

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.
00:00:13	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.
00:00:22	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. My next guest is Shea Serrano. He’s a writer. He’s covered basketball and culture for ESPN, <i>XXL</i> , <i>Grantland</i> , <i>The Ringer</i> , and more. He took a kind of unusual path to making a career out of writing. He was born and raised in Texas, and he was originally a teacher who’d write in his spare time. It wasn’t until he was in his 30s that he became a full-time journalist. He wrote his first book around then, too. <i>The Rap Yearbook</i> is a <i>New York Times</i> bestseller and a critical favorite. When he and I talked in 2017, he’d just followed that up with <i>Basketball and Other Things</i> .  <i>Basketball and Other Things</i> is kind of like a late-night party discussion with friends, but—you know—written out. There are cool illustrations, too. Serrano talks about stuff like great basketball villains, which NBA players get remembered for the wrong reasons, and he asks the important questions. Like who’s in the disrespectful dunk hall of fame? He’s since followed up <i>Basketball and Other Things</i> with <i>Movies and Other Things</i> , a similar book with movie rankings, hot takes, and icebreakers. And just this past month, he’s expanded his illustrated series with another entry: <i>Hip-Hop and Other Things</i> .  <i>[Music fades in.]</i>  Anyway. Let’s get into it. My conversation with Shea Serrano. Thumpy synth.
00:01:40	Music	Transition	Thumpy synth.
00:01:45	Jesse	Host	Shea Serrano, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . It’s fun to have you on the show.
00:01:48	Shea Serrano	Guest	Oh man, I appreciate y’all having me.
00:01:50	Jesse	Host	So, whyyyy basketball? What’s so great about basketball?
00:01:55	Shea	Guest	What’s so great about basketball!?
			<i>[Jesse laughs.]</i>  Basketball’s the best sport on the planet, Jesse! How dare you? How are you ask me that question? I’m a big baseball fan. So, I mean—I’m a basketball fan, too. But I love baseball. So, that’s why I’m allowed to challenge you with that question.
00:02:01	Jesse	Host	I’m a big baseball fan. So, I mean—I’m a basketball fan, too. But I love baseball. So, that’s why I’m allowed to challenge you with that question.
00:02:10	Shea	Guest	Oh my goodness. You know what? One time this guy asked me if I wanted to play baseball. Like, a kid in my neighborhood was like, “Yo, do you wanna go play a baseball game with us?”  I said, “Yeah, yeah. That sounds like a lot of fun. Let’s go try that.” And then I was just standing there for like three hours. And I was like, “When does the game start?”

And he said, “Yo, good game, today.” Like I was playing in outfield. Turned out and that was the end of the game for me.

00:02:34 Jesse Host So, let’s talk a little bit about how you started your career as a writer. You didn’t go to college to be a writer. And from what I gather, you basically didn’t aspire to be a writer. Is that true?

00:02:49 Shea Guest Those are both correct statements, sir.

00:02:52 Jesse Host So, how did you end up becoming a writer? Because becoming a professional writer is, spoiler alert, very difficult.

00:03:00 Shea Guest *[Laughs.]* Yeah! Yeah, you’re telling me! So, what ended up happening was I was a teacher at the time. I was a teacher. My wife was a teacher. And the plan was we were getting married. We were gonna have kids. We were going to live the rest of our lives as teachers for 35 years or whatever. And that was going to be the life we built together. And then, she got pregnant with the twins. And about four months into the pregnancy, we had—this is a longer story than needs to be told here. But basically, the short version is she had a bunch of complications with the pregnancy. She ended up having to go on bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy, which ended up being about four months.

So, she’s on bedrest for those four months. And we were trying to survive on just a teacher’s salary, which—when I was in Houston that first year, I think I was making like \$44,000 a year or something. Which is not nearly enough. You know? Every two weeks, you’d get a check for \$1,200 or something. So, I—we needed extra money. And I was trying to figure it out. And I was applying to places like Target or Pappadeaux. And I went on an interview or two, and both times, the person interviewing me told me that they weren’t gonna hire me because I already had a fulltime job.

So, I needed something I could do in my own time. So, I was literally at home googling “work from home jobs”. And writer was one of them. And I was like, “Bang. I’ll just be a writer then, I guess.” And Houston is a big city. There are a bunch of little, tiny newspapers that maybe only people in Houston know about that just cover certain neighborhoods. So, I started grabbing all of those, contacting those people, telling them—you know, I’m a new writer in town and pitching them ideas. And you know, it took maybe a couple of months for me to get my feet under me and figure out what I was doing. But once I did, I saw I was able to make a little bit of money doing this. You know, \$20 here, \$50 there. Whatever. And I was able to just build it up. And over that period of time, my wife had the boys. And she was taking care of them, and then she was also like supporting me in this new writing career that I was trying to do all of the sudden. And she was probably my first actual editor, because she was much more intelligent than I am. She actually had experience in writing. So, she would like edit the pieces or show me what I was doing wrong.

And after about a year, we figured out we were able to survive on just the teaching plus writing. So, we made the decision that she was gonna stay home with the kids, and then she started a photography career, which she eventually was able to chase down. And I was teaching and writing. And that was—you know, eight/nine

years ago. And it's just grown ever since then. 'Cause it's a slow—I mean, it's easy for me to tell you that story now. But again, this was over the course of several years.

00:05:48 Jesse Host When I was in my mid-20s, I got offered a chance to write a story for the alternative newspaper in Santa Cruz, California—where I'd gone to college. And I wrote the thing, and I had never written anything besides term papers or whatever. They just published it.

00:06:12 Shea Guest *[Laughing.]* And I realized—

00:06:14 Jesse Host *[Chuckling.]* I like where this is going, already. I like where this is going, already.

00:06:40 Shea Guest And I realized that like the alternative newspaper in Santa Cruz is basically just like this one guy. It is an odd situation where I guess if you just go up to that guy and pitch him something and you seem like you've got a head on your shoulders, he might just be like, "Yeah, okay." And by the time you turn it in, he doesn't have any choice to fill the space but to run it.

*[Laughs.]* That's 100% exactly what happened. The very first thing I wrote was for a neighborhood newspaper called *The Near Northwest Banner*. Not even *The Northwest Banner*. *The Near Northwest Banner*. And it was this—it was this older woman and her husband, and they were literally printing it up in their garage with like some machine that you turn.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

00:07:03 Jesse Host And then they would hand them out in the neighborhood.

00:07:06 Shea Guest A print—Shea, are you talking about a printing press?

00:07:13 Jesse Host A printing press! She had her own printing press in the garage! Her name was Francis. I'll never forget her. She was the nicest person I ever met in my life.

00:07:21 Shea Guest One day, Gutenberg bursts into the living room and tells his wife, "I've invented a machine! A machine that you turn!"

00:07:43 Jesse Host But she was really nice, and she let me write about the Astros. And then I wrote a thing about the Texans. And yeah, I was able to go from there. But—and what's funny is you mentioned going pizza place to pizza place, that's how I found that particular newspaper. It was in a kiosk in a neighborhood pizza parlor that I just happened to grab. And there you go!

00:08:07 Shea Guest One of the amazing skills that you have as a writer is you seem to have—and its in evidence in this basketball book—an indefatigable ability to like generate fantastical scenarios and premises for genuinely interesting, semi-listy things.

00:08:10 Jesse Host *[Laughs.]* That's a very specific skill to have, I think.

It is! I mean, but like one of the interesting things I think about the way that you do it is that you come up with something that is genuinely personal and specific in a format that, in the rest of the internet, is driven by the most banal baloney in the world. Right? Like, you write the interesting version of the boring thing that is internet listicles. Which is usually just like, "Here's seven things you recognize." Right?

*[Shea laughs and agrees.]*

Meanwhile, you're writing who is basketball's—who are the greatest basketball villains of all-time, that involves a complicated scenario where you're defining the exact nature of basketball villainy.

[Shea confirms.]

00:09:08 Shea Guest So, do you just like sit down and write down a list of 100 things and cross 75 of them out or what?  
That's basically how it goes, yes.

[Jesse laughs.]

You start out with some general ideas, and then you just drill it down to get as specific as possible. Like, so the thing you're talking about here is one of the chapters in the basketball book. And I had—originally, that started out with—it was just a phrase. I wrote—I had in my notes “tower of villains”. And I had no idea exactly what that was going to be until I sat down to start writing on it. And I knew I didn't want it to only be a list of like the meanest basketball villains or whatever, because that's been done already. So, let's approach it from a different angle. And yes, let's spend a lot of time talking about what it is that makes a basketball villain a basketball villain, and what it is that makes him or her a good villain or a bad villain.

When you get lost in those sorts of creases or folds, that—to me—is always a little more fun than just a straight-line conversation. So, generally that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to take one broad idea and then get very, very specific with it, and then hopefully—in that specificity—we have some, you know, general thoughts or ideas that everybody can grab onto. I don't know if—does that make sense?

00:10:18 Jesse Host Yeah. Let's talk about the specifics of that list, for example. What constitutes a great basketball villain?

00:10:26 Shea Guest Oh man, well, there was a bunch of bullet points I laid out in there, but for example, one of the things when you're looking at who a top tier villain is they have to sort of enjoy that role. So, you take somebody like a Reggie Miller, who seems to sort of covet being called a villain and doing villainous things. In other arenas, he always seemed to perform better in like a New York or a Chicago or something like that, against those teams. So, you really just wanna try to identify those traits. So, that would be one of them.

Another one is he has to be a player who plays a fair amount. Like, you can't just be a Dahntay Jones on the bench. You've gotta be out on the court. You've gotta be a Steph or a Lebron, at least somebody in the action.

00:11:15 Jesse Host Even more still to come with Shea Serrano. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:11:22 Music Transition Relaxed synth with a steady beat.

00:11:27 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. My guest is writer Shea Serrano. He's covered sports and pop culture for *The Ringer*, *Grantland*, and more. He's also the author of the books *Basketball and Other Things*, *Movies and Other Things*, and the new *Hip-Hop and Other Things*. Each one is an illustrated collection of questions, rankings, and thoughts designed to provoke deep discussion and, perhaps, some silly arguments. When we talked in 2017, Shea had just released *Basketball and Other Things*. Let's get back into our conversation.

Let's talk about fictional basketball players. This is another of the lists in your book: the greatest fictional basketball players of all time, ranked. This is like almost a parody of a *Grantland* or *The Ringer* article.

- 00:12:13 Shea Guest Yeah. Though—so, this one is not set up in that specific fashion. It's a—if we're doing an NBA draft and we're drafting, you can only pick players from basketball teams from TV shows or movies, then let's figure out what order all of those guys or girls would go in. But yes, I love this—I love this conversation.
- 00:12:33 Jesse Host How many of these TV shows and movies had you seen and how many did you have to see in order to write this piece?
- 00:12:42 Shea Guest I had probably seen about 70% of them, and then I had to watch the other 30%. It was a long time. That was—that's a three-part chapter. It's about 9000 words total.

[*They laugh.*]

- 00:13:01 Jesse Host Like, it's a lot. And I spent several weeks working on that section. You've thrown so much of your life down that hole!
- 00:13:04 Shea Guest Yes, it was way too much time. That's a big part of the reason I was late. I turned the book in several months late, because it was always way more researched than I was anticipating. But yeah, once you get started in that, you wanna do a good job. You don't wanna leave stuff out. You wanna make sure you have considered all of the parts that need to be considered. It's a lot, man.
- 00:13:24 Jesse Host How long did you work as a teacher while you were writing?
- 00:13:28 Shea Guest Nine years I was a teacher. And nine years I was writing. Maybe—probably eight years I was writing, of those nine years teaching.
- 00:13:37 Jesse Host So, how long ago did you quit teaching?
- 00:13:40 Shea Guest 2015, July of 2015. I'll never forget it.
- 00:13:44 Jesse Host I mean, was that like when you became a bestselling author, or—?
- 00:13:50 Shea Guest [*Laughs.*] I mean, that's not very long ago, man.  
[*Laughs.*] I know! I get the sense when I talk to people that they think I've been a fulltime writer for very long, when that isn't the case at all. I left teaching in July of 2015, and I was working at *Grantland* at the time, and that was—so, July from 2015 is when I started fulltime writing. But then, in October ESPN shut down *Grantland* and that was the end of my like fulltime writing career. It was four months. Until I started again at *The Ringer* in July of 2016. But yeah, *The Rap Yearbook* came out in October of 2015, so I quit right before *The Rap Yearbook* came out.
- 00:14:30 Jesse Host You taught some of the toughest kinds of students to teach. I mean, you taught like English language learners in middle school. Like, there's no more challenging teaching job. I mean, just hanging out with middle schoolers that much is quite a challenge.

[*Shea confirms.*]

- 00:15:03 Shea Guest I mean, we all went to middle school. It's hard. It's hard to be 12. But those are like—that's like—you put yourself in the toughest positions you possibly could be in.
- 00:15:03 Shea Guest Right. I wasn't thinking about it that way. And I don't wanna make it seem like I was in the middle of this combat zone. Like, I was teaching the English language learners and the special ed and the behavior groups, but I also had regular ed or a couple of pre-AP classes over those nine years. And it was always a situation where

those kids, as long as they feel like you wanna be in the classroom with them, then your life ain't that hard! If they know that you care, then they start to care too. And it does take a little while in the beginning. My first year, I just got skewered. It was a total disaster. I was horrible at teaching. But I could feel myself every morning wanting to like figure it out. I'm gonna eventually figure this out if I stick with it, is how I felt.

And then, once I started to get good at it and I was like, "Oh man, I had some kids who did well this year." Or several years into it. I'm like, "Oh, I'm getting invitations from kids who are graduating high school or who got into a college." Like, that was a big thing for me. So, yeah. It wasn't like just this terrible situation, like a *Dangerous Minds* gunshots going off around the classroom. We were just in a—we were in south Houston. It was a predominantly Hispanic area. The school was like 98/99—I mean, 98/97% Hispanic. It was a Title 1 school. Most of the kids were on free lunch. But that was the neighborhood—the Houston version of where I grew up in San Antonio. I was in that same middle school and high school, and it all felt very natural when I was in there. And like, it felt like that's where I was supposed to be.

00:16:41 Jesse Host

A lot of the teachers that I remember most vividly, from the urban public high school that I went to, were the ones who just seemed like they didn't consider it a burden that I was in their class.

00:16:58 Shea Guest

Yeah! Exactly! That's exactly what it is! You want a kid—you make a kid feel like he's wanted, or she's wanted, you give a kid a nickname. If you give a kid a nickname, that kid will run through a wall for you. That's all it is. Because they know you care at least a little bit about them. You—I start calling a kid Laser or whatever. Turbo.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

Turbo. And I was taking names from like old movies I saw. Oh, these two kids are always hanging out together. You guys are Turbo and Ozone. And they're like, "Why are you calling us Turbo and Ozone?" I try to explain it's from an old breakdancing movie, didn't make any sense to them. They don't know what breakdancing is. But they knew their names were Turbo and Ozone. And then, after that, I never had any issues with Turbo and Ozone ever again. And I was like, "Oh, wow, this is—like, these little things work."

00:17:45 Jesse Host

*[Chuckling.]* Were all the nicknames from *Breakin'*?

*[Shea laughs.]*

00:17:54 Shea Guest

Were there some *Crush Groove* nicknames at all?

No, I had them—I had them from all over, man. You would just take a name and switch it up a little bit. But I very—in my head, I can still see Turbo and Ozone. Also, I had a Harvard and Stanford—these two girls one year who were always sitting together at their own little table. And I was like trying to encourage them to try a little harder. I started calling them that. And then, like at the end of the year, we had our graduation ceremony, and Harvard's dad came up to me and was like almost in tears. And he was straight up like, "Hey, nobody has ever given my kid—like, you started calling her

Harvard, and then all of the sudden she started talking about maybe she's gonna go to college."

And it was like, woah. You don't realize it until maybe the end of it, but all that little stuff adds up. Like, that's why you remember the teachers you remember. I wanted to be that guy in the community. And I screwed up a bunch of stuff. I don't wanna make it seem like I was just this phenomenal teacher who never messed anything up. I messed a lot of situations up. I was just trying to do more good than harm.

00:18:57	Jesse	Host	Are there parts of your life as a teacher that you miss?
00:19:02	Shea	Guest	Yes! Absolutely! Teaching was I think the most meaningful job to me that I ever had, and it ended up being way more of like an emotional commitment than I had anticipated going into it. I knew I always wanted to be a teacher when I was growing up.
00:19:16	Jesse	Host	<i>[Interrupting.]</i> Hold on, Shea. Hold on, Shea. You're telling me that teaching was more emotionally meaningful than ranking the greatest fictional basketball players of all time?
00:19:26	Shea	Guest	<i>[Laughs.]</i> Yeah. Yes, Jesse. Just keep on poking me in my eye about it. Yes. That is true. It was really—it was like a touching experience to be in a classroom with those kids for as long as I was. You know, you don't—you don't—maybe because I went into it, I was really young. I was 24/25 when I started, maybe 26. And you don't anticipate the way that you connect with these kids or the way that what happens to them sort of affects you. So, yeah, I think about it all the time. Especially when you get around the big things. Like, anytime August rolls around, that's always a tough time for me, because I know the teachers are going through the—you know, getting ready for the new year. Or any time you get around from like March through April, which is the big testing period. Like, I can feel myself leaning toward that world in those moments. I think about it a lot, man.
00:20:22	Jesse	Host	We gotta take a quick break. When we come back, Shea Serrano and I will share our thoughts on rapper J. Cole. Look, my apologies to fans of J. Cole. He's—look. J. Cole is good. Of course, he is. Take it with a grain of salt. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:20:42	Promo	Clip	Music: Breezy, upbeat music.

**Kevin:** Hi, it's Kevin, from Max Fun HQ. This year, for Giving Tuesday, we're inviting you to a super fun tarot event. It's got some of your favorite Max Fun hosts, and it's for a great cause. Join *Depresh Mode's* John Moe, Carrie Poppy of *Oh no, Ross and Carrie!*, Stuart Wellington from *The Flop House*, Tom Lum from *Let's Learn Everything*, and Ellen Weatherford of *Just the Zoo of Us*. Your suggested \$10 donation supports National CASA/GAL and their work advocating for kids in foster care. That's this Giving Tuesday, November 29<sup>th</sup> at 5PM Pacific, 8PM Eastern. Check out [MaximumFun.org/events](http://MaximumFun.org/events) for more information and tickets to the Tarot Show with John Moe.

*[Music fades out.]*

00:21:27	Music	Transition	Chiming synth with light vocalizations.
00:21:31	Jesse	Host	You're listening to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is writer Shea Serrano.

I don't want our conversation to end without addressing a really important issue in your life and career.

00:21:45 Shea Guest  
00:21:46 Jesse Host *[Chuckles.]* Uh-oh.

Something that—something that I, myself, think about a lot. And something that a lot of people have reached out to me about on the internet and suggested that I talk to you about.

00:21:59 Shea Guest This is—this is a setup. I feel like it's not gonna be important at all. But go for it.

00:22:03 Jesse Host It's the rapper J. Cole.

00:22:07 Shea Guest *[Takes a deep breath.]* Yeah. I knew it was him. I knew it was him. It was either him or LaMarcus Aldridge. One of those two guys.

00:22:13 Jesse Host The superstar rapper, J. Cole.

*[Shea affirms.]*

00:22:21 Shea Guest How do you feel about J. Cole?  
J. Cole is the greatest rapper of our generation. That's how I feel about it.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

How do you like that, Jesse?! No, I—there are two parts of J. Cole, for me. There's J. Cole as a human, who by all accounts is a phenomenal person and just absolutely getting into Heaven immediately.

00:22:43 Jesse Host He seems like a very nice man. He's like one of the first star rappers ever to be proud of the fact that he went to college.

00:22:53 Shea Guest Yeah, he's great. He seems like a lot of fun and just a sweet guy. And a buddy of mine has worked with him on this project or that project, and he tells me the same thing. Like, in private, he is just as sincere and thoughtful as he appears to be in public. So, that part, there's no arguing there. J. Cole is a great person. And I would never try to deny the way he makes other people feel. He gives people this very strong sense of self, which I appreciate and respect.

But as far as his music goes, Jesse—as far as his music goes, I'm gonna—I'm gonna—I'm gonna leave that to you.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

I don't wanna listen to those—I don't wanna listen to those songs, Jesse. They're just not exciting. You know when you listen to a song and you, even if you don't know anything about it, you just feel it in your chest. You're like, mmm! Like, I get where this guy's coming from or I understand what this woman is singing about, like I feel it. I don't—I never have ever gotten that feeling with J. Cole. He's like the human version of the last 30 minutes of a comedy movie where they try to get very serious and philosophical, but they're just saying a bunch of regular things. Like, that's what J. Cole's music feels like to me.

*[Music fades in.]*

00:24:09 Jesse Host I've used up all my time, but I'm very grateful—I'm very grateful that you came on the show. It was really nice to get to talk to you.

00:24:16 Shea Guest Thank you for having me on.



00:24:17	Music	Transition	Upbeat, funky music.
00:24:19	Jesse	Host	Shea Serrano. His book, <i>Basketball and Other Things</i> , is a ton of fun. Go check that out. His latest in the <i>Other Things</i> series is <i>Hip-Hop and Other Things</i> . And it includes a lovely essay about Missy Elliott's <i>Supa Dupa Fly</i> . You probably need that in your life, right?
00:24:37	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:24:39	Jesse	Host	Bright, buzzy synth. That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. I will say, basketball, not my favorite sport. But I do love the way they dribble up and down the court.  Our 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. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Thank you, Dan. Our theme song is "Huddle Formation" by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team and to their label, Memphis Industries.  <i>Bullseye</i> is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us in all those places, follow us. We will share with you all of our interviews. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.
00:25:35	Promo	Promo	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> <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.