

[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.

[00:00:21] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Ask just about any comedian in the last 20 years to name their influences. Maybe ask 100 of them. Make one of those word clouds from 2011. The name that you will see over and over again—big, big letters in that word cloud—Steven Wright. Go see him on stage. It is joke after joke after joke. But not rat-a-tat-tat like an old Borscht Belt comic. In fact, the opposite: slow, steady, sometimes surreal.

[00:00:54] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:00:55] **Clip:**

**Steven Wright:** Curiosity killed the cat, but for a while I was a suspect.

*(The audience laughs.)*

When I die, I'm gonna leave my body to science fiction.

*(Laughter.)*

[00:01:10] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:01:12] **Jesse Thorn:** That's that classic Steven Wright deadpan a voice that has served him well not only as a stand up, but also as an actor. Like in *Reservoir Dogs*.

[00:01:19] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:01:20] **Clip:**

**K-Billy DJ (*Reservoir Dogs*):** That was the Partridge Family's “Doesn't Somebody Want to be Wanted” followed by Edison Lighthouse’s “Love Grows Where My Rosemary Goes”.

*(Song fades in.)*

As K-Billy's Super Sounds of the '70s weekend just keeps on truckin'.

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:01:38] **Jesse Thorn:** Lately, Wright has been changing things up a little. He just wrote a novel, his first. It's called *Harold*. *Harold*'s a book about a seven-year-old boy. It's not really a coming-of-age story or anything like that. In fact, it's pretty light on plot. Instead, it's an interior monologue, a day in the life of a dreamer, the kind you've got to imagine the author was when he was young. It's a beautiful and hilarious book, and I am so glad to get to talk with the great Steven Wright. So, let's get into it.

[00:02:09] **Transition:** Bright, chiming synth.

[00:02:13] **Jesse Thorn:** Steven Wright, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show. Or I think—I was trying to figure—I interviewed you once on the show. I think it was 20 years ago now. So, thank you for coming back.

[00:02:25] **Steven Wright:** Thanks for having me. Yeah, well, one time before, right? I don't really remember; do you?

[00:02:32] **Jesse Thorn:** No. I remember that we did it, and I remember thinking that you seemed really nice and lovely. That's my main memories of it.

[00:02:41] **Steven Wright:** Thank you. Those days are gone.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:02:44] **Jesse Thorn:** Were you nervous to write a novel?

[00:02:56] **Steven Wright:** No, I wasn't. Because I didn't really sit down to write a novel. I just—you know, I wrote this article for *Rolling Stone Magazine*. It wasn't an article; it was a short story—a fairytale about how the beach was invented. I wrote that in like 1986 and very surreal. And every few years, I would read it again. Because I liked it, and I would think I should write something else sometime. But then I never would. But then the last time I read it, I thought I should write something else. Because it's so different than the stand up, so I just started writing. "Harold was in third grade." And then I didn't think, oh, I'm gonna write a novel. I just started writing it, and then it just started getting longer and longer. And then I thought let me see how long I can go.

[00:03:54] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, I guess that's as good a reason as any—to find out how long you can go.

[00:04:00] **Steven Wright:** Yeah, I mean, it's different. Like, the stand up just floats into my head from my everyday life. I'll walk down the street, I'll see a sign, or I'll talk to someone, and they'll say some word or some concept. And it's like, oh, then—oh, that could be this. Oh, that could be this. But this was like sitting down on purpose, which is completely different.

[00:04:29] **Jesse Thorn:** Steven, Harold spends a lot of time thinking about and talking to his teacher in class. This mostly takes place in class. And that sense when you're a kid of how important your teacher is in your life is something that as an adult I have a hard time even wrapping my head around. Like, you're like this is the entire representation of adulthood to

me, other than my parents, is this person I go to see for six hours every day. You know what I mean? And can tell me to do anything, and I have to do it.

[00:05:15] **Steven Wright:** Yes. Yeah, he doesn't—Harold doesn't talk back and forth to her much. I mean, he answers the questions and everything. And there's a lot of what he says in his mind that he doesn't really say out loud, you know—wise things. It just got going. You know? It was a fascinating, creative thing. Because as I kept making stuff up, then things—I would remember things that I thought of before just because I thought they were odd or interesting. And then as I wrote, these things would float up like they were underwater. And they would float up into my consciousness. And I'd go, oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah, I can put that right there. Oh, I'll put that right there. Like, the fact that your teeth are the only part of your skeleton you can see while you're alive, you know?

*(Jesse chuckles.)*

That's—it's like—so, that floated up and I'm going, okay. I'll have him think this. One of the main things in the book is the rectangle. The description that is inside of his head. He thinks that the inside of his—he doesn't think this really, but there's a little—his head is full of thousands of birds, and there's a little—each bird represents a thought. And there's a little rectangle window in the middle of his brain. And when the bird flies through the rectangle, whatever thought that bird represents, that's what he would think of. So, the inside of his head is like an indoor sky with thousands of birds. And that I thought of years ago, for no—just—I mean, I just think of stuff for no reason. I don't know how or why I thought of it. But again, when the book started going, I thought, oh yeah, oh yeah! And that floated up, and I thought, oh, oh, oh yeah! I can put that right here.

I'll have him—I mean, a lot of it is me. I'm saying “I'll have him”—I mean, a ton of it is real stuff. I mean, that's not real, but I thought of it before. So, I put that in, and then I realized that now I can—I didn't put it in for this reason, but now I can change the subject constantly and blame it on the birds. I mean, there's a reason. You know? Because my mind, the standup just jumps around. And even my mind jumps around; I'm not a story guy. I mean, I'm not—there's kind of a story, maybe, but there's—it was just like—it just kept going. So, when I thought put the rectangle in, I could move around. You know, one goes through; it represents lifeboats. So, now he's thinking about lifeboats. He's thinking about the Titanic. He's thinking about how there wasn't enough lifeboats on it, and that ricochets through like lifeguard chairs; they should be everywhere, not just near the water. Because people need to be saved besides just at the water. You know, and it just kept ricocheting.

[00:08:50] **Jesse Thorn:** How do you catch those things when you're writing standup? Do you write them down in your phone? Do you carry a notebook?

[00:08:59] **Steven Wright:** No. You know, since the phone, I write it right into my note section of—one of my note sections is for stand up, and it's just this—that's where it goes. I used to write it on little pieces of paper, and then I would—when I got home, I'd write it into a notebook. I used to remember—if I didn't have paper, I could remember two or three of them. And then when I got home, I'd write them down. But they're written down immediately, because to me a good idea is precious. It's like a little piece of gold. You know, a little—a new idea that's different, that's never—that's unusual. “Oh, oh!” So, to not write it

down and have it float away is horrible. I learned that way early doing standup, how important the ideas are. ‘Cause that’s the whole thing. It’s all ideas.

[00:09:56] **Jesse Thorn:** Especially if each idea that you manage to grab hold of is 15 seconds of your act rather than five minutes of your act. You know what I mean? (*Chuckles.*) Like, you have to have a new idea for—you gotta have three new ideas a minute for what you do on stage. I think there’s a lot of comics who just think of, you know, “What was the meeting where they designed spoons?” And then they just think of—they think—they’ve got 10 spoon jokes for their five-minute “meeting they designed spoons” chunk.

[00:10:32] **Steven Wright:** Yeah, it’s less than 15 seconds. The joke, with the laugh, is about five or seven or eight seconds. That’s how it comes out about. I would go on TV, do a TV appearance. Five minutes was about 20-22 jokes; it would land out as that. It’s—you know, it’s interesting. Because it’s the only way I know how to do it. Like, people would say, oh, they’re so short, you need so many. Yes, that’s true, but I never thought of it like, “Oh, they’re so short! You need so many!”

Yes, that’s true. But I never thought of it like, “Ugh! Like, this is horrible!” You know, it’s like it’s just it! It’s like my height. Okay, that’s my height. I’m fine with my height. But the time—like for every three I think of—or of three to four—only one gets a big enough laugh to stay in the show. So, I mean, I slide them in. In the show, I slide them. I know where I’m gonna try them, and if it works three times, it’ll always work. But if it never worked—if it doesn’t work three times, I throw it away. So, you’re writing like three times as much as—when the audience sees the basic show that works, it’s three times longer than that has been written. You gotta chop it. You gotta just take the ones that work. The audience, they—unintentionally, they’re the editors. They’re editing the show. They don’t know. They think they’re just watching the show, which they are, but they’re in charge.

[00:12:20] **Jesse Thorn:** Stick around! More *Bullseye* around the corner from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR

[00:12:26] **Transition:** Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

[00:12:31] **Jesse Thorn:** It’s *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. I’m talking with Steven Wright: standup comedian, actor, and novelist.

I want to play some comedy from your first appearance on *The Tonight Show* in 1982, which we can talk about the extent to which it came out of nowhere. But first, let’s hear a bit of it.

[00:12:52] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:12:53] **Clip:**

**Steven Wright (*The Tonight Show*):** One time, right in the middle of a job interview, I took out a book, and I started reading.

(*Laughter.*)

The guy said, “What the hell are you doing?”

I said, “Let me ask you one question. If you were in a vehicle, and you were traveling at the speed of light, and then you turned your lights on, would they do anything?”

*(Laughter and applause.)*

He said, “I don't know.”

I said, “Forget it then. I don't want to work for you.”

*(Laughter.)*

[00:13:26] **Jesse Thorn:** You're more demonstrative in 1982 than you are in 1992 on stage. There's a little bit of trying to welcome the audience into the show. You show your face warmly a few times.

[00:13:39] **Steven Wright:** Oh yeah? *(Chuckles.)*

[00:13:40] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, it's true. You got scouted in Boston, almost completely happenstantially. There was this famous comedy show in Boston at a Chinese restaurant.

*(Steven confirms.)*

Did you know when you were performing there that there was somebody from *The Tonight Show* in the crowd?

[00:14:04] **Steven Wright:** Yes. I have had so many lucky things happen in my career. And in my life. I mean, you can be talented. Everyone is talented, but that's just part of it. There's—other things line up that you have no control over. Timing, and here—you were there; you were right there. You know, just weird, like—there was the Ding Ho Comedy Club, it was in Inman Square in Cambridge. It was half—the front was a comedy club. Originally it was for music, like folk music. In the back was a Chinese restaurant. So, Barry Crimmins, the great Barry Crimmins—one of my best friends. In fact, I dedicate the book to him and Peter LaSalle. He had this club. So, it was weird.

So, some woman, some freelance writer writes an article about it, because it's an odd situation. And then for some reason—I don't know why—it goes in the *L.A. Times*. I don't know why it went in the *L.A. Times*. And then Peter LaSalle, who was the producer of *The Tonight Show*, he saw the article. And that stuck in his head. And then like eight months later, his kids were getting out of high school. So, they made a trip east. They were going to go to Massachusetts and New York to look at colleges for their kids. So, he went to Massachusetts. And he remembered the article. So, then he called the club up, and he said that he was from *The Tonight Show*, and he was going to be in the audience.

You see all—even that. Do you see that? Like, the just—and that's why he was there, because the woman wrote the article. Why did it go in the *L.A. Times*? What if they didn't—? The kids were going to go to college, so he goes there then. And then I was one of the comedians, and I didn't talk to him or anything. But a couple weeks later I got a phone call from them.

[00:16:18] **Jesse Thorn:** That must have been unreal.

[00:16:21] **Steven Wright:** Totally like in the movies. Like, I mean I was making enough money barely to pay the rent, you know. The rent—even living with another guy. And it's like \$180 a month or something, so I was making just enough money from the comedy. So, I'm sitting at home in the day, in the middle of the day, watching the cartoons. My friend was—I don't know where he was. I think he—anyway, the phone rang. And it was not Peter LaSalle, but it was another guy—Jim McCauley from *The Tonight Show*. And he said, “Yes, Peter saw you, and we'd like you to go on *The Tonight Show*. Or write for *The Tonight Show*.”

And I said, “What—? Do you mean just from when he saw me do that seven minutes?”

“Yes, but we need to—if you have a videotape, we want to show it to the other producer, Fred de Cordova. So, if you can send that out.”

“Okay.” And I hung up, and I—it was like a seven-minute conversation. Then I called people I knew. No one was home.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

Just sitting there in this hallucination. I had one video of me on stage. It was a different club. I didn't even have shoes on. I had flip flops. I sent that out. But they liked it. That—Peter LaSalle changed my whole life. I mean, because of putting me on there, everything changed. I still know him. I became friends with him, and I still know him.

Johnny Carson affected my life twice, because I mean, from watching *The Tonight Show* when I was 16, 17, 18, 19—that's how I even thought of wanting to be a comedian, from watching that show, seeing these comedians come out and talk about life in a funny way, and then sit down and talk to him. And I thought, oh my god. This is unbelievable! Look at this! I would like to do that maybe. So, then when I went on, then it changed everything twice.

[00:18:42] **Jesse Thorn:** My producer called me earlier today. I was preparing at home, and he said, “We should have an acting thing. I kind of think maybe you don't want to have *Reservoir Dogs*. You've had so many wonderful projects where you've played Steven Wright like characters.”

And I was like, “Yeah, no, I don't—I don't know. I mean, I don't really need *Reservoir Dogs*.”

And it's like, “Oh, but I did pull *Babe: Pig in the City* for you.”

I was so grateful. I was so grateful. Thank you, Kevin, and everybody in the *Bullseye* staff for pulling *Babe: Pig in the City*, one of my favorite movies of all time.

[00:19:25] **Steven Wright:** Really?

[00:19:26] **Jesse Thorn:** Hopefully America knows that. Oh yeah! *Babe: Pig in the City* is a great movie. Love *Babe: Pig in the City*. You're the voice of—*Babe: Pig in the City* is a little hard to explain to people who've only seen regular *Babe*, which is also a wonderful movie, of course. But in *Babe: Pig in the City*, Babe goes to this kind of home—this sort of refuge home for pets and animals in a city that doesn't allow them. And your character is in an ape and monkey performing troupe, led by Mickey Rooney.

*(They chuckle.)*

And it's in this sort of like weird, sad, scary hotel. And this is the scene that we're about to play where a monkey runs in, steals Babe's suitcase, and takes it away. Babe has to follow him down the hallway. And the monkey sort of goes back with his weird performance troupe, slams the door in Babe's face. And Babe is trying to get in but can't until the door opens.

[00:20:33] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:20:34] **Clip:**

**Babe** (*Babe: Pig in the City*): Oh, I'd like the bag back, please.

*(Tug the monkey babbles.)*

**Bob:** Hey, pinkness. Look at the little guy. You want to break his heart?

**Babe:** But—! But it doesn't belong to him.

**Bob:** All I know is what I see. Tug comes in with the bag, just doing his job, collecting stuff, and you barge in here, accusicating and making demandments. I didn't see you with the bag. Who's to say it belongs to you?

**Babe:** I'm not leaving without the bag.

[00:21:00] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:21:05] **Jesse Thorn:** *(Chuckles.)* What's amazing about it to me is you so often play a—you know, something like your stage character, which is sneakily warm, right? And in this film, this character is really kind of distressing.

*(They laugh.)*

[00:21:36] **Steven Wright:** Like, he has a meanness? A nice meanness.

[00:21:41] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, discomfiting. Yeah.

[00:21:46] **Steven Wright:** I don't really—I mean, what I liked about that—many things about that movie is that I didn't meet Mickey Rooney, but the idea that I'm in a movie with Mickey Rooney just kills me. That's just so fabulous and wild and insane. That's surrealism to me. Combining realities. Him, in his whole career, and then I'm in with something with him?!

It's like—remember I said the two mosaic things? Like, it's like two things. Oh my god! I was just amused when I went to see the movie to see my voice coming out of a monkey. I mean, it was just wild.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

You know, 'cause it's a real monkey, right? And they're doing something with his mouth to make it look like it's moving. That is wild. And that movie had a darkness to it, like you're saying. The first one had a happy—kids-like happy thing, but it's almost like—was it Peter Jackson? Who was the director? Whoever did it, it was like—it was a whole other—*(laughs)* it was like this whole other guy got in charge of it and kind of made it not really sweet anymore.

[00:23:05] **Jesse Thorn:** George Miller, the creator of *Mad Max*, director of *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

[00:23:07] **Steven Wright:** That's the director from *Mad Max*! Laughs.

[00:23:10] **Jesse Thorn:** Among other films.

More still to come with Steven Wright after the break. How much coffee did it take him to write a novel? Too much, probably, but it got the job done. We'll talk about it in just a minute. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:23:30] **Promo:**

**Music:** Gentle, quiet acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** *(Softly.)* Hello, sleepy heads. *Sleeping with Celebrities* is your podcast pillow pal. We talk to remarkable people about unremarkable topics, all to help you slow down your brain and drift off to sleep. For instance, we have the remarkable Neil Gaiman.

**Neil Gaiman:** I'd always had a vague interest in life, culture, food preparation.

**John Moe:** *Sleeping With Celebrities*, hosted by me—John Moe—on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get your podcasts. Night, night.



(*Music fades out.*)

[00:24:04] **Transition:** Thumpy rock music.

[00:24:08] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Steven Wright. He's an award-winning standup comedian and actor. He's appeared on everything from *WKRP in Cincinnati* to *The Larry Sanders Show*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and—please take note—*Babe: Pig in the City*. He is also now a novelist. His debut is called *Harold*. It's out now. Let's get back into our conversation.

Are you offer-only, or are you going out on auditions?

[00:24:37] **Steven Wright:** I get offered things. I used to go on auditions, but now things just come in or not come in. But I don't think about it, really. I don't have this thing of acting. Mainly, it's thoughts. I'm always writing something down, going over what I've written down. It's amazing how like it's just part of my existence is I have a good imagination. But then when I drink coffee, it's like I'm a madman. I get high for like two hours on caffeine. I even thanked caffeine—I thanked coffee in the book. I don't know if you—in the acknowledgements.

[00:25:33] **Jesse Thorn:** I noticed that in the acknowledgments there. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:25:37] **Steven Wright:** I like thinking. I like making stuff up. It's fun, you know? It's just fun. It's fun making these things up. I don't feel a pressure of it. "Are you going to make more of them? What are you—? How much—?" You know. The book was fun writing. I was writing it for a few years. I had no book deal at all. I was just writing it to see if I could write it. And then years later, a publishing company contacted me to see if I wanted to write a book, and I was already writing it. But to create in a playful way is very important.

[00:26:22] **Jesse Thorn:** Can I ask you what your grandfather was like? Harold's grandfather is a big part of this book. Or either of your grandfathers.

[00:26:31] **Steven Wright:** Well, you know, the grandfather in there is not based on a real grandfather. I had an Italian—I'm half Italian, half Scottish. Both of them came from—one from Italy, one from Scotland. So, they had accents and—but the kid, Harold, that just happened like as I was writing it. I'm fascinated by a guy who's old and a little kid. Because I think it maybe says that in *Harold*. It's like a circle. It's like one guy is almost out of the—it's a circle with a little gap that doesn't meet. You know what I mean? So, Harold's just starting this circle to go around, and this guy's gone all the way around. But now they're standing right opposite each other.

They're close, even though they're—one guy hasn't done—experienced barely anything, and the other guy has experienced almost everything. And I think the older guy, you know, he's philosophical and everything, and he knows how much if it doesn't mean anything. I'm just fascinated by that little kid, older guy thing. It's amazing to me. I love the grandfather giving him advice and everything.

[00:28:06] **Jesse Thorn:** This is an unusual question. You are from Massachusetts, you're in Boston right now. I'd say a third of the photographs of you on the internet, you're wearing a Boston Red Sox hat. Was it weird for you, as it was for me, when there was a guy named Steven Wright pitching for the Boston Red Sox?

[00:28:30] **Steven Wright:** Yeah. Yeah, that was weird. I remember a friend of mine telling me. I wasn't following it. "What?!" That was just bizarre. It was amusing, though.

[00:28:48] **Jesse Thorn:** And he was a knuckleball pitcher, which is the—I mean, the Steven Wright of pitchers.

[00:28:54] **Steven Wright:** (*Laughs.*) Yes, I wanted to meet him, but I didn't. Yeah, it was weird. He was on there like three years, I think, so to hear my name, you know, in the lineup during the game—that's just funny. That's funny in itself. And it's perfect that he was a knuckleball guy.

You know, in *Harold*, he goes to—there's no kids in his neighborhood named Harold. Then he goes to first grade, and then he sees that there's other people named Harold. And I love—he doesn't know that that could even happen. So, then he's very disturbed by this. And he comes home. He's thinking about it on the bus. Do you remember this part? He's thinking about it. He's very upset, and he comes in and he says it to his mother. And she says, "Get away from me, just get away from me."

(*They laugh.*)

So, Steven Wright is like a giant *Harold* thing with the name, the same exact name.

[00:30:02] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Steven Wright, I sure am grateful for all this time getting to talk to you and for this beautiful book and your great work, as well.

[00:30:08] **Steven Wright:** Thank you, thank you. Good talking to you. That was fun. Thank you.

[00:30:13] **Jesse Thorn:** Steven Wright. His new book is called *Harold*. Go find it at your local bookstore or at [Bookshop.org](http://Bookshop.org).

[00:30:20] **Transition:** Upbeat, funky synth.

[00:30:25] **Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. I've been having a nice time driving my tiny Japanese van around. But my car's been in the shop for a month, and I just got it back. And I'm happy to drive on the freeway again.

[00:30:45] **Sound Effect:** Engine revving sound.

[00:30:47] **Jesse Thorn:** Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, DJW. Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”, written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them, and thanks to their label, Memphis Industries. *Bullseye* is on Instagram. We share interview highlights, behind the scenes looks, and more, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). We're also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:31:25] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*