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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 is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Susan Orlean has spent over 45 years writing. Her early career took her from alternative newspapers to *The New Yorker*. She started writing Talk of the Town vignettes in 1987. Her gift was noticing. She could see a funny sign on a street corner and figure out why it was a fascinating story. One of her first smash hits was about the rivalry between two hot dog restaurants: Gray's Papaya, and The Papaya king. In 1990 she published her first book, *Saturday Night*—stories from a polka hall and a teenager's babysitting gig and a missile silo, all at that special time of the week. *The Orchid Thief* followed an obsessive outlaw who collected rare flowers. *The Library Book* was a history of LA Central Library, and particularly of the suspicious fire that nearly burned it down.

All of Orleans's work is animated by that eye for detail and story: the incredible dresses on the women at the polka hall, the strange people who were obsessed with strange flowers, the man who walked across the country to find that library in LA. Not long ago, Susan Orlean had an idea to write a book about writing: how to do it, what works for her, what doesn't. And as she put pen to paper, that project became bigger—a memoir of her life and career, called *Joyride*. Orlean has spent a lifetime noticing the little details about others. For once, she has pointed her attention at herself.

But don't worry, it's not all craft. There are also crazy stories—like her career-making profile of Rajneeshpuram, the cult town in Oregon that seemed to capture the curdling of post-disco America. Anyway, I was so glad to get to talk with Susan about this book. Let's get right into it.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Susan Orlean, welcome back to *Bullseye*! I'm so happy to see you again. It's always so nice to see you.

Susan Orlean: I'm so happy to be here. I really am.

Jesse Thorn: Aw. I'm glad. Okay, so as I was reading the introduction to your book *Joyride*, there was a paragraph that I marked in my mind “please have Susan read this paragraph.” Would you mind reading it for me?

Susan Orlean: I'd be delighted! I like reading in general but especially if some if something struck you.

“Writing is a job. But for me it has always seemed like a mission. I felt called—I really did—to describe ordinary life in a way that revealed its complexity and poetry, to show how rewarding it is to be open to and curious about the world and how much joy can be found in letting yourself be surprised. I wanted to draw readers in and convince them to appreciate these stories, especially ones they might not think they'd care about or find interesting. Perhaps they would begin to look at the world in a different way: one that was full of curiosity and welcome. I wanted to be a writer, because I wanted to show that any life closely examined is complex and can embody both the heroic and the plain. Writing was my effort to make sense of the human experience, of my experience. And I hope that it might bring a reader to understand and maybe even empathize with a life or circumstance that initially might have seemed strange or impenetrable.

“When I started my career, I didn't know what I was doing. I made lots of mistakes. Some of my early writing was gimmicky and self-conscious. But even then, I was sure of why it was important to do it. Writing is the most meaningful thing I've ever done. It's given me my place in the world. Even when it's frustrating and hard, I know how lucky I am.”

Jesse Thorn: Now, I had to say, Susan, that one of the reasons I picked that out was because it was a sort of mission statement. But then I was like, “But this could be a little ponderous and self-conscious and talking about how great writing is.” You know, writers talking about how great writing is the worst.

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But! The next paragraph was you saying, “But also, it's super fun.” (*Laughs.*)

Susan Orlean: Right! Right. And in fact, I was very conscious of that ponderousness of saying, “Oh my god, writing is this, and writing is that,” when in fact a huge reason for anyone to do it is that it's really fun. And certainly, doing the kind of writing I do where I come up with something I'm curious about, and I get to go find out about it. That's really fun! The crafting of sentences too can be really fun! Obviously, very hard. It can feel sometimes unmanageable and insurmountable. But when you write a sentence that you feel really happy with, that is really fun.

Jesse Thorn: Gimme an example of a thing you've done while reporting that was really fun.

Susan Orlean: Oh gosh! So many things. I climbed Mount Fuji. I traveled with a Black gospel group down south for a couple of weeks. I hung out with backpackers in Bangkok. I wouldn't even be able to stop this list.

Jesse Thorn: Do you always have the expectation that it's gonna be fun? I mean, like when you pitch “how does a grocery store work,” Are you thinking in your head, “Ooooh! This is gonna be fun!”

Susan Orlean: Weirdly, the way my mind works, that seems super fun to me.

(Jesse laughs warmly.)

I think that, to me, learning about something is really fun. And yes, it's easy for me to point to these sort of glamorous things that I've done—travel, places that are exotic and that not everybody gets to go to. But I find it equally fun to say, “I wonder how a grocery store works,” and spend six weeks in a grocery store in Jackson Heights and really learn how the place works. To me, that's really fun.

Jesse Thorn: The book is called *Joyride*. And when I saw the picture of you on the cover—It's little. You know, it's like two inches by three inches or something like that. It looks like you tooling down the PCH in a Karmann Ghia or something like that. And you look a little closer, and you're like, “Oh, this is Susan in a bumper car.”

Susan Orlean: Right.

Jesse Thorn: And I thought to myself, “Well, ‘joyride’ isn't tooling down the PCH in a Karmann Ghia. Joyride is stealing someone's car and driving it until it runs out of gas and leaving it on the side of the road. And I'm guessing that that was... a conscious choice, to pick that word that means that thing.”

Susan Orlean: Yes. I think the appeal of naming the book *Joyride* was that it did work on a couple of levels. I think for a lot of people, they just think, “Oh, it's just a fun— That means a ride that you take that's just for pleasure.” But I also had this association with the idea that you hot wire a car and go for a ride. And in a somewhat oblique way, it struck me as being what being a nonfiction writer is all about. You sort of take another life for a ride.

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: Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is writer Susan Orlean. She's the author of the new memoir, *Joyride*.

One of the first stories that you write about in the book—and it was a piece from early in your career that I had never read; it's in the end of the book—was about a, let's say, on the line between a religious awakening and cult led by a swami who had moved to rural Oregon near where you worked at *Willamette Week*, in Portland. And that struck me immediately as a joyride. Because you know, you got to experience this strange thing. And indeed, like experienced part of the euphoria of this strange thing while also getting to leave after your eight days or whatever of reporting there. Whereas other people, you know, were left in shambles. (*Laughs*.)

Susan Orlean: Right! Exactly. Yeah. And that's a perfect example of the joyride that being a reporter enables you to experience, which is you drop into these alternate universes. But you always know you're leaving. You always— You can get very close; you can get very drawn in. And in the case of writing about Rajneeshpuram, the seduction is very clear to you. The appeal is

very clear, and even the little tug of thinking, “(*Clicks tongue.*) God, it would be nice to be part of this warm, happy family.” But the reporter’s kind of guardrail kicks in where you think, “Yeah, and now I have to walk away and write somewhat objectively about this place that I observed.”

In the case of writing about a cult—and I wrote a lot about cults when I first started my career; there were a lot of cults to write about! It was definitely kind of in the air at the time. The thing with Rajneeshpuram is it was the most sort of low-impact cult. The thing that Bhagwan pitched to his followers was “You can do whatever you want. You can have as much sex as you want. You can smoke, you can drink, you can have coffee. There are really no restrictions.”

Jesse Thorn: It was sort of a cult of letting yourself off the hook. (*Chuckles.*)

(*Susan confirms.*)

Until eventually, it became a cult of trying to poison an entire town.

Susan Orlean: Yyes!

Jesse Thorn: But initially! (*Chuckles.*)

Susan Orlean: Yeah! I mean, exactly. It was the most benign-seeming cult. And a lot of very—a lot of people who were not your typical cult-joiners. So, it got a lot darker the more that was learned about it. But superficially? It was basically a bunch of very attractive, smart people hanging out together. And you think, “Hey! What could be so bad about that? That seems kind of great!”

Jesse Thorn: When you’re writing about reporting on this story, there is a classic Susan Orlean detail in the story. Which is you are in the gift shop—which a photograph of the gift shop ends up being part of what kind of it takes the story national, so to speak. But you’re in this gift shop, and you’re looking at books of cassette tapes of lectures on soap bubbles. And the guy in front of you in line as you are buying a notebook or something is buying condoms. And the guy behind the desk says to him (*restraining laughter*), “Come on. Show a little ambition.” And puts away a three pack and buys a 12 pack! (*Laughs.*)

Susan Orlean: Right. It was—I mean, they were very pro-sex. And it was particularly funny, because the amenities in the hotel room—I was staying at the Rajneeshpuram Hotel. And they had soap, and they had a shower cap, and they had a box of condoms. And I have to say, I have never—in my many years of being in many hotels around the world have never had condoms as one of the hotel amenities in the bathroom. But that was part of their ethos, which was—you know—sex was great! Everyone should have sex with everyone.

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And they’re selling the condoms in the gift shop. And what I love was the cashier saying to the guy with the three pack, “Oh, come on. You know, you can do better than that!”

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckles.*) You learned from reporting this story the skill—that you have sort of obliquely described as we've talked—which is how to become enraptured enough in something to share that enrapturement with the audience, especially when you're becoming enraptured so often with people who are enraptured with a third thing. You know. Orchids or whatever. Right? But not fall in love with it.

Susan Orlean: Right.

Jesse Thorn: So, how did you learn that lesson there, and how did you apply it elsewhere in your reporting?

Susan Orlean: It's an incredibly challenging part of being a reporter, and there are a lot of psychological, emotional, and even ethical issues that get wrapped up in this. Which is the whole nature of immersion journalism, which is sort of the nature of modern nonfiction, where you're not on the sidelines. You try to go deep, and you get completely internal in the subculture that you're writing about.

And in order to do that you have to suspend some amount of critical distance. That's... that's what it's about. But you can't lose it entirely. And as I wrote about in my piece about Rajneeshpuram, I observed a few reporters who—while they were there to cover the story—suddenly said, “You know what? I think these people have a really great philosophy. And I'm staying.”

Jesse Thorn: Like, you literally saw a guy packing up his camera.

Susan Orlean: Yeah! And I said, you know, “Ehh, what are you doing?”

And he said, “I think these people have really figured it out, and I'm not gonna continue filming for CBS”—or whoever he was there for.

And I was completely rattled, because that's fundamental to being a reporter is there's a point at which you know to step back. It's not easy, because part of what you're trying to do is remain as open, as non-judgmental, as embracing as you can be. But you know, just pull yourself right out. At the very last minute, jump back out of the fire. It's not always fun to pull yourself back out. You know, it's a moment that can be jarring, where you have to keep saying, “Nope, I'm here as a reporter.” It's reminding yourself over and over again that you're the outsider. But that is what the job is. And if you can't do that, it's not the right job for you.

Jesse Thorn: Part of your story of being at *The New Yorker* is you were in transition to becoming a staff member of *The New Yorker* as its editor was being fired and Tina Brown was being hired. Tina Brown, who had been the editor of *Vanity Fair* and was a famous magazine editor, and part of what she was famous for was being flashy and having her finger on the pulse of celebrity and things like this—which were kind of anathema to what *The New Yorker* was all about. It was controversial enough that I vaguely remember this controversy from when I was 12. And you list some of the things that Tina Brown did as she became editor of *The New Yorker*. You know, some of them are difficult, keeping people on their wrong foot kind of to try and get their best work out of them and stuff like that. But some of them are like—You're like, “Wait, there was a

guy who was coming to work for 30 years, and they were paying for an office for him?! And he never published anything?! This is insane!”

Susan Orlean: Right, right, right! And she— You know. I mean, Tina had incredible strengths and incredible insights and also could be at times very hard to work for. But she was also not cowed at all by these longstanding circumstances that people accepted as “that's just the way we do it.” I mean, I was waiting and waiting to get office space.

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And in the meantime, half of the offices were assigned to people who hadn't published in decades. And to be honest, as a young writer eagerly ready to contribute to the magazine, it really got my goat that half of the offices were occupied by— And a lot of those people didn't come in, either.

Jesse Thorn: And you're like, “I want this office, but James Thurber's skeleton is in it with spiderwebs between his hands and his manual typewriter.”

Susan Orlean: RIGHT! Exactly! I mean, the guy whose office I ultimately took over when I got my first office there was a man named Thomas Whiteside who wrote for the magazine in the 40s and 50s and never came into the office. I don't know if he was still alive or not, but he had this office.

And Tina, to her credit, was like, “Yeah, no. He doesn't anymore.”

Maybe it harked back to a time where office space was in huge supply and offices didn't cost a lot of money and— Who knows. But the reality of 1986/1987 in New York City—and someone—the managing editor said to me that it was costing the magazine \$50,000 a year per office, in terms of rent.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah!

Susan Orlean: So, it was just money going out the door. And at that time, before Conde Nast owned *The New Yorker*, it was owned by a family—the Fleischmanns—who loved the magazine and underwrote any cost. And they didn't have a budget as far as I know. So, there was nobody going, “Oh, we're spending like \$500,000 a year on offices for people who don't come.” It just wasn't an issue.

Jesse Thorn: Here's the thing. As *The New Yorker* was in turmoil and you were becoming a staff member and it was being run by Tina Brown—a woman who was known for getting her way, knocking over chairs in the meantime, and assigning you to write stories about Marky Mark—that I thought was a special skill and quality of you that might have helped make you successful in that world, even though you wanted to write articles about grocery stores instead of Marky Mark. It was that throughout this book, your story, you are constantly asking for stuff and putting your nose in stuff in a way that I can't imagine doing. Right?

And like, granted you didn't have a contract when a new editor got hired for *The New Yorker*. You didn't know what you were—like, you didn't know if you were still gonna have a job by the

time the new editor figured out where the list of people to be fired was to be written. (*Chuckling.*) You know what I mean? But at the same time, you had the gumption to go ask for stuff!

Susan Orlean: It's funny, because when I wrote the book and took stock of those situations, I tried really hard to remember what was my state of mind that gave me the nerve to just stay the course? Even when it—or to ask for things that seemed unaskable. Some of it, I think, was a kind of brave innocence. That I didn't really think I shouldn't; and that I wanted this thing, so why wouldn't I ask for it? But also, I— And I was certainly— Listen. When Tina came in, I was sure she wouldn't keep me and wouldn't want my kinds of stories at the magazine. Not that I didn't appreciate writing about pop culture, because in fact I always had and was very comfortable writing about popular culture—which was not so true for everyone at the magazine. So, in that way, she and I were quite aligned. But I also had done these stories that were her idea of the worst possible idea for a story.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs softly through his nose.*) She had literally—in an editorial meeting—listed a story you had written as “the type of story we will not be doing.”

Susan Orlean: Exactly! And I remember when I heard this I thought—

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“Well. I guess that my goose is cooked.”

Jesse Thorn: Which one was I? I remember there were two examples. The other one was something someone else wrote about grain. A multi-part series about grain.

Susan Orlean: Yes, it was— Right. And it was my grocery store story.

Jesse Thorn: Oh, there you go.

Susan Orlean: And she had said, “This is an example of what we will not be doing in *The New Yorker* from here on out.”

To her credit, over time she came to understand that I could take a fairly ordinary subject and bring it to life and make it compelling and interesting. But her initial reaction is “why would you write a story about a grocery store?” And in time, I sort of persuaded her that there are great stories to be done that, from the surface, seem very ordinary, and very unexceptional, and how could they be interesting?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, if there is anything that is fundamental to the identity of Susan Orlean—you know—it's not being from Cleveland. It's not even being Jewish. Right? Not being a redhead, not being small. Likie, the fundamental element as I see it is this weird, bonkers confidence that you could just show up somewhere and figure out what's interesting about it. (*Chuckles.*)

Susan Orlean: I gotta say, I can't see how else you could define what I've done. And it's not that I am opposed entirely to ever writing a story that actually has a plot that actually has a narrative

arc. It's not that at all. It's the appeal, to me, of learning about another reality—whatever that reality may be. And it can be something that seems utterly ordinary, like a 10-year-old suburban kid—which, in fact, turns into the most exotic fascinating world, because we think we know it. But in fact, we don't—particularly, once you're an adult. And it took time to kind of ease Tina over to the idea that I could pull off those stories. And in general, I would say she was still wary of that, unless she was completely confident that the writer could pull it off. Because the truth is, those are a lot harder than a story that has an obvious narrative.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, the thing of it is that you're not talking about transforming something into something worth paying attention to through the virtuosity of your writing, necessarily. Like, the thing that— (*Clarifying.*) You're a virtuosic writer. But the thing that you are describing—and describe in the book—is being a sort of virtuosic noticer. That you are paying really close attention to when something interesting happens, even if it's someone swapping a box of three condoms for a box of 12 condoms. (*Laughs.*)

Susan Orlean: Right. Which who would deny that that is very interesting? And it's a whole little story in itself. And that's the thing that— And I agree that you— Being a crafter of beautiful sentences is a skill, but you have to notice interesting things to make those sentences worth writing. Quite often, what appears to be a very beautiful sentence turns on the fact that it's delivering a piece of information that's genuinely interesting or funny or surprising or acute. That— You know, it's something so specific that you see the world differently now that you know it. And that's why I feel like being a good noticer—being a good reporter—is maybe more than half the battle; that it's necessary to write beautiful sentences, but it's not sufficient. You need to— To be a nonfiction writer at a certain level, you have to be very good at finding the most interesting information, the most salient details, the oddest facts, the surprising moment the—

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You know, the bit of dialogue that captures a personality. That's the stuff that you need. And then the assembling of it has to be done really beautifully and artfully, but you've gotta have the raw material.

Jesse Thorn: We've got so much still to get into with Susan Orlean. After the break, we will talk about how it felt, after a lifetime of writing about others, to turn the lens on herself. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Promo:

Music: Quiet relaxing acoustic guitar.

John Moe: (*Soothingly.*) Sleep is important but it's difficult sometimes. I'm John Moe. On *Sleeping with Celebrities* famous people help conk you out by talking in soothing voices about unimportant things.

Maria Bamford on parking:

Maria Bamford: I parked in a bus stop. That's just not right. I am not a bus.

John Moe: Roxane Gay on airports.

Roxane Gay: My favorite airport is Indianapolis. It has a really smart layout.

John Moe: Alan Tudyk on yardsticks.

Alan Tudyk: You hand somebody a yardstick yardsticks become part of the family.

John Moe: Granted it's a weird idea. But it's lots of fun, and it works! Listen wherever you get podcasts.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Susan Orlean. She's an award-winning writer. Her books include *Saturday Night*, *On Animals*, *The Orchid Thief*, *The Library Book*, and many more. She just wrote a beautiful new memoir called *Joyride*, which chronicles her career in writing and the lessons that she learned along the way. By the way, we have this—and just about every interview we do—on video! If you like to watch this kind of thing, or if you're looking for a nice way to share this conversation, check out our big, beautiful, new studio too. You can find all of that and more on the *Bullseye* YouTube page. Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* on YouTube. Okay, let's get back into my conversation with Susan Orlean.

I only ever took one journalism class in my life, and it was when I was in high school. It was at San Francisco State. My high school was on the campus of San Francisco State. And it was like the newspaper class. And I took it because the professor of this class, a man named Austin Long Scott, was very close with my mom when he had worked in the *Washington Post* and my mom lived in Washington, DC. And he was a real journalism genius. And I remember the day when he was talking about stories. And I remember thinking like, “Well, if a newspaper is supposed to write what's important, why is it being a story important to whether or not it's important?” *(Laughs.)* Like, why does it have to have a beginning, a middle, and an end if we're writing about what matters? That we should just be ranking things on how much they matter. Right?

Susan Orlean: Right.

Jesse Thorn: And the kind of writing that you do often, in its genre, is about narrative. Like, it's often called narrative nonfiction. Right? Or if it's not called whatever new journalism or some other thing like that. But narrative nonfiction, most common name for it. And your pieces are often not particularly narrative.

Susan Orlean: Right.

Jesse Thorn: Like, story is often— Like, there's usually story in there, but it's often inessential to a really long— I mean the reason *The Orchid Thief* became the movie adaptation is because it's not that long on story. (*Chuckles.*)

Susan Orlean: Right. In fact—exactly!

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And there's, of course, the famous line in adaptation where he's complaining about it being that sprawling *New Yorker* (*censor beep*).

(*Jesse laughs.*)

And I remember being both simultaneously proud and humiliated. (*Chuckles.*) But to me, there is always one narrative, and that is my curiosity about something. And that does not mean there's a beginning a middle, and an end. But there's a forward movement which is I wanna learn about something; I begin learning about it; I begin wondering why it felt important to learn about it; and then I've learned it. And while that may seem like a rather small loop, it's enough to say, "I wanna learn about the world, and this is a particular element of the world that I don't understand. And I wanna learn about it. And now I'm gonna learn about it, and now I'm gonna teach you what I've learned."

So, that always exists as a as an engine in the story. And that certainly doesn't fit narrative as we look at a crime story or a—you know, a story that has an explicit movement from point A to point Z.

Jesse Thorn: It's not *The Moth* or *This American Life*, where it's about "here's an anecdote; here's a little thought about it; here's an anecdote; here's a little thought about it; here's an anecdote; here's a little thought about it. This is what it all adds up to."

Susan Orlean: Right. Right. And there's no— I mean, it's interesting, because I just rerecorded the audio book for *The Orchid Thief*. I hadn't read the book in years and years and years. It came out 25 years ago, and I don't reread it. It was fascinating to me to read it now with some distance and feel that it really was—the only narrative in it was me saying, "Why would anyone care about orchids?"

Jesse Thorn: (*Tipping into laughter.*) Right!

Susan Orlean: And that was the story. And it was— You think, "Well, that's not a very compelling narrative." Except then you think, "Well, it kind of is!"

Jesse Thorn: I mean, the book is in some ways defined by the fact that you had reported a *New Yorker* story on this swamp-based orchid heist. But by the time you got a book contract to write a book about it, the guy who had perpetrated this swamp heist had just gotten a different job! (*Laughs.*)

Susan Orlean: Right. And you know, when I showed up there and he said, “Yeah, I got fired from the nursery, and I gave away all my orchids, and I’m doing an online porn site.”

And I was like, “Wait, what?! This is— Wait, no. You don’t understand. Like—”

Jesse Thorn: You’re like, “No, you’re supposed to be—! Let’s work on one last job, please.”

Susan Orlean: Yeah! It was literally—! And yet, the funny thing—and this is the marvelous thing about writing nonfiction—is the truth is the truth! He was a serial monogamist. He fell passionately in love with things and then passionately out of love. And I caught him on the uptick of his passion for orchids and his downturn, where he said, “Done with orchids.” And he had already told me about all of the different things that he’d fallen in love with in his life and then given up.

So, it became a book about passion. And in fact, the working title was *Passion*, because it really wasn’t about orchids. It was about the way you can fall madly in love with something, feel that it defines your life, but then you also have the potential to fall out of love with that thing.

Jesse Thorn: (*Coughing.*) SusanOrlean. (*Coughing.*) Susan Orlean! That’s you describing yourself, Susan. You know. You’re aware, right?

Susan Orlean: Yeah. Well, that’s what was so weird about working on this. There was a day toward the end of the book where I said to Laroche, the orchid-heister—I said, “Look, I haven’t seen a ghost orchid yet. I’ve gotta see one. And I’m like done coming down to Florida. So, let’s go one more time into the swamp.” Because I had never seen this orchid that he had been so crazy about. We went on one last hike. As we’re in the swamp up to our armpits in this black water with the potential for alligators and snakes—and it was so creepy.

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And I thought like, “Oh my god.” And I’m looking at Laroche and thinking, “What kind of idiot would go hiking through a swamp for some dumb, little flower?” And I kind of looked around, and I thought, “Alright, there are two people here.”

(*Jesse cackles.*)

It dawned on me in a huge way that he and I— And I had seen us as antagonists much of the work on the book, because he meant to be an antagonist, that we had the exact same kind of cycle in our lives. That I fall in love with a story; that’s all I wanna learn about; I’m consumed by it; I read about it; I talk to people about it. That’s everything in my whole world. I write the story, and I’m done. I never go back to the same subjects. I’m done. And it’s not out of any antipathy. It’s not that I think, “Oh, now I hate orchids.” It’s just I’m done. I did my book. I learned everything about them.

Other people might think, “How weird. You just spent five years completely consumed by orchids, and you’re you have no remaining interest?”

And like, “No, I’m onto—you know—libraries now. Or German Shepherds. I mean, why would I wanna go back to that? I’m moved on.” And that was the uncanny moment, being in the swamp with Laroche and thinking, “He’s here in these very unsavory circumstances looking for a flower. I’m here in the same exact circumstances looking for a story, and there’s really no difference.”

Jesse Thorn: As someone who has spent a career writing about other people—even in pieces where you use the first person, you’re always writing about other people more than yourself. Was it hard to just turn the lens on yourself?

Susan Orlean: Very hard. Very, very hard. Very paralyzing, at first. I felt like I didn’t know how and where to turn my focus. And I had to really feel out how personal was this gonna be? How to make myself feel like a worthy subject. And I mean, that may sound funny, but I’m so committed to the mission of sort of illuminating lives that don’t often get written about, I found it hard to justify writing about myself on those same terms. I thought, “(*Clicks teeth.*) Who cares about a journalist living in LA, kind of having a comfortable life?”

But most of all it was that sense of “how do I address myself as a subject?” And it took quite a while of sort of playing around ‘til I felt I could get the voice right.

Jesse Thorn: You just casually mention in your book, *Joyride*, that you had a Camaro in college?

Susan Orlean: I sure did.

Jesse Thorn: Will you tell me about your Camaro?

Susan Orlean: Oh yeah! In fact, I feel sad that I don’t still have it.

Jesse Thorn: (*Teasingly.*) They don’t have it in your archive at Columbia?

Susan Orlean: Yeah, yeah. Really! They would probably keep it. I had an olive-green Camaro. It was really a totally boss car. I shared it with my brother and sister. Somehow this—we figured that we would be able to share a car, which made no sense. But my sister and I ended up having— My sister was in graduate school in Ann Arbor when I was in college, so we actually shared it there very nicely. But it was a really sexy car. It was a great car, and I really would kill to still have it. I don’t know why we ever sold it, but at some point we moved on to another more— Like, I think I got a Rabbit or something instead, (*laughs*) which is so sad. And my son is an incredible gearhead. And he, once in a while, will say, “(*Sadly.*) Mom, why’d you get rid of the Camarooo?”

And I think, “Well, at this point it would be a smoldering heap of rust. But—” I mean, it was a long time ago, but it was a very hot car.

Jesse Thorn: I’ll tell you what, I drove an El Camino in college, and then I sold it.

[00:45:00]

And later, my aunt sold me her El Camino. You can't really go home again. It wasn't the same. I mean, I blame it on I lived in Los Angeles now, and I needed better air conditioning. It was just too hard to drive on the freeway in an El Co. But yeah, you know. It's a vibe. It's not just a vehicle; it's a vibe.

Susan Orlean: Yeah. And certainly, at the time that I had it—I mean, they still—I think they still make Camaros, but they're not the same. Or whatever more recent iteration of them, they're not the same. But it was—I drove it across country. I actually—when I moved from Ann Arbor to Portland, Oregon—I moved in my Camaro and drove it across country. So, it was definitely the car of my heart. And sadly, at some point I think I probably thought, “Oh, I need something more practical.” I don't know why. It's not like I needed to haul like lumber. I just—

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckles.*) You could have been swerving into like a red zone in front of *The New Yorker* office—

Susan Orlean: I know!

Jesse Thorn: —throwing it into park in front of a fire hydrant and walking nonchalantly in.

Susan Orlean: I know! Sadly, I gave up that opportunity. But it was—And it's very funny, because my dad was a real car buff. He was really into cars. And for him, the greatest thrill was when we each turned 16 and he could come up with cars to buy for us. Which of course, was very generous, but also it fulfilled his desire to like get us cool cars. So, we were very lucky to have a dad who was a car buff.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, Susan it's not a joyride if you don't leave it on the side of the road with no gas left!

Susan Orlean: Exactly! And sadly—I think I have some pictures of me in the Camaro which would've made a good picture for the cover. But I love this bumper car, and most of all I love the expression on my face. Because I remember—I don't remember if this was Disney World or some other amusement park, but I just remember laughing hysterically. And I mean, what could be more fun than a bumper car?

Jesse Thorn: (*Giggling delightedly.*) Nothing, bumper cars rule!

Susan Orlean: I mean, they're the best thing. And all of—You know, you're told you have to drive carefully, and you never want to hit another car. And suddenly, you're in a situation where all you're doing is hitting other cars. Absolute, pure joy.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Susan Orlean, I'm so grateful for your time. I'm always happy to see you, and thanks for this wonderful book. I had such a great time reading it.

Susan Orlean: Thank you so much. This is my joy.

Jesse Thorn: Susan Orlean. As we mentioned, her new book is called *Joyride*. You can buy it at your local bookstore or at [Bookshop.org](https://bookshop.org). Do you have a favorite of Susan Orleans's work? My

producer Kevin says his favorite is *The Library Book*. And I have to say, I was so obsessed—especially with the part about Charles Loomis, the guy who walked across the country and invented southwestern aesthetics on the way and founded the Los Angeles Public Library. But I think maybe my favorite is the compilation *On Animals*. 'Cause I don't think anyone has a greater gift describing animals, and our relationship with them than Susan Orlean: the woman who once wrote a celebrity profile of a show dog.

Transition: Bright, upbeat synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created in the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun—as well as at Maximum Fun HQ in the historic jewelry district in downtown Los Angeles, California. In that district, I just found a very nice place to get a BLT.

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, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer, Daniel Speer. We have booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known. DJ W. You can find his music 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. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram TikTok, and YouTube where we put up video from all our interviews—including the ones you heard this week. If you enjoyed an interview that you heard this week, why not share it using those videos? Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* on YouTube.

Alright, 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.

[00:50:00]

(*Music fades out.*)