredible.</p>
00:33:41	Sound Effect	Transition	<p><b>Javi:</b> I [censored] told you. Music swells and fades.</p>
00:33:43	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Laughs.]</i> Now, we've been adding dimension and shade and light to our portrait of Nicolas Cage for this entire interview, Keith. But I wanna know what's a movie that has a part where Nicolas Cage goes totally bonkers that you love the part where Nicolas Cage goes totally bonkers?</p>

00:34:07	Keith	Guest	I mean, the gold standard for Cage freakouts is <i>Vampire's Kiss</i> .
00:34:12	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:34:13	Clip	Clip	<p><b>Peter (<i>Vampire's Kiss</i>):</b> What could be easier?! It's all alphabetical! You just put it in! The right file! According to alphabetical order! You know, <i>[mockingly]</i> A! B! C! D! E! F! G!</p> <p><b>Speaker:</b> Peter.</p> <p><b>Peter:</b> <i>[Getting more riled up.]</i> H! I! J! K! L, M, N, O, P!</p> <p><b>Speaker:</b> Peteer!</p> <p><b>Peter:</b> <i>[Escalating to shouting.]</i> Q! R! S! T! U! V! W, X, Y, and Z!</p> <p><b>Speaker:</b> <i>[Inaudible.]</i></p> <p><b>Peter:</b> <u>HUH!</u>?! <i>[Screaming.]</i> That's all you have to do!</p> <p><b>Speaker:</b> Very good. You know your alphabet.</p> <p><b>Peter:</b> I haven't misfiled <u>anything!</u> Not once! <i>[Voice cracking.]</i> Not <u>one</u> time!</p> <p><b>Speaker:</b> I'm <u>sure</u> that you didn't.</p>
00:34:49	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:34:50	Keith	Guest	<p>I mean, everything else—in some ways—echoes of that. And—but I do feel like, you know, some of the nuance—when you watch the YouTube clips, it's nothing but freakout moments. You lose a lot of the nuance there. I mean, the one no one's seen or not that many people have seen that's full of big Cage moments is <i>Zandalee</i>. Which <i>[chuckling]</i> at one point, he covers himself in black paint—uh—which apparently was his idea for an improv, and the directors went with it. And boy, that's remarkable. I mean, the one—but one that I think actually is a fantastic piece of acting that's also a Cage freakout is in <i>Matchstick Men</i>, where he's someone—his character has just been driven to wit's end by not being able to fill a prescription for his medication.</p> <p>And he tries to cut the line. He tries to talk to a pharmacist. He's—you know—in a heightened—he's worked himself into a frenzy. And he finally just loses it on someone else. He's cut in front of in line, and—you know—says words that probably are not repeatable on the air. But it is a—it is a truly—it is a true highlight among Nicolas Cage freakouts.</p>
00:36:04	Jesse	Host	You've watched sooo many movies in your long career as a film writer and critic. And you went back and watched a hundred-and-whatever Nicolas Cage movies to write this book. How did your understanding of the arc of film over that 40-year period that Nicolas Cage has been making movies change from watching all of these Nicolas Cage movies? What did you learn about the broader world of film from watching 100 Nicolas Cages?
00:36:39	Keith	Guest	You go back and you read enough essays and film has always been dying. You can read it—you know—from any given year about how the film—you know, films are doomed as an art, because of

whatever. That said, I'm not optimistic about mainstream filmmaking these days. On the one hand, I'm of two minds, 'cause I'll—you know, it's a family tradition. We go see the new Marvel movies. My daughter is so into that right now. And I like that stuff too. It's a lovely thing to share. But I—wow, do I wish there were more going on, that there was more than big, franchise films coming out.

And you know, I think the beginning of Cage's career kind of catches the tail end of the '70s—obviously it is the '80s but he—you know, he's working with Francis Ford Coppola. There's more possibilities. It's not just completely blockbuster-driven at the beginning of his career. And you know, he finds a way to find interesting—when he does shift over to blockbusters, it's gonna be pretty interesting. I mean, *The Rock*—like it or not, it's distinctive, and it's groundbreaking, and it looked like no other film that came out at the time. In some ways, I feel like if you're gonna sit out—if you're a movie star that needs to sit out a decade or, you know, sit on the sidelines making smaller, low budget films that mostly go direct to VOD. You know, the teens aren't a bad one to sit out.

It is a decade in which mainstream Hollywood filmmaking became increasingly focused on big franchises. And I know we're still in that phase, but at least maybe—I don't know. At some point, maybe we'll find a way out of it. I'm not sure. But there is—you know, if you watch—if you follow the career, it is—you know, Cage's career is Cage's career. It follows an eccentric path, but the background noise is of a increasingly risk-averse filmmaking system. And I wonder where we go from here with that.

00:38:36	Jesse	Host	Well, especially if you're Nicolas Cage, I can't imagine a less risk-averse Hollywood person on earth [ <i>laughing</i> ] than Nicolas Cage.
00:38:49	Keith	Guest	Right?! And you know, he's going to be Count Dracula in this movie coming out next year, called <i>Renfield</i> . It's his first, big studio film in a while. So, you know, we'll see what happens with that!
00:38:58	Jesse	Host	Well, Keith, I sure appreciate you taking the time. It's always great to see you. I really enjoyed the book. So, thanks, pal.
00:39:05	Keith	Guest	Jesse, thanks so much for having me. It was nice to talk to you in person again.
00:39:08	Jesse	Host	I know. Like humans.
00:39:10	Music	Transition	Buzzy synth with a steady beat.
00:39:12	Jesse	Host	Keith Phipps. His new book is called <i>Age of Cage: Four Decades of Hollywood Through One, Singular Career</i> . You can buy it now at your local bookstore. Keith and his former <i>AV Club</i> and <i>The Dissolved</i> colleague, Scott Tobias, also collaborate on a great newsletter, which you can find on Substack. It's called <i>The Reveal</i> .
<i>[Music fades out.]</i>			
00:39:37	Music	Transition	Playful synth with a syncopated beat.
00:39:39	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> , created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Today at my house, I fixed my toilet after my five-year-old got angry, [ <i>trying not to laugh</i> ] said she was gonna pull the pipe out of the wall and did. Oh boy.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio

and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Tabatha Myers.

It is a small pipe! But she really—wow.

We get booking help on this show from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music's by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme music is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team for sharing it with us, along with their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us in those places and follow us, and we will share our interviews with you there, as well. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:40:40 Promo Promo

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

00:40:47 Jesse Promo

*[Music fades out.]*

Thanks for listening to *Bullseye*. NPR is doing its annual survey to better understand how listeners like you spend time with podcasts. Please help us out by completing a short, anonymous survey at [NPR.org/podcastsurvey](http://NPR.org/podcastsurvey). All one word. That's [NPR.org/podcastsurvey](http://NPR.org/podcastsurvey), all one word. Thanks