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(ADVERTISEMENT)

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. My guest, Jane Borden, is kind of obsessed with cults—reading books about them, watching documentaries, old news pieces from 2020, whatever. What kind of cults? Well. There's your classic cults, the ones everyone knows about. The Manson family, Jonestown, that kind of thing. There's obscure ones, like a group called Mankind United from the '40s that promised to bring justice to the secret cabal that caused the Great Depression. And old cults too. Like that time three guys loaded up a bunch of families on a boat, pointed it West, and sailed thousands of miles until they finally hit a rock. Plymouth Rock.

Anyway. Jane Borden is a writer with bylines in *Vanity Fair* and the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times Magazine*. So, she didn't just read about cults; she wrote a whole book about them. *Cults Like Us* is not just a study of cults, but also a study of why they seem to be such a uniquely American phenomenon. I'm so thrilled to welcome Jane on the show. So, let's get right into it.

Transition: Twangy, futuristic synth.

Jesse Thorn: Jane Borden, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show. It's so nice to see you.

Jane Borden: Thank you for having me. I'm excited.

Jesse Thorn: So, do you think that—well, let's start with this. What is a cult?

Jane Borden: Oh, what is a cult? So, the modern definition, which we have thanks to a psychologist named Robert Jay Lifton—and this has definitely become a pejorative word. It wasn't always in history, but today the definition of a cult has three characteristics. There's a charismatic leader who's worshiped. There is some form of undue influence or coercive control, popularly known as mind control. And there's actual harm being done, usually to the people within the cult, usually financial or sexual.

Jesse Thorn: Has this always been an interest of yours, Jane?

Jane Borden: Yes. Yes, very much. I remember in high school I did my big project on the communes of the ‘60s. And of course, cults and communes are different, but in the ‘60s there was a lot of overlap. In middle school, I did a big project on the spiritualist movement—again, adjacent to cults. I was a Religious Studies major in college, and I've been reporting on cults specifically for *Vanity Fair* since, I think, 2017. So, I just keep coming back to belief and its connection to identity, which fascinates me endlessly.

Jesse Thorn: Are you, yourself, religious?

Jane Borden: I was raised in the Presbyterian church. So, Protestant—what we call a High Protestant. And I'm not practicing. I consider myself agnostic, but I do devote a lot of my time to studying it, so I don't know. I guess it depends on your definition. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: What do you think drove you to be a religious studies major?

Jane Borden: I realized that I wasn't going to use a liberal arts education in any kind of practical way.

(They laugh.)

So, I decided to just sign up for whichever classes most interested me, just to take this incredible, privileged opportunity to learn.

Jesse Thorn: And they didn't offer underwater basket weaving!

Jane Borden: *(Laughs.)* No, but I did take golf.

Jesse Thorn: Oh, really?!

Jane Borden: Which I guess I equate in some ways with underwater basket weaving. Yeah. And so, all the classes that were most interesting to me kept showing up in that department. And then I was like, “Well, I guess this is my major.”

Jesse Thorn: So, what is uniquely American about cults?

Jane Borden: Cults are everywhere, of course. They're a human phenomenon, and we are hardwired genetically to participate in such groups and to veer toward cult-like thinking in the larger society. However, I do believe these groups are more prevalent in the United States, not least because of the First Amendment. And because, you know, if they can gain church status, we don't tax them. And so, there's a lot of incentive for these groups to grow to that level in order to save money/make money.

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I also believe that when it comes to cult-like thinking at the macro society level, we're more prone to it in America because we were founded by a high control doomsday group: the

Puritans. Which many people today would call the Puritans a cult just by looking at them. And pilgrims, same thing. They weren't technically a cult based on the definition we just laid out, because there wasn't a charismatic leader being worshiped. The church magistrates had a lot of power. That's why I describe them as a high control group, because they sought more and more power, and their grip got ever tighter—especially up in Massachusetts, where the Puritans were.

But by that, you know, charismatic leader part of the definition, you could say they weren't technically a cult. But they espoused several tenets of cult-like ideology, which I then trace through American history, through secular American history in the book.

Jesse Thorn: Plus the raw charisma of anyone wearing those shoes, right?

(They laugh.)

Those famous shoes!

Jane Borden: Those famous shoes. A bit of a myth, those shoes. Also a myth: they wore bright clothing.

Jesse Thorn: Really?

Jane Borden: Yeah. And they kind of just wore whatever they could get their hands on, you know?

Jesse Thorn: What about those funny hats?

Jane Borden: No.

(Jesse "wow"s.)

I know. It's heartbreaking.

Jesse Thorn: *(Chuckling.)* There's so much they don't teach you in school!

Speaking of stuff they don't teach you in school, I knew nothing about the Puritans or the pilgrims, truly. Because I am from California, where they seem irrelevant to our understanding of history in a way that they don't in the Northeast or in the East in general. So, what brought them to the United States, in truth?

Jane Borden: They were fleeing Armageddon. Following the Reformation, we have the founding, essentially, of what became Protestantism. And within Protestantism—which was the Anglican church in England—within that developed a more radical strain of Protestantism. And you could argue that the apocalyptic strain was really appearing in all Protestantism at the time, but it was especially virulent in the Puritan movement and also

among the Separatists. Together these people were called Hot Protestants, *(chuckling)* which I love.

(Jesse agrees with a laugh.)

Or Radical Protestants. So, the difference between the Puritans and the pilgrims is that the pilgrims wanted to separate completely from the Church of England. And so, they were chased. The pilgrims fled to Holland, where they lived for some time before eventually coming to America.

Jesse Thorn: Because the Church of England was a state religion.

(Jane confirms.)

So, it was treasonous to separate yourself from it.

Jane Borden: Correct. The Puritans, meanwhile, wanted to purify the church. And no, they didn't call themselves Puritans, and it was not a compliment. *(Chuckles.)* The pilgrims also didn't call themselves that; that name came quite some time after. So, the pilgrims came over in 1620, and the Puritans started coming in 1630. The fear was that, because of England's refusal to—you know—purify completely from Catholicism, the apocalypse was coming to England. And that's part of why they came to America.

Jesse Thorn: There are two really important understandings of how the apocalypse is gonna work with, re: Jesus' return and so forth. Post- and pre-millennialists. The millennium in question is the 1,000 years of peace that comes when Christ returns to Earth.

(Jane confirms.)

What is the difference between a pre- and a post-millennialist?

Jane Borden: The pre-millennialists believe in predestination. So, it's a very strict understanding of, essentially, the Book of Revelation—what's now the last book in the canonized New Testament. Which says that Jesus will return; there's a battle; and then there's 1,000 years of peace and prosperity. And then after that is when Satan gets bound; you have the checklist of who gets saved and who's damned. And then New Jerusalem descends from Heaven. It's a literal city made of white gold.

Post-millennialism developed sometime later. And the idea there is that maybe this is all a little more allegorical. And so, this is when we get into the High Protestant churches. Episcopalianism, Protestantism. Maybe there's not gonna be a literal city that descends from Heaven. Maybe there's not going to be this literal battle and locusts with hair-like ladies flying around torturing people.

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Maybe it's all just kind of spiritual and allegorical. And so, the post-millennialists—to their mind, they saw— And this happened particularly in the late 1800s, following the Industrial Revolution. They saw all this incredible progress happening, and they thought, "Maybe we are already in the millennium, or maybe we're at least approaching it. And maybe if we work extra hard to help God, we can bring it on ourselves. We can bring on New Jerusalem ourselves."

Jesse Thorn: I mean, you list these things that are in the Book of Revelations. And like the truth is, it's a real tone shift in the New Testament and Revelations.

(They laugh.)

Jane Borden: Yeah! Yeah. It's dark. It's dark; it's incredibly violent. It was written by this guy, John of Patmos, while he was exiled on an island. And it was written around the time that the Romans just destroyed Jerusalem, because some Jews tried to rebel, and the Romans just crushed them. And it was horrific. And he reasoned, "Surely we're going to be rescued soon. Jesus said he was going to return within our lifetime." It had been about a lifetime since then. And he just reasoned it had to be coming; and when it does, the Romans are gonna be the ones who are getting the punishment. 'Cause they're the ones persecuting the chosen people.

And so, a lot of the plot of Revelation is coded language about the Romans. And revelations were like a genre at the time. A lot of people were writing, you know, "God showed me what's going to happen at the end of time, and this is what I saw." That's all a revelation is. John's just happened to last longer than any of the rest of them did. But before these poets saw these visions, they were in the spirit. Now, whether that means that they had drunk a lot of wine or had spun themselves around in circles until they were dizzy, that's a little bit lost to history. But the idea is that they got themself into some kind of altered state of consciousness.

Jesse Thorn: What does it mean that the United States has <u>always</u> been so invested in apocalyptic understandings of Christianity?

Jane Borden: I think it means that we give con artists and cult leaders and demagogues a window into exploitation, because we are indoctrinated into these very powerful, apocalyptic ideas that are used against us, are used to activate us to behave in ways that serve whoever's pushing our buttons.

So, you know, for example, the Puritans believed that the way you worshiped God was through work, was to have a calling and just pursue it all the time. I mean, they worked themselves crazy. And we still do, of course. America's—work culture in America is an aberration. But what we see in that happening over history is Americans begin to equate the number in someone's bank account with their moral character. Because if you work a lot as a way to worship God, you're naturally going to acquire money. And further, if God's going to reward us on Judgment Day—reward his chosen on Judgment Day—then wouldn't he also reward his chosen during life? So, that wealth is also a sign that God loves you back.

And if that's true, then the inverse is also true. Which suggests that poverty is a sin. And you know, poor people have supposedly been assessed by God and found unworthy, and that's

why they're poor. And if that's true, then why help poor people? Sin should be punished. And so, we see this again and again throughout American history. A modern example being welfare to work programs, which require recipients of funds to be working in order to get them. Unfortunately, welfare to work programs have been proven ineffective. In fact, sometimes they push people deeper into poverty, because what actually pulls people out of the cycle of poverty is training and education. And you can't pursue those if you're having to make these work requirements. You know, a certain number of hours a week or whatever.

Jesse Thorn: We're taking a break. We'll be back in just a second. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Jane Borden. She's a writer who's appeared in *Vanity Fair*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and elsewhere. She just wrote a wonderful new book called *Cults Like Us*. It's a history of cults. And specifically, the American variety. Let's get back into it.

Can I ask you a serious question here? In a culture that's built on cult-like faith roots—even if they don't have charismatic leaders, other than thinking about the Big J—*(chuckles)* how do you define anything as a cult?! Like, how do you decide what counts? You know?

Jane Borden: Yeah. I mean—

Jesse Thorn: What about the golden tablets? What about Christian Science? What about Creflo Dollar? What about—? You know, where is the line between beneficial faith and a cult?

Jane Borden: It's murky. I think the easiest way to locate a cult is by looking for a charismatic leader. Sure, not every charismatic leader is exploiting members. However, power corrupts. It's not just an adage; it's been proved by science. *(Chuckles.)* Always. Always and every time. And the appetite for power is insatiable, and that's why we see cults that end in mass death. Because, in my opinion, that's the ultimate power grab is control over life and death. There's nowhere to go beyond that, and the leader usually dies as well.

So, it's incredibly rare, in my opinion, to have a charismatic leader who is given great power, who isn't stopped by some kind of, you know, democratic structure that shares power—it's very rare for that person not to eventually be corrupted by it, even if that's not their original intention to be a con artist.

Jesse Thorn: You're very funny, and the book is very funny. How do you decide how to—how and when to be funny about something as dark as cults?

Jane Borden: I guess my defining ethic around the humor is that I want to be able to put my arms around readers and say, “Hey, look how insane we are. It's gonna be okay if we look at it and understand it.” I wanna reveal the magic trick, so we stop falling for it. But you know, it was very important to me not to make fun of cult followers, because I see them all as victims. I do make fun of cult leaders on occasion, but I also honestly didn't wanna give them too much attention. Because I feel like we have this tendency to—you know, even people outside the group worship these people. I mean, people are obsessed with Charles Manson still! And we see them as these—we give them great power. How do they do it? The masterminds! You know, charisma!

And it's like, well, they're just narcissists. You know? Anyone could Google “how do I start a cult?” And you could do it tomorrow very effectively. I mean, it's not rocket science. The reason why you won't do that is because you have empathy. Because you're not a malignant narcissist or whatever, you know, psychological diagnosis some of these people would receive. It's different case-to-case. But so, I don't think these people are all-powerful magicians. I think they're hacks! *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: I mean, one of the things that you revealed to me in the book that I had never thought of was just the simple extent to which many, many, many cult leaders just copied their cult stuff from some other cult. *(Laughs.)*

[00:20:00]

(Jane confirms.)

Sometimes wholesale! Sometimes just straight-up plagiarism style. Not big, broad ideas, but like actual texts.

Jane Borden: Mm. Mm-hm. Oh yeah. Particularly the large group awareness trainings of the ‘70s, during the Human Potential Movement. Yeah, they all just copied each other. And I talked to one scholar who said it's two degrees to Scientology. A lot of people who went out and started their own outfits had gone through the Scientology system—or at least, you know, for a few months; the early levels. Yeah, they're all just copying each other, because they saw how much money you could make. I mean, cults are businesses at the end of the day. They're businesses that don't have a board of directors, which allows the leader to have sex with everyone.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* Describe to me MSIA, 'cause it's time to start talking about particular cults.

Jane Borden: Okay. The Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness, MSIA. Known to insiders as Messiah, which I think is excellent branding. This group was founded by a guy named John-Roger, originally born Hinkins. He was in the hospital for a procedure. He went under, and when he woke up, he claims that he had been visited by John—of the Gospels John—and that he was now this new entity called John-Roger. And he was divine, and he was BFFs with God. And his role was to help people exit the cycle of karma.

Jesse Thorn: I just wanna take a moment to acknowledge—

(Jane agrees with a laugh.)

—that this is a man whose name was Roger, said that the Apostle John came to talk to him, merged with him, and then he changed his name to John-Roger.

Jane Borden: It's pretty simple. It's pretty basic when you put it out that way. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: I feel like a lot of cult leaders might have just changed their name to John.

(Jane laughs.)

But I love that he combined the two of them, 'cause he is like, "Well, I'm both guys now. Now, I'm two guys."

Jane Borden: Well, and you know, that's the narcissism, right? Roger's great. I'm great. Why would Roger go away?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. *(Laughs.)*

Jane Borden: You know, "Worship me as John and worship me as Roger."

Jesse Thorn: Okay. So, what did John-Roger get up to?

Jane Borden: John-Roger ultimately coerced a lot of men into having sex with him and made a ton of money. And so, he grew a following slowly over time, and then eventually bought this mansion in Mandeville Canyon out here in California, and started pulling people in specifically through an organization called Insight. Which was what we now refer to as a large group awareness training. The most common one of these today is probably Landmark. That's the one people have heard of. These trainings are still incredibly popular. And they were huge in the '70s, and typically they happened over two weekends—so, two Saturdays and Sundays. And you were in a conference room with a bunch of other people, like 100 other people, doing these workshops. And it was a lot of self-investigation, and there was a lot of crying, and there was a lot of honesty and secrets.

And part of what was happening behind the scenes is that they were breaking people down and then rebuilding them back up into supposedly, you know, a more enlightened state. The problem is that a lot of people never got built back up. They had major psychological breaks. They were in the hospital; they lost their jobs; there were suicides. I mean, if you haven't heard of these groups, your parents have. It was all over the news. So, these groups proliferated in the '70s. And that's in part because they actually helped a lot of people. Now, I think the reason why they were so helpful is probably just because people weren't really doing therapy otherwise. Obviously, psychotherapy had been around for quite some time, but there was still a lot of stigma around it. And then here comes this organization where it's like you can do it in a group; it's much more accessible; we're gonna have fun.

And so, I think the breakthroughs that people were having were probably just as the result of like basic talk therapy. But the goal was to make a lot of money off of these people through direct asks at the end of the training session, when people were high on themselves, essentially. You know, manufactured moments of ecstasy. And then right at that moment it's like, "This is so great what we're doing. We're saving the world. Give us some money!"

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And people are like, "YEEEAH!" You know, writing checks for 10 grand and stuff. And then, getting them to proselytize, go out and spread the word; tell everyone to come sign up for these.

So, Insight, was a huge moneymaking venture for John-Roger. And it was also a pipeline directly into what was more traditionally a cult: Messiah, MSIA.

Jesse Thorn: One of the things about these groups is that they required the kind of vulnerability that one has in therapy before people with power in these groups. So, like MSIA, for example, had a thing where you had to tell people your deepest, most shameful secrets. That's something that comes up in Scientology too. How did that play out in MSIA?

Jane Borden: Well, people found out later that John-Roger had hidden cameras and microphones—not just throughout his home in Mandeville Canyon, but in these Insight trainings as well, the assumption being that he was looking for collateral. And of course, that's the accusation often lobbed at Scientology. So, hard to say whether, you know, net positive or net negative for people who bared their souls. You know, a lot of people found the sharing of secrets helpful in some ways. But there does seem to have been more sinister motivations at play.

Jesse Thorn: Multiple people told you that they had heard confessions—not what they called them, but confessions of murders!

Jane Borden: Yes, I had found in two sources people saying that they heard someone confess to a murder in one of these. So, imagine how comfortable and trusting you have to be at that point. And a lot of the psychological research that's been done into these groups suggests that one of the results of this breakdown and build you back up MO is that you begin to associate with the leader. And of course, we see that in cults as well. And so, I think that's a little bit of what's happening too, just the incredible trust that you would feel toward the person asking you to betray your secrets.

Jesse Thorn: But he was coercing these straight dudes that lived in his mansion into sex in ways that, you know, were obviously grotesque in the way that any coercive sex was, but where an essential quality of it was that the guys that he was getting to perform sex acts on him and with him were, themselves, straight. So, it was like an extra level of coercion.

Jane Borden: Yes. Yeah. And he—you know, the way he framed it was not in sexual terms. So, he argued that sex with him could help you burn off karma faster. And *(sighs)* the degree to which people believed it or not, we'd have to interview each person individually. But

typically in cults when this kind of exploitation is happening, people feel so blessed to be that close to the leader, to be that intimate with the leader. So, it's not necessarily sexual for them either. It's more about communion.

And I interviewed a guy, Victor Toso, who very generously shared his story with candor. But he says the first moment when he was coerced by—and he sees it now as coercion; he didn't at the time. But after that first incident, he says his only thought was, "Gosh, if I'd only known before that it was this easy!"

Jesse Thorn: To achieve—?

Jane Borden: To be in his good graces. To be chosen. And that was part of John-Roger's MO, is that he would ice people out before the approach and the coercion.

Jesse Thorn: So, in Toso's case, for example, there was like a trip to Australia where everyone but him was invited. He just got left behind by himself at the mansion.

Jane Borden: Yeah. Yeah. He called it—John-Roger called him his sadness or something? I can't remember the exact word. But he was basically like, "You stay here and think about what you did." And that's essentially what it was. And Victor spent the whole time distraught. And again, this intense self-investigation. And so, then when John-Roger and everyone else came back from their fun Christmas vacation, Victor says that he just knew he was gonna get kicked out. He could just feel it. And sure enough, that's what happened. Unless! Right? And that's when the coercion happens.

Jesse Thorn: Sexual coercion is at the heart of so many of these stories. Like, the only thing that is more consistently in there is leaders collecting money.

[00:30:00]

But it seems like even when sexual coercion isn't at the beginning of the story, it always ends up being in the story.

Jane Borden: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. I think that's the path of power. So, the psychological research into the effects of power suggests that when—what it does, when you're feeling power, it leads you to expand the spectrum of what you consider to be acceptable behavior. And so, that means you start giving into your impulses. You have fewer inhibitions. And when you're surrounded by sycophants, no one's telling you that what you're doing is wrong. That spectrum just gets wider and wider and wider. And so, we don't see as much sexual coercion in groups that are led by females, although there is some. And there's certainly promiscuity. I mean, people in power take advantage of what's in front of them. But I think for a lot of men, that's a deep impulse—to have sex with whoever you wanna have sex with. And the more powerful you become, the more likely you are to indulge that impulse.

Jesse Thorn: Okay. Let's talk about a financial cult called Mankind United.

Jane Borden: Oh, this one's my favorite.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. This one is one I had never heard of before.

Jane Borden: I hadn't either.

Jesse Thorn: From the first half of the 20th century. Tell me how this operation got started.

Jane Borden: So, this guy, Arthur Bell—it was a con from the start. But it was only revealed as a con when the FBI finally closed in. And so, what people who were in the group believed is that there were organizations under this banner of the sponsors all over the nation, all over the world. *(Chuckles.)* In reality, they were just in California and a little bit up the coast. So, the idea—

Jesse Thorn: Well, for you in Oregon, but yeah.

Jane Borden: *(Chuckles.)* Yeah. So, the idea was that there was this group of Hidden Rulers, they were called. Capital H, capital R. And it was a few families who had, for millennia, been amassing power and money. And all they wanted in the world to do was exterminate and enslave everyone else. Don't fret, because there's also a group called the Sponsors—capital S—who are fighting in secret and developing a way to stop the Hidden Rulers. They can't come out in the open yet, because if they play their cards too quickly, they'll lose. But if you sign up to join this organization—which you can do by attending meetings and buying textbooks, buying pamphlets, which cost him pennies to make—and recruiting; bringing other people in and getting them to buy textbooks and pamphlets—then you can help the cause.

So, what fascinates me most about this— First of all, it was incredibly successful. You know, the number of actual followers I think was 14,000. I'm not gonna remember. But the wider reach was quoted as 200,000 people having at least attended a meeting or maybe purchased a textbook or something. Just incredibly successful. The most fascinating thing to me about this is how detailed the plans were—that he, of course, had just made up—about what the hidden rulers were going to do. And the promise at the end of all of this, once the Sponsors, you know, overcame the Hidden Rulers—which is a doomsday ideology, right? You'd work fewer days a week for fewer hours each day and make even more money. And again, the numbers were very specific exactly how much money you were gonna make. Everyone would have a home. In that home would be a microwave. *(Chuckles.)* Outside of that home would be a little fountain.

I mean, just incredibly specific. And these promises were incredibly powerful, because this was during the Great Depression. And once again, these cults take advantage of people who are desperate and in need. Almost always financial need.

Jesse Thorn: We'll finish my conversation with Jane Borden after a quick break. Keep it locked. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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[00:35:00]

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 Alan Tudyk.
>
> **Alan Tudyk**: You hand somebody a yardstick after they've shopped at your general store; the store's name is constantly in your heart, because yardsticks become part of the family.
>
> **John Moe**: *Sleeping With Celebrities*, hosted by me—John Moe—on MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts. Night, night.
>
> *(Music fades out.)*

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is writer Jane Borden. She's the author of the new book, *Cults Like Us*.

When the theologies of these cults are described, say on a public radio program—

(Jane chuckles.)

—they sound utterly bonkers. You know, I mean, I suppose you could say the same thing for Deuteronomy. But like Deuteronomy has thousands of years of, you know, history of faith and interpretation, and so on and so forth. It's a lot easier—

Jane Borden: And people believed different things thousands of years ago.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. So, with one of these cults with a bonkers ideology—especially one where, you know, people aren't in the same place as the person creating the ideology; you know, where it's not just somebody who's so good looking or has such a nice house that you wanna live there with them—what brings people in? Like, how do people fall for it?

Jane Borden: Mm. Part of the reason that I include so many case studies in the book is because I want readers to see the same ideology at play in a group that we would typically consider to be wacky and outlying and these extreme beliefs. But the foundational ideology is

exactly the same as what I then show in moments of secular American history that are accepted as quite normal.

Now, why do we believe bonkers details? I leaned on some research by a guy named Mikael Klintman into knowledge resistance. And what he was trying to figure out with his work is why do people believe ideas that seem so anathema to what the general public believes? And his basic argument is that we evolved to be a social species. We didn't evolve to root out truth; we evolved to hue to the center of a herd, because that's how you stay alive. You know, if you get kicked out of the group, you die back in the day. You know, good luck in the tundra, essentially. So, we will always, always choose to believe whatever the people in our group believe, because we want to be in that group.

And as it turns out, the more extreme the ideas, the more likely we are to believe them. And he's shown that the smartest people in the group sometimes believe the most outlandish ideas, because that is a way to show even more loyalty to the group. This is how we show that we're unique and that we're together. And I get into a lot of evolutionary biology as well around the fact that we developed to be social creatures, later in the book. But I think that's ultimately what's behind outlandish beliefs. Because these cults are isolated. They are distinct from the rest of society. And that's when we see the ideas get more and more extreme.

Jesse Thorn: There were a lot of far-right, cultish organizations that developed toward the end of the 20th century, and you know, ended in conflict with the government—violent conflict with the government. That seems to—those movements seem to have borne new sort of far-right, cultish, conspiracy theory mashups in the 21st century. Is something like QAnon a cult?

Jane Borden: First of all, I love the phrase "conspiracy theory mashups". *(Laughs.)* It's always a mashup. 'Cause conspiracy theory is equal opportunity. "I'll take that one. I'll take that one too." QAnon—is QAnon a cult? So, the argument for why it wouldn't be is because who's the charismatic leader?

[00:40:00]

Q… Q is exhibiting undue influence. And there's actual harm being done to members, followers of QAnon, in my opinion. But is Q a charismatic leader? Probably not. However, when you combine QAnon with Trump, then you have a charismatic leader. And we saw that happen quite a bit, particularly in the lead up to the 2016 election and during his first term where he was retweeting QAnon experts—quote/unquote "experts". And we saw a lot of also QAnon followers running for government, some of them winning. And so, that's a compelling argument to me that Trump becomes the worshiped, charismatic leader in making QAnon a cult.

Jesse Thorn: One of the big differences between those movements in the 21st century and those movements in the late 20th century—

Jane Borden: The militia movements?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, is the internet. Like, it's one thing to have to access pamphlets, you know what I mean?

(They chuckle.)

Like, on the one hand, pamphlets are a good way to make money if you're an evil pamphleteer.

(Jane laughs.)

But on the other hand, they can really limit the spread of information. Because ultimately, you know, if you're that—you know, if you're that White power novel that I forget the name of, like you're not just gonna be in the library or at the bookstore, right? So, it makes things a little tricky to spread. The internet seems like it really changes the dynamics of what people can become obsessed with and how they can become obsessed with it. Because they don't have to get a book, and they don't have to show up at somebody's house for the meeting. Like, their meeting can be them in their underpants, in their basement.

Jane Borden: And meanwhile, their family has no idea that they've been radicalized or indoctrinated. Which can be even more dangerous, because then they don't have any way to try to fight it.

I interviewed—several times, honestly, since 2017; I've relied on his work quite a bit—this guy Rick Alan Ross; he's an exit counselor, which is what we today call deprogrammers, which he was back in the day. And I always think about this one thing he said: that he had such high hopes that the internet was going to mitigate cult participation. Because if you became interested in a group during those early phases where you still had your critical thinking skills and you were like, "What is this all about?", you could just Google the group or the leader or whatever and read all these firsthand testimonies of "run, don't walk, away from this group."

Jesse Thorn: Right. Ultimately, like you could look at the Yelp reviews and be like, "Mm-mm!"

Jane Borden: Yeah, exactly. And then of course, jokes on us. That's not at all what happened. The internet further radicalized Americans. Probably it was social media more than just—you can't just blame the internet. It was probably social media. I call social media algorithms the most successful cult leaders of all time, because they trap us. That's the goal. They lead us into extreme content. They separate us from IRL community. They love bomb us by saying—you know, getting all the likes on your comments, making you feel like you're part of a cool community or group. All the Facebook groups, right?

Jesse Thorn: Love bombing is the cult phenomenon where, you know, at your first meeting—if you're a dude, like three pretty girls come up to you and tell you what a great job you're doing. Or equivalent.

Jane Borden: That's right. Yeah. Well, it's usually pretty girls, 'cause even another girl likes pretty girls. *(Laughs.)* Social media algorithms literally control our information intake with the goal to control what we do and don't believe. And the whole purpose is to mine resources from us—our data or other things that they've monetized. And so, I think the increases we're currently experiencing in cult-like thinking can largely be attributed to social media algorithms.

Jesse Thorn: How has spending five years in the world of cults writing this book changed how you interact with the regular world?

Jane Borden: I see the apocalypse everywhere.

(Jesse laughs.)

Especially in pop culture, TV and films. We're just—we tell the same story again and again. We can't get enough. I see the ideas everywhere, undergirding secular culture and politics. Ultimately, though I've become less fearful of it. When you understand something, it's less scary.

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Like I said, I wanna reveal the magic trick. Because that's all it is. It's a simple con. It's a three-card Monty. It's—you know, we don't have to keep falling for it. I want people to buy the book, not only so I can continue to have a career, but I want us to start being able to acknowledge it. To recognize it and call it out. And that's when it loses its power.

Jesse Thorn: I think often of Father Yod of the Source Family Cult in Los Angeles in the 1970s, who—

Jane Borden: I would've joined that group for sure.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I don't know—I had the directors of a documentary about it on the show some years ago. And one of the things I remember most vividly in the documentary was that the people were freely describing the horrific nightmares. And they were like, "But overall it was pretty good. Like, I'd do it again."

(They laugh.)

But anyway, Father Yod, he passed away—tragically or not, depending on your perspective—because he tried to do some hang gliding, because he figured he could do it since he was so genius and powerful. But he had never hang glided before and didn't ask anyone how to do it. So, he just jumped off a cliff and died.

While acknowledging that all of these cults by their very definition involve tremendous pain and suffering and negative effects on the world, what is the silliest cult stuff that you learned about?

Jane Borden: *(Giggles.)* The silliest cult stuff?

Jesse Thorn: Is there anything that one of these evil people tried to do that's as ridiculous as thinking they could hang glide when they didn't know how?

Jane Borden: Hm. I mean, I, think a lot about Dwight York, who led the group eventually known as the Nuwaubians, up in—they were in Bushwick in Brooklyn, first as the Ansaaru Allah community. And then they were in Atlanta—or outside of Atlanta, rather—where he was eventually taken down. But he brought all of his older kids together and was basically like, "This is all a con. Like, you know, isn't that cool? Don't you want in on it? Don't you want in on all the women and money?" And he basically came clean about all of it.

And so, that to me is a sign of like feeling invincible. So, I've always found that fascinating.

Jesse Thorn: You ever thought about starting a cult?

(Jane laughs.)

What kind of cult would you start if you were gonna start a cult, Jane?

Jane Borden: Dance. Dance cult.

Jesse Thorn: Dance cult!?

Jane Borden: Oh yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Not a *Dance Dance* cult, like a *Dance Dance Revolution* cult, but a standard dance cult.

Jane Borden: Yeah, dance and drugs. That's what's always been attractive to me about any of these groups. Like—I mean, the first few episodes of *Wild, Wild Country*, I think we all wanted to follow the Bhagwan. You know? It looked like a lot of fun. Just drugs and dancing.

Jesse Thorn: Wait, so are you making an argument here maybe that just like the Watusi and the Mashed Potato were technically cults?

(They laugh.)

The Twist was a cult led by charismatic leader Chubby Checker?

Jane Borden: Possibly. Maybe that's my next book, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: Jane Borden, it was great to see you, great to talk to you, and thank you for this wonderful book.

Jane Borden: Thank you so much for your interest. I appreciate it.

Jesse Thorn: Jane Borden everyone. Her new book is *Cults Like Us*. You can pick it up right now at your local bookstore or on Bookshop.org.

Transition: Jazzy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, 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. Here at my house in Northeast Los Angeles, I live near a hotdog restaurant chain. I just saw a TV commercial during the ball game that they sell fried chicken in hotdog form? *(Beat.)* I gotta admit, I kind of want to eat it.

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 Hannah Moroz. Our video producer 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 at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music was written in recorded by The Go! Team. It's 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 will find video from just about all our interviews, including the ones you heard this week. And 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.

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