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Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

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

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.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*, I'm Jesse Thorn. Being a kid is hard, right? So many choices get made for you. The people who make those choices, grownups, don't often feel like explaining themselves. You can't drive to In-N-Out and get a double-double whenever you feel like it. Then maybe you get to high school, and you can finally drive and get that double-double, but have you picked out a college? What are you going to be for the rest of your life?

Now, add to all of that another wrinkle: being a gifted child. You can play the violin like a fancy adult. You can read like a college student. You're in middle school, but you can paint landscapes like somebody with an MFA. Think about all the pressure that that applies. The pressure to keep doing that thing you're good at for the rest of your life; the pressure to keep getting better and better at that thing, so your peers never catch up with you. So many opportunities to fail and disappoint. It sounds exhausting, right?

Tavi Gevinson was a gifted child. She started keeping a fashion blog when she was only 11 years old. It was a monumental success. Then at 15, she founded *Rookie*—a teen magazine that covered fashion and gender and pop music. It was fun and frivolous, serious and thoughtful, always engrossing. A real special achievement. That magazine ended its run in 2018. So, now. Tavi is no longer a gifted child, because—well, that kind of thing only lasts so long, by definition. So, what comes after that?

For Tavi Gevinson, gifted adulthood. Seriously, she is so talented. She has acted in movies, on television, on and off Broadway. And she remains a writer. Last month, she released *Glimpses of the Moon*. It's an audio drama that tells the story of a man and a woman who stage a fake wedding to get free stuff. She also just published a zine. (*Chuckling.*) And yes, it is 2024, and she published a zine. It's called *Fanfiction*, and it is—in Gevinson's own words—a deranged novella about a writer named Tavi and her friendship with Taylor Swift.

Gevinson really is, or was, friends with Taylor Swift. She also, as a teenager, was a superfan. And the book is all about exploring celebrity and fandom in a mix of fiction and nonfiction that we can't quite put our fingers on. Both that zine and the audio drama are fantastic. Tavi Gevinson, fantastic. Let's quit dawdling and get into our conversation.

Transition: Upbeat, chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: Tavi Gevinson, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm happy to have you back on the show.

Tavi: Thanks, Jesse! I'm really happy to be here.

Jesse Thorn: Here's the thing. So, listening to the new show—the new podcast, *Glimpses of the Moon*—and reading *Fanfiction*, your most recent blog, and knowing your life as I do to some extent, it feels like a heavy period of reckoning for you.

Tavi: With? (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: Like, trying to get a handle on the very weird phenomena of the early part of your career.

Tavi: Oh, yeah! I guess that's true. I mean, I think I've done... let's see. (*Chuckling.*) I guess I try to do a lot of reckoning that doesn't go into things I publish, because I don't want them to feel like therapy. But naturally, you know, I am interested—in I can do a lot with the worlds that these two different pieces are set in, because I know them very well. The fashion world, media, the world of Taylor Swift and fandom and the internet.

So, I guess maybe there was earlier reckoning, and I'm sure there are things I'm still working out or things that are in the pieces that I'm not—that I wasn't really aware of that are more personal or revealing than I meant. But at this point, I just sort of feel like what a weird life I've had, and what a gift, and what can I do with this? This is wild. This is inspiring. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, one of the things that I was thinking about as I was both reading *Fanfiction*, the zine that you made, and listening to *Glimpses of the Moon* is that your career on the internet—

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Like, it's one thing to say you were born with the internet, right? You were raised with the internet, and that is true. But there's a really big change in the way the internet works for people making stuff that happened at that point in your life that we're talking about, right? That like when you were a 12-year-old fashion blogger, the World Wide Web was still the center of the internet, and you could publish things to Blogspot or whatever platform. (*Chuckles.*) And you were the author; people went to your website, chose to go to your website. Maybe some of them subscribed to an RSS feed or something.

And by the time you were 18/19/20, and you were trying to make *Rookie* and so on and so forth, you were living in an almost post-blog world where creating stuff was mediated through, you know, algorithmic platforms like Instagram.

Tavi: Yeah, a lot has changed in the 15 years since I started my blog. I mean, *Rookie*, I believe, launched the same year that Instagram started. And so—and I didn't even have an iPhone when *Rookie* launched. I had like a slide phone, and I was like texting our editors from school. But I mean, a point of pride with *Rookie*, I think, was that even 'til the bitter end—which it folded in 2018—we still had—like, most of our traffic still came from people going directly to the website. Which is something that tech and money people always found really shocking, and they couldn't believe it wasn't just kind of people casting about on social media and maybe taking the bait and then going to our site.

So I feel really lucky that I've, with a *Rookie*, had this dedicated readership for so long. But I guess *Fanfiction* is sort of maybe on some level me processing that constant content-making being part of my brain. And *Glimpses of the Moon* is a little more—there are some of those layers going on and layers of performance with these characters, but what I was thinking about was this sort of collision between legacy media and social media. (*Laughing.*) That's going to sound like really niche and inside-baseball, maybe. But.

Jesse Thorn: Tavi, you're here in part to promote a zine that you wrote, like it was 1989.

(*Tavi laughs.*)

You got an REM album you want to push.

Tavi: Yeah, I know. Look, I'm trying to find the plot. As you just mentioned, the internet's changed so much. So, I'm casting about, putting these out there. But I guess like when I started my blog, it was like fashion blogging was this new thing. And it seemed like the biggest threat you could imagine to print-magazines. I mean, I think it was kind of, you know, journalists sort of creating a story where there wasn't much of a story. But it seemed like blogs were the future and that this was democratizing journalism in a very frightening way.

And then, of course, that feels very quaint now. Even blogs feel quaint, like you said. And I guess that's part of why that show—like when I read the Wharton book, that it's based on the Edith Wharton book—and you know, there's obviously a theme of old money and new money; it felt really fun to set it now and set it against this backdrop of like, you know, a Met Ball full of TikTokers or whatever.

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckles.*) Even more still to come with Tavi Gevinson. Stick around. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy rock music.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is writer and actor Tavi Gevinson. When she was 15 years old, she founded the magazine *Rookie*—a smash success still beloved today, six years after it finished its run. She also just wrote a new zine, a fictional account of her interactions with Taylor Swift, called *Fanfiction*. And in addition to all that, she has a new podcast: a scripted drama about two influencers who fake a wedding for clout and money. It's called *Glimpses of the Moon*. Let's get into the rest of our conversation.

You alluded to this intermediary world, right? So, you had a world of the World Wide Web where people had to choose to go to something. And you know, blogging changed that in that it made it easy for a normal person to change what was at a website. But like, it's still like—

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It's choosing to go to a place to look at the thing, because that's a place you like. Maybe you have it bookmarked, maybe it's in your head, whatever. There was an intermediary place where Twitter and Facebook were outbound traffic centers. And over the course of the last 10 years, those platforms—those Twitters and Facebooks and Instagrams and now TikTok—figured out “Why are we sending people to other people's websites when we could force everyone creative to have to live in our advertising ecosystem?” (*Chuckles.*)

Tavi: Yeah. And then we were like, “Let's try to have really complicated, nuanced conversations and to transform society on this horrible app.” (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, part of that Instagram world—which is probably the place where you personally have been most invested—is that, you know, blogging is certainly a very personal medium, relatively speaking, but even first-person writing isn't nearly as weirdly personal as first-person picture taking. Like, putting a picture of yourself up in that context and like making that a story that people connect with is a really intense act. Like, it's a really weird thing to do. You know?

Tavi: I agree that it's weird, but I think I feel the opposite or the inverse. Like, to me at this point, I'm like—a photo of someone is like—we're so inundated with them that it almost is nothing to me. And maybe also with my knowledge that I could post a picture of garbage on my floor and be like, “Oh, this was really hard for me to post, but I'm getting over my fear of posting pictures of garbage on my floor,” and I would get a bunch of comments that are like, “So brave, thank you so much.”

(*Jesse laughs.*)

I think the way that all that has become—I guess what I'm getting at is like false intimacy, like these things that maybe at an earlier time did feel like you were really getting access to someone, now I think there's just so much of that I'm kind of like—writing feels way more intimate to me. Like, you know, merging with another person's consciousness as a reader. And as a writer, knowing that you're actually transmitting images to the reader's mind that come from your mind and are not necessarily, you know, what you look like.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, part of what you had to do as an adolescent when you were making your fashion blog was like demonstrate through various means that you were the author of your own work.

Tavi: Yeah. I mean, I guess I didn't have to, but I wanted to. I was like, “Oh, this is me. I want credit.”

Jesse Thorn: How do you think that affected the kind of stuff that you were able to make at the beginning of your career? That it was so important to you to demonstrate that it was your work?

Tavi: Well, when I think back, I think so much of what was supporting me was kind of invisible to me. Like, I didn't consciously—I couldn't identify or really appreciate that a blog sort of gives you this automatic format of a post a day. And I think to have that (*emphasizing*

the word with playful haughtiness and self-deprecating humor) practice was actually really conducive to a lot of creativity and a lot of momentum and not overthinking things.

And I think the same goes for—even though I had a tripod, and I put a lot of work into the photos I was taking, I thought of them as outfit photos. I didn't think of them as self-portraits. I wouldn't think I was a photographer. They were mostly about documenting my outfit. And sometimes they were about, you know, the setting and the editing and more than that.

But I think that... what I'm saying is not really related to your question. (*Laughs.*) Except that I guess it's hard for me to know how—I mean, it's really hard to remember my brain when I was that age and know that I was aware of how—like, it probably gave me a bit of a chip on my shoulder about credit and authorship and having—you know, seeming like a person who has autonomy and who made work really consciously and intentionally and wasn't just, you know. It wasn't like just a thing that happened to me. But I'm not sure how it affected the creativity itself to have this feeling of, “Oh, people think it isn't me or something.”

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I think being written about and photographed at a young age—or maybe at any age—it does force you to dissociate a lot. And I think that is a double-edged sword. And I think the kind of nice edge that I'm really glad that I have now is this sense of kind of being able to take yourself out of your work or the way your work is received.

Jesse Thorn: Is that actually the case? I mean, I ask because I'm 43 years old; I can't do that. Somebody says something about me personally on the internet? I'm bent out of shape about it.

Tavi: Yes. I mean, I also think my ability to intellectualize it was a way to not feel that kind of injury. But I mean, I have all the different things I could tell you (*laughing*) that are like how to think about criticism in a way that won't make you want to never make anything ever again. But I think no matter what, there's still also the emotional response you're describing. Like, it still stings a bit.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, what I think of with you is that when I was preparing for this interview, every commentary that I saw about your work—particularly, you know, people's reactions to *Fanfiction*—was about you in a way that... you know, when it happens for me, I'm surprised. Right? Like, everybody experiences art as a relationship with the creator to some extent, right? But like, when somebody tells me about how I look or something, I'm like, “Oh, weird!”

(*They chuckle.*)

And I think that you, in the worlds that you inhabit being a woman and not a man—the demographic cohort you're in—people experience all your work as a fundamental expression of who you are and that they are then having a reaction to you as a person, rather than to your work as a work. And that is intense.

Tavi: It's interesting, because that's something that (*chuckling at herself*) the narrator talks about in *Fanfiction*. Reading women as objects in their own writing rather than subjects and authors with agency who, you know, are knowingly disclosing things or using details of their life for formal or aesthetic reasons and not purely like transcribing their experience to you without making a zillion artistic choices.

Although, I mean, in whatever I saw, I think I was... well, (*sighs*) I did feel like I saw people just engaging with the writing, which was fun. But I also think the piece is designed to invite some of what you're describing. I mean, that's what Taylor Swift does, and it is—in many ways, the piece is me trying to do things she does in her songwriting that I like or find provocative. I was most surprised when someone would totally understand that the piece was fictional but take for granted some piece of it as true and be like, “Oh, it's about how like Tavi met Taylor this way.”

And maybe it's a weakness in the writing, but I was like, “Ooh, wait! I caught you! Like, why do you trust that thing, but not this other thing?”

Jesse Thorn: So, you know, you had this one long career as a teen fashion blogger, starting before you were a teen, but adolescent fashion blogger. Part of the story in *Fanfiction* is a character based on you as a sort of like transitional young adult, right? Visiting colleges, deciding not to go to colleges. Which is something that you really did. And like going around with your dad, which I know is real, because you came to my office with your dad one time. But I wonder like when you decided, “I'm not going to go to college; I am going to move to New York and audition for acting jobs,” what led you to that point?

Tavi: I had gotten a role in the play *This is Our Youth* when I was still a senior in high school. And I left school two weeks early to start rehearsals for it in Chicago at Steppenwolf, and then it moved to Broadway. And I deferred school for a year and thought the play would be my gap year. And then as I was doing it, it just made less and less sense to do a design-your-own-major thing. Because between that and *Rookie*, I was like—

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“Wait, I'm gonna be spending so much money to get credit for things that I'm already doing.”

If I wanted to study something else, that would have been different. But just financially—I mean mostly in the sense that like I was already doing what I wanted to do and learning a lot in the field. So, it just made sense to keep going.

Jesse Thorn: I know you had acted for a long time, through a big part of your life, and that had always been a goal for you. But by the time you got there to Broadway as an 18/19-year-old, was part of the appeal of acting the relative freedom from self-authorship? (*Chuckles.*) Like, that you could pretend to be somebody else as your job?

Tavi: Absolutely. For those two and a half hours, you don't have to think of what to say. You can stretch the limits of a work of writing that you love as much as you can imagine. Like, I

don't know. If you love English class, then being able to do a play that you love is really stimulating.

And yeah, to be seen a different way, seen as a character, seen even as an actor, to know there are people in the audience who didn't know anything about my other career. There were all kinds of passages to other ways of being in that experience that I did find—I mean, it was a lot of pressure to do that play, just because I did not have that much professional acting experience. And it felt like it could go really poorly. But once we were in the swing of things, I found it very liberating. And it's a lot of why I've stayed here and continued to do a lot of theatre.

Jesse Thorn: After a quick break, we will wrap up my interview with Tavi Gevinson. She and I will talk about how she dealt with the pressure of being called a wunderkind and how it's a relief to no longer be one. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Playful ukulele.

Jesse Thorn: Hi, I'm Jesse Thorn, the founder of Maximum Fun. And I have a special announcement. I'm no longer embarrassed by *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. You know, for years, each new episode of this supposed advice show was a fresh insult, a depraved jumble of erection jokes, ghost humor, and—frankly this is for the best—very little actionable advice. But now, as they enter their twilight years, I'm as surprised as anyone to admit that it's gotten kind of good. Justin, Travis, and Griffin's witticisms are more refined, like a humor column in a fancy magazine. And they hardly ever say “bazinga” anymore. So, after you've completely finished listening to every single one of all of our other shows, why not join the McElroy brothers every week for *My Brother, My Brother and Me*?

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. My guest is Tavi Gevinson. The writer and actor just published a short story, called *Fanfiction*, which is available to read right now for free.

Did you consider at any point divorcing your career completely from sort of first-person representations? You know, did you ever think like, “I should just stop taking pictures of myself, writing about myself, existing on social media world”? And just be... whether it's an actor, or a journalist who writes about other people in a real journalist type way, or whatever. Like, did you ever think like, “I'm just gonna go away from all that stuff into this other world that's safer”?

Tavi: Well, pictures feel like part of the job as an actor. I don't take as many of myself—nearly as many as I did when I had like a fashion blog. And I would like to have—you know, to have some kind of practice like that again. Because like I said, I actually really enjoyed it when I was a kid. And then social media feels like part of the job and part of the game.

And then in terms of writing, like I just write down what's in my head. And that has largely taken the form of, you know, trying to remember things and make sense of things that happened to me. And I do want to keep writing fictional works like this. And also, I really appreciate how much—like, with writing *Glimpses of the Moon* or with screenwriting that I've done—

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—the considerations are so much less about me and, you know, me being really aware of the meaning I'm giving to different things in my life. It's a lot more like does this scene work or doesn't it? As opposed to like are you really attached to this thing that happened to you or not? So, writing *Glimpses* too—I mean, now of course, we're done with it, and I can see that I was working things out through it. But I think because it's obviously based on this Wharton book, and it's sort of silly. And it's not—I don't think of it as autobiographical, even though there are pieces of my experience in it. That was really freeing too.

Jesse Thorn: How mindful are you in your day-to-day life of the fact that, in order for your work to be consumed and in order for you to make a living, you have to create a coherent narrative of your public-facing self?

Tavi: I think the narrative making comes in—it's more that I feel aware of like needing to use Instagram or to do publicity, and the narrative-making comes in as a part of that. (*Chuckling.*) Like, as I'm sitting here. But I think most people I know, whether they are actors or writers or directors, are constantly trying to make the same calculus where you're like, you know, I can't do things that have some kind of intangible benefit but are supposed to be in some vague way, quote, “good for my career.” Which often means like, I don't know, free work.

But it also can feel like there's so little to hold onto, and you have so little control, and there isn't a super clear path all the time. And so you're like, “Should I be doing everything in my power to be as successful as possible?” But like I don't want to spend my time that way! So, I think most people I know who do this sort of thing are often trying to navigate, you know, “What do I have to do? What do I want to do? And how can I just make things as much as possible?”

Jesse Thorn: From one former wunderkind to another, how do you feel about being a former wunderkind?

Tavi: (*Chuckles.*) I don't... I would say it's another thing, like the narrative-making, that's like I don't really think about that unless I'm, say, asked about it right now.

Jesse Thorn: But you live with the consequences of it all the time. You know what I mean?

Tavi: I mean, when I was younger, I felt—and *Rookie* was—toward the end of *Rookie* and after *Rookie* folded, I felt way more conscious of outgrowing it, and outgrowing a status of, you know, being like—quote— “good for your age” or “gifted”. All these different things that are sort of compliments but also ways of taking away some of your agency, I think.

I was conscious of losing that, and I did find that very emotionally hard. And you're also like, “Who am I going to be as an adult? Like, will even just the people in my life still like me?” Adults can be messier and more complicated. And was I just kind of—(*chuckling*) you know, a girl is a lot less threatening to people than a woman.

So, that was hard. But when that kind of passed—like, especially once *Rookie* folded, and so I didn't have to want to talk about *Rookie*, you know, adolescence anymore, I felt like I just really started to appreciate going into a rehearsal room and my age not being a big deal. And being surrounded by other people my age or people younger than me. And I mean, the way I see it now, I'm just like—I got like the best arts education anyone could ask for when I was really young in all these different fields. And how do I—you know, how do I use that now?

Jesse Thorn: Well, Tavi, we're out of time, but thank you so much for talking to me. I think you know how much I admire you and your work, and I'm always grateful to get to see you and talk to you.

Tavi: Thank you, Jesse. I really enjoyed this conversation.

Jesse Thorn: Tavi Gevinson. Tavi's short story/critical essay/zine, *Fanfiction*, is available to read for free at Mirrorball.org.

Transition: Relaxed jazzy synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created in the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, as well as at Maximum Fun HQ—overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California, where we are finally enjoying some almost autumnal weather. Or at least some not-summer weather.

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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 Daniel Huecias. Our video editor is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our pal Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music, including the music that he has made for *Bullseye*, at DJWSounds.bandcamp.com.

Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team, and thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you will find video from just about all of our interviews—including the ones that you heard this week. So, go

watch and share them with your friends, smash those like and subscribe buttons. You know how it works.

I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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

(Music fades out.)