

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

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://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. Consider with me the Choose Your Own Adventure book: a format of novel in which the reader, usually a younger reader, chooses how the story in their book unfolds. It's a thing that's been around for about 50 years or so, depending who you ask.

And here's how it works. If you don't remember, you get a few pages into the story, you have to make a decision to fight the goblin. You turn to page 6 to run away towards the castle. You turn to page 11 to ask the wizard to help you turn to page 30. Go it alone, page 45, et cetera, et cetera. The authors included R.A. Montgomery, Edward Packard, R.L. Stine—and now, Griffin McElroy. He's one of the hosts of the podcast *My Brother, My Brother and Me, Wonderful*, and the *Dungeons & Dragons* play-along show, *The Adventure Zone*. He is also a former longtime video game writer for *Polygon* and a *New York Times* bestselling graphic novelist. A friend of mine and one of the funniest and nicest guys in podcasting.

In his book, *The Stowaway*, you are a stowaway—not on a pirate ship, but on a spaceship: one in which the crew has vanished, and the helpful robots have gone berserk. Can you navigate the ship to safety? Can you find your way home? What weird experiences will you experience? It's all up to you. I'm so thrilled to welcome my friend, Griffin McElroy, back on *Bullseye*. Let's get right into it.

**Transition:** Bright, playful synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** Griffin McElroy, welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you, bud.

**Griffin McElroy:** Thanks! It's nice to be here in the context of something a little bit more legitimate than... podcast clown. Like, you know. Obviously, what I'm saying sounds bad, but like author—I feel like I'm coming in with a little bit more dignity, I guess, is the word I'm looking for.

**Jesse Thorn:** Griffin, we have some time to destroy your dignity, don't worry.

**Griffin McElroy:** Okay, good! (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you read Choose Your Own Adventure books as a kid?

**Griffin McElroy:** So, I didn't read a ton as a kid. I was a gamer nerd sort of first and foremost. I was like born into a house that just always kind of had a Gameboy in it. So, there was really no excuse. Like, I could be playing a game basically anywhere. (*Playfully.*) And as we all know, games are like way more fun than books. So, they really couldn't hold much of a candle to 'em. But that truth was countered by the fact that whenever we would go on like a family trip, a vacation or a road trip or something, our dad would always stop at a used bookstore, and we would spend about two to three hours there.

Like, we would spend a very long time there while my pervert father hunted down elusive *Doc Savages* or whatever, stuff that he was missing from his outrageous, extensive collection.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

And I think that is where I sort of first found Choose Your Own Adventure Books and was sort of immediately enticed by— This is a book, so that's a knock against it, but it is also like an interactive kind of journey. And some of the stuff that happens is like kind of scary and dangerous. And then also *Goosebumps* did 'em. And so, now we're both fists of scary interactive stuff and *Goosebumps*. Like, I'm into it.

So, basically whenever we went to a used bookstore on trips like that, I would grab a book. And then, on our 13-hour drive back to Huntington, would just like tear through a few of 'em, trying to find all the endings and trying to see everything I could see. I love bookstores now. I love bookstores and books now! They're great. Support your local bookstores. But man, not my favorite time as a kid.

**Jesse Thorn:** I think that you, as a gamer and as a former professional gaming journalist—

**Griffin McElroy:** (*Correcting him pleasantly.*) Disgraced!

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Giggles.*) —would have a special connection to this kind of story. Not just because it is interactive, which is like the obvious layer, but because there is so little second person fiction, right? The premise of playing a video game is that you are your guy, right?

*(Griffin confirms.)*

No matter what gender your guy is. And that is also the premise of the Choose Your Own Adventure book, that this is a book that is about you, you, you, you, you and the choices you make. Which, you know, is not like *Moby Dick* or whatever. You know?

**Griffin McElroy:** No! But this was like the first kind of like long form sort of prose book that I've ever written. *The Adventure Zone* graphic novels, the seven of those that we did was a lot of writing, but it was all—you know—graphic novel writing, which is like entirely a different thing. When you're doing a graphic novel, for the most part you're not describing things that much. It's purely sort of dialogue. So, it's like a totally different thing. And writing it in second person is such— I feel like maybe it's instilled in me like weird habits that are going to be difficult to break if I ever try to write a sort of non-interactive, more traditional first-to-third person literary experience.

*(They laugh.)*

But I mean, it was really fun to write it. Right? Because like, instead of trying to frame the things that are happening in your world through the mindset of some character who you are also trying to introduce to the reader at the same time, you can kind of skip that second step. And that also helps to kind of keep it parsable for a younger reader. I really found the process so fluid and enjoyable, 'cause it was just like, “Okay, here's what is happening! What are ya doin’?” *(Chuckling.)* I really enjoyed writing in that format. That would be— It'll be weird to not do it that way someday.

**Jesse Thorn:** You say that, Griffin, but I imagine that—before you wrote this book—you had to have an entire wall of your home covered with index cards connected by pieces of yarn.

**Griffin McElroy:** No, it wasn't on the wall. It was on the floor of my office.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

It started out— I have this big, magnetic whiteboard that I like started putting these like little, magnetic tiles on it. It looks so— *(With genuine delight.)* Jesse, it looks so good. It looks so good. People would've seen me— Like, if a literary person had come in and been like, “Ooh, ahhh. This is a real author doing—”

**Jesse Thorn:** Griffin, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but you're suggesting that if a literary person came into your office—

**Griffin McElroy:** Yeah. Yeah. And didn't look at my wall of video game handhelds and instead looked to this one specific sort of books corner (*unclear.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** —and they would say, “This is the kind of magnetic whiteboard that Cervantes would've used to plot out *Don Quixote*.”

**Griffin McElroy:** If Cervantes had access to magnets and whiteboards, you know he would've gone nuts for it.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles.*) Right.

**Griffin McElroy:** But yeah, eventually I had to switch to index cards that were on the floor of my office that I then had to enforce a very strict, “Please don't go in daddy's office. Daddy hasn't captured these into a digital format yet, so please—until I have created a flow chart online—I beg of you, please don't mix these cards around with your feet like a game.”

I had to learn a lot about different software that professional writers and editors use. I finally learned how PDF, like Acrobat—I learned how to do that stuff for this book, man.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

I was stoked. I learned how to make a flow chart. I learned all kinds of stuff because I had to be presentable!

**Jesse Thorn:** Griffin, you say professional authors. I mean, we're talking about anyone who's filled out a form since 2002!

**Griffin McElroy:** (*Laughs.*) Yeah, exactly! But those people up to now have just been using Apple Preview and then just like taking a picture of their signature or whatever and just kind of photoshopping. But I had to learn PDFs for this one!

**Jesse Thorn:** Okay. I see.

**Griffin McElroy:** So, to answer your question, I did grow a lot as an artist.

**Jesse Thorn:** What did you learn about pacing a story and structuring a story where the reader gets to make the choices? Because the last books in this series were now decades ago or whatever.

**Griffin McElroy:** The big challenge for books like this is it does have to start with quite a bit of front-loaded exposition, right? If you think about it like a video game instead of a traditional book—like, video games do the same thing, right? When you're playing a video game, you gotta do the tutorial level. You gotta do all of that sort of world building. Once you start getting into the choices and you start making options, then things break down into like much neater sort of compartments.

Trying to figure out how to write a thing to set up this whole world that could then go in a million different directions without sort of putting a child to sleep was sort of a huge issue. So.

**Jesse Thorn:** Griffin, I bought one of those games called (*jokingly overpronouncing it like he's never heard it said out loud before*) *The Witcher*. And I got so mad during the exposition that I just quit, even though I had spent like \$50 to buy the game.

**Griffin McElroy:** My book's only \$10! So, if you can't get through the introduction, it was only \$10,

**Jesse Thorn:** \$9.99 even. Yeah!

**Griffin McElroy:** Yeah. It's a book. So, it's like a good cause. (*Audibly grinning.*) You're helping books.

**Jesse Thorn:** When I'm playing video games, I'm very much a game enjoyer more than I am a narrative enjoyer, typically. Like, to me, the ultimate video game experience? Having my own baseball team, and I trade the guys and sign free agents.

(*Griffin affirms.*)

No human narrative involved. Just names of guys and numbers next to them.

**Griffin McElroy:** Well, you can do sort of a *Moneyball* roleplay if you want to—if you want to live out that life.

**Jesse Thorn:** Pretend that I'm a handsome and compelling business thought leader, like Billy Bean?

What are some game narratives that have moved you or contributed to the way that you think about storytelling?

**Griffin McElroy:** So, the one I always come back to is the *Final Fantasy* series, which—if you're not familiar—is a Japanese roleplaying game series that I think originated in '87 or '88 on the NES. And really early days, back when the genre hadn't really found its place in the gaming ecosystem. I remember we got a Super Nintendo in our house when I was like four years old, maybe? And we had *Final Fantasy II*, and I was so enraptured by that game that I was like teaching myself how to read. But I remember like having that feeling of—by the time I reached the end of that game, I was able to do it on my own. And I wasn't beforehand.

**Jesse Thorn:** We've got much more to get into with the great Griffin McElroy, cohost of *The Adventure Zone*; author of the new book, *The Stowaway*. Back in a Flash. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn, I'm talking with podcast host and novelist Griffin McElroy.

For many years, you and your brothers and your dad have made a podcast called *The Adventure Zone* that is an actual-play roleplaying game podcast—which is to say that the four of you in various configurations are playing a roleplaying game into a microphone. You know, a *Dungeons & Dragons* style game—in some cases, *Dungeons & Dragons*—where one of you is controlling the narrative and three of you are portraying characters, doing voices, the whole nine yards.

**Griffin McElroy:** Yeah.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Griffin McElroy:** Previously on *The Adventure Zone*.

*(Eerie, upbeat synth fades in.)*

**Travis McElroy:** I'm playing a human fighter named Magnus Burnsides.

**Griffin McElroy:** I love that.

**Justin McElroy:** I'm playing a wizard. His name is spelled T-A-A-K-O.

**Griffin McElroy:** Daddy, what do you—? You're a cleric, right?

**Clint McElroy:** I'm a dwarf cleric named Merle Highchurch.

**Griffin McElroy:** Over drinks one night with Gundren Rockseeker, he has to offer you what he calls the last job you'll ever need to take.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** When you became the Game Master/Dungeon Master of the first big story in that podcast, how much experience did you have with roleplaying games and roleplaying game storytelling?

**Griffin McElroy:** Roleplaying game video games, lots. Non—like, pen and paper/tabletop roleplaying games, virtually zero. Like, almost none. I lived just outside of Cincinnati for a year, and there was a friendly local game store that I went and just found like a pickup group that I played with a handful of times, but really nothing before that. It was something that was always in the periphery just because—you know, I was writing about games for AOL first and then for *Polygon*. And so, it was a thing that I covered, and there were other places that had started kind of like doing it and making shows about it. And I didn't have any kind of like direct experience in it.

Which like, the further we get— That was in 2014 that we started *Adventure Zone*. The further we get from that, the more I kind of realize—like, it does lend that first series of the show, *Balance*, a wild level of authenticity that is kind of tough to reproduce. Because we all were just learning on our feet and making stuff up and seeing what stuck.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's funny, 'cause coincidentally—before we went on air—you and I were talking about silly nonsense that we podcasters do for the folks who send us money.

*(Griffin agrees.)*

Right? Right now, my friend Jordan and I are watching every episode of the sitcom *Alex, Inc.*, from 2008 or something. I can't remember when. 2018. 2000? Call it 2000.

**Griffin McElroy:** It could be either one of those. And that speaks to the kind of eternally sort of relevant nature of that Zach Braff television program.

**Jesse Thorn:** And what I remember about *The Adventure Zone*, which started in a form like that, was just how much of a goof it was. “Oh, we're gonna make a podcast episode where it's us and our dad playing *Dungeons & Dragons*,” was the silliest idea in the history of the world. And the other day I did a show with a friend who— We were doing a show in a rock club in Chicago. He happened to be in town because he was playing the basketball arena playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. He was gonna play *Dungeons & Dragons* in front of 12,000 people or 14,000 people or something.

**Griffin McElroy:** Yeah. We've come a long way, baby!

*(Jesse laughs.)*

I say we. They—they've come a long—*(bursts into laughter.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** You've also done very well.

**Griffin McElroy:** We've done very well, yes.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you realize that this thing that you were doing as a dumb goof was all of a sudden at the center of your career, almost completely accidentally?

**Griffin McElroy:** I don't know that there was one like huge kind of moment. I think we recorded the first two episodes, and they were released in the *My Brother, My Brother and Me* feed. And they were, when Sydnee gave birth to Charlie. So, Justin wanted to take some paternity leave. So, we recorded these episodes ahead of time.

**Jesse Thorn:** And this is a sort of comedy advice show that you host with your brothers. Sydnee is your brother, Justin's, wife.

**Griffin McElroy:** Yes. Sorry, I should give more context on that.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's fair to say that people who listen to, say, NPR's current events and public affairs show, *1A*, are already familiar with the world of the McElroy Brothers podcast *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. But some people might not listen to that show. So.

**Griffin McElroy:** We're where they come to cut loose, to really let their hair down and listen to the show with no expectations of you.

**Jesse Thorn:** But it was just to cover a hole in the schedule.

**Griffin McElroy:** That's it. That's all it was. And I— At that point I had been covering this new fifth edition of *D&D* at *Polygon*, like a lot. It was something I was interested in and I wanted to play. So, there was like a— I kind of hoped it would become something else, but it was not like a lock. We hadn't really even talked about what that would look like with dad, because dad still was working the like early-early-early morning shift at a radio station in Huntington. So, like this idea of, “Oh, and by the way, you also have this part-time job now.

*(Laughing.)* Like, it wasn't a thing that we kind of really thought through pretty critically.

But I mean, the response was wild. In all of our years, I can think of few reactions we've gotten from our audience that have been more kind of like immediate green light; like, yes, please just do this; just make this a thing.

And so, we very quickly kind of said, “Okay!” And as soon as Justin was back, we started doing more episodes of it.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

*(Raucous audience enthusiasm while The Adventure Zone's theme song plays—nearly completely drowned out—in the background.)*

**Griffin McElroy:** *(Laughing awkwardly.)* You know we're just gonna play *Dungeons & Dragons*, right?

*(Laughter and roaring cheers.)*

Alright.

**Clint McElroy:** You've heard the show, right?

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** I remember in the office one day at Maximum Fun, the company that I used to own that distributes these podcasts, my then-colleague, Lindsay, just casually mentioning to me—nine months into *The Adventure Zone* or something—how many people were listening to it. And I think it was already more than your other very popular show.

*(Griffin titters and confirms.)*

And I could not believe it. Like, I had just checked in two months previously. It was like doubling every week or something! That must have been very exciting, of course. But also, given that you were all making it up as you went along— This was a story that had begun with literally the piece of paper, the booklet that comes with *Dungeons & Dragons*.

**Griffin McElroy:** *The Lost Mines of Phandelver*, which comes with the starter kit. Yeah, that was just out of the book for the first two episodes before we kind of went way off script immediately.

**Jesse Thorn:** And then you realize, “Oh wow, this is at the center of my creative life. And... I have no idea what I'm doing.” *(Laughs warmly.)*

**Griffin McElroy:** Right! But that was also like— It was the most exciting time of my sort of creative career. And I still live a very satisfying creative life, where I feel empowered to do— The book, *Stowaway*, is like an example of that, right? Like, I'm very fortunate that we have the podcasts and the shows and the things that support us financially that, when an opportunity comes where I can do something that just sounds cool—like write a Choose Your Own Adventure book—I'm able to do that. Right? But this was a whole different thing. This was— Justin describes it as like you're driving a car, and it just starts to fly out of nowhere.

Like, it felt very much that way where we were... very out of our depth. There is a certain thoughtfulness that the job of Dungeon Master or just the job of anyone telling stories that wants to be inclusive and doesn't want to fall prey to various kind of harmful tropes. Like, these were things that—as four, cisgender White dudes, we had never really tackled before—and never really even thought of before. And so, a lot of that then sort of turned into the audience saying like, “Hey, I love the show and it means a lot to me. But this one sort of story that you did, here's why it traditionally in the past has been kind of a tropey thing that's been—” And we all really tried our best to sort of take that stuff to heart.

I started doing music for the show, which I had never really messed around with before. But I realized one day that I could connect my *Rock Band III* keyboard controller to my PC and then use it as a midi controller. There's nothing really else

in my career now that kind of looks like that, where it's like, “Oh, and now I can just start doing this entire other discipline and put it on a pizza. And I have infinite time and zero kids! I'm gonna just stay up until 1AM writing this thing or putting—”

It was such a singular time in our sort of like creative life.

**Jesse Thorn:** What was a lesson you learned about storytelling while you were, you know, putting up the scaffolding as you climbed it?

**Griffin McElroy:** *(Sighs.)* A lot of the lessons that the first season of the show, *The Adventure Zone: Balance*—which is still like the biggest thing we have done, by far—those lessons are things we are still kind of learning, right? A lot of that stuff has come in the debrief. And a lot of it is like turning the stuff that people like about your work or the dynamic that you have with your family—who, in this case, are the cohosts of the podcast—turning that sort of organically into an emotionally resonant story, whether it is comedy or going for a sort of deeper emotional strain, is a thing that I don't know if I understood at the time how we were doing it/what we were doing.

Looking back now, there is something to the unseriousness of how that story started—of us just kind of being ourselves with fantasy names, not particularly hewing close to the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and not having a bunch of stuff like written down ahead of time. Like, it was more improvisational, because the thought that we would prepare something for it was so ridiculous. *(Chuckles.)*

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Griffin McElroy:** Yes. With that, the box pops open, and it has 900 gold pieces inside.

*(The players all cheer.)*

**Justin McElroy:** I did it.

**Merle Highchurch:** Way to persevere!

**Taako:** We can't take these... This is a bank.

**Magnus Burnside:** *(Rushing to interrupt.)* Nope! Totally can. Nope!

**Clint McElroy:** I keep staring at Taako.

**Taako:** No, listen!

**Clint McElroy:** I don't blink!

**Taako:** We're literally stopping a bank robbery!

*(Griffin cackles.)*

**Griffin McElroy:** I keep staring at Taako.

**Taako:** Just 'cause you found money in a bank doesn't mean that you can just take it with you!

*(Griffin says something unclear.)*

**Travis McElroy:** I put the money in the bag for safekeeping.

**Justin McElroy:** Great. I grab some chairs! Like, I grab furniture!

*(Griffin giggles and claps delightedly.)*

**Taako:** What? Why are we looting? This isn't a dungeon; people do business here!

*(Griffin's losing it.)*

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Griffin McElroy:** That has been the format of all of our best sort of creative output. It's such a tricky kind of balancing act to do that and not be like underprepared or have the thing feel super sloppy. But that is the thing that we learned. It is rarely like super-duper helpful, but it's nice to have sort of the guideline of like, "This is— When we're firing on all cylinders, it looks like this. It starts like this, and then we turn it into something from there. We can't start sort of at that level."

**Jesse Thorn:** If you compare *My Brother, My Brother and Me*—the sort of comedy advice show that you hosted before *The Adventure Zone* and continue to host—that show had a format that was pretty recognizable. It fit within the idea of, “Oh, this is what a radio show is like.” You know, maybe it's a little like *Car Talk* or something like that. And the three of you are brothers. That gives the audience a kind of good, warm feeling about your relationship.

But I think as soon as you added both your dad and a narrative element and a character element, it became a much richer text for people. And it became a world that they wanted to visit/ And that world that they wanted to visit was not just the fictional world, but also the real-life world. You know, the human beings who made it.

**Griffin McElroy:** Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** What was it like to suddenly go from like having fans to having people for whom the narrative of your life was meaningful?

**Griffin McElroy:** It was, uh—it was immensely overwhelming. It was immensely overwhelming in a way that was exciting but also terrifying. You know, going from *My Brother, My Brother and Me*—which after 10 episodes we were like, “This is the format of this thing. Like, this thing works and we don't wanna rest on our laurels or anything like that. But we kind of know what to expect from this thing” to—you know, at one point *The Adventure Zone* was like the number one searched topic on Tumblr. There was a fandom for this thing that exceeded both in scale and intensity. And it really... it scared me a lot. It freaked me out pretty bad—partially because I struggle with imposter syndrome a lot, right? And I was not under any sort of impression that I was some great storyteller or some great composer when I was like writing basically cell phone jingles in GarageBand and then putting them in sort of emotional moments during the podcast. And so, when lots of people started to watch that, I was like, “Uh-oh. I better get good at this. Like, really.” Like, it got in my head a bit.

At the same time that was happening was also sort of when Gamergate was really boiling over on the other side of my career, when I was still working at *Polygon* and getting doxxed from that a couple times. Like, obviously waaaay on the other end of the spectrum—right? But it was—

**Jesse Thorn:** Gamergate, for folks who don't know or don't remember, was a sort of precursor to what became the alt-right that emerged from the world of video games, and especially from some of the like more insular worlds of video game fandom that was obsessed with the idea that video game journalism—of which (*chuckling*) you were a member—was biased and that—

**Griffin McElroy:** They didn't have the word “woke” back then yet, but if they had, they would've—I'm sure—really enjoyed tossing that one around.

**Jesse Thorn:** But yeah, this was a thing that started in the world of video game journalism where you worked and was truly the predecessor to the growth of the alt-right, to right wing conspiracy theories that have really changed the world over the last 10 or 12 years.

**Griffin McElroy:** I'm in no way comparing like our fandom exploding— Because the truth is, the things that I learned about storytelling and just—honestly, just being like a thoughtful human being truly changed me as a person. There was just a certain amount of like “I don't know how to handle this amount of attention. I don't know how to handle—” Like, the scrutiny over here is great, because it's like feedback that is truly changing the way that I'm able to tell stories, and that's amazing. And the scrutiny that's over here is like, “You only gave that game an 8.5 because it had a woman in it,” or— (*Laughs.*) So, like wildly, completely different.

That was about when I started—like, that's when I started doing therapy and got medicated as an adult. And I'm glad that to be sort of on the other side of that, all things considered.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, I'll tell you this, Griffin. There is this part of me, in my own public life, where— For example, I have two transgender children for whom I've publicly advocated. And like, occasionally nutbar transphobes will start talking about me online. You know. I mean, I'd rather they didn't.

*(Griffin agrees with a laugh.)*

But it doesn't bother me that much.

When I, as a person who has tried really hard to make my dumb art positive for the world and sensitive and considerate of others—which I know you have as well—catch it from people who are accusing me of not being sensitive or not making the world better or whatever, that gets me way, way, way worse.

**Griffin McElroy:** Sure!

**Jesse Thorn:** Even when those people are being reasonable, which they're not always. When someone criticizes a well-worn narrative trope that could be seen as colonialist in an episode of *The Adventure Zone*, they may very well be right about that.

*(Griffin agrees.)*

It also can be much more difficult to process than somebody just saying you're a—you know.

**Griffin McElroy:** Way more. Absolutely. I mean, I was a White dude in the games industry, so I don't wanna make it sound like I was catching an outsized amount of flack. Because I didn't. I definitely did get some, but I definitely worked with people who got it much, much, much worse. But it was the people who I had disappointed that was sort of the most kind of affecting. And in almost every case, it was like, “Well, this is a thing I didn't even know existed.” I didn't know about sort of burying your gays being a prevalent, constant trope in fiction storytelling. There are things that I just had never even heard of before that. Now I have learned about that, and I can try and be more thoughtful.

But there is also a signal-to-noise ratio in kind of bad faith arguments and conversations that like—I don't know. Trying to figure out what was coming from people who were fans of the work and wanted it to be better and wanted us to be better, versus maybe people who—like, that's not their first sort of priority. I mean, I'm in a waaay different place now. This was like— All of this conflux of stuff happening was like eight years ago. And I feel like there's been a big kind of reconciliation about boundaries and avoiding kind of like parasocial dynamics with creators and from creators to their audiences. And it's a totally different sort of ball game now.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll wrap up with Griffin McElroy in just a minute. When he is not writing Choose Your Own Adventure novels, Griffin has cohosted several long-running, successful podcasts with members of his immediate family. So, we'll talk to him about what it's like to work with your brothers and your dad and your wife. Is it fun or hard or both? We'll break it down. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Fun, upbeat guitar.

**Jordan Crucchiola:** I am Jordan Crucchiola, host of *Feeling Seen*, where every week I have a different actor director or writer as my co-host. And whoever that co-host may be, it is a sure bet that we are digging deep and having a great time doing it.

**Speaker 1:** I love that you just said that.

**Speaker 2:** Yeah. I mean if I were gonna join a cult, I think this might be it.

**Jordan:** A fresh look at your favorite film and a peek behind the curtain at how movies get made.

**Speaker 3:** Oh, okay. I'm gonna tell you this full story. Okay? I almost got fired from that movie.

**Jordan:** YOU should be listening to *Feeling Seen*.

**Speaker 4:** I had so much fun. I love what you're doing.

**Speaker 5:** I hope I did okay.

**Jordan:** New episodes every week on Maximum Fun.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalization.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Griffin McElroy. He is, of course, the cohost of the hit podcasts *The Adventure Zone*, *Wonderful!*, and *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. He's also a YA author. He just published the Choose Your Own Adventure novel *The Stowaway*. It's out now on Scholastic. It is a hoot! I read it—I guess a bunch of times! I don't know; I kept going back after I died. I think you're allowed to do that. *(Playfully defensive.)* It was my book!

Let's get back into our conversation.

You make *The Adventure Zone* with your two brothers and your dad. How much of your childhood was your dad a single parent?

**Griffin McElroy:** So, my mom died when I was 18 years old. So, technically there was no part of my childhood, but it was like a month after I turned 18. So, it was pretty—my earliest possible adulthood, he was a single dad, I guess.

**Jesse Thorn:** How did that and your mother's illness change your relationship with your dad?

**Griffin McElroy:** Ooh! Uhh... it changed it completely. Our entire kind of family dynamic changed. Partially—like, even if our mom hadn't gotten sick and died— She had melanoma; she had skin cancer that spread just really, really, really rapidly. And it was sort of a—she was in remission, and then it was sort of a shock that it came back so— It was really just a real rug-pulling kind of thing where there was a pretty traditional dynamic before then. There was Mom and Dad, and at this point Justin was going to college in town at Marshall University. And Travis was in college in Oklahoma. And so, like we were already— I was about to start college and shopping around for places to go. So, already kind of stuff was going to change, sort of no matter what.

But then our mom died, and I sort of made the decision “I don't wanna leave home for school. I should probably stick around and help out to whatever capacity I can.” And I think everyone whose parents live into their adulthood, you get to know your parents as like people who are like you—like, people who think like you and who have the same kind of problems that you do and, by virtue of your relation, are actually way more similar to you in those processes than sort of anyone else you meet on the street. And I think we kind of had that in a very, very condensed version. For all of us.

I think that *My Brother, My Brother and Me* was very important for me and Justin and Travis, having this kind of scheduled time where we just kind of hang out and try to make each other laugh. And when we brought Dad into that— Like, I don't know. I feel like that relationship of “I see you now as like a person and as a creative collaborator,” like that was not really anything I had done with him previously before that. I know him on a level that I don't know that anyone else I know sort of like understands their parents. And that's a really—that's a really special thing.

**Jesse Thorn:** Your dad was— I mean, he is again now but was for a long time like a professional goofball.

*(Griffin agrees.)*

In that he was like an institution morning radio host in Huntington, West Virginia, where you grew up who—you know—did like morning radio stunts for charity.

*(Griffin confirms with amusement.)*

Just like truly classic stuff. He was a columnist in *Wizard*, the comic book magazine that they sell at the comic book store. How did that piece of your relationship change when he became your sole parent? Like, it's very easy to imagine a goofball dad being an ancillary body that circles a thoughtful, caring mother.

*(They giggle.)*

You know what I mean?

**Griffin McElroy:** Yeah! Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't fully reduce it down to that dynamic, but there was a— Like, I don't think any of us really knew how to take care of ourselves particularly well. *(Chuckles.)* And so, I think basically right away, that was not the expectation. Like, being roommates with your dad— I bought a drum kit and just put it in my old bedroom.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

'Cause like, *(censor beep)* it, who cares?

No, there was a bit of freedom that was sort of afforded to me that I appreciated and also kind of *(laughing)* drove me absolutely wild my freshman year of college. Not the best choices were being made at that time.

The thing I'm always grateful for is I don't think any of us tried to make out the situation to be anything different than it was. Which is like “The person who has been the sort of backbone of the family and the one who made the trains run on time is gone now.” I don't think any of us were like, “And now, Dad's gonna step in *(laughing)* and fill in those—!” Like, it simply wasn't the expectation. And maybe if I was younger, it would've been different. But I was 18, and there was this feeling of “I should be able to take care of myself a little bit more,” even though I truly didn't. The first year of holidays was weird.

The first Thanksgiving, me and Dad just got a bunch of buffalo wings, and we bought a big TV.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

And we watched movies on a big TV and ate buffalo wings. And so, there's a certain amount of like, “Hell yeah!” Like, I think of Dave Eggers in *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, when introducing the book and talking about why people are reading it, he references uncomfortable magic of sudden parental disappearance. Like, this idea of “there was a reason why we didn't spend all of our

money on a big TV and eat only buffalo wings, right? There were good reasons for that. But you know, it's Thanksgiving, and it's gonna be a huge bummer no matter what. So, let's just go whole hog.”

**Jesse Thorn:** And there's also a reason why like every children's novel (*chuckling*) starts with the parents disappearing for some reason. You know?

*(Griffin agrees.)*

Like, it is a terrifying and horrifically sad thing that has a weird, thrilling element to it too.

**Griffin McElroy:** Yeah. Of a— And I mean, this was happening also as I was like entering college. Like, there were a lot of kind of reasons why— I don't know; everything was changing. And we lived a pretty— We grew up going to church a couple times a week, and I was fairly— I was pretty sheltered, right? Like, I didn't go out and party. I wasn't like drinking while I was in high school. I wasn't like— I was a super good kid, and so that was like—as a freshman in college, one of the more kind of like selfish ages that a person gets to go through—there was something sort of exciting about how anything could happen.

**Jesse Thorn:** I remember the first time that we did a live performance together—you and I; our respective shows—was also the first time you guys had done a live *My Brother, My Brother and Me* show. And your father came out to the show, took an airplane to come out to the show. And I met your dad. We had dinner. And I was like, “Well, this is a very nice man... Why is this man here?”

*(They laugh.)*

**Griffin McElroy:** (*Giggling.*) “Who is this—? Is this these nasty boys’ manservant?! Who is this?!”

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughing.*) And I'm like— My parents barely came to the musicals I was in high school!

I don't think I knew your family's whole backstory until I met him, and I realized what a choice the four of you made to have this family as adults.

**Griffin McElroy:** Yeah. It is hard to not take it for granted or not feel like I am taking it for granted because it is—it is... my whole life! It's like my whole life. My family was so close, growing up. And we work together, we do so much stuff together during the week, we spend the holidays. Like, we do so much stuff

together that it is hard not to just think about like that is quite abnormal. That's not the relationship that a lot of people have with their families. But every time I do kinda have that thought, like I am so immensely grateful for it, because it's a rare thing. It's a rare thing to start doing. It's a rare thing to continue doing for 16 years. Like, I feel very grateful and very sort of like cognizant of the fact that a lot of people don't talk to any of their family. Like, there are so many other ways that this could go down. There are so many other sort of ways we could have come out of the other side of our mom dying that would be completely different.

And I don't know, as I get older and as my kids get older, the more sort of just stone-cold astonished and grateful I feel that things sort of have worked out in the way that they have.

**Jesse Thorn:** What's it like for you to be in business with your siblings and know that, to some extent, this is an almost a for-life choice you have made, because the odds that all three of you will want to bail on it at the same time are so low!

*(Laughs.)*

**Griffin McElroy:** Right! A lot of people sort of frame that question as like, “How do you solve for this problem?” Right? Where I think of it as we started doing this podcast every week in 2010; and now all of a sudden, I'm talking to my brothers every week. This was a time for the three of us to sit down and have a Skype call that we recorded and released as content, sure. But I'm still talking to my family every week, and now just basically every day. And how do you manage to keep that going on the professional side of things?

Like, I would say sort of the basic kind of answer is we truly, genuinely enjoy each other's company. Like, I love hanging out with my brothers. I love hanging out with my dad. I love doing shows with my wife. I love spending time with them. Like, I truly do. But also, I don't know; because we are in business together, because we have even more reason to communicate well and hear each other out and be kind of like patient and thoughtful and not sort of pigheaded about our disagreements— Like, it has doubled the stakes in so many ways. But I feel like, time and time again—whenever there have been like moments of friction or whatever—we've been sort of eager to figure it out so we can get back to doing what we enjoy doing. It's a tricky thing, but it is also— It makes it easier to stay in touch with your family when it's also like your job. I spend my working hours trying to make my family laugh, and that's what I also like to do in my non-work hours. So, it's all just such a blessing.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, Griffin, thank you so much for talking to me. I had such a great time reading your book—or reading most of your book, or reading your

book a bunch of times, depending on how you count the number of times that I died and went back.

**Griffin McElroy:** I always say if you can take the Accelerated Reader test on it at school after you read it saying like, “I get 13—” I don't know if this is like narrow casting, but we had this thing called Accelerated Reader where you could read a book and then take a quiz, and then you get points, and then you could maybe get like pizza and stuff with those points. If you get to an ending, you can get the Accelerated Reader points for this. You get the Goodreads credits or whatever.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, Griffin, I'm so glad to get to talk to you. I'm so glad and proud to get to work with you and your family. It's just a joy of my life. So, thanks so much for taking the time.

**Griffin McElroy:** I feel the same way, Jesse! I had a great time. Thank you for having me.

**Jesse Thorn:** Griffin McElroy. As we mentioned, his new book is called *The Stowaway*. It is a hoot! I think the adventure you should choose is to read that fun book. His podcasts are *Wonderful!*, *The Adventure Zone*, and *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. They are all wonderful. Give them a shot wherever you listen to podcasts.

**Transition:** Funky, playful techno.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is recorded at Maximum Fun World Headquarters in the historic Jewelry District of downtown Los Angeles, California. Our senior producer, Kevin, today in the office wore a green t-shirt and brown pants. And our colleague, Christian Duñas, said he was Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo*. (*Beat.*) Not... incorrect.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin “Shaggy” Ferguson; our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey; our production fellow, Hannah Moroz; our video producer, Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at [DJWsounds.bandcamp.com](http://DJWsounds.bandcamp.com). Special thanks this week to our friend Griffin McElroy in Washington DC, who recorded himself! Sometimes it's nice to have a professional podcaster as your guest. 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, TikTtok, and YouTube, where you'll 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](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*