

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.
00:00:14	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.
00:00:21	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s Bullseye. I’m Jesse Thorn. So, how many episodes of television has Shonda Rhimes written? Maybe a few hundred? A <u>thousand</u> ? She’s created seven shows. That includes <i>Scandal</i> , <i>Private Practice</i> , and <i>Grey’s Anatomy</i> . <i>Grey’s Anatomy</i> , of course, one of the longest running primetime television shows ever. Pretty much everything that Shonda Rhimes has made has been watched and adored by millions. She’s gotten awards, praise, we’re talking about Emmy nominations, NAACP awards, the Writer’s Guild, GLAAD. Michelle Obama is a fan. I could go on, but we can agree Shonda Rhimes, beloved and accomplished. I mean, just imagine the amount of work that all of that took? The number of days and nights staring at a blank screen, then an outline, then a draft—rewrites, shoots, writers’ rooms. Over and over and over again, literally hundreds of times.
			Now, what if I told you that despite all of those accomplishments, all those accolades, Shonda Rhimes is only just now starting to feel like a success. That’s what she tells our correspondent, Jarrett Hill, in this next interview—among a bunch of other stuff. It’s kind of astonishing <i>[chuckling]</i> to think that there is basically no level of success at which you are immune from insecurity. Shonda Rhimes’s newest project is <i>Queen Charlotte</i> . It’s a spinoff of <i>Bridgerton</i> , which was produced by Rhimes and her company, Shondaland. Like <i>Bridgerton</i> , <i>Queen Charlotte</i> is a period drama set in the Regency era. But instead of the Bridgerton family, this show’s about the queen—her rise to prominence and her rise to power.
			We’re excited for you to hear this interview. I did wanna give you a heads up, Jarrett and Shonda recorded this a few weeks before the Writers’ Guild of America went on strike. If you’re listening to this segment and wondering why we are not talking about that—well, that is why. Anyway, here is a clip from <i>Queen Charlotte</i> ’s pilot. In this scene, a young Queen Charlotte is set to marry a man she hasn’t met. It’s an arranged marriage. She’s traveling with her brother, Adolphus, to meet that new husband-to-be and she doesn’t seem thrilled about it.
00:02:46	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:02:47	Clip	Clip	<b>Adolphus (<i>Queen Charlotte</i>):</b> You give the appearance of a statue.
			<b>Charlotte:</b> Statues are works of art. Art is beautiful.
			<b>Adolphus:</b> Art can be beautiful to gaze upon. You are ridiculous to the eye.

**Charlotte:** Is there a point?

**Adolphus:** You have not moved an inch in six hours.

**Charlotte:** I am wearing lyonnaise silk incrustated with Indian sapphires working with overlay of 200-year-old lace. Apparently, too much movement can cause the sapphires to shred the lace. If that were not enough, the gown sits atop a bespoke underpinning made of whalebone.

**Adolphus:** Whalebone?

**Charlotte:** Yes. Whalebone, brother. The bones of whales. Whales died so I could look like this. All the finest corsets are whalebone. You would know that if you knew anything. If you'd ever paid attention, you would also know that's the problem with whalebone is that it is rather delicate and also very, very sharp. And of course, I'm in the height of fashion, so this corset is quite snug. So, I give the appearance of a statue, ridiculous to the eye, but that is because I cannot move.

00:03:44 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:03:45 Jarrett Hill Host

Shonda Rhimes, welcome to Bullseye. How are you?

00:03:48 Shonda Rhimes Guest

Good! Excited to be here.

00:03:50 Jarrett Host

Thank you for being here. I got to check out the first couple of episodes of *Queen Charlotte*, and the first thing I kind of wanted to ask you about *Queen Charlotte*—before we really talk about you and your career in writing—I'm curious about how the vision for *Queen Charlotte* began for you. I know that *Bridgerton* obviously—it's the origin story of Queen Charlotte. But Queen Charlotte has really kind of developed into her own kind of—her own series and her own story. So, how did that really get started for you? How did you start seeing it?

00:04:17 Shonda Guest

You know, Queen Charlotte as played by Golda in *Bridgerton*—the actress in *Bridgerton* was so dynamic and so interesting to me, and I felt like I was always drawn to watching her, and I wanted to see more, even when we'd leave scenes. And it really made me start to think about how she grew into that power, how she became such an amazing, three-dimensional person. And also, the real story of Queen Charlotte and King George was—we're sort of doing fiction inspired by fact, but that real story was so exciting to work with.

00:04:52 Jarrett Host

In one of your interviews recently, I was watching a lot of different interviews, and you talked about owning power. And you actually just used that language now, talking about Queen Charlotte. And I remember watching Queen Charlotte in *Bridgerton* and thinking she was so interesting and unexpectedly funny and there was like—there always seemed like there was a little bit more there, beneath the surface, and I always kind of wanted to be like, oh, I definitely wanna know what she's thinking there or how she came up with that or what that was.

Can you talk about how you see Queen Charlotte as a figure, as a person?

00:05:23 Shonda Guest

Oh my gosh. Especially when we meet her when she's young, she's very naïve. But she still has a sense of—as you could hear in the

			clip—she still has a sense of very strong duty and what’s been done to her. She understands that her power doesn’t exist yet. And watching her sort of come into it was really fun. But she does! She has this amazing sense of humor. She’s—you know, very witty and quick with a word and knows what she wants. She just doesn’t know how to get what she wants when we first meet her.
00:05:55	Jarrett	Host	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> Talk to me a little bit about how you wrote this. I will tell you that I, as I—I’ve been a journalist for 20 years, and I started screenwriting a number of years ago, and the way that I started doing that was by taking your Masterclass, actually.
			<i>[Shonda reacts with surprise.]</i>
00:06:20	Shonda	Guest	That was a really transformative moment for me. So, getting to kind of understand a bit of your writing process was illuminating, and I’m curious about how you attacked this story. For me now, I think I’m in a process where instead of—you know, writing lengthy outlines and doing a bunch of stuff, I really just start writing and see where it takes me. You know. I do all my research. I know what world I’m in. So, I feel educated about that. And then, I just start writing and truly see where the story goes. I try to follow the characters to where they should go, which is so much fun for me. And I’ve been doing it that way for, I don’t know, 15 years or so? But it’s the only way I can write at this point.
00:06:52	Jarrett	Host	I remember in your Masterclass, you said something that was really, really freeing for me. I’ve always gotten down on myself about getting started and having a difficult time of like, okay, it’s time to write. Let’s do it. And in the Masterclass, you said something to the effect of, “My writing process is getting a glass of water, getting some headphones, turning on some music, getting on Facebook, and then maybe Instagram, and then maybe Twitter, and then maybe opening the document, and then looking at this—”
			And I was like, “Oh my god, I’m not crazy. Like, I’m not doing this wrong.” Talk to me a little bit about what you’ve learned about writing, even in the last decade as you’ve kind of gone from one network to another.
00:07:34	Shonda	Guest	You know, for me, the process is still almost the same. You know, you think that—I don’t know. I always had this like magical idea that, you know, you just sit down and at some point the writing just comes out. That does not happen still. I do have all these little rituals that I have to do. Now, it’s like maybe I need to watch 20 minutes of this comedy or something before I write. I add things on. But as long as I end up writing that day, I feel okay, and I feel successful. It’s really hard to get started for people. It’s really hard to get started for me, even now. I procrastinated writing the beginning of <i>Queen Charlotte</i> for I don’t know how long. Seriously. But I always feel like once I’m writing, once I’m in it, I’m swimming and I’m good.
00:08:16	Jarrett	Host	You referred to writing as being your food and as your air and like as, essentially, lifeblood for you. Does it still feel that way all these years in as a writer? Or has that started to shift and change? Or how do you think about that?
00:08:31	Shonda	Guest	No, it definitely still feels that way. I mean, I have kids and a life, but the reality of it is when I’m sitting down and I’m writing, it truly is like no other feeling for me. I feel whole in a way that I just don’t feel in

other places. So, yeah, it's still my food and my air. And I hope it continues to be that, because when writing stops being fulfilling, then I'm gonna have to stop doing it.

00:08:56 Jarrett Host I watched *Queen Charlotte* and immediately thought to myself—even with *Bridgerton*—and thought how is it different for you now, writing at Netflix and doing—you know—content for Netflix. And obviously, you can cuss and have—you know—different kinds of sex scenes maybe. But I'm curious about how you approach it differently, if you approach it differently, thinking about Netflix and the streaming audience as opposed to a network audience.

00:09:20 Shonda Guest You know, I always used to say that when I was at the network, I was writing a specific kind of show like, *Shondaland* for that network. And now that I'm at Netflix, there's no sort of brand that I'm creating for their specific audience, because their specific audience is the world, which is fascinating. So, I no longer have to worry, "I am going to speak to my audience correctly or in a way that they're gonna wanna hear it?" There's a lot of freedom there.

00:09:49 Jarrett Host You referred to writing *Grey's Anatomy* initially as laying track for a train that's already coming down, [*chuckling*] that's on its way. Does it feel that way for you with *Queen Charlotte* or is it a little bit different now that you don't have like a network air date coming and stuff like that?

00:10:06 Shonda Guest You know, I used to be responsible for 70 hours of television a season, which meant that—I mean, literally every eight days, there's a new script for three different shows. Every eight days, there has to be a new script that comes out so that they can start to prep it for production. That's what I meant by laying track for a train, because that train really is coming no matter what, and you have to have the track there. The scripts must be there. This is very different. You know, you're making—you know, *Queen Charlotte* is, I think, six episodes. So, you're making six episodes and you can sort of write them completely, see what the whole picture is, and then hand it over to production.

00:10:50 Jarrett Host There's no—you know, and once production starts, you don't have that frantic, "Oh my god, what's next? How'm I gonna do this next?" You get to enjoy the process of making something.

00:11:02 Shonda Guest How has your life changed since we've seen you kind of transition to Netflix and really releasing different kinds of shows? How has it been different for you, as a person?

00:11:27 Jarrett Host I think before I didn't necessarily have time to enjoy what I was doing—you know—while it was happening or enjoy any accomplishments when they came. Because I was so busy. Now, I feel like I get to sit back a little bit and enjoy, and I feel like I have a lot more creative time to write, which—that was what I was supposed to be doing in the first place, but I found myself doing all kinds of other things that weren't writing. And now, writing is the focus. It's wonderful.

00:11:31 Shonda Guest What does enjoying it look like?

00:11:31 Shonda Guest To me—I don't know. I have time to take walks and think about things. I have time to read novels and think about things—things that—I mean, I think when I left the network, I had 127—I counted—books piled up around my bedroom that I had been planning to read.

[Jarrett chuckles.]

			I never had the time to read. So, now I spend time reading. I go to the library. I get to really have life. And honestly, you can't be creative when a life of your own isn't sort of happening. You can't—what are you gonna write about when you're not in the world? So, now I have time to really be in the world.
00:12:06	Jesse	Host	We're gonna take a quick break. When we come back, more with Jarrett Hill and Shonda Rhimes. It's Bullseye, from <a href="https://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:12:15	Music	Transition	Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.
00:12:20	Jesse	Host	Welcome back to Bullseye. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, our guest is Shonda Rhimes. She is, of course, the creator of <i>Grey's Anatomy</i> , <i>Private Practice</i> . She's the producer of more than a dozen other television shows. Her latest creation, <i>Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story</i> . Interviewing Shonda is our correspondent, Jarrett Hill. Jarrett is a journalist and the cohost of the podcast <i>FANTI</i> . Let's get back into their conversation.
00:12:47	Jarrett	Host	When I started <i>Queen Charlotte</i> , there's pretty quickly a conversation about race that starts. And in researching you and like knowing your work over the years, I've heard you talk about always reading the news and being very tapped into what's happening in the world around you. And as a journalist, I have had <i>[chuckling]</i> a difficult time staying plugged into the news over the last few years. It's like burnt me out. How are you thinking about like staying engaged with the news and trying to stay current as you're also writing these stories? 'Cause there's definitely some moments in <i>Queen Charlotte</i> where I was like, "Hm. I feel like I could maybe see some inspiration coming from there."
00:13:28	Shonda	Guest	How do you think about news consumption and staying current? For now—and I think this started sometime during the pandemic—I stopped for a while. I pulled back, because the news really was just increasingly more disturbing and depressing. And, you know, I didn't wanna sort of sink in that. I wanted to be entertained. I wanted to watch something that made me feel good. And so, that's where that kind of writing for <i>Bridgerton</i> came from. But more importantly, now I really sort of limit it. Like, I have one thing I read. I have a five-minute little NPR morning thing that I listen to. And that's it. Because otherwise, I'd make myself crazy with all of it. And it would fill my mind. So, I'm trying really hard to step back from it.
00:14:10	Jarrett	Guest	I can relate to the feeling crazy by staying too tapped in. Can we hang out there a little bit? I'm curious about like making the choice to stop watching news. For me, it was feeling burnt out and exhausted and being a person with depression and anxiety, like suicidal ideation even at its worse points. Right? But once I turned it off, I remember it had only been like a couple of days I wasn't watching, and then it was a week, and then it was a few weeks, and then it was months where I hadn't turned it on. And I started to feel myself feeling differently. I'm curious about going off of news. What was that like for you? How did it have an impact?
00:14:51	Shonda	Guest	I wanna say it had a huge impact. Because for me, it wasn't just that I would listen to it and feel upset and anxious—which I know is huge and really happened to a lot of people around me. I would also—like, I have this enraged factor that happens. So, I would listen to the news, and I would really get angry about all this happening, and I'd try to figure out like what can we do to stop this

and how can we—and I realized that I was literally sort of like eating myself alive by listening to what was happening, because it was so bad. And that just wasn't healthy in any way, shape, or form. And I really wanted to let it go, to give myself a chance to experience the world without the doom and gloom.

The other thing that you notice is how much they focus on just the doom and gloom and not on other aspects of life, which—you know, I wish it wasn't that way. So, I sort of took a break. And the break was good.

00:15:45 Jarrett Host I [*chuckles*] wrote down—I was like, “I'll probably say this at some point.” Shonda, you could cure cancer, end world poverty and hunger, and I would also remind people she also created *Scandal*.

[*Shonda laughs.*]

00:16:09 Shonda Guest Like, I just wanna make sure that people remember that. What do people approach you the most about from your work? 'Cause I imagine people have various different points of entry for you. They do. And what's fascinating to me is after 20—19 seasons, heading into the 20<sup>th</sup>, it's still *Grey's Anatomy*. And I think it's because now that it's—you know, it's on Netflix, kids are discovering that show at 12-years-old—like, fans have given birth to fans. Kids discover that show at 12-years-old, and they watch the whole thing. I thought that would end at some point, but it's not ending. They're still doing it. And I know they're still doing it, because every once in a while, I'll be in a grocery store and a bunch of 12-year-olds will start following me around. And I'll realize, “Oh, they know who I am!”

[*Jarrett laughs.*]

00:16:57 Jarrett Host Because nobody else cares, but they do. So, that's the one, I think. And, by the way, so many young women went into sciences and became doctors because of that show, which is a really amazing thing to be proud of. And I hear about that a lot.

00:16:57 Jarrett Host Are you thinking about impact as you're writing various different kinds of shows or figuring out content? Are you thinking about that or are you really wanting to be creative? How are you processing that?

00:17:10 Shonda Guest You know, I never really think about how it's going to be received. I try really hard to think about how I wanna put it out in the world, like how I want it to look, how I want it to be, but when you start thinking about how other people are gonna take it in—for me, that's—you know, that stops me dead, creatively. I can't work in that way. I sort of have to keep my responsibility to the story, not to the outcome of the story.

00:17:32 Jarrett Host You talked about writing within guardrails, kind of helping to be able to kind of explore the creative like—knowing—and you said this in your Masterclass, knowing the ways that I need to—the perimeter, essentially, of what this story is and where we're going. And I have an assignment. How did you figure the assignment for *Queen Charlotte*?

00:17:58 Shonda Guest Mm. I'm not sure I think in assignments anymore. But I did—you know, I did set some parameters for that show. Because I knew that I wanted to talk about the older women—I know they're not old, but

the older women of *Bridgerton* in a different way. I wanted to bring them into a *Queen Charlotte* world and be able to—you know, the show was set in two different time periods, *Bridgerton* time period, and then the Georgian era. And you're seeing them when they're young and at their current age. And I really wanted to get to explore that and see how those women sort of came into their own and who they are and listen to them talk about their lives, their sexuality, you know, all of that.

00:18:37 Jarrett Host You said you don't write with assignments anymore. I wanna hang out at "anymore". I'm guessing that was a Netflix transition, but when you say "anymore", how and when did that change?

00:18:50 Shonda Guest There are real guardrails in network television. And they're not—you know—arbitrary and they're not for bad reasons. They're trying to get to an audience in a certain way. And they have broadcast standards and practices that they have. My job was to try to—not my job, but one of my jobs was to try to tell the story while remaining within the guardrails but tell the stories I wanted to tell. Which meant telling a lot of stories that made them nervous but in ways that they couldn't actually say shouldn't be done.

00:19:22 Jarrett Host I wanna go back, 'cause I also read your book, *The Year of Yes*, and I was really intrigued by you deciding to say yes to everything that year. And I went back and watched your Dartmouth commencement speech, and I was curious about how, after that year of yes and then doing the book and then having to talk about it for a long time, I'm sure—how is "yes" showing up for you now—yes or no showing up for you now, as you're moving through life?

00:19:54 Shonda Guest The aftereffects of saying yes are still with me completely. You know, all of the things that I learned and the way that I approach things that scare me, those have all really changed because of that experience in a real, true way. I've become comfortable with being uncomfortable. You know? I'm not a giant extrovert. I don't wanna sit in front of giant audiences and talk. But now, I'm comfortable with the fact that I'm uncomfortable with it, if that makes any sense, and I can sort of sit in it. And then, now a lot of my *Year of Yes* learnings that I learned are about saying no. Just saying no and having "no" be a complete sentence and just feeling comfortable with that, feeling no guilt.

00:20:37 Jarrett Host I thought about the *Year of Yes* moment and thought about how people would try to take advantage of that and be like, "I heard you're saying yes to everything!" What was like the drawback of *[chuckling]*—of saying yes to everything? Or had you gone through that year not telling people? Like how did that go?

00:20:51 Shonda Guest I didn't tell people, but then the book came out. And literally everybody who asked me anything, the first way they started the question was, "I know you're saying yes to everything," as if that meant I was guaranteed to say yes to things. And then, I really did have to learn all the different ways to say no. I still say yes to some things, but truly, like there is no yes to everything anymore. That became a little overwhelming. Although, I recommend anybody try it at least for a year.

00:21:18 Jarrett Host A year of—?! I was thinking to myself, I'm like, I say yes to too much stuff sometimes, and then I'll get into things, and I'll be like, "Why did I say yes to this?" So, I was like, "I probably need a year of no."

*[Shonda agrees.]*

00:21:32 Shonda Guest A year of being like, “Chill out.” *[Chuckles.]*  
I think the year of no would do a lot of people some good right now. I agree with that.

00:21:37 Jarrett Host I would love to know a little bit more—you talk about being an introvert and not liking doing press. And I—when this came up, I was like, “Oh! We have an hour with Shonda? That’s really, really cool!” I know that a lot of people feel uncomfortable in front of people and getting up and speaking, and most people aren’t doing press. But talk to me about what that is. Like, what that anxiety or uncomfortability is with interviews and press.

00:22:03 Shonda Guest You know, for me, talking to people—before, I will say this. Before, talking to people I didn’t know about me always felt like a really stressful experience. I would—you know, my hands would be shaking. I would somehow feel like—you know, you could—I was like, “They can all see me sweating crazily.” It just wasn’t a comfortable space for me. I wasn’t used to it. I lived my life in writing. I lived my life in books. And doing that was stressful. Now, though—and I don’t know what this is, I will say. I discovered in this last week, which is the first time I’ve been doing anything in a long time, I’m completely fine. Which I found shocking. I kept waiting for that moment when I was gonna go, “Can’t do it. Shutting down. This is too hard.” I’m fine this time! So, we’ll see how long that lasts.

*[Jarrett laughs.]*

00:22:56 Jarrett Host I’ve actually been enjoying talking to people and doing these interviews.  
Well, the first thing I wanted to ask you, but we started with a clip—I wanted to ask you like what’s in the room? Right? Like, what’s happening with you right now? And you said in this last week that that’s been kind of eye opening for you to be doing press and not feeling uncomfortable. Unpack that a little bit. What is—how is it now to be like, “Oh, maybe I’m not afraid of this anymore. Maybe I don’t feel so uncomfortable.”

00:23:17 Shonda Guest What I found is I’m trying to find aspects of it that I enjoy and really focusing on the aspects that make you happier, make you feel joy—it sort of counteracts. I mean, it’s something I should’ve learned years ago. It counteracts all of that panic and fear for me in a lot of ways to really just focus on—you know—the conversation, not, “Am I doing this badly?” Which was a lot of it. It was a lot of self-criticism going on in my head.

00:23:41 Jarrett Host I remember learning that like public speaking was the number one fear that people have and feeling really unclear about why that was, ‘cause I was a kid who always wanted to get up and speak in class and answer the question and all of that kind of stuff. And so, now, when I work with people who are learning to do public speaking or media training and stuff like that, it’s interesting to me to see like the different places that that comes from. Right? Some of it is I was scared in class. Some of it is my parents didn’t—you know—let me speak up a lot or something like that. Do you have an idea of where that started for you of like not wanting to get up in front of folks?

00:24:16 Shonda Guest You know, I have a very large and very verbal—I was gonna call them loud; they wouldn’t like that. I have a very large and very verbal family.



*[Jarrett chuckles.]*

I'm the youngest of six. My parents, you know, were very engaged in our growing up. We had a very noisy household where everybody spoke, and everybody felt comfortable. And I did too. I mean, I really did. I just couldn't translate that outside the home. You know? I was always like, "What do all these other people mean?" And maybe that's because I honestly had such a comfortable, happy, like little environment to live in that when I stepped out of it, I just felt uncomfortable. But I think it got worse after I got out of college. You know, I got out of college, and then you're very new and unsure in a world in which you're supposed to make your way. And I was terrible at selling myself. I was terrible at the making my way part. And I think a lot of it came then, when I really had to be out in the world describing myself to people, being myself for people, showing people who I was to get a job. It was just painful.

00:25:19 Jarrett Host

How did you get through that? Like, how did you—what were you telling yourself? Or did you have messaging for that?

00:25:25 Shonda Guest

*[Chuckles.]* I don't mean it was painful for me. I know it was painful for them. I mean, people I've worked with later were like, "Wow." But for me, I think I just—what was lucky for me is that in order to do a job as a writer, I had to provide them with something I had written. So, in a way that sort of saved me from—you know, I'd have these meetings and they'd be terrible, but they'd read the script and they would see what was there. That really helped me. Because I couldn't pitch a story to anybody to save my life. And I—the stress was just too much.

00:25:57 Jarrett Host

I'm guessing that pitching stories now is a lot easier.

00:26:01 Shonda Guest

I don't have to pitch anymore.

*[Jarrett laughs.]*

So, that's the—that's the beautiful thing that's come out of this is now I'm in a place where I don't have to do that anymore. Because, truly, in the beginning I pitched *Grey's Anatomy* by—with a paper in front of my face, reading aloud in a monotone. And if anybody interrupted me with a question, I had to start back over again at the beginning. Like, it was that bad. And my hands would be shaking, and I would be sweating, and it was just bad. So, not pitching anymore is one of the things that I feel is one of the best gifts I've been given.

00:26:34 Jarrett Host

I've heard you talk about having an idea and like even if you're not pitching it to a network, but like taking it to people and like being curious about what the questions were that they would have about it or, you know, trying to figure out what was working or what wasn't—while you're not pitching to network now and like have a lot more control, as you're even like pitching your ideas to friends or people who might be interested in watching these kinds of things, does that feel different for you now as well?

00:27:00 Shonda Guest

That definitely feels different. But also, they're friends. So, I have the advantage of they're not thinking horrible thoughts about me while I'm talking, or whatever it is I'm believing in my head. What's nice is that I don't necessarily pitch a whole idea. I'll say, "I'm thinking of writing blah-blah-blah," and I'll try to tell some facts about it. The more facts I can tell, the more I know I'm interested in it in a way that I didn't know before. And the way they react, even if it's

that nice smile that says, “That seems great.” I know whether it’s good or bad. It really helps me to say something to other people and then watch them take it in.

00:27:35 Jarrett Host Mm. I feel like watching people take in your content is—to me, it has been nerve-wracking. Like, I don’t wanna look. I don’t wanna like—it’s very anxiety inducing, actually. But do you feel that same kind of thing now when people are watching what you’ve created? Since you’ve been doing it for so long now.

00:27:55 Shonda Guest No. And I don’t necessarily watch a lot of people watch what I created. That’s not a thing. Like, it’s not like I stand there and watch the audiences take it in or even at a screening. But my oldest sister, who is the person who told me I never said yes, in the book. But my oldest sister is the person for whom every show I’ve ever made, I’ve shown her first. Because she doesn’t give a whack about how famous I am or what I’ve been doing. She doesn’t find me important at all. But she also has this weird ability to watch a show and from watching her, I know exactly where the problem points are. I know exactly if it’s gonna be successful or not. And she’s not afraid to criticize in any way, shape, or form. So, my older sister, Delores, is my best critic at this point.

00:28:42 Jarrett Host Well, one of the things I was thinking about with you is I saw a headline that said you’re the first woman to create three shows with 100 episodes, which was a pretty phenomenal moment in history. And I’m—as you’re saying like there are moments when you can tell if it’s gonna work or not, depending on how your sister’s responding, I’m like, “Well, what didn’t work?!”

*[Shonda laughs.]*

Like, what isn’t—what isn’t hitting?! Like, talk to me about a moment when it didn’t really work.

00:29:07 Shonda Guest I mean, I’m lucky in that all the shows that I created so far have worked—that I personally have created.

*[Jarrett chuckles.]*

‘Cause she’s really harsh. But I have been like working on an edit—like a final edit to something. Before it’s done and ready to give to the studio, the network, the public, I will show her those things. And she’ll be very clear. She’s like, “I didn’t understand any of what happened here. That didn’t make any sense to me.” And I will go back and make changes based on that. I shouldn’t be saying that. My bosses won’t like it.

00:29:35 Jarrett Host Well, no! I mean, I’m gonna—I’m gonna make sure that we send this to your sister as well.

*[Shonda chuckles.]*

But like I—*[chuckles]* when you’re getting that feedback of like “this didn’t make sense and I didn’t understand that” I feel like sometimes for writers and creators, they can take that really personally. But I know that this being your sister, I would imagine that you don’t take it as personally. Talk to me about taking notes and feedback, though.

00:29:59 Shonda Guest You mean from other people other than my sister? *[Chuckles.]*

00:30:02 Jarrett Host Both, actually!

00:30:03	Shonda	Guest	From her, it's fine. She's as brutal with everybody. You know. And in terms of like shows she's watching, shows she's seen—like, she will tell it like it is. You know? She's like, "This doesn't work for me, and I don't wanna watch it." And she's very much in line with what other people wanna watch, I find. For other places, I really believe that there is value in a note. The note itself might be wrong, but it does signal that there's some misunderstanding somewhere, that something could be clearer, that maybe you should look in a different direction. I don't take notes that tell me how to fix things, but I do really take in when someone says, "This was confusing for us. Or is this who the character is supposed to be? Because we see this."
00:30:45	Jarrett	Host	Hang out there a little bit more, about taking notes and not—I've not heard anyone phrase it that way, of like, "I don't take notes on what to do but more so kind of hearing like what issues are arising." That's intriguing.
00:31:00	Shonda	Guest	For me, it's don't walk into my office and hand me your solutions. I just need to know what the problems are, because recreating it and fixing the solutions is a creative job, and that's my job, not—you know, some executive's job. And the people at Netflix have been really respectful of that. And there was a time when I was, you know, doing network television where I just didn't take any notes at all. I just was like, "I'm not reading them. They're not coming into my email box." And that, not totally the most mature way to go. But <i>[chuckles]</i> it helped me then. And now, I'm definitely at a place where I feel more open to hearing criticism, to understanding why something's not working, to hear that people wish I'd done something else. I'm fine with that now.
00:31:45	Jesse	Host	So much more with Shonda Rhimes still to come. Stay with us. It's Bullseye, from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:31:52	Promo	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Playful electric harpsichord.

**Travis** McElroy: Hi! I'm Travis McElroy.

**Teresa** McElroy: And I'm Teresa McElroy.

**Travis:** And we're the hosts of *Shmanners*.

**Teresa:** If you're looking for a good place to jump into our show, we really recommend either the playgrounds episode or the job interviews episode.

**Travis:** Or if you wanna go way back, you can check out the episode where we compare the differences between afternoon tea and high tea. So, check out those episodes and new episodes every Friday on Maximum Fun or wherever you get your podcasts.

*[Music fades out.]*

00:32:23	Music	Transition	Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.
00:32:27	Jesse	Host	It's Bullseye. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Shonda Rhimes. She's being interviewed by Jarrett Hill.
00:32:33	Jarrett	Host	Something I don't feel like we spend enough time giving appreciation for, for folks like yourself—we often think of you as a writer and creator and this big boss oftentimes. But we don't often necessarily talk about leadership specifically. And I'm really curious how you think about leadership. You talked about <i>[chuckling]</i> don't

			come in my office with that, right? And it made me think about you as a leader, but like how do you think about yourself and leadership more specifically?
00:33:02	Shonda	Guest	That was something I had to learn and learn on the job really quickly. I mean, I went from being a woman who sat at home in her pajamas and wrote movies to being somebody who had, you know—I walked into an office, and I had 350 employees suddenly. And then, I had 700 employees. And then, I had 1000 employees. And it's grown. So, for me, there's a real responsibility there. And I had to really learn what it meant to be a leader. Not just, you know, you're in charge so everyone should listen to you, but really how to make sure that things like my sets were—you know—comfortable, happy places for people to be, to take in the other ideas of writers in a writers' room, to be able to communicate what I was thinking to a director, to empower the people around me to do their jobs instead of trying to do them myself.
			That really gives people ownership of what they're doing. But I worked on that. I learned about it. I read a lot of books. I thought about it very hard, because bad leaders are everywhere. And I don't mean that in a bad way. There are bad leaders everywhere, and there are not very many—you know—especially good leaders. And I wanted to be one of the good ones.
00:34:11	Jarrett	Host	How did you approach that? Like, how did you come in thinking—? 'Cause I remember, years ago, [ <i>chuckles</i> ] that you had like a no like a no [ <i>censored</i> ]hole policy. Right? And like you don't want people on your sets or on your shows that don't have reputations for having good character or being good people. How did you start approaching like your own leadership principles over the years?
00:34:33	Shonda	Guest	They grew as I grew. I mean, there were—I would say I made a ton of mistakes as I went on, but I was really trying. And when we reached a point where I fully understood that if I'm not onset and the set's still being run badly, that's on me. It's not on the person who's doing it, because those people reflect you and you've put them out there to be your representative. And if they're making everybody's lives miserable, you're responsible for that. So, for me, a lot of it was really understanding that you both empower people, but also—you know—watch over people to make sure that they're—you know—conveying what you believe, not giving lip service to it.
00:35:15	Jarrett	Host	I've heard you talk about how cool it was but also exciting and maybe weird to have an idea and then see it like happen at such a large scale. Can you talk a little bit about what that feels like, to be able to have something in your mind and begin to imagine it and then for it to like completely manifest itself in front of you?
00:35:39	Shonda	Guest	That's always still magical to me. I mean, it really is. The set of <i>Queen Charlotte</i> was so beautiful and so opulent and so much of it was built and was there for us. I never get over the feeling of writing like "Interior, Queen's bedroom, day," and having them build an actual replica of Queen Charlotte's bedroom. You know, those things are spectacular to me and very exciting. And it's part of the fun and the magic.
00:36:07	Jarrett	Host	I feel like whenever I've had an idea and we've brought it to fruition, it's always been exciting and a little bit miraculous and a lot of different kinds of feelings. But you've been doing that now for so

00:36:39	Shonda	Guest	many years, I'm intrigued that it still feels special. And how do you maintain that?
			It's always—I mean, I don't know how I maintain it, but I was excited when they built me an OR for <i>Grey's Anatomy</i> . I was excited when they built me an oval office that I played in a lot when we did <i>Scandal</i> . Those spaces—you know, standing in a space that is built for a young queen, for instance, is really empowering somehow, because you realize that you've made this happen. And I sort of can never get over the idea that I've made this happen, that I said something, and then all these people brought their artistry to bring it to life. I'm always grateful for that.
00:37:05	Jarrett	Host	Yeah. I have a friend who's an actor who was on a network show and talked about coming to set and seeing how many people there were hanging lights and designing set and doing props and all this and recognizing like it's—how much bigger than him it was. And that's always stayed with me, as I'm moving through the world and working on things. How do you think about, you know, it being bigger than you and it going out into the world and having value for folks?
00:37:35	Shonda	Guest	[Sighs.] Well, first of all, I'm a person who keeps saying to people, you know, "A writer doesn't create something." Like, I write what's a lovely blueprint, and then all of these other incredible artisans like make it a 3D experience for everybody, like a real experience. Breathe air into it. And when I think about that, somehow that's more magical to me than the fact that a bunch of people are going to see it, the finished product. Because I'm always—I'm not necessarily terrified about that, but I'm trying really hard to rein in my feelings about it, 'cause I'm not responsible for how they feel. Like, I'm not making them feel a certain way. And I want them to be able to feel however they wanna feel. It's a hard line to walk.
00:38:20	Jarrett	Host	You were saying how you don't feel responsible for like how people feel, and I think that's such an important, powerful piece of it. Right? Of being able to understand like I don't control how people respond to the work I'm doing and putting it out. I feel like a lot of creators are often worried about what people are gonna think, how people are gonna say—what people are gonna say, what the response is gonna be. Have you always been that way or is that a place that you've grown to?
00:38:45	Shonda	Guest	I've definitely not always been that way. But at a certain point, it became really clear to me that when you believe the good things people have to say about you, then you're also obligated to believe the bad things they say. You're putting too much weight on that. And I wasn't willing to put that much weight on the bad things people had to say. For a long time, I felt like I hadn't made it, like I was still climbing and trying, and it made me really worried about other people's opinions. And at a certain point, I sort of decided, "I'm okay. I no longer need to worry about those things."
00:39:17	Jarrett	Host	I'm curious how you think about the history that is you. Right? The fact that you exist and have made history in the ways that you have and had such a thumbprint on so much of the world. How do you even begin to start to think about that?
00:39:37	Shonda	Guest	I was making a face while you were asking the question, because it's the legacy question, right? How will you be perceived, you know, years from now? What kind of footprint have you left? I cannot begin to answer that question. I'm not in a place where I wanna spend time examining—you know—whatever the legacy is. I'm in a

time still where I'm still creating. It's still crazy to me that I'm now the OG—you know—showrunner here. But—

[Jarrett laughs.]

It's amazing to me. But I do feel comfortable enough in my space to keep going. And I feel like I've reached a really wonderful place where there's no fear in creating at all. Like, my creativity just feels like it can go, and I don't have to spend time being afraid of how it'll be perceived or whether or not they'll wanna make it. So, to me, I'm just—I'm still making stuff.

00:40:27 Jarrett Host  
00:40:31 Shonda Guest

There's no fear in the creativity at all!

I feel like I've reached a point where I don't have to be afraid of making a mistake. I feel like I'm at a place where making a mistake would be completely fine for me, because it's not gonna define me. You know, there was a period of time when you're—you know—the first Black woman this, the first Black woman that, that it's stressful. Like, you're—you feel like you have to be perfect to a certain extent. And now, I feel like, "Okay, I was inducted into the Television Academy Hall of Fame,"—that's not a brag, but—"By Oprah Winfrey." And that was the moment, about 15 years into my career, where I started to feel like, "Okay, you can relax." And that was not that long ago. But when Oprah tells you you're good, you think you're good.

00:41:18 Jarrett Host

[Chuckles.] Thank you so much, Shonda. We really appreciate your time today. *Queen Charlotte* is an exciting new show that's gonna be out for us to kind of indulge in and sink our teeth into, so thank you for your time today.

00:41:29 Shonda Guest  
00:41:31 Jesse Host

Thank you. It was good to talk to you.

Shonda Rhimes. Her new show is called *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*. You can watch it on Netflix. Our thanks to Jarrett Hill for conducting that interview. Jarrett cohosts the excellent podcast *FANTI*, in which he and Tre'vell Anderson dive deep into the most nuanced and complicated parts of both day-to-day life and popular culture. Go check it out at Maximum Fun or wherever you get your podcasts.

00:41:59 Music Transition  
00:42:02 Jesse Host

Bright, upbeat 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. Although, I am just back from greater Mexico City, Mexico—which is just an awesome, awesome place. I will—let me say this. If you're in Mexico City, a deeply underrated museum is the Museo Franz Mayer. Which has just an unbelievable collection of decorative arts. And then, also has two great shows up right now: one of the incredible Mexican designer, Carla Fernández, and her gorgeous clothes and a big collection of design by women that is so cool. There's a lot of great museums in Mexico City, but that one really blew my mind.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellows at Maximum Fun are Tabatha Myers and Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is composed and provided to us by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Our thanks to The Go! Team,

one of the great bands. Go see them in concert. Our thanks to their label, Memphis Industries. They both agreed to share that song with us. We're always grateful.

*Bullseye* is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Find us there, follow us. We will share all of our interviews with you. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:43:47    Promo            Promo

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

*[Music fades out.]*