

[00:00:00] **Music:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

[00:00:01] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:14] **Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

[00:00:22] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We are thrilled to welcome back to our program, Bob Odenkirk. Bob is probably best known for his role as Saul Goodman on *Breaking Bad* and its spinoff, *Better Call Saul*. And a couple years ago, he also starred in *Nobody*, an absolutely bonkers action movie.

[00:00:42] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:00:44] **Clip:**

Music: Low, ominous music.

Hutch (*Nobody*): I burned it. All of it.

Yulian: What all?

Hutch: Everything you have. Had. Everything you had.

(*A loud bang.*)

Yulian: (*Shouting in Russian.*) Obshchak!

Hutch: You should have seen it go up. (*Chuckles.*) It was something. I mean, this doesn't make us even. Because after all, you came to my house. Which you know you don't do!

[00:01:00] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:01:10] **Jesse Thorn:** Odenkirk is also a legend of alt comedy. He wrote for *Saturday Night Live* and *The Ben Stiller Show*. Alongside David Cross, he co-created and starred in the legendary sketch comedy show, *Mr. Show*. He also helped launch the careers of Tim and Eric.

Now, when he came in to do this most recent *Bullseye* interview, Bob Odenkirk brought with him a notebook, a well-worn notebook. It was filled pretty much cover to cover and stuffed full of other stray bits of paper, folded in and taped in and stapled in. And what filled that notebook? Poetry. Poetry that he had written with his children, Erin and Nate. The poetry in that notebook became *Zilot & Other Important Rhymes*, a new collection of poems written by the Odenkirks, with illustrations by Erin. It's sweet, sincere, funny, and very, very silly. And

of course, Bob Odenkirk is one of the sweetest, sincerest, funniest, and silliest out there. I am so thrilled to have him back on the show. He's an actual hero of mine. Let's get into it. My conversation with Bob Odenkirk.

[00:02:23] **Transition:** Cheerful, chiming synth.

[00:02:31] **Jesse Thorn:** Bob Odenkirk, welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you.

[00:02:34] **Bob Odenkirk:** It's great to see you! Thanks for having me.

[00:02:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Thank you for coming back on the show and congratulations on your new book.

[00:02:39] **Bob Odenkirk:** Oh, I'm so excited about it.

[00:02:41] **Jesse Thorn:** I asked you to pick something out from it to read. Do you want to read something?

[00:02:45] **Bob Odenkirk:** Yeah, it's called “Lollygagging”.

“There's not enough lollygagging going on around here, and daydreams are in short supply. The whole week is jammed with to-do's and to-don'ts. No one's gazing at clouds in the sky. There's so much nonsense to accomplish! I simply can't do it all alone. I'll think stray thoughts, and you mutter drivel. You walk in circles, and I'll tunelessly whistle. We'll bandy about the most pointless of piffle and cram this day full of jabber and jibble. We'll aim to aim aimlessly and traipse about spaciouly and fart around graciously and fritter tenaciously. Let's not focus nor work on what's necessary or needed. Let's get down to beeswax and get our lollygagging completed.”

[00:03:35] **Jesse Thorn:** That's very sweet, Bob.

[00:03:37] **Bob Odenkirk:** Thanks, man. (*Laughs.*) It's one of my favorites this book, *Zilot & Other Important Rhymes*.

[00:03:44] **Jesse Thorn:** The depth of your—the sincerity in your eyes and the excitement that you have about reading your doggerel verse is just tremendous.

[00:03:58] **Bob Odenkirk:** Yes, well, it's my favorite kind of poetry, doggerel verse. And yeah, I mean, this book was written—I wrote this with my kids when they were little. So, I mean, I was reading all these books to them. We read a lot to our kids, like right from when they were like two weeks old, we would show them a book and even read to them. And somewhere after a couple of years, I thought, you know, I just—I always thought back to my own journey in showbusiness, which was—so much of it was, and even still is—but for so long, so much of it was taken up with such an effort to convince myself that I deserved to be writing comedy, acting in something, be on a camera or be on a stage talking. You know?

And I met a couple young people who either had grown up in showbiz or just were gifted from childhood with some weird sense that they had a right to perform and to create. And so, I very much wanted my kids to not necessarily go into showbusiness or anything but just know they are entitled to write something too and say, “This is my presentation,” or whatever that is. You know, write a song, a poem, a book. And here we were reading all these books every day before nap time and before bed. It was part of our ritual. And so, I said, “Let's write a poem.”

I brought these. This is the actual book. I'm handing it to you, and you'll see that, you know, like we would write like one or two a week. It's not like we'd write them every day. And we'd write on whatever piece of paper we had laying around. And when the kids were old enough to write, they would write in their own handwriting. And I sort of—I just kept them. I wanted the kids to sort of see that on the shelf and think, well, that's the book I wrote. And I also knew that some of them were pretty good. Like, there were some that had a point of view or an idea in them. There's a lot there, as you can see. You can even see some of the pages have three poems on them.

[00:06:31] **Jesse Thorn:** You handed—what you handed me here is a notebook, like a spiral-bound notebook, that says, “Old Time Rhymes by Dad, Nate, and Erin”. You're Dad.

(Bob confirms with a chuckle.)

And it's not just the notebook, but it is completely full of—you know, it's like completely full of different pieces of paper.

[00:07:02] **Bob Odenkirk:** Yeah, loose pages. Torn pages.

[00:07:03] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, loose pages.

[00:07:06] **Bob Odenkirk:** Because wherever we were, we'd write it. Or I'd just grab a piece of paper that was nearby.

[00:07:11] **Jesse Thorn:** This one is in a kid's hand. It says, “A trip to the 99-cent store, a little of this and a little of that, some gums, some pills, and a cardboard hat, a no trespassing sign to hang on your fence, a... and it adds up to a lot, but it's only 99 cents.”

[00:07:37] **Bob Odenkirk:** Yeah, and that one's in the book, actually. But it was rewritten for the book that is coming out. But for instance—so, my son loved the 99-cent store. He loved it. He got an allowance probably when he was like seven or eight, and it was probably like 50 cents a week or a dollar maybe. And he had some, you know, jobs to do. And then he could go to the 99-cent store, and he could actually buy some things! Because they were 99 cents. He loved it. In his case, I think there was a sense of control. “If I have—if I can make enough money as a kid to buy things in the world, then I have some control over my world.”

And anyway, the analysis isn't that important. What was important was I was writing poems very often that were like, what'd you do today? Well, we went to the 99-cent store. Let's write about that. And so, then I stuck it on a shelf knowing that there were some decent ideas in

there. And then during the pandemic, my kids are grown up. They're both in college at that time. And I said let's rewrite these. And my daughter, you know, who is an artist, who went to PRATT, she could do the art.

[00:08:54] **Jesse Thorn:** When you were working on this book to be a book, you said your kids were in college. Were they back at the house?

[00:09:04] **Bob Odenkirk:** Yeah, they were doing their classes through Zoom, and their lives were heartbreaking. I knew where I was when I was 19 and 21, and I was not sitting in my bedroom. Usually, I was at a music venue, either in Carbondale, Illinois or Milwaukee when I went to Marquette. But mostly I went to Southern Illinois University, and I was just out almost every night. And I was seeing a band, and I was screaming and shouting over the band, talking to somebody the whole time.

And my kids were sitting in their bedrooms, not meeting anyone, talking to their friends on Zoom, and nothing. And it was just brutal. I said, "You know, we have this. I always thought maybe we could rewrite these and make them stronger. So, let's get to it. I'll take out two a week, and I'll rewrite them. And Erin, you do drawing." And I said to Nate, "You have any ideas? Write them up." And he did. And so, it was just another thing to do.

[00:10:15] **Jesse Thorn:** What was it like during the pandemic to have two adults, who were your children, in your house and the three of you are looking through this book of things that you'd written down together when they were six and seven years old?

[00:10:41] **Bob Odenkirk:** You know, it was fun. I mean, I would say to people, you know, you take all these pictures with your kids. And some pictures can really be amazing and take you to a place. But working on something, looking at this book—this original, and even the book we are publishing reading—and reading some of these? Boy, nothing takes you back to those times as much as looking at this and thinking about who the—you know. And gee, it's almost like your kid comes to life right next to you as you look at these words.

Because you know—I let the kids write lines, and I would just write them down. I wouldn't change them right away to make them smarter or rhyme-y-er or anything. I would let the kids see that they can say something, and it could be in a book. And that was the point of the whole thing, really. So, if you wanna do something that will take you back in time, do a drawing with your kid or write a poem or something and save that. Because that will take you back to that childhood more than a film or a picture, I think. A photograph, I mean.

[00:12:03] **Jesse Thorn:** I think the cliché would be that it would remind you of the pathways that had closed or the mistakes that you had made, that it would be—

[00:12:14] **Bob Odenkirk:** Potentially, it would. I feel like maybe we just had such a wonderful time when the kids were little. Things got difficult later for various reasons. There was more tension in our house later when I was trying to reconfigure my career. But also, we had some challenging scenarios which I've talked about before where we had a break in, and that was extremely disturbing to the family. But most of their childhood, we were having a damn good time and laughing and making things up and reading books.

[00:12:56] **Jesse Thorn:** So much more still to come with Bob Odenkirk. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:13:04] **Transition:** Chiming synth with a steady beat.

[00:13:09] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I am talking with Bob Odenkirk. He is, of course, the star of *Better Call Saul* and before that, *Breaking Bad*. He was also the co-creator of *Mr. Show with Bob and David*, and he played big time agent Stevie Grant on *The Larry Sanders Show*.

Odenkirk just wrote a book. It's called *Zilot & Other Important Rhymes*. His co-authors were his children, Erin and Nate. Erin also illustrated it. Let's get back into our conversation.

You and one of your brothers are both comedy writers. Your brother, Bill, is also a very successful comedy writer.

(Bob confirms.)

Was one of the reasons it was so important to you to demonstrate—as you said—to your children that they could be writers or creators as well that you did not have the opportunity to do that when you were a kid? Or the vision—that was not encouraged?

[00:14:13] **Bob Odenkirk:** For sure. Yeah. I mean, look—we weren't scolded for being creative. I was very silly as a kid, and we would make little radio shows—me and my brother, Bill. We'd record onto this little Panasonic recorder that I bought at Kmart for 30 bucks, one of my greatest things I ever bought. But I think that, you know, this is the thing. People are held back by what they—the first thing you have to do is believe it's possible. For you, too. Write. Make. You know, do whatever it is. You have to believe it's legitimately possible that you could be one of the people who contributes to the world in that way for you to try—for you to even try.

So, I think so many people in the world are held back by just a basic belief that they have a right to contribute. And so, whether you choose to or not isn't—you know, obviously not everyone's going to want to do the same things, but just as a baseline thing, every kid sort of think, “Every avenue is open to me. And whatever I like in the world, whatever I see in the world that I respond to, I should be able to pursue that. And I may go far.” You know, that's the first thing you want to help your kids believe is that they could do almost anything. And it's important too, because the world we're going to live in is the world they will make. And while it feels like you're overwhelmed by the adults in the world and the number of people in the world and the internet and the ideas running around, at some point you're going to be one of these adults. And we need you to care and be involved and want to share yourself with music and writing and ideas. Everything.

[00:16:17] **Jesse Thorn:** I was thinking about Matt Foley, the character that you wrote for *The Second City* that ended up on *Saturday Night Live*, that folks will remember Chris Farley as a motivational speaker who screams, “I live in a van down by the river.”

[00:16:32] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:16:33] **Clip:**

Matt Foley (*Saturday Night Live*): (*Caught between fury and despair.*) First off, I am 35 years old! I am divorced, and I live in a van down by the river! Now you kids are probably saying to yourselves, “Hey, I’m gonna go out and I’m gonna (*screaming*) get the world by the tail! And wrap it around and pull it down and put it in my pocket!

Well, I’m here to tell you that you’re probably gonna find out as you go out there that you’re not going to amount to JACK SQUAT!

(*The audience laughs.*)

[00:17:09] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:17:13] **Jesse Thorn:** I was thinking of how emblematic that was, of how much of your early work—which I mostly know *Mr. Show*, right—but which is just the depth of wounding in a man being expressed as weird rage. (*Chuckles.*) Like—

[00:17:39] **Bob Odenkirk:** It is a bit of a twisted psychology put on display there. Yeah.

[00:17:42] **Jesse Thorn:** And I’m like—this is also, I don’t mean to put a too fine a point on it, but half of your characters on *Mr. Show* were some remix of just pain inside a man that comes out as weird rage. Like, comes out sideways as rage.

[00:18:03] **Bob Odenkirk:** Well, I think that’s a very true aspect of being a person and especially of being a guy. You know. And when you write movies and everything, you’re always going what’s the motivation, right? What’s deep inside this guy—what’s the broken thing? Oftentimes it has to do with your dad, whatever he was like, and a reaction against that. I don’t know what to say. I mean, Tony Robbins was just becoming a thing, I think at the time. It would have been ’87 and—it would have been about 1990. Maybe he wasn’t on the scene yet, but certainly motivational speaking was. That was a new thing. And so, a motivational speaker who’s using himself as the negative example of where you don’t want to be is sort of something that they kind of do anyways. Very often preachers or motivational speakers will start with, “I used to be...”

[00:19:11] **Jesse Thorn:** Right, it’s a personal transformation story.

(*Bob confirms.*)

I think the twist there is that the transformation has yet to occur. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:19:17] **Bob Odenkirk:** Yeah, no, it hasn’t occurred for him. But for you, it might still happen.

[00:19:22] **Jesse Thorn:** Was that a reflection of you or your dad or both?

[00:19:28] **Bob Odenkirk:** Oh gee. Um, I've talked about my dad a lot. Poor guy. Uh, kick him around the block a bit more. (*Laughs.*) I don't know. I mean, you know, he was a messed-up dude and kind of didn't—he couldn't follow through on anything. He wasn't thrice divorced. He was only once divorced. Yeah, I don't know if it was a reflection on that. I think it was more like just the way I see people and how it works and how things work.

I actually wrote one about a doctor too at *SNL* for John Goodman to play. A doctor who's smoking and eating burgers and fried chicken and showing people their lungs and then his lungs.

(*They chuckle.*)

And saying, “You don't want to end up here. That's me, by the way.” That never made it to air. It was on dress, but it was funny-ish.

[00:20:34] **Jesse Thorn:** Why do you think so many of the characters that you did at that point in your life when you were in your 20s and early 30s had such strong like 47- to 53-year-old man vibes?

[00:20:51] **Bob Odenkirk:** Oh, I don't know! I think young people like making fun of older people. You know, John Cleese was the one—in some interview he observed that one of the reasons sketch comedy is hard to do when you're older is when you're young, you just tend to play archetypes, right? You tend to play a doctor, a lawyer, a judge. You know, *Monty Python* had a lot of judge scenes and a lot of lawyer scenes. People are going to laugh, because you're not old enough to be a distinguished judge or lawyer or president of anything. So, it's already a joke, because you're pretending. You young people are pretending to be a big corporation or whatever. But when you get older, the joke's gone. You could be a judge now. It's not funny right away. There's still the joke of the scene, whatever that may be, but I'm not going to laugh just at the concept of it, because you legitimately could be a doctor.

I think, you know, being young and sketch comedy, you want to make fun of the world. And the world is older people. You're not in charge yet. And so, you want to poke fun at that. So, you're naturally going to go after a bunch of older people.

[00:22:14] **Jesse Thorn:** If we take the example of *Mr. Show*, though, right? This is a partnership between you and David Cross. Obviously, you weren't the only other—you weren't the only cast member. There's lots of wonderful cast members on the show. But you and David Cross are the front persons of this operation. And I think, you know, I haven't watched all of *Mr. Show* through recently, but from my memory, I would say probably in a given half hour episode, there's one and a half times when either you or a character you are playing yells at David Cross in the manner of a scolding father. (*Chuckles.*) And David Cross was—you guys weren't—you're pretty similar in age. So.

(*Bob confirms.*)

And he was bald, and you weren't.

[00:23:00] **Bob Odenkirk:** Well, I have—inside me, I have always had a 60-year-old man.

(Jesse laughs.)

I'm now 60. These are the people who run your world when you're young. And these are the people you want to take down. I think that's why.

[00:23:18] **Jesse Thorn:** You seem like you were born with that writer's room mentality, that even in the, you know, beginnings of *Mr. Show*, when arguably you were a writer who had failed to find success and fulfillment on *Saturday Night Live*, which had been your main writing gig to that point, you had like such a clear and passionate vision about what you wanted the show to be, how you wanted things to work, that like—

[00:23:52] **Bob Odenkirk:** It's very strange. It's unjustified. You know, I mean, to answer this question, I have to preface it by saying, you know, the show was always equal parts David Cross and myself. But we did get along and I think agree on what it should be like instantly, you know, and it was like a great marriage. You know, it was like an unexplainable partnership that just worked. And there's arguments and disagreements along the way, but honestly, the core of it, the bulk of it is just some weird spiritual alignment that we have and still have.

[00:24:33] **Jesse Thorn:** But what I'm asking you about here, Bob, is, let's say I went—our listeners went and read your wife, Naomi Odenkirk's wonderful history of *Mr. Show*, *Mr. Show, What Happened?*, question mark, or talk to someone else who worked on the show, Paul F. Tompkins or Brian Posehn or something. I think what they would say about the show, and this is based on my experience having asked them about it in the past, is you had to justify your sketch to Bob. And Bob had real strong ideas about it.

[00:25:11] **Bob Odenkirk:** I did! I was a professor, you know? I somehow felt I knew exactly what we needed to do. And I knew exactly what I liked and what I wanted it to be. And I don't know why! I mean, it's obviously not *Monty Python*. It is close in many ways, but it's not that. And I knew that at the time. I didn't pretend like what we're doing is the same. I knew that those guys—I would have told you when I was making *Mr. Show*: they are smarter than us. They have more reference points than us. They're more absurdist than we are. They live in a sort of a more of a dream state than *Mr. Show*. *Mr. Show* is very grounded. I knew all that when we were doing it. As much as I admired the writing on *Monty Python* and wished I could have been in that group, I knew we weren't doing that level of stuff.

And I was okay with it! I was like this is an American thing. We are more grounded. We are—our feet are stuck in this mud here, and we don't live on a higher plane. *(Chuckles.)* We're very utilitarian, and that's what our comedy is here. So—and I knew what it should be and what it shouldn't be. And with few exceptions, we found the best in every sketch, I think, and made the most of it. And I don't really know where that comes from. I was very—I struggled so much at *Saturday Night Live*. I learned so much at *Saturday Night Live*, watching Jim Downey, seeing his writing, AL Franken's writing, Smigel, of course, and Jack Handy. And I learned so much.

And then I came to LA, and I was like, “Get out of my (*sensor beep*)ing way. I know what to do. I know what this should be. I don't—”

It's just—there's no justification. And the fact that people treated me like I was right to see myself that way? I mean, Janeane Garofalo and sort of the crew of people I felt gave me tons of respect. Why?! I don't—I don't know! I think, you know, when you're young, that you have inspiration, and you can be by it and pulled along by it, and people can sort of sense that, “I think that guy's on to something. I don't know, let's give him a chance to fail.” I think we succeeded with *Mr. Show*. And I'm so glad we had the opportunity. I thought *The Ben Stiller Show* was going to be my only chance, but I didn't run that show. And it reflected Ben and Judd's point of view a lot more than mine, although I had a ton of freedom there.

And once it was over, I thought, “Well, that's it. I don't get to do any more sketch comedy, even though I have inside me this burning desire to do this great show that, you know, has the purity of a great sketch is so great to me.” It just—it's inexplicable why I'm drawn to that. And people have this, you know. All different kinds of things that they love.

[00:28:37] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, one of my fondest memories of this show is the first time you were on as a guest, which I'm going to roughly say—I'm going to call it 2005, something like that. And I was still in Santa Cruz. You were on the phone, and I remember very vividly—this is, you know, I guess around that time was—you had made the *Mr. Show* movie and somewhere around that time you were working on a sketch show for Fox called *Next*.

[00:29:16] **Bob Odenkirk:** *Next*, yeah.

[00:29:16] **Jesse Thorn:** With Fred Armisen among other people. And I remember your passion about in what cases sketch comedy sets should and should not be realistic and to what extent. (*Chuckles.*)

(*Bob affirms.*)

I remember you getting on the phone with me.

[00:29:42] **Bob Odenkirk:** I don't know what was wrong with me, man.

[00:29:44] **Jesse Thorn:** 300 miles away from you. You're in LA. I'm in Santa Cruz. I'm on college radio. I mean, more people are listening than most college radio shows, but not that many people are listening. And your passion about whether, when you slam the door, the wall should shake a little...

[00:30:03] **Bob Odenkirk:** Right. Yeah. Yeah. I thought generally, yes, I think the wall should shake a little.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

And that comes from *Monty Python*. And it comes from the sketch about the mountain climbers who are climbing the street. And they're doing the act. And at one point, I think it's Graham Chapman starts marching around the office or it might be Cleese, but I think it's Chapman. And everything is wobbly, you know. And I thought that's how it should be, because you should—the physical space is telling the audience we're goofing around. We're being silly, and it's all great. And I'm—so, yeah.

So, I'd thought about these kinds of things on this deep level. Like—(sighs) and I, you know—and it wasn't a conscious choice. It's just where my brain went and what I loved. And writing my memoir, which is called *Comedy Comedy Comedy Drama*, one of the things—people ask me, “What'd you learn from writing that?” And I learned what a freak I was for sketch comedy, how my brain thought about that for so many years so deeply and with such a love. Uh, why? I mean, there's so many things you can care about. Feature film structure is really involving. You know, half hour comedy. You know, four camera sitcoms are a form that people can care about and master. And there's just—there's no way to explain it to me. And yet it's just an instinct that you have.

And you know, what a gift to be able to pursue your instinct and even present it. You know, once I finished *Mr. Show*, I really felt like I don't have anything else to offer the world. That's the only thing I organically cared about. I can't imagine ever caring about anything that much again. And the great thing, of course, is I got a chance to do it. I got it. If you ask me, “What do you think is good?” I can point to sketches and even episodes where I go, “That's what I'm talking about.”

[00:32:36] **Jesse Thorn:** More with Bob Odenkirk after a quick break. As we said earlier, Bob got his start in comedy. He became beloved and I guess we could say maybe semi-famous as a comedy person. And then, he got the part in *Breaking Bad* as Saul Goodman, and he became really, really famous as a drama person. We'll talk about how he's learned to embrace that change. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:33:07] **Promo:**

(School bell rings.)

Music: Bright, optimistic music.

Caroline Roper: Alright class, tomorrow's exam will cover the science of perfect pitch, the history of pride flags, and speed running video games. Any questions? Ah, yes, you in the back.

Student: Uh, what is this?

Tom Lum: It's the podcast *Let's Learn Everything!*

Ella Hubber: Where we learn about science and a bit of everything else.

Tom: My name's Tom. I studied cognitive and computer science, but I'll also be your teacher for Intermediate Emojis.

Caroline: My name's Caroline, and I did my Master's in Biodiversity Conservation. And I'll be teaching you Intro to Things the British Museum Stole.

Ella: My name's Ella, I did a PhD in stem cell biology, so obviously I'll be teaching you the History of Fanfiction.

Tom: Class meets every other Thursday, on Maximum Fun.

(Music ends.)

Student: So, do I still get credit for this?

(They laugh.)

Tom, Caroline, & Ella: *(In unison.)* No!

Ella: Obviously not.

Caroline: No.

Tom: It's a podcast.

(They laugh.)

[00:33:52] **Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

[00:33:57] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm here with Bob Odenkirk. He has written for *Saturday Night Live*, co-created and starred in *Mr. Show with Bob and David*, and of course played Saul Goodman on *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. His latest project is a book, *Zilot & Other Important Rhymes*, a collection of poetry that he co-authored with his children, Nate and Erin.

If people are listening to this on the radio and they know who Bob Odenkirk is, it's probably from *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*.

[00:34:32] **Bob Odenkirk:** Or *Nobody*. That film is massive around the world.

[00:34:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Frankly, you wouldn't find a bigger Bob Odenkirk fan than I, that I think is evidenced by this conversation, right?

(Bob agrees.)

Or me having you on the show 20 years ago. But if at any point between when I came to know who you were, because my friend Gene had bootleg VHS tapes of *Mr. Show* that he brought to college our freshman year in the spring semester from a video store that sold them in the valley.

(Bob affirms.)

They were the kind where it's like extra-long, super extra-long play. So, it was like six hours each VHS tape.

[00:35:16] **Bob Odenkirk:** Slow. Yeah.

[00:35:19] **Jesse Thorn:** Until you started being like nominated for Emmys. If at any point along the way there you had told me, "Bob Odenkirk will become famous as an actor"—It's not to say anything bad of your performances and these things that I love, but...

[00:35:37] **Bob Odenkirk:** You wouldn't have agreed.

[00:35:39] **Jesse Thorn:** I would have—

[00:35:43] **Bob Odenkirk:** You would've laughed.

[00:35:44] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, because even on *Mr. Show*, I wouldn't have said that the performances were the strongest part of—again, one of my favorite TV shows ever, and the performances are strong—but like, it's not like I'm looking at—like, there's a—

[00:35:56] **Bob Odenkirk:** You didn't lose yourself in anybody's performance. *(Laughs.)*

[00:35:59] **Jesse Thorn:** Like, there's a reason that Chris Farley is the guy yelling, "I live in a van down by the river" and not you, even though yelling is your greatest strong suit as a comic performer. *(Chuckles.)*

[00:36:08] **Bob Odenkirk:** Well, don't forget, I got—you know, I got famous as an actor in drama, not in comedy. Which I did a lot of comedy performing and did perfectly fine. You didn't say, "Get rid of that guy."

[00:36:22] **Jesse Thorn:** You were very funny on *NewsRadio*.

[00:36:25] **Bob Odenkirk:** But in drama—listen, the first scene I did with Bryan Cranston on *Breaking Bad*, and I'm Saul, and he comes in my office, and I explain, you know, this is not my real name. My name's James McGill. And they put the camera right here—I'm putting my hand about three and a half feet from my face—and they told me what lens they were putting on. It was like a 50. And I had made three feature films, and I knew what a 50 lens did. I knew how it showed you. And so often when I did comedy acting in other people's projects—not *Mr. Show*, other people's projects; and I did a lot of it—I was always being asked to be bigger, be bigger, be bigger. And I was—part of me always felt like, well, you know what I

do. You asked me to be here. And I do *Mr. Show* and stuff. I don't—bigness is not sort of at the core of what I do. But I get it. You're doing a comedy. It's a two shot. It's a wide shot. You need me to be louder and bigger.

When they put the camera right here and I had done these features, so I knew what the lens did, I thought, “This is awesome. I can do this. I can work here. And I know my—I know what's happening here on my face. And I know what's happening behind my eyes. And I can do this well.” Like, the range—my range, which on a wide angle is this big, suddenly becomes this big, because where this camera is and what the lens does lets you into every little thing that you're doing. So, drama acting and that kind with that kind of equipment, I've got to say, found me! And knew I could work there. I still am astounded at the opportunities I got, because they're beyond anything. You know, I mean, *Better Call Saul* is just insane. I mean, there's actors, wonderful actors, who will never in their lives get a role that dynamic, where they, on one page—for two pages, you get to be comic, and then four pages later, you get to be utterly earnest, as quiet and interior a performance and a scripted moment as you could ever dream of. And that happened over and over and over on *Better Call Saul*. That just—the dynamic range of any single episode of that show, it just—you can't believe it exists.

And they handed that to me. I mean, I didn't do a damn thing to deserve that. And so, (*chuckling*) I just killed myself to do it, to deliver, because I knew what a gift it was. And fact that I could do it—well, I didn't know that. I knew that I was being asked to do it and being paid to do it. And I—too late, I realized maybe not everybody in the world, but a lot of people in the world are gonna look at this. So, if I fail here, it's not going to be a secret.

[00:40:01] **Jesse Thorn:** As a character, it does fit. First of all, your comedy work has always been very deeply sincere. As sincere as you're being right here. Like, I think one of the great dynamics between you and David Cross is that one of David Cross's great gifts can be to be—I don't want to say insincere, but he could be impish or snide or, you know, he could be a table flipper in that way. And you, you are always very deeply eyes on the prize, very committed to where you're at and where you're going, and very grounded even when you're being at your absolute silliest.

[00:40:44] **Bob Odenkirk:** Yeah, mostly. I think sometimes I'm silly with an ironic distance on what I'm doing, but you're right. I'm probably a lot more earnest as a performer, as a presence.

[00:40:52] **Jesse Thorn:** I think even that guy who's ordering the donuts and he says, “I think I will have the one that is called jam.” I think even that guy is weirdly sincere. (*Laughs.*)

[00:41:04] **Bob Odenkirk:** I know what you mean. I know what you mean. And the thing is comedy supports ironic distance. Comedy allows the performer to grin just a little bit through the whole performance. And the audience is fine with it. They're not—they're like happier, because in comedy people all the time. You know, they break, and the audience doesn't care. They like it. So, there's a lot of in comedy to be—to comment on your own presence and to enjoy it, frankly, as a performer.

[00:41:40] **Jesse Thorn:** That is something that Saul Goodman and his precedent before he becomes Saul Goodman—that he has, which is that he is a performer. He is enacting himself constantly. You know what I mean? Like, he is very aware of his—he may not always have full control over it or—but he is very aware that he is putting on a show. Like, that's what his job is.

[00:42:12] **Bob Odenkirk:** Well, when he's Saul.

(Jesse agrees.)

When he's Jimmy, I don't think so. But when he switches into this mode of manipulation, then yes. I think he's got an awareness of himself that is somewhat distant, and it's wild.

[00:42:34] **Jesse Thorn:** One time—best piece of advice my dad ever gave me. Well, at least one of the best; he was a mixed bag, my dad, but I loved him very much. And he had been like an organizer in the '60s and—throughout his life, actually, not just in the '60s. He was a professional organizer. And I was like in my mid-20s, early mid-20s. I was doing this show. I was like, “I can't even get these public radio program directors to make eye contact with me. Like, how am I ever gonna—you know, how am I ever going to get this show on enough—like, I'm making \$10,000 a year here making this show. And how am I going to eat, you know?”

And my dad said to me, he's like, “Well, in my experience, uh... they'll get old and die, and you'll get a shot.”

(They laugh.)

[00:43:22] **Bob Odenkirk:** He's not wrong. To take us back to *Zilot*—

[00:43:28] **Jesse Thorn:** Your new book, *Zilot*, by Bob Odenkirk?

[00:43:33] **Bob Odenkirk:** No, I mean, I was saying it at the beginning. I want my kids to know. You want your kids to know you will make this world. You will write the books of this world. You will write the movies. You will write the jokes. You will make the songs. You will be the lawyers. You will be the politicians. You will be the presidents. You! Yes, believe it! Because also, it's true! And so, you need to believe that so that you go out and try to do the things that you like or that you are excited by and not doubt yourself or doubt that is even possible. So, really, I'm being honest, I mean, we will die. And you will do it, you know? And whether you're good at it or not, you will do it. So, believe it, and get good at it.

And if you're—and if you don't try, I'm promising you, somebody who's not as good and smart as you is going to try, and they're going to get to do it! And you're going to sit there and go, “*(Censor beep)*, I think I could have done that better than them.” So, believe it from a young age. And then you can choose to follow whichever dreams you like or do something that you love that you're not that good at, but you just love it. Find your way into it. Or go, “Hey, look, I'm really good at this thing. I only kind of love it. But you know what? I'm really good at it. So, I'll do it.”

[00:45:05] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Bob, I not only am grateful for the many things you've done to this point that have brought me joy, but I also believe that you—even at age 60, having now starred in a hit action film, *Nobody*—

[00:45:22] **Bob Odenkirk:** Thanks.

[00:45:23] **Jesse Thorn:** I believe you will have the opportunity to do a devastating one-inch punch in a film.

[00:45:28] **Bob Odenkirk:** Oh, you know I want to do that, right?!

[00:45:31] **Jesse Thorn:** Which I know is your greatest dream.

[00:45:33] **Bob Odenkirk:** This whole thing, the action thing is so crazy, man. Believe me, it is crazy for me. Absolutely as crazy as you think. In all the training that I was doing, Jesse, all the years of training—I trained for two years. And I was shooting Saul, so I couldn't train every day, but I kept up my training three times a week when I was shooting. I was thinking, “If we ever get to make this movie, and if for some reason I pull this off, people like you, Jesse, and fans from *Mr. Show*, and my friends who knew me as a writer at *Saturday Night Live*, their minds are going to explode. Their brains are going to explode. They're going to be like, what did he do?!” (*Laughing.*) It's like it doesn't connect. It feels like a big—like I fell through a hole, some kind of wormhole into another dimension. Right?

[00:46:39] **Jesse Thorn:** But I mean, I think I remember the moment that the trailer dropped. And I remember that the universal reaction was that, but immediate, “Yeah, sure. That makes sense.” And I think the reason for that is as soon as people realized that it wasn't a joke about action movies—

[00:47:03] **Bob Odenkirk:** Right. And I was really—that was important, because I could easily have said, “Well, let's be cute or coy or wink at the camera.” Because then that'll protect me, right? Then if it doesn't work, hey, I was joking! See? But—

[00:47:18] **Jesse Thorn:** But I think that the thing that people liked and bought about it is that when they saw that trailer of you, a—I mean, we'll say 55-year-old man at the time, 57—get beating and being beaten into oblivion and in just an absolute orgy of physical violence and suffering, they could see (*laughing*) the same intense sincerity that drove you through all those both *Mr. Show* performances and writers meetings.

[00:47:59] **Bob Odenkirk:** You nailed it. (*Chuckles.*) Seriously, you nailed it.

[00:48:03] **Jesse Thorn:** And then, we hear you talking about your book of children's verse here that you wrote with your children. It's that same quality that could lead you to get beaten into a bloody pulp while seeking revenge on behalf of your family.

[00:48:23] **Bob Odenkirk:** I'm not deft enough at anything to just delight people with my, you know, skills. There has to be genuine feeling there for me to win you over. I think it's kind of true. I also think I just don't know any other way go at this stuff. You know. I wish

my mom understood that I had done that and that that was at the core of what I did. I think she'd have appreciated what I did more. She was just mystified by the fact that I was in showbusiness at all. But I really think she was very serious about life, even though she joked around a lot. She was, at her core, just very serious about life. And I—maybe she knew that I am too. Yeah.

[00:49:17] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Bob, I am always really glad and grateful to see you. Congratulations on the book.

[00:49:23] **Bob Odenkirk:** Thanks.

[00:49:24] **Jesse Thorn:** And thanks for coming by.

[00:49:25] **Bob Odenkirk:** Thanks, man.

[00:49:27] **Jesse Thorn:** Bob Odenkirk, everyone. *Zilot & Other Important Rhymes* is absolutely charming. Go find it at your local bookstore or on Bookshop.org.

[00:49:36] **Transition:** Jazzy, syncopated synth with intermittent vocalizations.

[00:49:42] **Jesse Thorn:** 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. Will the lemon bush that I transplanted make it? It's in shock right now. I did a bad job transplanting it, I'm not gonna lie. But I'm hopeful. Maybe we'll find out on a future update in the credits of *Bullseye*.

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 Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis, who, believe it or not, I'm about to meet in real life for the first time. (*Chuckles.*) I'm headed to Atlanta, where she lives, on tour with my friend, John Hodgman. So, we'll see what she's like! Our interstitial music—we have meetings, of course, on the internet. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”. It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Our thanks to them. Our thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is on Instagram now. Yes, that's right, the latest trend, we've jumped onto it. [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](https://www.instagram.com/BullseyeWithJesseThorn), search for us and follow us. And we post fun clips from the show and pictures of me and my guests and all kinds of neat stuff. And I think that's it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:51:02] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

(*Music fades out.*)