[00:00:00] **John Moe:** Today, you're going to hear an eloquent and vivid description of anxiety. If you have dealt with anxiety, I don't think it will make you feel more anxious, but I hope it makes you feel seen. Okay, on with the show.

I get books at my house. Sent to me at my house. I work from home. I step out the front door, there's a book on the front step—usually in a padded envelope. Often it's a book by an author I'm going to interview. Sometimes it's a book that a publicist or someone just thought I would find interesting. Steady stream of books. Steady stream of padded envelopes. Then one day, a few weeks ago, there was a box on my front step. Pretty big box, too. So, I haul it inside. My wife and my daughter wanted to know what was in there, because it looked like the kind of box that would ordinarily contain like something from a sponsor of the show—frozen dinners for me to try out and talk about, maybe, or something large like that. But no, I could see this was from a publishing house. So, I knew it was a book, or had to be books.

Open it up, and yeah, books—plural. All novels, all by the same author, Jason Pargin, *New York Times* bestselling author. Here, I have all the books at my desk. I got *John Dies at the End (a heavy thump)*, *This Book is Full of Spiders (thump)*, *Zoey Punches the Future in the Dick (thump)*, *Futuristic Violence and Fancy Suits (thump)*, a book called *What the Hell Did I Just Read (thump)*. Then a couple days later, a padded envelope and another Pargin novel, the forthcoming *Zoey is Too Drunk for This Dystopia*. Now, I was glad to get these books, because Jason Pargin is a really interesting guy and a great writer, and because I knew he was going to be on the show. And on some subconscious level, I made a judgment.

I thought, well, if this guy has these six books out, plus one more that they didn't send me for some reason, then he must be feeling great. Clearly, he's written books that have sold well enough that he could then be allowed to write more books. Hell, *John Dies at the End* was even made into a movie. This guy has the life, I thought. This guy, this guy isn't plagued by anxiety that permeates his very soul. This guy, I surmise, isn't hounded by nervous demons. I should know by now that even though someone has achievements, they are not magically immune to mental disorders. That's not how mental health works. I should know that! After all, I host this show. It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

[00:02:41] **Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

[00:02:49] **John Moe:** Jason Pargin, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

[00:02:52] **Jason Pargin:** Thanks for having me!

[00:02:52] **John Moe:** *Zoey is Too Drunk for This Dystopia*. Tell me who Zoey is and what circumstances we find her in in this new book.

[00:03:01] **Jason Pargin:** This is a sci-fi series that I've been writing. This is the third book. They are episodic, so you could read them in any order—although I guess if you go back and read an early book afterward and there's a character that you like that you don't remember being in the third book, then you should probably not get too attached to them.

(John chuckles.)

But they star Zoey Ashe, who is a woman living in the future in a trailer park, who—through a series of bizarre and frankly implausible accidents—winds up inheriting a criminal empire. So, she winds up at the head of a crime family in a futuristic city that does not exist in our universe. And hilarity and horror ensue.

[00:03:43] **John Moe:** *(Chuckles.)* How did Zoey come into existence for you in this series?

[00:03:47] **Jason Pargin:** I wanted the most fish-out-of-water possible human being, a fish so far out of water that they had reached orbit.

(John chuckles.)

So, thinking in terms of this, this is a story about, you know, imagining a future in which, for example, social media basically gives you a God's eye view of everything, where everybody has cameras pinned to their clothes, and you have an internet where you can go get any view from anywhere on earth at any time and where every conversation held in public is assumed to have an audience, an unseen audience somewhere. So, thinking in terms of what would a futuristic city look like under those circumstances, how would people behave? And then, what is the wildest possible situation for a woman who grew up in a tiny town—living in a trailer with her mother—having to go there and finds herself in not just the city of the future, but the city that is on the cutting edge of all of these changes. And decided I thought it would be very funny and very strange if she through—again—a series of spectacularly unlikely events, wound up at the head of a crime family, and then having to navigate that.

Because it is a story that has a lot of action. There's a lot of violence. Her role in the story is to prevent the violence and the convoluted means by which you go through trying to understand why people come into conflict, especially in a world where everyone is posturing, because they know they are on camera. That felt relevant to today's world.

(John agrees.)

So, it's to—here's a hint that most sci-fi is not about the future. It's secretly about the present.

[00:05:34] **John Moe:** The present. Right. Now, I was reading this book soon after reading what you had written about anxiety in various places, and I knew that you're somebody who has dealt with anxiety, and I felt a lot of anxiety for Zoey Ashe. Is that intentional? Is that—were you drawing on your own experiences with anxiety disorders to inform this character, or is that just a dramatically plausible situation put a protagonist in?

[00:06:04] **Jason Pargin:** That is where—that gets to the heart of what I want to talk about. Because the difference between anxiety and an anxiety disorder is the most difficult thing for, I think, anyone to understand. So, in the case of this character, in all of my books—and this will be, Jesus, my seventh?—you have characters, which is a very common theme in fiction, where someone is put into a situation that is radically outside of their comfort zone. So, the anxiety is baked in. Part of the issue of today's society, I believe, is that everyone feels like they are a fish out of water somehow, that everyone feels like—because that's the nature of

anxiety. You're in an unfamiliar circumstance. You have to be hyper-vigilant of your surroundings and the environment and the events.

That, to me, is the nature of anxiety—that you have something where, in terms of evolution, was designed to bring you to a heightened state of awareness, because you're in danger. And we have a society, an economy, a media ecosystem, all of that, that is designed to keep you humming at a low level of danger all the time. Either worried about your bills or how you're coming across to the world or whatever. The million things that are—you know, dating, whatever's on your mind. So, in each of my stories, you have people facing the unknown—either the supernatural unknown or a situation that is so foreign and alien to them that it might as well be supernatural, because nothing that they know from their previous life has prepared them for it.

Whether or not someone has a disorder, I feel like that is a universal feeling, because everyone has had something—either a new job or going through a divorce or your parents going through a divorce or something that made you feel like nothing I've learned in my life up till now has prepared me for this. So, if there's a theme that I keep coming back to, it is about the ways in which people react to that and try to cope with it.

[00:08:21] **John Moe:** So, what constitutes somebody having a disorder and somebody having a naturally anxious reaction to circumstances?

[00:08:29] **Jason Pargin:** That is why I wanted to do this show.

(John affirms with a laugh.)

Because that is the thing that—to give some insight: you, I assume, and everyone listening, have at some point overslept for something important. You woke up and you realized like the light coming in from the window, you knew you overslept even before you looked at a clock.

[00:08:49] **John Moe:** Right, you're too rested. You wake up too rested, and it's danger right away.

[00:08:53] **Jason Pargin:** Yeah, or you're not waking up to the sound of the alarm. Like, you realize something's gone wrong, and you're now going to be late for work. You're going to be late for your flight. That moment of panic, it's a curious sensation. It's panic, and it's also self-loathing. You wake up hating yourself, because you allowed yourself too much rest. You did not interrupt your sleep cycle, which is what an alarm is supposed to do.

Okay. I wake up to that sensation every morning, and I don't have a job. Like, I'm a fulltime novelist. In theory, I could oversleep for a week, and nobody would notice. I don't have to be anywhere. It doesn't matter. I wake up every morning with a sense of self-loathing that I allowed myself to sleep to whatever time I woke up. It doesn't make a difference. My nervous system is so tuned to deadlines and feeling like I'm behind on work that every morning I wake up, and I think if you could test my cortisol levels, you know, all of the physiological markers of stress, I think I wake up to that every morning. That stress hangs over me all the time. And I would love to say, well, this is a disorder. I need medication to treat this. And I

am on medication. But when I talk about it to other very successful people, and I read about successful people in the past, it is very hard to find the ones who did not operate at a similar level, if not much, much worse.

Like, the things that I allow myself to do—like, I work seven days a week. I will take part of Saturday evening off. I will—Sunday, if there's football on, I will watch a football game. Then, I will work in the evening. It is so common among successful like hard-driving people that it is hard for me to think of it as something that I need to cure, even though I know it is shortening my life. Like, this is not good for you. Like, this is—it's not new science that this is not—this is hard on your system.

[00:11:06] **John Moe:** So, this is—this explains why there's seven books, and they're not short books. *(Chuckles.)* These are voluminous books. This is you working all the time.

[00:11:16] **Jason Pargin:** But how many books has Stephen King written? Like, he—or like I write at a fraction of Brandon Sanderson's pace. He writes like it seemingly three books a year. And they're much longer than mine. Like, the fantasy novels will run triple the size of the one you just read. And he—like Brandon Sanderson—not only does that, but he has other obligations beyond what I have. He has kids. I don't. He does public appearances. I don't. He, you know—he's running his own publishing company and a lot of the logistics side of that. I don't have that.

So, you can sit there and say, "Wow, it's so impressive that you cranked out seven novels in addition to—up 'til very recently—having another fulltime job that worked me 60 hours a week. Like, how did he find time for it all?" But all I do is look at other authors and their body of work. And it's like these people reliably crank out a book a year and do a million other things. Like, you look at like Stephen King. It's not just that he's written a book every year for the past—what?—40 years, but he's also directed films. He's also done—you know, he's done TV. He's got all of these side projects on top of that.

So, I feel like there's no way I can claim my schedule is optimized even though I don't have any hobbies. I will go see friends about twice a year. I'll do it on Christmas, and I'll do it probably once during the summer. I don't go out. I don't—you know, I don't garden. I don't have anything. I have two jobs, writing books and promoting books. But I still don't feel like I'm terribly productive in terms of volume.

[00:12:49] **John Moe:** Why do you work as hard as you do?

[00:12:52] **Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

[00:12:55] **John Moe:** Get the answer to that after the break.

(Music ends.)

[00:13:09] **Promo:**

Music: Fun, upbeat synth.

Bikram Chatterji: Hi, I'm Bikram Chatterji, the CEO of Maximum Fun, and I'm here with my fellow worker-owner—

Marissa Flaxbart: Marissa Flaxbart! Producer. This week for Co-Optober, we'll be highlighting other co-ops who work in the arts.

Bikram: The past few years have been challenging for all kinds of creative industries. We at MaxFun believe that co-ops are better suited to meet these challenges, and there are a lot of other companies who feel the same way.

Marissa: So, all this week on our social media and website, we'll be sharing interviews with some of our fellow co-ops.

Bikram: And head to our YouTube channel Friday, October 20th, where I'll be talking with worker-owners from Defector and Stocksy about their co-ops and why the model works for them.

Marissa: And next week is Volunteer Week! Learn how you can participate in that and get details on exclusive merch, our live streams, and other Co-Optober happenings at MaximumFun.org/cooptober.

Bikram: That's C-O-O-P-T-O-B-E-R.

(Music fades out.)

[00:14:07] **Transition:** Relaxed acoustic guitar.

[00:14:08] **John Moe:** Before the break, I asked Jason Pargin—who, again, has written seven books—why he works as hard as he does. He paused a bit, and then answered.

(Music ends.)

[00:14:23] **Jason Pargin:** This gets at the other thing. When I have taken my foot off the pedal in the past—and I have tried—it's been a disaster, and other people have lost their jobs. It's not like I'm selling so many books that I'm like trying to figure out what to do with the money. You know, publishing doesn't work that way.

(John agrees.)

You know, unless you are a superstar writer who is selling books in big box stores where you go to Costco, and they've got 800 copies. But if you're not that, the vast, vast majority of writers, if you walk into a bookstore, are writing part time. If you walk into Barnes & Noble right now or one of the other book chains that—oh, I'm sorry. There are no other book chains. It's just Barnes & Noble.

(John chuckles.)

If you walk into the one remaining book chain, and you look at all those books and shelves, those are all written by people in their spare time. In their day jobs, they are reporters or they're teachers, you know, or they're lecturers or they're professors or they're—if, you know, they're somebody working in the field that they're writing about. You know, these are written by politicians, by celebrities, comedians. They all have other jobs.

I am a fulltime novelist. To sell enough books to do it full time, you have to promote relentlessly. Like, my job is about 80% promotion, 20% writing, and that sells at the bare minimum number of books that allows me to keep doing this fulltime. And I can only do that because my wife has a fulltime job. I get my health insurance through her, you know. But writing, being an author, you do not have a 401k. You do not have a health insurance plan. You do not have any of that stuff. So, all of it, any—whatever you get paid in cash, you have to put back some for your retirement to make up for what you're not getting by having a real job type job, you have to make that up through just book sales and by relentlessly promoting.

So, ideally, I would be working about 30% more than I am now, but I physically can't. It makes me—I get too exhausted. My digestion has been ruined. I struggle to digest any kind of meal. I'm constantly sick from anxiety and worrying about—and every one of my fears is justified. Because if I step back 20%, I will not be a writer anymore. Like, this is the industry. Like, you're competing against too many other authors, competing against too many other things people can be doing with their spare time. It is a knife fight. So, this is what's so difficult having a conversation about anxiety with people. Because I don't know what is the proper amount of anxiety I should be feeling, but none of my fears about what will happen if I stop working so much are—it's not superstition. It's not a phobia. I've been doing this long enough, and I have failed enough times to realize, "Oh, I'm doing a job that millions and millions of people wish they could do. And I am competing against people who will work day and night, all night, all day, and will push harder, and will promote harder, and will do things that I'm not able to do."

So, if I'm talking to someone trying to work through it and say, "Well, what's the nature of your anxiety?" or whatever, what I'm looking for are tools to make my body stop breaking down under the anxiety, not to lose this fire that motivates me where I wake up, my eyes snap open, you know, at whatever—eight in the morning, and it's like I've gotta run and go start answering emails, go plan for the day. I'm afraid of losing that, because if I lose that, I probably lose my dream job in the process.

[00:18:17] **John Moe:** Is there a world that you can imagine where you're doing just as much writing and you're working just as hard, but the anxiety isn't there?

[00:18:25] **Jason Pargin:** That's the other thing. So, this is all complicated—

[00:18:28] **John Moe:** I keep hitting the things.

[00:18:29] **Jason Pargin:** But this is at the heart of it, because I think a lot of the people you speak to are in the exact same place. Like, the episodes I've listened to, they're saying a lot of the same things. Because these are—if they're someone you've—if you've heard of them to the point that you're eager to hear them on a show, then they have succeeded in media to a degree that I think it is difficult to do unless you are somewhat obsessive and driven. Like, no

matter what somebody's public facing persona is. Like, they can be, as their public face, a goofy loser comedian, but then you look at their schedule, and you realize, oh, this person works 80 hours a week. They travel six days out of the week. Like, they fly for six hours, go do a show, sleep for two hours, get on a bus, go to the next show. And then, their show is all about how they're depressed and lazy and goofy and, oh, I'm just a drunk, worthless—It's like, no, this person works around the clock to remain successful and to keep their face out there.

So, I try to be open with people about that, that there is a reputation of writers as alcoholics who kind of like, "Oh, they're six months past their deadline, and you got to drag them out of bed to write anything. And they're all just kind of hanging around," and try to make it clear. It's like, well, in this media environment, this is kind of how you have to be. But getting back to the thing, I was probably eight years old the first time I went to the doctor with an upset stomach because I was worried about something as a child. And I—at the time I grew up in the—I was born in 1975. So, you're talking about the early '80s. I probably had been watching the news, because back then you just had the one TV, and you had to watch whatever your parents watched and probably saw something about nuclear war. And probably had nightmares.

[00:20:15] **John Moe:** *The Day After*.

[00:20:17] **Jason Pargin:** Yeah, that was 1984. I was nine years old when that came out. I watched it and then listened to everybody talk about it. And it was not fiction. It was here's a show about what's going to happen in the next few years. You're not going to grow up. So—and then having to have a, you know, a doctor and my parents try to explain, "Well, you're just a kid. You know, you can't let this eat a hole in your gut. Like, this is the world. You have to adjust, and so on." So, there is something about my physiology that is in my family, that's in—it's on my mother's side and my father's side both—where I have a nervous stomach, as old timey doctors used to call it, and just a disposition toward being nervous and being anxious all the time.

If I'm in a scenario where I don't have anything to worry about, generally I will find something to worry about. And it is a steadfast belief on my part that your body wants to repeat sensations because it's familiar. So, if you are someone who—you know, I think addiction works like this. So, like if you have scheduled that you do something that's pleasurable to you every day at a certain time, your body is going to demand you start doing it. But I think it works that way with negative emotions too. I think if you have been very, very sad about the state of your life for a very long time, or you've been nervous about something for a very long time, if the source of the nervousness is taken away I think your body will go looking for something else to fill that gap to get you back to that baseline.

And this is something that I only discovered listening to an interview with Larry David, the co-creator of *Seinfeld*, who's a billionaire, saying that he spent his entire life as a struggling comedian worrying about money every day. 'Cause you're a comedian living in New York. Like, that is a—you're going job to job, like you're accounting every dollar. And he's like, "I was wealthy overnight, like more money than what you can spend." He has the kind of money that you can't spend it. There's nothing that exists that costs that much. And he said, "The amount of my anxieties did not change one tiny bit." Then, all that happened was when

the money worries went away, my brain instantly filled that space with other anxieties that I think to an outsider probably sound ridiculous.

It's like you're obsessively worrying about—I don't know—your refrigerator making a weird noise. It's like, well, what do you care? Just buy a new one. Or you're obsessively worried about, you know, having lunch with somebody you haven't seen in years and you kind of don't like. It's like, well, who cares? You were wildly successful. You have everything you want. And anxiety doesn't work that way. So, here's the thing, if my next book became the new *Harry Potter* somehow, it became a worldwide sensation. It sold 30,000,000 copies, and I suddenly had more money than what I can spend. Because I'm—again, I'm not somebody who goes on trips. I don't have a drug habit. I don't have anything to spend it on. I think you would be correct in saying that if all of that job stress went away, if all of those deadlines went away, if you got to a place where you knew you could retire and just literally live on a beach for the rest of your life, you would be just as anxious.

I cannot argue with you. That is the paradox. Because on one hand, I fully 100% believe that my current level of anxiety over deadlines and over money and over selling enough books is—I can justify it down to the molecule. I mean, I can show you a spreadsheet of what I need to sell versus what I have sold so far to be able to pay my bills and keep doing this as a career. I think I can factually say that. You could come back and say, "Yes, Jason, but you were just as nervous as a 12-year-old who literally was not in the job market. So, is it possible that you are intentionally arranging your life in such a way that justifies the amount of anxiety that you have been feeling for as long as you can remember?"

And the answer is: I don't know. And I don't think science knows. I don't think science yet understands how this works.

[00:24:49] **John Moe:** A bit of a curveball question, but I am going somewhere with it. Where did you grow up?

[00:24:54] **Jason Pargin:** In rural Illinois, town of about 4,000 people, in Southern Illinois. If you picture Illinois, if you know where Chicago is up in the corner? It is the exact opposite of that. It's down in the tip that is just cornfields.

[00:25:06] **John Moe:** Did you have a notion when you were growing up that somewhere near you would be the place that the Russians nuked first?

[00:25:17] **Jason Pargin:** Uh, yes. We had an oil refinery. It was the one thing in that town that was the source of all the employment. And then, it went out in the late '80s, and that's why the town died. So, I grew up in a town that was crumbling, where the empty storefronts—all of the stereotypical stuff you hear about Trump country. I grew up there, because that refinery went out, but that refinery would have—allegedly have been a target.

[00:25:42] **John Moe:** This is something that—I'm a little bit older than you. Not much, but I've noticed this about people of our generation, of the *The Day After* generation. I grew up in the Seattle area. We were convinced Boeing would be hit first, because they make all the airplanes. I've talked to people who grew up in New York who thought, "Well, it's the big city." I know people in Alaska who said, "Well, this is where the Air Force bases are. This is

where they would hit first." And it's all a product, I feel, of this anxiety of dealing—of this hope that they would not feel the pain, that they would be annihilated before everything else, which is some really bleak shit to imagine growing up in.

Why do you think people of our generation are fixated on getting obliterated by the first nuclear strikes?

[00:26:32] **Jason Pargin:** It's not just that, it's that also we were—it was a deeply religious community, and it was a lot of evangelical churches. So, the concept that—it was baked into the religion that the world was going to end soon, because Jesus Christ would return. So, the news that nuclear war was coming at any minute, that fit perfect. Because like, see, this is the fulfillment of the prophecy. So, believing that you were going to be destroyed in a nuclear fire became a religious belief. But to be clear, we did nuclear war drills at school. Like, we would do that thing where you get under the desk and put your hands over your head, which would do nothing in the event of a nuclear attack.

But we did these drills. Like, we had a fallout shelter in the school, like an area that was like designated. It had the big radiation symbol on it. Like, this is where you go in the aftermath that—to, you know, it's to avoid the nuclear fallout. It's not like this was all just mythology, but it tied in perfectly with the mythology. And it's weird, because you grow up—it's not even specifically imagining like, "I'm not going to grow up." It's just that you never think about the future. Like, the idea of what I would be doing when I'm at age 48, if you had asked me as a high school kid, it would have been a ludicrous question. Because how would I make it to 48? Like, you look into the future, and you just see nothing at all. So, people ask me like, "Well, when you were a kid, did you think you're going to grow up to be a bestselling novelist? Did you think you would have movies made about your book?"

It's like I didn't think anything about what I would grow up to be. So, even when it came time to choose a major for college, I just picked one. Because it's like what difference does it make?

[00:28:16] **John Moe:** What did you pick?

[00:28:19] **Jason Pargin:** Oh, I went to a community college for two years just to delay the decision, because it's a—it's basically just high school where people are allowed to smoke. And then at that point I went into broadcast journalism, because I thought, well, I'm an information junkie. I like to write, you know. And I did that. That was my first job out of college. I worked at an ABC affiliate in rural Illinois; it's a very small market, and I was decent at it, but I had no passion for it. It's just like I just—again, it was a decision that was probably made in a day. I certainly didn't sit around daydreaming about what my life would be like as a news person. It's just like, oh, okay, I guess this is the time in my life where they make me pick something out of this catalog.

And so, I did. I was the first—you know, first kid in my family to ever go to a university. And—but the reason why like, today, when I hear kids say the exact same thing about climate change, whether it will—like, they'll be memes on social media about like, "What do you mean what am I going to be doing in five years? We're not going to be alive in five years." It's like, that's no way to live, because you would be surprised. 'Cause I thought at best we

would be fighting rats for food. And instead, I'm living in a very nice home in a very nice neighborhood in a very nice city. And I have my own name on my books. And it's like I have dreams that came true that I didn't have these dreams.

Like, I've been in the world. Whatever you can say about the world, it's a million times better than what I ever pictured it. So, you would be surprised at how good things can turn out. And it is not helpful to have that thing where it's like, well, I'm not going to worry about the future, because there's not going to be a future. I'm telling you, no. Plan as if you're going to live to be 100 and you're going to be working until you're 80. Plan for that, because that is by far the most likely outcome than that you're going to die in some sort of a climate apocalypse or something like that.

[00:30:19] **John Moe:** So, if you grew up convinced that there wasn't going to be any growing up to do, that the obliteration would happen, and then now you find yourself in the present, you know, living in the future, so to speak—does that refutation of your anxiety do anything to abate present anxiety?

[00:30:38] **Jason Pargin:** It should! It should, because think about the things I thought I would be worried about. Escaping radioactive mutants and scrounging through the dirt for food through the rubble of the buildings that remain vs. what I'm actually worried about, which is I have a deadline at the end of the year for this novel. I've got a ton of publicity I have to do for the last novel while trying to finish this novel, and I'm doing it all from an air-conditioned house surrounded by technological marvels. I have a little device in my hand that has access to all human knowledge for almost no cost, something they literally did not even have in *Star Trek*.

(John chuckles in agreement.)

The idea of I am in an absurdly comfortable place compared to any possible outcome for my future but am so worried about it that my body is breaking down. Like, I can't eat a full, normal human meal, or else I will vomit it back up unless I'm taking medication to regulate my system. Because I can feel worry in my gut that if I—if you try to have me sit down and watch a movie or go to the theater, I will sit there watching the movie thinking about my deadlines. And I will sit there and be worried that whole time. I always get kicked out of jury duty, because the moment they ask me questions about like how I would react to being off work for a while, it's like, "No, we do not want this guy. He's going to get steadily more and more upset the longer we keep him here. And then he's just going to vote guilty out of spite." Because they don't want people that are like workaholics or whatever.

So, there's nothing logical about it. And at the same time, if you or a therapist or a family member are concerned and you try to hold an intervention to talk me out of my anxiety, I can give you numbers. Like, I can give you hard data proving why you're wrong. I have built up these defenses in my brain. That's like, no, this is all justified. This is what the greats do. If you watch that Michael Jordan documentary, whatever it was called, *The Last Dance*, and you see what—he's basically a psychopath. Like, he was great at basketball, but he's—

[00:32:54] **John Moe:** He's a miserable person.

[00:32:56] **Music:** Deeply unhappy. Did not enjoy one second of it, because the moment they win the title, it's just immediately like, okay, get back in the gym to win the next one. And like knowing that this is eventually going to end with him. He has to lose at some point. He has to quit at some point. At some point, he's not going to be the best anymore. Knowing that's coming and haunted by that, and then—you know, winning the title, and then going out on the golf course the next day and betting 100 grand per hole on golf, because he's still—like, that didn't do it. It didn't take. It didn't satisfy. It didn't fill the hole inside him.

So, it's hard to sit here and say, "Is that what I want for myself or is it not?" Because he never filled the hole, but look at what he did. They will know his name 100 years from now. So, the fact that he himself was never satisfied, does that matter? Because he brought greatness into the world. He inspired generations of people around the planet to show them what is possible, what can be done. Like, people watched him and marveled that a human can do the things he does. And that's the thing. Because I think if you sat him down and said, "You're clearly miserable. You don't have any friends. Your teammates hate you. They've written books about what a miserable bastard you were. Is it worth it?" I think he would be shocked that that question's even being asked.

It's like, okay, but why were you doing it? If it didn't—this urge to dominate, like instead of letting it go and letting yourself feel that peace, why did you cling to it? And he would say, "Well, yeah, I won all these championships. I made all this money." It's like, yep. *(Chuckling.)* But if that didn't make you happy, so why did you—is it possible you would have been happier and more at peace working just at a normal type job somewhere and playing basketball on the weekends with your buddies and just being a guy and not having the burden of being Air Jordan? That is like the central question at the heart of all humanity. Because I think he would say, "Well, what if all of the great inventors said that? What if the Wright brothers weren't obsessive about trying to steal the idea of the airplane from somebody else?" or however that actually happened. What if Thomas Edison had not been so driven to steal inventions from other people? You wouldn't have all of this stuff, you know. Like, society wouldn't advance if not for these driven psychopaths that are unreasonable about their pursuits.

Because these people, and I'm telling you—and I don't say this in public very often, because I worry people are going to take that a long way. There are not many all-time greats who had very good work/life balance. Going all back—go back as far as you want. The founding fathers. Read about their personal lives. Like, they were a mess. The great inventors, it's hard to find people that were not obsessive, did not leave a trail of divorces and bitter children in their wake. And it is terrible advice to give to someone who is—because there are just as many people who would be obsessive, and they won't get rich, they won't get successful, they will just be miserable and also they alienated everyone around them for no reason. So, it is difficult for me to give advice on this without being a hypocrite. Because I know in my heart, I believe that I have to be this way.

And someone will try to come back and say, "Well, but there's an example of this famous writer, and he had a family, and his wife loved him, and he got, you know, his children, and he worked for charity. Like, he clearly achieved some balance." And I will say that's someone whose first book sold 4,000,000 copies, and it gave them enough breathing room that they could do that. Or you know, that there are athletes who don't obsessively practice that are so great. They are the exception that proves the rule. They are <u>so</u> talented and like

genetically gifted that they're able to get the same results by not trying nearly as hard. That does exist. I think those people don't prove what I'm saying, because my name on a book doesn't automatically sell it. The fact that I have written a book does not automatically make people rush out to the bookstore. I'm not at that level. In order for me to sell like the minimum number of books to mostly pay back the advance they paid me, I have to promote daily. Daily. I will record probably 30 hours of podcast guest appearances promoting just this book while also trying to finish the next book while also trying to do all the other things in my life.

So, if someone is listening, waiting for me to give them some conclusion about "here is how you should live a human life", what I'm trying to tell you is that you live in a society at the heart of which is this paradox. Where they want you to simultaneously be great, that you're not worth caring about unless you are great. 'Cause that's what the system tells you, right? Unless you're famous, unless you're prominent, your life isn't worth anything. But also, every movie you take that—you know, one of the messages is, "No, stop and smell the roses. Take time for the people around you." It's like I'm hearing two different things here. *(Chuckles.)* I feel like in some ways I am the embodiment of that paradox.

[00:38:34] **Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

[00:38:34] **John Moe:** Okay, but does Jason Pargin, despite all this—despite the anxiety and the pressure and the fear—does he like writing? I'll ask him after the break.

(Music ends.)

[00:38:54] **Promo:**

> *(School bell rings.)*
>
> **Music**: Playful synth fades in.
>
> **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 masters 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.)

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

Ella: Obviously not.

Caroline: No.

Tom: It's a podcast.

(They laugh.)

[00:39:41] **Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

[00:39:42] **John Moe:** Back with author Jason Pargin.

(Music ends.)

Do you like writing?

[00:39:52] **Jason Pargin:** I like parts of it. Any job that you do, there's a part that's fun and a part that's not. Any job. I don't care if there's some guy out there whose dream job is like, "Well, I want to be the guy who like photographs swimsuit models," and he's the one who has to like brush the sand off their butt before the photo is taken. "That's my job." There's like some horny teenager thinking this. It's like, no, that job exists, but it's not mostly massaging bikini models. It's mostly travel. It's mostly logistics. It's mostly editing. It's mostly dealing with businesspeople and agent stuff. Same thing with if you just want to be a doctor, if you actually have a noble profession in mind. It's like your job is not healing people. Your job is paperwork. Your job is insurance companies. Your job is dealing with administrators. Your job is all these other things other than, you know, doing the Dr. House thing where you solve the mystery, and you get rid of the patient's pain. It's like that's a part of the job, you know.

And same thing—actors tell you 90% of the job is standing around waiting and then promoting and then traveling to promote the movie, doing interviews, doing press. The acting

part, getting into character, bringing the character to life, bringing a story to life, that's—what?—5% of it? You know, how much time do you actually spend doing the acting? How much time do you actually—? So, with writing, I'm a born storyteller. The way this happened was I wrote as my hobby on the side for most of my life. I just had normal day jobs and then wrote on the side. And then eventually I got the job working at *Cracked* as an editor. So, I was editing columns and essays during the day, and then writing the stories again on the side. But the stories were what I did for fun. Because for someone who is anxious, escaping into their imagination is a very common reflex. Because you're escaping into a world in which you have total control. Where you control what the dangers that are coming, you set the rules. So, creating a story in your mind is a coping mechanism that I think every little kid who, you know, is frightened of the world probably has done at some point.

So, the act of coming up with characters, coming up with things for characters to say and all of that is a soothing, self-soothing mechanism. And I find it very pleasurable. I enjoy it. I love knowing that I can take someone else on a journey. Because I think of all the times that a great book has gotten me through something, because being able to escape into a book and a book that is so well done that every sentence is worth reading—there's no boring part, like it's crafted to a T, and you know from the first page that you're in the hands of a great writer and just letting yourself go? To be able to bring that to other people, wonderful. But 95% of the job is not that. It's editing. It's rewriting. It's working. It's researching. You have to do a ton of homework. No matter how silly the story is, you have to do a ton of—look up a ton of stuff. It's all of the grunt work and the elbow grease and all of that.

[00:43:02] **John Moe:** So, is there an accounting? Is there a ledger that balances the stuff that you love about your job vs. the anxiety and the sort of fanning and the enhancement of that anxiety that your job entails? Where, if it tilted too much to one side, would you say it's not worth it and quit?

[00:43:26] **Jason Pargin:** Um… probably, but this is one of those things where, again, part of existing in our system just as it exists—this part of capitalism where we're at right now and this media environment where we're at right now, you're constantly surrounded by people who want what you have. And I don't mean competitors. I mean, I have people messaging me every week saying, "Well, how did you do it? How did you get your book out? How are you able to do this fulltime? Like, how do you—? That's what I want. You know, I'm working during the day in retail, but I write in the evening. My goal is one day I'll be able to do this full time." Like, so you're constantly being reminded that in line behind you is a line of people that wraps around the earth, people who would rather be doing what you are doing, sitting inside in the air conditioning, typing silly stories you made up in your head instead of working on a roof in the hot sun or working retail and having customers be cruel to you all day or doing whatever—editing other people's work where you have no control over the, you know, the creativity of it. You're just having to do the grunt work and fix the grammar and all that.

People that work in various stages of the industry where they all, they <u>all</u> want the thing you've got. And you are living what to them is their dream job, and that many, many bookish young kids—you know, right now there's some kid reading their first, you know, *Harry Potter* novel or whatever and thinking, "I want to do this. I want to grow up and write the new *Harry Potter*." That you have what all of those kids want is very, very difficult to square with being miserable in the job. Because parts of the job are miserable. Like, I'm physically,

you know, suffering under the strain. So, in that case, it hits you in two ways. One, you could say, “Well, I feel silly for allowing myself to be unhappy doing a job that all of these people would love to have or living a life that all of these people would love to be living.” But on the other hand, it's like this just proves how scared you should be of losing it.

And I think—I cannot drive this home enough, because I think this is something that people badly misunderstand about our society. When you look at the people that are ruining the world—right?—like if you're someone who complains about the Boomers and how they've squandered their wealth or the way that Trump voters behave, it's like they have everything, they have all this privilege, but they act like they're put upon and like they're the victims and on and on. What they're saying, they're being honest about. They truly do believe that they are oppressed. This system has a way of making everybody feel like that. And I'm telling you right now, there is a billionaire on his yacht somewhere who feels like he's one of the most oppressed people in America. Because he feels like everything he has is so precarious and that if he makes the wrong move, the wrong decision about whether to sell this company, the wrong this or wrong that, if he says the wrong thing to the press, that he will lose it, that he will lose all of the status that he's gained, everything that he's spent his whole life working for.

This system makes you feel like you're on a high wire, no matter who you are, no matter how comfortable your life is, no matter how objectively comfortable your life is compared to previous generations. Everyone feels like they are one minute away from losing it all. And I'm telling you from experience, logically, you should build up a cushion to the point where you could say, “You know what? I could fall down five levels from here, and I would probably still be all right. Like, I'm still going to be sleeping in a warm bed. I will still have a home, a loving wife. I will have my friends. I have my video games. I will have access to the most delicious food ever made, because I'm living in America in the 21st century.” The human brain doesn't work like that.

[00:47:19] **John Moe:** Are you working to have less anxiety now? Or trying to?

[00:47:22] **Jason Pargin:** So, I have been trying treatments off and on. The most disappointing thing you find out is that the best anti-anxiety treatments, like statistically, are things like exercise and regulating your diet and getting enough sleep. If you're not getting enough sleep, it's kind of hard to do anything that makes up for that. Not ingesting 600 milligrams of caffeine every day to get through the workday, as I do. I have—you know, I'm drinking iced coffee through the day to keep me going. That destroys your system. That is an anxiety—a pro anxiety medication you're taking.

(John agrees with a chuckle.)

Eventually the circuits that run your anxiety just get fried and they go dark. And that's the depression. Like, you just burn out your system, and then you go dark for a while. And then you come back, and it's like, alright! I'm ready to take on more anxiety again. You have to make treating your mental health a part time job.

[00:48:23] **John Moe:** So, then are you just—are you choosing—over this idea of getting more sleep, having less caffeine, getting more exercise—are you choosing your own version

of health? And the health is a higher word count and more promotion of the books and more things that sustain your career? I mean, is it just a matter of looking at two options, and you're choosing option B?

[00:48:49] **Jason Pargin:** Yes. And I realize that it's a false choice. But if society should collapse, or if reading should go away as a thing that people do, and they say, "That's okay. We've implemented a new government system. We will just pay you. We pay all the citizens to just live. It's fine. We've achieved utopia, like capitalism has been—we decided next year we're gonna get rid of capitalism. We've done a utopia instead." I think, living in that environment, I would find myself missing the anxiety. And that is the part of the puzzle that I think most people are trying to solve about themselves, because there are people out there who have been in 12 relationships. Every single one of them has ended in like some sort of crazy drama who have not admitted to themselves that they seek it out, that there are negative emotions that some of us go hunting for. Because I think—surely, because that's the familiar landscape to our minds and our bodies.

[00:49:57] **John Moe:** You're in a dysfunctional romantic relationship with anxiety.

[00:50:03] **Jason Pargin:** And it's—that is a great metaphor, because in any bad marriage, if you say, "Well, why don't you leave him?" They can immediately come back to, "Well, most of the time he's fine. And he—look, he makes all this money. We have this beautiful home, and he protects me. And you know, anybody tries to insult me, he's very strong and protective. And you know, most of the time he's great." It's like you kind of choose your own prison at times, and you do it because you know someone who's in a much worse situation. And that gets into part of what my books are about is, Zoey in these books, she is—she grew up poor, her mother was poor, suddenly comes into fabulous wealth. But being poor was territory she knew. She had strategies for dealing with that. Those were the battles she'd been fighting her whole life, and now it's a totally different thing where you're fighting with other, you know, fabulously powerful people for territory or, you know, share or market share or whatever. And finds itself not ever saying, "Oh, I was better off poor."

I'm not crazy. I'm not going to write a book where the theme is you're better off poor. But that the world is pulling her back to that, because it has taught her that, well, this is who you are. This is your identity. You are Trailer Park Zoey. Don't you—wouldn't you like to retreat back into that? And part of the challenge is that she has to say, "No, I'm not going to let you push me back into the shadows by constantly reminding me that I'm a fish out of water. Like, I'm going to push. I'm going to push into the unfamiliar, and I'm going to become good at this." And that is me writing my own story of trying to not fall back into the same familiar habits or not fall back into being like, "Why am I just as unhappy now as I was when I was in high school with no friends and—you know, and not being very good in school?" It's like, how can I—why doesn't the system allow me to enjoy this?

[00:52:28] **John Moe:** Are you writing another book now as you promote this book?

[00:52:30] **Jason Pargin:** Yes, because I'm under contract. I signed a three-book deal. So, it's a book that—the first book was—it was due last year to come out this year. The next book, the follow-up was due at the end of this year, to come out in 2024. And then, I wrote in a two-year gap where I have two years to write the next book after that. So, it's a three-book

deal. But the way writing works is like if these books don't sell, there's no guarantee that there will be another contract. And this book deal pays me less than the deal I signed last time. So, the reminders that you really should be out there. You should be out there promoting a little bit harder. You know, you could have done—you could have done this better. You could have—

[00:53:15] **John Moe:** Could have called more people, could have gotten more people to write about you.

[00:53:19] **Jason Pargin:** Could have been on more podcasts, could have contacted—you know, gotten friendly with more whatever. 'Cause the way writing works in movies where like the author is like at all these cocktail parties and they're like friends with their agent, I guess maybe if you live in New York that's what it's like. I don't think that's the way it is in the real world. In the real world, you are for the most part on your own. The publisher's job is to get your book on shelves, because that's an accomplishment. Like, my books will be at Barnes & Noble. They will have a bunch of them. They will have them on the shelves facing out. That's the giant hurdle that the publisher has to overcome to get them in brick-and-mortar stores, to get Amazon to buy a whole bunch of copies. That's their job.

To get the actual people to know about it and to want to read it, that's my job. And this is something that young authors don't understand. They're like, "Well, no, I'm the author. Don't you understand? I did the hard part. I wrote the book." It's like, no, listen.

[00:54:16] **John Moe:** No, that was just the first part.

[00:54:18] **Jason Pargin:** Your readers, at this moment, have access to infinite free pornography on a device in their pocket.

(John laughs.)

They could be watching YouTube. They could be watching Netflix. They could be watching a stream on Twitch. They could be watching TikToks. They could be scrolling Twitter. They could be scrolling Threads. They could be scrolling BlueSky. They could be scrolling Instagram. They could be scrolling Snapchat. They could be scrolling Facebook. Do you understand? There are infinite things that they could read and be scrolling. It's like to pierce through that cloud, that massive—you're living in an ecosystem where, when Stephen King wrote his first book, there is literally a billion times more entertainment being produced than when he wrote his books. He wrote his books in an era when you either had to watch like, on Saturday, golf on TV. Because that was literally the only thing on all three channels was golf in the '80s. Or you could read your Stephen King novel. Okay?

You are entering an ecosystem where video games exist. Not just on your phone, but on your console on your PC, where all of this stuff is cheap, infinitely available, instantly available at any time, instant gratification—stuff that is dazzling and wonderful to look at, that is hilarious, that will delight their mind. You have to write something and convince them to pay 30 bucks for a hardcover for this thing that is 150,000 words long and to sit down and commit themselves to reading it. And then among the people who are hardcore readers who would prefer to read than do all of these other things, you have to convince them that of the

however many—you know, there's something like 100,000 books being written a year, most of them published for free online—that all of that infinity of books, they should be yours instead. That of the stack of books they want or that they pass on the shelf, that yours is the one they have to grab.

To convince them to do that requires relentless day and night reminding them that it exists, and then trying to appeal to them. Like, I'm now on TikTok. I'm a 48-year-old man. I have 315,000 followers on TikTok. I did that because that's where they are. That's where the readers are. Do you think I would be on TikTok under just normal circumstances for my own amusement? Like, do you think this is what any man who's pushing 50 wants from his life? It's like, no. That's where they are. And so, that's most of my life is going out and just relentlessly trying to tell people, because I know that if I don't do that, the book will just pass quietly into the night. And then when it comes time to do a new book deal, the publisher will say, "No, we're just—we don't think we're really interested. The last one didn't really—it didn't really sell through." And then that'll be that. I will need to open the classifieds and try to find a job. And I'm not qualified to do any job!

[00:57:22] **John Moe:** Jason Pargin, thank you so much.

(Jason thanks him.)

[00:57:27] **Music:** "Building Wings" by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

[00:57:34] **John Moe:** *Zoey is Too Drunk for This Dystopia*, the latest novel by Jason Pargin, comes out on October 31st. Halloween. Next time on *Depresh Mode*, Jane Marie wanted to hire a new life coach, because she felt like she was losing the game of life.

[00:57:50] **Jane Marie:** The life coach that I ended up going with, I did find in shopping for her *(chuckles)* is that she's kind of unusual, which I liked. You know, I really didn't want a lot of woo-woo. She's a little woo-woo. But I wanted to be able to take her seriously. I didn't want someone that was just gonna, you know, talk to me about the moon. Although she does talk about the moon a lot for herself, but she wasn't making me do any new moon fasting or anything like that.

[00:58:18] **John Moe:** Jane Marie from the podcast *The Dream* joins us. The only way *Depresh Mode* exists is from the donations of people who listen, the support that you, the listeners, give us. If you are already supporting the show, thank you. We appreciate it. If not, we really need to hear from you. This is an important time. We need to hear from you to keep this show going. Please, go to MaximumFun.org/join. It's super easy. It's super quick to donate. You find a level that works for you. You select *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows, and you are supporting the show, and we appreciate that.

You can visit our merchandise store. We got all sorts of "I'm Glad You're Here" merchandise there. We got mugs and shirts, we got *Depresh Mode* sweatpants, all sorts of fun things for you to choose from. The holiday season is coming up. I hate to mention that in October, but it's reality. It's coming up. You can't deny the linear motion of time. All of that can be found

at MaxFunStore.com. MaxFunStore.com. That's our merchandise store. Visit it. Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews.

The Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is available 24/7 for free in the United States by calling 988. The Crisis Text Line, also free and always available. Text “home” to 741741. Our Instagram and Twitter are @DepreshPod. If you're on Facebook, look up our mental health discussion group, Preshies. Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is on Substack. Search that up. I'm on Twitter and Instagram @JohnMoe. Our electric mail address is DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org.

Hi, credits listeners. I'm not going to rake the leaves. I might mow the leaves. *Depresh Mode* is made possible by your contributions. The show is produced by Gabe Mara. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our music, including our theme song, “Building Wings”.

[01:00:14] **Music**: “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller.

I’m always falling off of cliffs, now

Building wings on the way down

I am figuring things out

Building wings, building wings, building wings

No one knows the reason

Maybe there’s no reason

I just keep believing

No one knows the answer

Maybe there’s no answer

I just keep on dancing

[01:00:51] **Ally:** Hi, this is Ally from Cape Town, South Africa. Depression and anxiety are worldwide. You're not only not alone, you're in great company. Keep going.

[01:01:02] **John Moe:** *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now.

(Music fades out.)

[01:01:13] **Sound Effect:** Cheerful ukulele chord.

[01:01:14] **Speaker 1:** Maximum Fun.

[01:01:16] **Speaker 2:** A worker-owned network.

[01:01:17] **Speaker 3:** Of artist owned shows.

[01:01:19] **Speaker 4:** Supported—

[01:01:20] **Speaker 5:** —directly—

[01:01:21] **Speaker 6:** —by you!