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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](https://www.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. My guest this week is Linda Holmes, and she knows what goes into a good romantic comedy. It's gotta be breezy enough to feel funny and light, but the stakes also have to be real. You have to actually want the couple to get together, or at least be happy. The characters can grow and change, but the story can't be about one person changing the other one. And there are other guidelines—many more. We'll get into it, I promise. Linda's kind of an expert on the topic. She's been a pop culture writer for two decades. She cohosts the NPR Podcast *Pop Culture Happy Hour*, and she has indeed been a guest interviewer here on this program.

In 2019, she tried something different. Instead of just covering romance and pop culture, Linda wrote a romantic novel: *Evvie Drake Starts Over*. It's a mix of romcom and baseball. Then in 2022, another: *Flying Solo*, about loss love and a mysterious missing duck decoy. Also great. And now, *Back After This*. *Back After This* tells the story of Cecily, a podcast host who agrees to do a dating podcast where she has to go on 20 blind dates. 20! Does she find love along the way? Well. It's a fun romance book, but I'm not gonna spoil it. I will say the novel is a delight. And our pal Linda Holmes is a delight as well. So, let's get right into it.

Transition: Funky, upbeat synth.

Jesse Thorn: Linda Holmes, welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you, pal.

Linda Holmes: Oh, thank you. It's nice to see you too.

Jesse Thorn: And congratulations on the new book. It's really a blast.

Linda Holmes: Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you! I'm so excited. I'm very excited.

Jesse Thorn: I'm glad. (*Chuckling.*) You sound like you're faking it, but I'm glad.

Linda Holmes: I'm not, I'm not, I'm not.

Jesse Thorn: Was it hard to give up Maine?

(*Linda confirms.*)

Your first two books are Maine books, and this is a Washington DC book.

Linda Holmes: Yes. It was hard to give up Maine. But I felt like if I wrote a third book that's in Maine, then you're that person who writes books about Maine. And I didn't know if I wanted to write exclusively books set in Maine. So, I thought that I would move out of Maine for this book and to Washington DC, which I also love and know a lot about. And it was sort of the easiest other place to set a book. Because, you know, I also know this city. So.

Jesse Thorn: I guess the thing about writing a bunch of books set in Maine is that you could become the next Stephen King.

Linda Holmes: I mean, I could! I have not—I do not do as many creatures, deaths, diseases, zombies, vampires, et cetera.

Jesse Thorn: Horrors.

Linda Holme: Horrors. But I mean, for the purposes of Maine, sure. Absolutely. I would join that club in a heartbeat.

Jesse Thorn: Your books are what I will call romantic fiction.

Linda Holmes: Sure!

Jesse Thorn: Does that feel like the right description to you?

Linda Holmes: I think that's fair. Yeah, I think that's fair. I sometimes say like love stories. But yeah, romance is fine. Romantic fiction is fine. Whatever. Whatever people think is fine.

Jesse Thorn: What draws you to that kind of story?

Linda Holmes: You know, I just grew up watching a ton of romantic comedy. I think that it was always the genre that I clicked into the most easily. And it tends to be something that makes me feel— Like, there are a lot of opportunities to just kind of talk about people and how people work and that kind of thing, which I was interested in. And I also think that because it was the thing that I knew the best, it was the thing that I set out to write first. You know?

And with this book, I really wanted— There are some things that happen in this book that are very, very romantic-comedy-ish. And that was very much the original idea behind this book was that it was gonna be very, very romcom. And so, these people kind of keep bumping into each other, and that's very much—very intentionally kind of a romcom reference. They just— everywhere this woman goes, she keeps bumping into this same guy. But of course, like as I was writing the book, it took some other directions.

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But yeah, I mean—for me—I love a romcom, and I love the idea of people gradually attaching themselves to each other. And that's always appealed to me and seemed like a happy thing to write about.

Jesse Thorn: Do you love an okay or lousy romcom? I know people who love romcoms because they love the satisfactions of the form, and I know people who are snobs about them, both.

Linda Holmes: I am not a snob about them, I don't think. But I will say I know the difference between good ones and not good ones. And I care about the difference between good ones and not good ones. Now, it's a little bit like what people say about pizza that, you know, even bad pizza is not that bad. Which is only true up to a point, as it is with romcoms. But it is true that a relatively ordinary quality romcom is something that I am more likely to like than a lot of people.

But I definitely am conscious of the difference between like a really good romantic comedy. To me, you know, something like—I think about something like *The Big Sick* or something like that, versus something that is more kind of disposable and sort of interchangeable with other ones. So, I think it's a combination of both.

Jesse Thorn: Do you like the interchangeability of the interchangeable ones?

Linda Holmes: There is something comforting about elements of a formula. And I feel the same way about something like a heist movie. When you sit down to watch a heist movie, and you have that scene where they're getting the group together—even if it's not a particularly great version of that, there's part of me that just goes, “Oh, hooray! They're getting the group together!” 'Cause I love a heist movie.

And I feel the same way about a romantic comedy. It can be, you know, “Oh, this is the—oh, I get it! This is the friend! Cool.” I like it. “Or they're gonna go to this place, and there's only gonna be one bed.” And these are all, you know, tropes that are very, very familiar and labeled as such by people who read or watch a lot of romance. And yeah, you know, many things are cliches for a reason, and you gotta kind of respect that reason, I think. And I do respect the durability of some of these cliches/tropes/formula elements, you know?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, there's a line in the book where your protagonist says, “Fine line between a cliché and a classic.”

Linda Holmes: Yeah, absolutely! Absolutely.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, so besides meeting people—people seeing each other serially, besides people bumping into each other over and over because fate wants them to be together, what are other elements of the genre that you appreciate?

Linda Holmes: I think I like a good fight. I like a really good and deeply meant fight. Because I think often it needs that, and I think the story often needs that in order to feel like it

has any stakes. So, I like a big fight. There are a couple of really good fights in *When Harry Met Sally*.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Harry (*When Harry Met Sally*): I take it back. Okay?! I take it back.

Sally: You can't take it back!

Harry: Why not?

Sally: Because it's already out there.

Harry (*Irritated.*): Oh geez. What are we supposed to do?! Call the cops? It's already out there!

Sally: Just. Let it. Lie. Okay?

Harry (*Sarcastically.*): Great. Let it lie. That's my policy!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Linda Holmes: I do love an enabling friend. You know? I think so often you have these kind of hero characters. You have these kind of hero performances—particularly in movies, when you're talking about movies. You have these actors— Like, obviously you and I both know how good Judy Greer is in roles like this. She's done it a bunch of times. And Rosie O'Donnell in *Sleepless in Seattle*.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Annie (*Sleepless in Seattle*): And then suddenly, for no reason at all, he starts to talk about how much he loved his wife and how he just fell in love with her, like he was one of those cows in Michigan.

Becky: What cows in Michigan?

Annie: It was on *60 Minutes*. There were those cows that got zapped by stray voltage. No one knows why. And maybe it was Wisconsin. (*Sighs.*) But anyway. I was listening to him talk about how much he loved his wife, and suddenly I was crying. It's like what happens when I watch those phone company ads. I don't have to see the whole thing, just the part where the daughter gives the mother the refrigerator with the big—

Both (in unison): Red bow on it!

Becky: Yeees, the Polaroid commercial, two 5-year-olds at their grandfather's birthday party.

Annie: They're making the album!

Becky: With all the—! (*Chuckles.*) That kills me!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Lina Holmes: I love the friend. I think the friend is such an important part of rounding out who the person is. There's a moment in *Sleepless in Seattle* when Meg Ryan and Rosie O'Donnell are hanging up the phone, and they both say, "I love you."

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Which I absolutely love that, because my friends and I do that. And you almost never see it in movies. You almost never see friends hang up the phone and say, "Love you." And a bunch of my friends and I do that. So, it's a really important part of making sure that you're writing a whole person and not just a person who only exists to be in a love story.

Jesse Thorn: What things about the genre do you not like?

Linda Holmes: I don't like anything that suggests that you should try to repair people. I do not like, you know, "I met this person, and they had all these problems, and then they met me, and now they're good." I think for the most part people have to— I think sometimes a relationship can teach you a lot about yourself, but it doesn't change who you are as a person, in the sense that that person comes in and makes tweaks. You know? And that is certainly a kind of story that exists. And sometimes they are very lighthearted, the kind of *Pygmalion*-inflected stuff.

But sometimes they're a little bit more, "Well, this person has all of these—" I mean, sometimes it's trauma or something like that, and there's a suggestion that, you know, you meet the right person, and that kind of gets resolved. Which is not true. I don't believe in that. I believe in therapy! So, I don't really like anything like that. And I don't really like ones where people are mean to each other. When it starts with people being really mean to each

other, and then in the end they're supposed to fall in love, that's gonna be a no for me. That's not my thing.

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna go for a minute. On the other side of the break, we will talk more with Linda Holmes about her great new novel, *Back After This*. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

(Summery, '90s-inspired music.)

Speaker 1: *(In a valley girl accent.)* In two weeks!

Echo: Two weeks, two weeks!

Speaker 2: *(In a surfer accent.)* Put on your gecko shorts and grab your pods! We're celebrating MaxFun Drive, '90s style!

Speaker: Support the shows you love.

Speaker 3: *(Over a garbled phone connection.)* And get some rad, retro-themed gifts.

Speaker 1: Meetup day, bonus content, and more.

Speaker 2: So, don't miss it!

(Retro internet connection sound.)

Speaker 3: On the worldwide web, March 17!

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Linda Holmes! She's a veteran writer who has covered pop culture for over two decades, first on television, *Without Pity*, then on NPR's website and on NPR's *Pop Culture Happy Hour*. She's also a novelist. Her third book, *Back After This*, just came out. It's a story about a podcaster who agrees to host a dating show that will set her up on 20 blind dates. Let's get back into our conversation.

Years ago I read this profile of Anna Faris in *The New Yorker* that I have not stopped thinking about since. Anna Faris, I think, is just such a wonderful comic actor.

(Linda agrees.)

And there was this moment in this profile that acknowledged an element of the film romantic comedy that I had not thought about before. And it acknowledged it in the context—if I remember correctly, this was a long time ago—of praising Sandra Bullock. And it is that often the woman in a romantic comedy who is the—you know, the protagonist of the film—has to fall over at the beginning. Literally, fall over at the beginning.

Linda Holmes: Yes. There's a lot of falling down.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. Or else the audience won't like her or find her relatable or something along those lines. Sometimes that's a metaphorical thing. Sometimes they get some other kind of embarrassment. How do you feel about that part of it?

Linda Holmes: I do not like to humiliate characters. I think everybody bears a certain number of bad experiences. And I think, you know, being limited in what you feel comfortable doing because you're thinking about all of your old experiences that are in your head, that's all perfectly fine. But I don't care for humiliating characters.

There certainly was a streak of romantic comedy films for a while that kind of specialized in humiliating, specifically in humiliating Katherine Heigl?

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

(Playful background music.)

Jane (27 Dresses): It's really not the worst one. If I had to pick one? I got a good one. *(Shuffling sounds.)* It's my favorite.

Kevin: Ohhh my god, what the hell is that?!

Jane: Theme wedding!

Kevin: What was the theme? Humiliation?

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Linda Holmes: And I will say, I think there's some truth to the fact that the easiest way to get some parts of an audience to sympathize with a woman who's a main character is to embarrass or humiliate or tear down that character.

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Partly because it leaves them very— It can leave them very pliable and somewhat desperate. In all three of the books that I have written, there have been people who have said— And obviously, this book is sort of just coming out, but even in the very early response, there's a little, little strand of this—of people saying, “I don't like her. I just don't—I don't like her.” And I think that's not the entire reason why that's true. Everybody likes different things, right? But I think part of it is that I don't really go in for that.

And I think that has a lot to do with the fact also that I tend to write women characters who are, you know, between like early to mid-30s and 40s. And I think you can get away with it more easily—having somebody be kind of a bumbler, I think you can get away with it more easily— It doesn't make it the right thing to do, but I think you can get away with it more with somebody who's really young and maybe in their first job or something like that. But when you're talking about people who are— I mean, the women that I know who are in their mid-30s—and I mean, honestly, the women I know who are in their 20s as well, but particularly by the time you're in your mid-30s—they're not falling down a whole lot. *(Chuckles.)* They're not embarrassing themselves in kind of massive ways or whatever. So, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I guess it's partly about the tension that inhabits all film, between us wanting to go see impossibly hot people and the question of whether we are actually able to relate to someone who goes through the world impossibly hot.

Linda Holmes: Oh yeah, absolutely. That's right. And one thing that happens, especially in movies, is that you get this impossibly beautiful person. And in order to achieve some level of relatability, you have them, you know, sit in something and they're sustained on their dress or something like that.

Jesse Thorn: *(Chuckling.)* Or they just wear glasses.

Linda Holmes: Well, yeah. I mean, as we all know, the glasses wearer is always hiding a beautiful soul within who just needs to be brought out. I could take mine off right now, but I don't wanna damage—I don't wanna scare anybody with how different of a person I would be if I did.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I mean, if you took yours off, it would be like Cyclops from the *X-Men*! I mean.

Linda Holmes: Yeah. I mean, that's why I don't do it.

(Jesse laughs.)

That's why I wear them, actually. I don't need them for seeing, they're just—

Jesse Thorn: Instead of lasers, it's charisma. Just—pew!

Linda Holmes: They're just to protect people from how cool I am. That's my whole life. I've just been so cool.

(Jesse laughs.)

As you can imagine, I was just a very cool child. Like, really, really popular, really cool kid. And I started wearing glasses, 'cause it was like, “I just need to tone it down a little bit! I just can't be so cool!”

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that the amount that you know, as like a voracious consumer of culture and as a thoughtful and insightful critic of culture—is it helpful to you as a creator? Or a hindrance?

Linda Holmes: Oh, it's a help. I mean, I think the most important thing is I've spent a lot of time breaking down what I do and don't like in stories that other people tell. And it gives me some advantage. Right? I mean, trying to critique your own work is obviously really different, but it gives me some framework to figure out “What do I like? What do I not like? What have I seen 4,000 times?” And it gives a little bit of freshness to it. But I think the best advantage—like I said, I think the best advantage that it gives me is that I have spent so much time trying to think about and argue what works and what doesn't work in various different stories.

One of the best like feedback-folks I have in my own life who reads books for me is Alan Sepinwall, who's a TV critic. And he is not a novelist, but he is spent the last gazillion years explaining why a particular story point like in *The Sopranos* doesn't work or does work. And so, people like that have experience with story structure and that kind of thing is really helpful. And then there are other people who have a ton of experience writing specifically about romance. And I have some experience with all those things, and so I think it's a great benefit.

It doesn't—I think people expect that it would get in your head more than it gets in mine. I don't— Out of all of the weird flaws that I have, I don't spend a lot of time trying to worry about how critics will perceive my writing, I will say.

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And it's because I know that they will receive it however they're gonna receive it, if they do. So.

Jesse Thorn: Films in particular are really short compared to novels. Television shows, at least romantic ones, often are too. But you know, television shows kind of tend to go in holding patterns. You know, will-they-won't-they holding patterns to fill time.

Linda Holmes: They do. They do.

Jesse Thorn: And when we look at a film, much of the information that we are getting is just, “That’s Sandra Bullock. That’s Hugh Grant.” They are in those movies, because their very way of being in the world gives so much information to the audience.

Linda Holmes: Right. And I would say, you know, the Amazon movie that just came out, *You’re Cordially Invited* with Reese Witherspoon and Will Ferrell— If that’s not Reese Witherspoon and Will Ferrell, you have to do a whole bunch of work that they don’t have to do. And there’s nothing wrong with that at all. It’s just that there are a lot of situations—it’s not just romcoms. There are a lot of situations where casting does a lot of work for you. Think about how much work it did when they cast Tom Hanks as Captain Sully. You know, like you cast Tom Hanks as Captain Sully, and everybody understands the fundamental Sully-osity of Captain Sully. Same thing with Captain Phillips. Two captains, right? Both sort of regular but heroic guys. And you cast Tom Hanks, and it gives that a boost.

Well, it’s the same thing with a romantic comedy. If you take, you know, Sandra Bullock, or you take Hugh Grant, and you put them in a movie, you get a lot of work done just by using them, you know?

Jesse Thorn: You can’t cast somebody in a book. And in fact, you spend relatively little time in your books describing your character’s outward qualities.

Linda Holmes: Yeah. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, (*chuckles*) there’s a great summary of the male romantic guy in this book, which is the protagonist describes him as “Imagine a picture of a celebrity, and he’s standing next to his brother, who looks like a celebrity but also like a normal guy.” (*Laughs.*)

Linda Holmes: Yes. He is the exact right amount of handsome to be an unrealistically handsome man’s brother. And that is the kind of thing that, if I can figure out a way to describe it, that gets at what I want: you to feel like she feels about what he looks like. Then that’s more interesting to me than—you know. And then there’s enough in here like that he has dark hair, and there’s some stuff. But mostly I want you to get the feel of how she feels when she looks at him. And I think you could theoretically see him if he existed in real life and not necessarily react to him in the same way she does. And it doesn’t matter.

The point is not for me to make an argument that he’s handsome in the book, in terms of like, “His nose looks like this, his face looks like this. It’s perfectly symmetrical.” The point is how does she feel? What is her attraction to him like? And so, that’s why you have this thing where she’s trying to explain it to her friend, and she’s like, “Well, yes, he’s very good looking, but like he’s not like weirdly good looking. He’s like a normal amount of good looking.” (*Laughs.*) And so—so, yeah, that’s sort of what I’m more likely to go for.

Jesse Thorn: In—I don’t know how to describe it; let’s say hard genre romance. In the kinds of romance that have very specific tropes and qualities that the audience is going to them for, one of the really hard and fast rules is that the protagonist is an avatar for the reader, that one

of the goals of that character's characterization is that the reader can see themselves in that character.

Linda Holmes: I think that's true for a lot of people. I would say, I don't know that that's true for all of the kind of genre romance that you're talking about, but it is certainly something that people go to romance for, for sure.

Jesse Thorn: How do you feel about that idea? That when you're writing romance, you're offering a journey that has a feeling, and that the protagonist—if the reader doesn't identify with the protagonist, then they're not gonna get that feeling that they went to the book for?

Linda Holmes: Yeah, I mean there's always a risk of that. And you can extend that so far that you're afraid to make the character kind of pointy in any way.

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You're afraid to have them have any like potentially odd qualities, which can—

Jesse Thorn: Or even specific qualities, I would imagine.

Linda Holmes: Or even specific qualities. Right? I do think one of the reasons why I don't do a lot of physical description is that I do— It's not so much I want you to feel like this could be you; it's that I want you to feel like this could be anybody. And if it's not important, then I'm probably not going to add it in terms of physical description, because— It's partly for that reason, but it's also partly because I find when I read a book, if I start the book, and I see the character's name, and I see the beginning of the story, then I often have an idea of what I think that person looks like. And if the author then comes in and says she has blonde hair and I've already imagined her with brown hair, I'm going to keep imagining her with brown hair anyway. And so, all that's gonna happen is that every time the author mentions the blonde hair, I'm gonna go, “Oh. No, no, no, no. That's irritating.”

Because I'm still gonna see what I saw. And so, physical description to me, it's not that it has no place, it's that its place is only as it helps the story. I don't do it just to do it, because I don't think it usually matters.

Jesse Thorn: We talked a little bit about movie and television romance. What do you like to read about in a romantic book?

Linda Holmes: Mostly I like for there to be a sense of a place, which is why I did write two books in Maine and one in DC. Right? All places that I have a good amount of kind of reference for and places that exist to me in a specific way. I also have to have other people in the book besides the people who are falling in love. Because if you have just— If it's just like, I don't know, *The Blue Lagoon* or whatever, (*chuckling*) and it's just these two people in a total vacuum, it's very difficult for me to clue into who these people actually are, right?

Everybody knows somebody; everybody has people in their lives. And every once in a while, I run into something where, you know, the characters don't seem to be interested in or care

about anybody other than themselves. They don't seem to be invested in anyone else. They don't seem to notice the existence of other people. And I think, you know, it's not enough. Like yes, you have the best friend, but the best friend relationship has to go both ways a little bit. It has to— The main character should also be invested in the life of the best friend.

And sometimes that doesn't happen. Sometimes you get a best friend who's doing the job of like—basically, this best friend exists to be a consultant in the life of the romantic lead.

Jesse Thorn: Or even just to put the romantic lead's feelings—to explicate the romantic lead's feelings.

Linda Holmes: Yeah. And it means more to me—I think I especially spent a lot of time on this in my first book, in *Evvie Drake Starts Over*. There's a best friendship in that book that's just as fraught as any other relationship in it, including the developing romance in it. And that book is probably, to me, as much about that friendship as it is about the love story, in many ways. Friendships are important to me. There are friendships in this book that are really critical to the way that the story is progressing and to the character's ability to grow and to make choices.

And you gotta have other people in the book, or I don't care. I mean, that's as simple as I can say it, you know. Because that we all exist that way. Right? You, me, everybody, we all exist within a community of other human beings. And when you take people out of that, it can be very—I think—dull. And you lose a lot of opportunities to develop and explain the character. You know?

Jesse Thorn: Linda, you're my friend.

Linda Holmes: Yes, this is true.

Jesse Thorn: And you're a really exceptional friend.

Linda Holmes: Aw, well so are you, buddy.

Jesse Thorn: A really great friend. What do you think are the qualities of a good friendship?

Linda Holmes: I think honesty is very important, and I think meeting people where they are is very important. And that's something that I have—it sounds like such a consultant thing to say, but it's something that kind of—as I've gotten older—I've learned a lot more about. Like, some people are gonna wanna talk to you on the phone all the time. I have one friend who I still talk to on the phone all the time, and she's really my only friend that I talk to on the phone. Like, I don't call up my other friends very often at all.

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I have friends that I text a lot. I have friends that I Slack with a lot during the day. And it's not just like “what's the technology?” But it's like “what's the rhythm of the friendship?” There

are people who are busy with their own lives, and they have their own way of processing information, right? And you figure out eventually not to take it personally and to know the difference between this person has this friendship style, versus this person doesn't care about me. And those are very tricky things.

And I'm, you know, over 50 and still figuring this stuff out, because my friendships are so important to me. But I think in a really good friendship, you feel like you can ask for what you need, and you feel like you can define what you can give. And I think sometimes you just have to feel your way through it. And the amazing thing about friends is that you chose each other. You made a decision to be really close with this person. You made a decision that you would continue every day to get up and think, "This person is still my friend. I still care about this person. I wanna reach out to this person."

It's a little different when you're talking about, you know, your family or even a romantic partner—something like that, where your lives are very entwined logistically in addition to everything else. I'm not saying romantic partners don't do that choosing process every day, 'cause obviously yes. But with friends, it's almost like... it's stripped down to this very simple kind of relationship, which is: you offer as much as you can to that person of what they need in a way that's healthy for you, and you get something back from them that's healthy for you.

And I've had friendships that have broken for significant periods of time because of what's going on in people's lives or because of complications that people run into. And I try to never close the door to that unless the person has, you know, harmed me or something like that. Obviously, that's very different. But people do drift, and they do weirdly tend to come back in many cases. And I try to always be open to that. So, I think like openness, forgiveness is really important with friends, and a certain faithfulness of affection and attention. And just saying like I— You know, 'cause you and I don't see each other super often, right?

Jesse Thorn: No, we live 3,000 miles away from each other.

Linda Holmes: But you know, it's not uncommon to be like, "Oh, I'm thinking about you." You know? And sometimes that's really all you can do. And you literally have nothing else that you can offer at that moment, except "I'm thinking about you." You know? And that can be a really profound and important thing. I think. That's a long answer to a short question, but.

Jesse Thorn: That's how it's supposed to work, Linda.

(They laugh.)

Linda Holmes: You know, that's what they tell me. When I do events and interviews and stuff, people always say my questions are too long. But it's always 'cause I want it to be a good question. So, I'm like explaining what I'm thinking. I did an event with Jason Siegel and Brett Goldstein about *Shrinking*, and I just like wanted to explain all the questions. 'Cause I really—'cause my questions were like really intense to me, 'cause I intensely love that show. And so, my questions are long. *(Laughs.)* And I think to some people it's like, "Why is she talking so much?" It's like, no! I have to explain the question! It's really deep to me! So, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Linda Holmes after a quick break. Like the protagonist in her new novel, *Back After This*, Linda is a podcaster. But she still had to do a lot of work to make sure that she got all the little nitty-gritty details of podcasting right. How did she do it? We'll get into it, back after this.

It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

(Fantastical tinkling and sparkle sounds.)

Narrator: *(Echoing.)* Somewhere, in an alternate universe where Hollywood is smarter.

(Harp chords fade into applause.)

Presenter: And the Emmy nominees for Outstanding Comedy Series are *Jetpackula*. *Airport Marriott*. *Throuple*. *Dear America, We've Seen You Naked*. And *Allah in the Family*.

(Applause fades into harp chords.)

Narrator: *(Echoing.)* In our stupid universe, you can't see any of these shows. But you can listen to them on *Dead Pilots Society*.

(Rock music fades in.)

[00:35:00]

The podcast that brings you hilarious comedy pilots that the networks and streamers bought but never made. Journey to the alternate television universe of *Dead Pilots Society* on MaximumFun.org.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Linda Holmes. She's NPR's pop culture correspondent and host of the show *Pop Culture Happy Hour*. She's also the author of three excellent novels, the latest of which—*Back After This*—is out now. Let's get back into our conversation.

Let's talk about the podcasting part of this book. You're always supposed to write what you know. This is what-Linda-Holmes-knows adjacent, anyway.

(Linda confirms.)

Maybe it's more like the people that sit a few desks over from you than your own world. Other than the fact that you've absorbed a lot of it accidentally—and some directly and intentionally—what was interesting to you about this setup?

Linda Holmes: I think that part of it was pettiness, because—as you and I both know—fictional portrayals of podcasting and audio, although there have been a couple of good ones—

Jesse Thorn: *Pitch Perfect 2.*

Linda Holmes: *(Chuckles.)* If you are interested in romantic comedies, there is one called *The X List*, which was written by someone who has worked in public radio that's much more reasonable. And also the movie *Come On, Come On*, which Joaquin Phoenix was in, where they did have experienced people. So, there are a couple good ones, but there are so many bad ones. *(Laughs.)* And there are so many that are, you know, people randomly walking around with a microphone and then all of a sudden they just like block the show onto the...

So, part of it was just frustration with the fact that I thought it was a really interesting world that people really didn't understand very well. And you know, with podcasting in particular, there's this idea that it's just like, “Hey, we just talk into a couple of microphones! And that's how the show is made!” And you know and I know—and everybody who hosts a show that they put any work into it at all knows that there's a whole bunch of other work that goes into it.

And you know, somebody asked me— I was very proud that a producer at NPR asked me, “Oh, who did you interview about producing to write this book?”

And I was like, “No, this is mostly just I've paid attention for 15 years, you know, and worked with so many people for 15 years that I do know how a lot of this stuff is done.” And I've had a little bit of training in doing field pieces. Not very much at all. And I did have my producer, Jessica, read the book for me and make sure that there wasn't anything that was, to her, glaringly wrong. And she fixed a couple of like—you know, what would I call it? Terminology kinds of things.

Jesse Thorn: Linda, I've met Jessica. She gave you a long list of pickups she needs.

Linda Holmes: *(Laughs.)* She did not. She was very, very wonderful and gave me just some little terminology tweaks. But I just think it was, you know—in the same way that I like a romantic comedy, a romance, to have a sense of place, I also like it to have a sense of work sometimes. Like, what do these people do other than fall in love? And I felt like it was something where there was maybe some space to write about this. I thought it would be fun

to write about. I don't necessarily have a great, specific thing that made me wanna write about it, except that I thought it was cool, and not that many people know about it.

And every time I've seen like a really experienced producer cutting tape, I've always thought it was so cool. And that goes for like—you can find on YouTube, this old tape of Ned Wharton at NPR cutting physical tape on one of the machines with the razor blades and everything.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

(High pitched fast-forwarded audio plays.)

Art Silverman (Recording): I picked up the paper this morning, Leanne.

Ned Wharton: There we are. That's where I'll come back in.

(Rewinding.)

Leanne (Recording): Art Silverman got on a plane and has been working virtually nonstop, since. He joins us now to open his producer's notebook. Good morning, Art.

Art Silverman (Recording): Good morning, Leanne.

Leanne (Recording): Tell us some of the things you've seen.

Art Silverman (Recording): Well...

Ned Wharton: Cut out all this.

(Fast-forward sounds.)

Dumping it on the floor.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Linda Holmes: And it's just absolutely stunning how badass it is. It's just unbelievable. But also, you know, much later—the only like real narrative radio piece I ever did—reported radio piece I ever did, I was editing with this NPR editor, Tom Cole.

[00:40:00]

Shoutout to Tom Cole, who is now retired and—much to his relief—no longer has to cover the Grammys. That's just a little Tom Cole joke.

And I was watching Tom Cole cut tape on digital—right?—on his computer at work. And it's just so cool. Like, the ability these people have to listen back to things, to make adjustments, to make little changes that you're not really gonna necessarily know that you're benefiting from. And they do that with podcasts too. They do with our podcast all the time. Glen Weldon always says they make us sound at least 20% smarter than we are, just by cutting out things that are extraneous and go nowhere.

So, yeah, I just think it's—I just think it's cool. I think it's a cool little world of— Speaking of nerds, you know? It's just a cool, little nerd world. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: There are two specifics about podcasting that I am really interested in that show up in the book. The first of them is the difference on the creative side between the experience of a man and the experience of a woman. There are a lot of dudes in the podcast business, and there are plenty of dudes in front of microphones, like myself.

Linda Holmes: Yes.

Jesse Thorn: My experience, especially in the sort of creative/nonfiction world, is that it's a majority women. So, how do you think their experiences, both in front of the microphone and as a producer, are different from a man's?

Linda Holmes: I think that a lot of that comes down to how much of what kind of feedback you get from audiences. I think increasingly there are tons and tons of women hosting. It did feel at one point like everybody in narrative podcasting was a guy named Alex. Right?

(Jesse agrees with a chuckle.)

However, I do think that has— You know, I think that has expanded a little bit.

But the feedback issue, there is no question that feedback from listeners is much more likely to be critical of the way you talk if you are a woman versus if you are a man. I just believe that to the very depth of my soul. It's based on so much experience, and there's mention of that in the book. I'll also say—and this is a Jesse Thorn *Bullseye* exclusive; I haven't even talked about this yet. But when I did the audio book—

So, the main character has an ex-boyfriend who is a hotshot guy in podcasting. And when I did the audiobook, I was very careful. I gave that guy as much vocal fry as I could manage when I did the audiobook, because it is so common for guys in podcasting to have a ton of vocal fry. And they never, never hear about it. Never!

So, that was my little joke between me and me. (*Laughs.*) I gave that voice a lot of vocal fry. So, I think a lot of it has to do with feedback from the audience. The other thing though is, you know, this character also spends a lot of time in meetings with rooms full of guys, which is a thing that sometimes happens. It doesn't really happen as much at NPR, I don't think. But there are places where, you know, as soon as you get into a media company, you are in a meeting with a room full of dudes who are selling ads, who are doing business stuff.

Jesse Thorn: Bold, visionary entrepreneurs who feel very comfortable in their combination dress shoes/not dress shoes?

Linda Holmes: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So, I think there's a few different ways that those experiences differ. I also think some women are more likely to be vulnerable to what happens to the main character in this story, which is that she becomes one of those people who is so valuable in her job that she can't ever get promoted. And that is something that I think maybe is a little bit more likely to happen to the kinds of women who have been socialized to be really cooperative and really helpful all the time and can wind up in that situation where, "Oh, we can't possibly promote you. We need you too much in the job that you have now."

And I have seen that happen to multiple people.

[00:45:00]

Not necessarily where I work, but in other—you know, in other parts of the world. And I have a feeling it happens more commonly to women.

Jesse Thorn: I think that's very true. I think men are much more likely to expect helpfulness from women.

Linda Holmes: Well, yeah. And I think—you know, I think it's one of those things where everybody is different, and so you don't wanna go down the road of saying, "Men are like this, and women are like this." But I do think there is a kind of socialization that happens to some women where you are kind of encouraged to cooperate your way into success, and that does not always work. When you're just kind of, "Well, surely if I keep doing everything that they ask, right? Surely if I just keep doing everything that they ask, then eventually there's going to be some reward for me at the end."

And in some jobs that works, but in some jobs that doesn't work. And they will be perfectly happy to have you cooperate and cooperate and cooperate and cooperate. And eventually you realize, "Oh, this is how it's going to be forever. And they like me perfectly well where I am now and don't really care about where I would like to be, myself." And so, I do think that is a phenomenon that— And maybe I think this because I have a lot of women friends, but that is something that I have seen happen a little bit more with women.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Linda, thank you for taking all this time, and thanks for your amazing work. And also, thank you for being my friend. Love you!

Linda Holmes: Thank you! Love you!

Jesse Thorn: Linda Holmes. Her new book, *Back After This*, is out now. Another delight from the great Linda Holmes! Grab a copy from your local bookstore or on [Bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org). And be sure to listen to Linda on NPR's *Pop Culture Happy Hour*, which is one of the great programs.

Transition: Jazzy, percussive synth.

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—as well as at Maximum Fun HQ, overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. I've been seeing a lot of action on the new playground there in the park. Always nice to see those kids out playing!

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis.

Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at [DJWSounds.bandcamp.com](https://www.djwsounds.bandcamp.com). Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. The song is called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you'll find video from just about all our interviews—including the ones you heard this week. 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](https://www.maximumfun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)