

[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](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:13] **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.

[00:00:20] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Look, I don't want to stereotype or anything, but research suggests that you—a public radio listener are probably not 19 years old. But I'm also willing to guess that you remember when you were 19, and the adult that you are today is a very different person from the “adult”—we're gonna put quotes around that—that you were way back then. Maybe you were fortunate enough to get to travel with friends. And that's weird, right? You're far from home. You're maybe crashing at somebody's house, eating cheap pizza or veggie burgers. If there's a plan, it's probably something along the lines of “hang out and see the sights”. You don't have any real grownups to watch over you, to tell you where everybody's going.

Instead, you have friends. Friends you might know great, but also friends with whom you probably haven't spent 24 or 48 or 72 straight hours. And like you, those friends are also barely adults, still trying to figure out who they are and how to be on their own in the world. So, the dynamics are strange. You navigate some awkwardness—a lot of awkwardness, maybe. Maybe you fall in love with someone, someone you met on the trip or someone with whom you are traveling. And no matter what, you make memories that you will remember forever.

Anyway, there's a new graphic novel called *Roaming* that is about exactly that. It follows three 19-year-olds on their first trip to New York City. Dani and Zoe are close friends. They're joined by Fiona, who's Dani's new classmate. The three students navigate their relationship and the new dynamics that it has taken on. They very literally navigate their way through New York, a place that is at once thrilling and overwhelming. My guests Jillian and Mariko Tamaki wrote and illustrated *Roaming*. They are cousins. Jillian is the illustrator, Mariko the writer. The two of them also co-wrote *This One Summer*, which was a just absolutely breathtaking and Caldecott-winning graphic novel that has been challenged and banned in many school districts.

Mariko and Jillian cover themes like sexual expression, queerness, and similar subjects in their work. If you're listening to the podcast version of this interview, we'll talk about some of those, particularly in *Roaming*. If you aren't listening to the podcast version—well, search for *Bullseye* in your favorite podcast app to hear an even more in-depth conversation with these brilliant and boundary pushing authors. Anyway, let's get into it. My conversation with Jillian and Mariko Tamaki.

[00:03:05] **Transition:** Bright, jazzy synth.

[00:03:09] **Jesse Thorn:** Mariko, Jillian, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

[00:03:12] **Mariko Tamaki:** Thanks for having us.

[00:03:13] **Jillian Tamaki:** Hello!

[00:03:15] **Jesse Thorn:** Tell me how you split up the work when you're writing together.

[00:03:22] **Mariko Tamaki:** This is the first time we've actually written the script together. The sort of way that we've worked in the past is that there's been a script that I have worked on, and then I pass it to Jillian, and then there's a back and forth. And then she does the lion's share of the work which is the illustration part of it. But this time we wanted to do something different, so we—actually, Jillian sent me what was the sort of beginnings of the script for *Roaming*, and then we like just passed it back and forth like chain letter style, until we had a script that felt like that was the script.

[00:03:55] **Jesse Thorn:** Mariko, you've written for television and prose and stuff like that. When you—for example, for your previous book, *This One Summer*—when you sent a script to Jillian, what was the script? Like, what was the form it took?

*(Jillian laughs.)*

[00:04:10] **Mariko Tamaki:** I mean, my scripts for Jillian are notoriously sparse. I think because you know, the sort of like standard Marvel script is very broken up into panels and things like that. I think now I try to keep an eye on like what the—like a sort of page-by-page situation, but it's much more a sort of like my—I started out in theatre, so they're much more scenes and acts than they are than actual like sort of page layouts.

[00:04:38] **Jesse Thorn:** I always imagined like Harvey Pekar, the *American Splendor* writer, who would just draw the whole comic book, but with bad stick figures, because he couldn't draw at all.

[00:04:49] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah. No, no, no. It's not like that. *(Laughs.)* I think it's much more—I mean, I think you're sort of—you know, you're sort of creating a world together. And so, the first step is to be really clear about like as much as you understand about the world. And then I think the thing that I love about working with Jillian—really working with like any co-creator, is you're like, “Well, this is what I think the world is. This is the start of the world.” And then to see—you know, it's like you're both kind of witnesses to the story. And so, I'm sort of the first witness to say like, “This is what I think happened, and this is what they said.” And then I feel like, you know, Jillian always takes it a step further into like this sort of whole other dimension of the world and the story, like from where it began.

[00:05:33] **Jesse Thorn:** Jillian, what do you make of a theatre script that lands in your inbox?

[00:05:40] **Jillian Tamaki:** *(Laughs.)* Yeah, they are—I mean, with our first two books, *Skim* and *This One Summer*, it really was just, “Hey, do you want to work together?” Sure! “Okay. Like, talk to you again in a couple months.”

(They chuckle.)

[00:05:54] **Mariko Tamaki:** See you later!

[00:05:55] **Jillian Tamaki:** And then really had no input as to, you know, what's the story about? Who's—what are the characters? What are—what's the setting? Or anything like that. And I kind of love that. I love that challenge of just being punted something, and you have to catch it and do the research and put yourself in that world. It didn't really work that way with this book, because this is kind of based on some of my experiences living in New York and visiting New York as a 19-year-old.

But to the question about scripts, they really do—to my eye; I'm not a script writer—but they look like screenplays a little bit in that Mariko has an incredible ear for dialogue, and I think you even studied linguistics.

[00:06:44] **Jesse Thorn:** I did. I studied Linguistic Anthropology for two years, and then I quit, (*giggling*) to be clear.

[00:06:49] **Jillian Tamaki:** So, there's so much information packed in just the dialogue, and there's so much character packed in just the dialogue alone. And that is really fun, because I think a lot of our work is about communication and lack of communication and bad communication and saying things but not meaning them, or not saying something and thinking, you know, something else. So, there's that space in between what is said and what somebody looks like or what's happening in the situation, and that's the place that I get to play.

[00:07:22] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, it must be hard for you, Mariko, to write in a way that remembers that you are leaving most of the communication, like a substantial portion of the communication, to images rather than words.

[00:07:46] **Mariko Tamaki:** I mean, the work of prose is so different, because you are really constructing so much. And actually, I find prose—the problem with writing comics is I find prose very laborious after writing—and my prose is notoriously short, because I think I am so used to comics. But I think that the thing that I like about it is I don't like—like Jillian says, I think we're both kind of like under explainers. And I think that the thing that I love about our comics is that you're really sort of like witnessing a conversation, less having something explained to you.

And I think that comics really lets you do that. Like, you know, comics is very not—is not a medium of one character saying that they're feeling sad or one character saying that they're, you know, explaining what's going on. It's really about like watching something happen and sort of figuring it out the way any character in the story would have to figure it out. And I really love that approach to storytelling. I mean, exposition is always my least favorite part of writing, because I hate explaining. (*Chuckling.*) I have very little patience for explaining anything.

[00:08:50] **Jesse Thorn:** You know you've written for genre television, right?

*(They laugh.)*

[00:08:53] **Mariko Tamaki:** Well, I do think it's like a—

[00:08:54] **Jesse Thorn:** “We're gonna need a capacitor—a space capacitor!” “Well, space capacitors do this! How could we get one?!”

[00:09:02] **Mariko Tamaki:** Right. Well, and it's like I was working on something for Marvel once and I was like—you know, they're like, “What is this?” It's like a brain transfer machine. And it's like, “How does it work?” Nobody needs to know that. Just say it's a brain transfer machine.

[00:09:09] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, it transfers brains. *(Laughs.)*

[00:09:11] **Mariko Tamaki:** It transfers brains from one body to another. How does it work? No, no, no, no, no. Like, let's just leave that. And I do think that that is—you know, I love sparse storytelling. Jillian and I were talking earlier about like sort of, you know, we both kind of grew up with, you know, Canadian literature and people like Alice Munro and, you know, this very like moody, subtext-heavy prose that's really about kind of like trying to sort of find your way into what the characters are doing as opposed to the characters explaining what they're doing.

[00:09:41] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, it's also adolescence at the time when we have to try and build the skill of understanding others with empathy—which, you know, is not something that is required of—you know, like there's some sympathy in younger kids, but like really, to understand—to see the world through someone else's eyes is something that only starts to happen when you're the age of those characters in this one. Some are 10/12 years old.

[00:10:16] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah, well, and I think it's like—I think *Roaming* is this kind of like experiment of like it's really hard to do if you're three people in New York for the first time. The hardest time in the world to empathize with anybody is when you're three people on a trip together. You can maybe empathize with one person at a time, I guess, is what we're really sort of illustrating in this book. You either like this person or you like this person, and then you don't like the other person. That's just how it goes. It's just math.

[00:10:45] **Jillian Tamaki:** Well, like 19 is a perfect age, too, where—Jesse, as you said—like, *(chuckling)* you're learning how to like interface as an adult, and that's just—I mean, I think a lot of our books are about those in-between times—you know?—where it's really, really messy. You don't become like a functional adult like overnight. You actually have to like mess up and muddle about for a bit. But it's—19 does feel like the guardrails are off.

*(They chuckle.)*

Because you're not—you know, there's no parents to interface through, there's no teachers in school, and especially in a situation like this where the first time you travel with your friends and you don't have a parent, you really don't know anything about the world or how it works or what to do if you get into trouble, how to do some of these basic functions you just don't

think of as an adult. Like, you don't come with that knowledge like preprogrammed into your brain. And so, that struggle is very funny in retrospect and poignant in retrospect. And when you're in it, it's like a mess. (*Laughs.*)

[00:11:53] **Jesse Thorn:** More with Mariko and Jillian Tamaki after a quick break. Stay with us, it's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:12:02] **Transition:** Bright, chiming synth.

[00:12:07] **Jesse Thorn:** I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. My guests are Jillian and Mariko Tamaki.

Jillian, you mentioned that *Roaming*—which is a story about two old friends and a third friend who is a new friend to one of them—coming together on a trip to New York. And you said it is in part inspired by your own experiences at that age. These are all sort of like 19-year-olds, first year in college. What were your experiences?

[00:12:40] **Jillian Tamaki:** Well, I did go on a trip. This is not an autobiographical book. (*Laughs.*) People always ask us if the books are autobiographical. They're not. The settings, I feel like, are based on real settings. But I had gone on a trip. I went—I grew up in Calgary, Alberta. So, other side of the country. And I went to school at Queen's University, which is in Kingston, Ontario here. It's like a city outside of—it's not outside of Toronto, but it's close-ish to Toronto. So, wanted to go to New York, and I'd never been to New York. Took the train down and met a friend. She was actually a pen pal, and we met for the first time on the train. She brought a friend—her friend from—and they were actually old friends.

So, that was like sort of the impetus. Then nothing correlates to anything that happened in the book, but it was a funny trip (*laughs*) kind of thrown together with like strangers and just—and there were other trips as I, you know, graduated college and you look back on these vacations or trips you took with friends and you're just like, “I can't believe we stayed in that place. That place had—there was no windows in the like window! There was—you know, you could have fallen out of the window in that place or—” Just these situations you look back and you're just like amazed as to how little you knew.

So, that is somewhat the basis of the book. But I also, when I lived in New York, I taught at Parsons and at SVA for a long time. And right around this time, 2009. And so, I was teaching a lot of 19- and 20-year-old kids that were, you know, most of them not from New York. So, I was sort of experiencing the city through their eyes too. And sort of what they were into and what they were like is in there as well.

[00:14:36] **Jesse Thorn:** I felt very—my wife went to college in New York at Sarah Lawrence, and I felt very indicted as I read about these trips around the city and thought about the times I flew out to see her when we were 19. And that was before I even got to the part about, uh, how pathetic it is to marry your high school sweetheart.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:15:02] **Mariko Tamaki:** Well, according to 19-year-olds it's pathetic, just to be clear.

[00:15:03] **Jillian Tamaki:** Yeah, you're different though. You're different.

[00:15:05] **Jesse Thorn:** It's worked out great. I love you very much, Theresa.

*(They laugh.)*

But there is that kind of feeling that is in some ways specific to New York, which is that New York is sooo different from any other city in North America. I mean, even Toronto or, you know, Chicago or the other biggest cities. And as a 19-year-old, it is the most—I mean, I still, when I'm in Manhattan—you know, so much of Manhattan is so deeply corny and annoying, but I'm there and I'm like, *(chuckling)* “This is so awesome! Like, this rules! Let's go around and see stuff!”

*(Mariko agrees.)*

[00:15:50] **Jillian Tamaki:** *(Chuckles.)* I feel like all the cliches and stereotypes about New York, good and bad, are all true in rotation. And five minutes apart from one another. You know?

[00:15:59] **Jesse Thorn:** People really are walking there!

[00:16:01] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah. I mean, that's the thing too, is that you know it before you go, right? Like, before I went, I had watched almost every episode of *Law & Order*. So, I was like walking around New York like I know this place. Like, you know like I was like—and I think especially coming from, you know—like, especially if it's a sort of early tourist experience, you're like, “That's a brownstone! These are the cops that they had on *Law & Order!* Like, this is what like a donut place looks like!” And you're like, “This is a New York bagel!” Like, you have all these little very kind of like insignificant and also—

[00:16:32] **Jesse Thorn:** Now I know what bialys are! Sort of.

[00:16:36] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yes! This is what this thing is! Yeah, exactly. So, I think it's like—and you know, you go to Times Square, and it's like larger than life. And then you go, you're like, “Now we're in a New York bar. This is a bar that's full of New Yorkers!” You know, like it just seems cooler. It's maybe not cooler than a bar in your university town, but it just—you just feel the significance of it so overwhelmingly as like a tourist.

[00:16:56] **Jesse Thorn:** The book is set in 2009, which is quite a while ago, but not that long ago.

[00:17:04] **Mariko Tamaki:** *(Giggles.)* I know, right? It's ages ago!

[00:17:05] **Jillian Tamaki:** Yeah, it's really weird. I feel like that time is just coming into focus now for us.

[00:17:10] **Jesse Thorn:** So, why did you choose a place that is far enough away to be different but not so far away as to be foreign?

[00:17:19] **Jillian Tamaki:** This is the New York that I—like, the sweet spot of my time there, you know? (*Chuckles.*) And cities change so fast, right? So, I did feel comfortable depicting the city as it was at that time. It posed some practical problems for researching it, you know—in addition to covid. But you're right. Why set something then? You know, when it could be, you know, set now? I thought there was something interesting about traveling then—which is not the case now—of we didn't have cell phones in this way where you're never gonna get lost, because you always have a dynamic map. You're gonna be able to search out the best pizza or cupcake or whatever you want to find. You're not maybe gonna stumble upon stuff in the same way. You don't have communication with your friends through texting, easy texting.

Like, I thought that that was an interesting limitation. And another, again, communication barrier between the characters, in that: Canadian. (*Laughs.*) You never know how your cell phone worked. Like, how does roaming work?! Like, is it going to be a million dollars if I turn on my phone?!

Like, that was like—I just remember that being such a concern whenever you went anywhere at that time. I'm still not really sure how it works to be honest, but yeah. (*Laughs.*)

[00:18:57] **Jesse Thorn:** What really like affected me about these people wandering around scared to turn on their cell phones is the way that that kind of young adulthood/post-adolescence like traps you in these awkwardnesses, traps you in these in-betweens. And that is one of them. Like, it's a terror of penury, right? (*Chuckles.*) But it's—and it's a terror of a place that you don't know.

And even—you know, you have a character in here who's relatively free-spirited. But even she is just trying to convince—trying to figure out how to convince the world that she is that while also completely not being that. You know what I mean?

[00:19:44] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah, I think it's—I mean, the other thing that we—what we got out of making it 2009 was we could avoid the kind of immediate sort of like self-reflection of tourism, which is Instagram and things like that. So, we didn't have to have them. Like, you know, we could kind of have them taking photographs and doing stuff without having to be sort of like self-reflexively documenting and summing up everything as they were going along, which I think was sort of closer to our experience of, you know, being a tourist in our teenage years than if we said it present day.

[00:20:17] **Jesse Thorn:** And in a way it bounds that experience. Just as, you know, it's structured by days, it makes it a discrete experience that happens within the boundaries of that place and time rather than stretching out across the world.

[00:20:33] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah. I mean, I think always the—to me, having any kind of box around things or having any kind of limits—if it's time or if it's resources or whatever—to me, that always just makes a story more interesting. Like, “you can do this, but you can't do this” is like sort of like the bedrock of most stories.

[00:20:50] **Jillian Tamaki:** A fun element of—oh, I think it was what you were talking about with the characters—was when you travel as a little group like that, you become this cell. *(Laughs.)*

*(Mariko agrees.)*

Some people are good at this; some people are good at sniffing out food; some people are good at planning; some people are good at the transit; some people are gonna push the group in good ways; sometimes somebody's gonna be a complainer. Like, I feel like that's the experience of being around somebody 24/7. So, that was, I think, probably the most fun about doing this and trying to reflect on what these 19-year-olds would be like is that you get to see the good, the bad, and the ugly of your travel mates. *(Laughs.)*

*(Mariko agrees.)*

And it kind of rotates, you know. It kind of—somebody gets to shine in one situation, and they're just like horrible in another situation, and every character gets a turn to be great and gets a turn to be horrible. *(Laughs.)* Which I think is quite realistic for when you travel with friends.

[00:21:55] **Jesse Thorn:** I think that being 19 is also a time when you are constantly in cells of people trying to navigate the world. Like, traveling, you know, shines a light on it, certainly. But you know, otherwise you're with roommates, with dormmates, with people that you met on your improv team. Maybe at this point I'm getting too autobiographical.

*(They laugh.)*

[00:22:21] **Jillian Tamaki:** Your improv people who are sort of your friends. *(Chuckles.)*

[00:22:24] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah! Right, so—and each of these groups has intense, vital, urgent social dynamics that you don't experience in the same way when you're 37. You know what I mean? Like, maybe a little bit at church, but like besides that. You know?

[00:22:38] **Mariko Tamaki:** Well, and 19 is very specific. Because, you know—and also for Jillian and I to be moving away from kind of the high school experience into something more of an adulthood—is that you've just made this huge leap, which is your first year of university or your first year of college, right? Like, you've gone from this place where you sort of had this established pecking order of like I am the nerd, or I am the mathlete, or I am, you know, the super social girl in my high school. And then you pick yourself up and you go somewhere else, and you have this opportunity to like, you know, cut off all your hair or do whatever and sort of try something new.

So, you know, I do think that this was kind of a way of not necessarily going into the first year of like that world but looking at kind of a peripheral moment that's affected by it.

[00:23:24] **Jesse Thorn:** We'll finish up my conversation with Jillian and Mariko Tamaki after a short break. When we come back, as we mentioned earlier, their books have been



challenged in school districts around the country and banned in some school libraries. We'll talk about what it's like when your indie graphic novel gets thrust into a heated national debate over censorship.

It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:23:47] **Promo:**

**Music:** Fast-paced synth.

**Yucky Jessica:** (*Rachel McElroy doing a rasping, whiny voice.*) I am Yucky Jessica.

**Chuck Crudsworth:** (*Griffin McElroy doing a gravelly, nasal voice.*) I'm Chuck Crudsworth.

**Yucky Jessica:** And this is—

**Jessica & Chuck:** *Terrible!*

**Chuck Crudsworth:** A podcast where we talk about things we hate that are awful!

**Yucky Jessica:** Today, we're discussing *Wonderful!*, a podcast on the Maximum Fun network?

**Chuck Crudsworth:** Hosts Rachel and Griffin McElroy, a real-life married couple—

**Yucky Jessica:** Yuuuck!

**Chuck Crudsworth:** —discuss a wide range of topics: music, video games, poetry, snacks!

**Yucky Jessica:** But I hate all that stuff!

**Chuck Crudsworth:** I know you do, Yucky Jessica!

**Yucky Jessica:** It comes out every Wednesday, the worst day of the week, wherever you download your podcasts.

**Chuck Crudsworth:** For our next topic, we're talking Fiona, the baby hippo from the Cincinnati Zoo.

*(Music ends.)*

**Yucky Jessica:** I hate this little hippo!

[00:24:29] **Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

[00:24:33] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I'm talking with Mariko and Jillian Tamaki. They're the authors of the new graphic novel *Roaming*. It tells the story of three young college students who take a trip to New York and

the challenges that it presents for their relationships. Jillian and Mariko also wrote the graphic novel *This One Summer*. That book won a Caldecott in 2015. *This One Summer* is also one of the most frequently challenged books at school libraries. Let's get back into my conversation with Mariko and Jillian Tamaki.

I have to say like having read *This One Summer*—which was, you know, marketed as a young adult book, because, you know, when you—for context, A) I think comics for young adults sell exceptionally well, relatively speaking. And B) you can market something for young adults and adults will also buy it, but if you market something for adults, it's hard to sell it to young adult markets. So, there's like reasons for that generally, but like—

[00:25:37] **Mariko Tamaki:** But there's also a complex history behind that too. Which is—and you know, people are going to listen to this podcast and then comment, and please do! But there is—part of the—one of the elements here is writing about young characters generally means that you are writing young adult. So, it's really a protagonist. Like, part of what initially kind of like slotted us into the category with our first book was that we wrote about a teenager. Neither Jillian and I were like, “We're writing YA or young adult literature.” We were like, “We're writing this story.” And then kind of once we had established that, then we are YA writers. And then the next book that we did, because it was also about young characters, also became like a YA book.

[00:26:19] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, like when I read it, I didn't know that it was supposed to be a YA book. (*Chuckles.*) I had no clue! It showed up in my mailbox, and I opened it, and it's about, you know, themes that are very important to young adults but the same kinds of themes that are very familiar and important to adults. You know, it's about sex and its consequences, and big feelings within families and stuff, relationships. And when I was reading this book, I was like—I knew like, oh, so this one's supposed to be an adult one. And I'm like, “You know, the characters are a different age, the feeling is really similar.” Like, the kinds of feelings that we're engaging with are really similar. And then I was like, “But I bet they were glad to just like put in a head between some thighs.”

(*They laugh.*)

And (*inaudible*) did not have to feel weird about it, you know?

[00:27:09] **Mariko Tamaki:** Jillian, were you glad to put a head between some thighs? Is that a relief?

[00:27:12] **Jillian Tamaki:** I'm like, “Finally.”

(*They laugh.*)

[00:27:14] **Mariko Tamaki:** “Head between thighs. I feel better. I feel better as an artist. I feel better as a writer.”

[00:27:20] **Jillian Tamaki:** You know, like we never set out to make any sort of... hit a target demo, you know? Like, with our first book, it was—we actually did a 24-page zine

version of it through a little feminist press here in Toronto. That was, you know, the first iteration of *Skim*. And we actually were like “mature audiences” ‘cause they're smoking and they're swearing. And there's like, oh, you know, all these other naughty things in it. And then like it was actually, you know, a book publisher that was like, “Oh, this is YA.”

Like, we had—like a lot of the times—and I feel like we really guard our freedom to make the choices to tell the stories that we want to tell. But a lot of times it does sort of like take—who packages it and how you sell it is like a secondary conversation and one that, you know, we're only tangentially involved in sometimes. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:28:22] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah. I think every time we make a book together, we're very specific as to the story that we're telling, and we're very unspecific or worried about who the market or the audience is. And I think that partly the benefit that we have of having sort of like a—you know, now that we have a couple books under our belt, I feel like people who know us know what kind of story that they're getting. So, we like less have to be concerned about like—(*chuckling*) you know, so it's like, if you—I feel like if a too-young reader opens *This One Summer*, feel like that reader is not going to get too far into it, because it's just not, you know, created for a certain kind of younger audience. Like, I just don't believe you're going to get halfway through the book if you're like looking for like, you know, something by like—you know, like *Smile* or something like that. You know what I mean? Like, I feel like that's the joy of most books is that you can self-select out of it if you're the wrong reader.

[00:29:18] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, I have a daughter who just turned 12. If she was interested in *This One Summer*, I would be pumped for her to read it and talk about it with her, because I liked it so much.

(*They chuckle.*)

Mostly—but I think that like one of the challenges of writing a book that's in that category is then you have to deal with people's expectations about that, which include—among other things—you know, a huge dialogue about censorship and what is appropriate for who and all these things. And as those have like bubbled up in the culture in the last five/ten years, your book has been weirdly at the center of it. Like, not the center-center but pretty close. And I don't know. My wife wrote a picture book that has gotten banned in a variety of places. *It Feels Good to be Yourself* by Theresa Thorn.

[00:30:21] **Jillian Tamaki:** Very controversial topic, being yourself. Yeah. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:30:24] **Mariko Tamaki:** It feeling good to be yourself. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:30:24] **Jesse Thorn:** In bookstores now. Some children are transgender.

But like seeing it on these lists and stuff and occasionally in like a hyper-conservative website's haranguing article, I'm like—it both feels so close and intense and so far away and meaningless. And it's a really weird place to be!

[00:30:56] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah, it is. It is a weird place to be.

[00:30:59] **Jillian Tamaki:** There's sort of—it feels sort of like, yeah, it's horrible. It's horrible personally, and it's horrible culturally, and it sucks. Sometimes it does feel like I don't know what more to say about that, um... you know what I mean? Like, uh...

[00:31:17] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah. It feels like banning books is—it just feels—I don't agree with the practice of banning books. It is censorship. I don't agree.

[00:31:26] **Jillian Tamaki:** And it has really ramped up since then. I mean, our book has been—since 2017 and it, you know—I feel it was always in a little cohort, but now that cohort has expanded.

*(Mariko agrees.)*

And it's like it's taken on new categories and like very, very, very innocuous topics and sort of stories and little picture books about being yourself and all this stuff. It's—the cohort has grown a lot over the last couple of years. So.

[00:31:57] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah. It's also—I mean, I feel like it's a difficult conversation to engage in, because it's largely not a conversation about the books themselves. So, as a lover of books and as an avid reader, I find it hard to engage, because I don't believe that it's a conversation started by people who have even read the books. So, I think that that's, you know—that to me is a huge part of it. *(Chuckles.)*

[00:32:23] **Jesse Thorn:** That seems like it could make it, in some ways, more difficult. You know, when people are mad about *This One Summer* involving these sophisticated themes and involving a queer character and so forth, you're like, “Well, I was—I had sophisticated themes in my life when I was ten, and I was queer.”

[00:32:46] **Jillian Tamaki:** I guess I thought about—I thought this a little bit earlier in the first bannings of, “Wow, people really just want to keep children in bubbles.” Right? And there's like—what do people think adolescence is? It's not that you're a kid one day and then you're a fully formed functional adult. *(Laughs.)* Like, there is so much mess in between these states of being. And I mean, life is just a mess anyway. It's not like there's any perfect state. But I feel like that's what our books are really about, those in-between states.

So, we're interested in those in-between states. And it's messy. And people want to deny that messiness, and they want like a super insulated bubble world for their children that don't exist. Now I feel like it's evolved a little bit where it's politics, but that was sort of my initial feeling when our book first started getting challenged.

[00:33:45] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah, I mean, I—yes, I think it is. It's very sad to have people's access to books—you know, like it's—the people who are sort of these things are—you know, like if you look at the number of book bans and how few people it is that are actually making the complaints and like the smaller population that it is that is like affecting this, you know, so-called problem. I don't know. Books were so important to me when I was a young person; I was like an obsessive reader, and I don't necessarily know about the sort of like windows versus mirrors of it all, but I was just like voracious and trying to like absorb as

much as I could. And like, you know, in not just books and films and television and all that stuff.

So, that has always been a really important process to me. And I feel like, you know, it's been really interesting talking to kids. Like, I have actually talked to a 12-year-old who read *This One Summer*. And we had a really amazing conversation about miscarriages. (*Laughs.*) This like very sophisticated miscarriage-literate 12-year-old. And I was like, "That's amazing that that's what you got from this book. And I'm so glad." And I also had a conversation with a kid when I was at a library conference one time.

And this kid was like, "I did not like your book."

And I was like, "That is totally fair. You do not have to like it." You know, like it's there if you want it, and if you don't, you know, fine. You can, there's tons of other books you can read, so you're good to go.

[00:35:18] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Mariko and Jillian, I absolutely loved this book, and I love your past work as well. So, I'm really happy that the two of you could come on the show. Thank you so much for making the time.

[00:35:33] **Jillian Tamaki:** Thanks so much for having us.

[00:35:35] **Mariko Tamaki:** Yeah, thanks for having us!

[00:35:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Jillian and Mariko Tamaki. You can buy *Roaming* at your local bookstore or take a look at [Bookshop.org](http://Bookshop.org).

[00:35:43] **Transition:** Peaceful, chiming synth.

[00:35:44] **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. I just got home from touring with my friend, John Hodgman, and our show, *Judge John Hodgman*. I had such a great time. Thank you to everybody who came out to those shows. We have a streaming version. You can find all the information about that, which is going to premiere soon at our events page, [MaximumFun.org/events](http://MaximumFun.org/events). It's a good time. You can hear me sing.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Special thanks this week to Katie Jensen of Vocal Fry Studios in Toronto for recording Jillian Tamaki at her studio. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is "Huddle Formation" by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on Instagram. There we share interview highlights, behind the scenes looks, and more. We're [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:37:00] **Promo:** *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*