

Algorithms, Angry Men and the Collapse of Reality

An Interview with Jon Ronson

Krishnan Guru-Murthy

Sep 11, 2026

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Why are so many men feeling angry, lost and without purpose, and what role do algorithms, AI and the collapse of traditional institutions have in this?

Jon Ronson has spent decades investigating the strange corners of modern life.

His new book, *The Castle: Adventures in a World of Unraveling Men*, begins with his son being lured to a mysterious castle in Connecticut and expands into an investigation of masculinity, internet fame, the manosphere, public shaming and the increasingly extreme incentives of social media.

He joins Krishnan Guru-Murthy to discuss his long-running feud with Graham Linehan, why YouTube can push ordinary people towards increasingly extreme behaviour, the seductive promise of becoming a personal brand, and whether AI threatens our sense of purpose.

Jon also reflects on his own search for purpose, the impact of his upbringing, and why he believes the answer lies not online, but in reconnecting with communities in the real world. This episode contains offensive language.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psESmkFQ5aY>

Preview

Jon: The internet's getting worse. AI's getting worse. People's purpose is going to be eroding more and more from our lives and what does that do to us? Because a lot of men, when they feel that society has nothing to offer them anymore, fold in on themselves. It's like we're drifting towards this world of faking. When you build your house on sand, things collapse.

Krishnan: Do you think the characters in your book, were they bad people, any of them, or are they victims?

Introduction

Hello and welcome to Ways to Change the World. I'm Christian Girimurthy and this is the podcast where we talk to extraordinary people about the big ideas and their lives and the events that have helped shape them.

My guest today has spent more than three decades exploring the strange corners of modern life. He's embedded with extremists and conspiracy theorists, investigated military experiments in psychic warfare, examined psychopathy in corporate boardrooms, and explored what public shaming does to people in the age of social media.

His latest book is *The Castle: Adventures in a World of Unraveling Men*, and God knows men are unraveling, Jon Ronson, welcome back.

Jon: Yeah, I was here in 2019.

Krishnan: Yes.

Jon: Good to be back.

Krishnan: So men are unravelling.

Jon: Yes.

Krishnan: But this came as an idea sort of by accident.

Jon: Yeah, this is a story that crashed unannounced into my life.

Let me tell you what happened and Anne stopped me when you think it's an appropriate cliffhanger.

I'm asleep and I wake up to a series of texts for my son and so I read the last text first and the last text said, we left, that was completely We're okay now.

So I read the other texts and it turns out that he and three friends had been invited to a party being held by a stranger that one of them had met earlier that week on Tinder.

So inauspicious start.

So they drive to this man's house and it's in the forests of Connecticut and when they arrive, this stranger's house is a giant, unbelievably ostentatious, newly built castle without way too many turrets and gargoyles and it was on a street of otherwise modest, normal homes.

Krishnan: Nothing about this rang alarm bells for them.

Or maybe it was the appeal.

Jon: Well, they did sort of discuss turning around, but then the great gates opened and they found themselves crossing the drawbridge over the moat, entering the grand banqueting hall to discover that there was no party.

It was a trick.

They had been lured there for a different reason.

So then the castle owner came out and they said, sorry, but where's the party? And he said, no, I've invited you here for another reason.

I would like you all to take part in my reality show.

So they said, what's the name of your reality show? And he said, 101 princesses.

So they said, what's the core concept? And he said, I'm the king, I'm looking for my queen, and I have 101 princesses to choose from and then he said to the women in Joel's party, go downstairs to my basement costume room, put on some princess costumes, and then come back upstairs.

Krishnan: Which they did.

Jon: They went downstairs.

Why? Maybe they were susceptible to the pressure that he was putting them under.

Also, these were young people trying to catch a break, then it was the hint of a work opportunity.

Anyway, they're dressed up in princess costumes.

Joel and his male friend Cement put on tuxedos.

I'm glad you're not dwelling on the fact that he's called cement because there's so much other weirdness in this story, but I think he's a goth.

Then they all came upstairs and a videographer appeared and filming began, but it became clear pretty quickly that this wasn't a real reality show, in part because the videographer had this other duty, which was to cut up meat for the castle owner.

He had a huge slab of meats that he was, and only the castle owner was allowed to eat the meat.

So my son and his friends were kicked out after they refused to participate in 101 Princesses.

Finally, the red flags, they recognized and they left and not a great idea to invite a journalist to your forbidden castle of mysteries because I then went to the castle.

Krishnan: And he becomes the character threaded through the book.

Jon: Yes.

I go to the castle and he says some quite unwise things to me about how he manages to get women to the castle, then panics, that he was clearly being a bit indiscreet, tried to get me to sign an NDA.

I refused and then I left because it was all getting a bit awkward and then he started sending me these very ominous messages, including the fact that he's got he says he has two murderers on his payroll called Carlos and Brandon.

Krishnan: It's relaxing.

Yeah.

Jon: And if I ever write anything negative about the castle, Carlos and Brandon will be very upset.

They've only just got out of prison for killing somebody, and they're on the way to New York to find me.

So then a cat and mouse game ensues between me and the castle owner, which lasts throughout the book, but then I go off on other journeys.

Krishnan: Yes, I mean, so we shouldn't give away too much about where it ends up.

But why is he the thread of unravelling men?

Jon: Well, I'll tell you what, so my first thought was, this is a man trying to be Hugh Hefner.

at the worst moment in human history to be Hugh Hefner.

You can't, unless you're the creme de la creme of manosphere influences, which he isn't, you can't lord it over your princesses in Newcastle like it's the 1970s anymore.

So I thought that was interesting and I also noticed that I...

All this coincided with me just coming out of hospital.

I'd had a foot of my too much information colon removed due to diverticulitis.

So I was rattling around my house feeling without purpose in the same way that he was rattling around his castle feeling without purpose and I realised that all of my sort of self-worth was draining away from me because I had no purpose.

I'd just come out of hospital, I was convalescing by sitting on benches trying to come up with story ideas but after 10 minutes of that I'm just overwhelmed by this terrible thought which is I'm just a man sitting on a bench.

So it struck me that I was being propelled to this man's castle because of my dysfunctional relationship with purpose.

Because as soon as I found out this was happening, I thought, great, I get in the car and drive to the car.

Krishnan: Well, is it a dysfunctional relationship with purpose or is that actually what men should be?

Jon: Well, yes, exactly and I was thinking about that and I thought, we're now living in a time when, because of the collapse of the old institutions and structures, suddenly a lot of people but I'm focusing on men in this book, are feeling without purpose, and purpose matters so much to us.

It's so important.

Our self-worth is wrapped up in our work, and now we're entering an age where the AI gurus are trying to convince us that we don't actually want to work.

Sam Altman saying, Imagine a world without work, how amazing will that be?

Krishnan: Nightmarish.

Jon: Completely nightmarish.

Even more pernicious than that is another AI person I heard, whose AI makes music said, well, of course, people don't enjoy making music.

It's so pernicious.

So I thought we're entering a world where people's purpose is going to be eroding more and more from our lives and what does that do to us? What does that do to our inner lives? So I thought my kind of clash with the castle owner could tell us about that bigger story.

Krishnan: Do you think the characters in your book Were they bad people, any of them? Or are they victims?

Jon: That's a really good question.

Are there any like genuinely bad people in my book? No, I think that I think there's a, I mean, I tend to not think of that any, there aren't that many.

Krishnan: Some of them are doing bad things.

Jon: Oh yes, many of many of them are doing things that I would disagree with.

But Carl Sloan is luring women to his castle, but you know, he is being to some extent driven by mental disorders and so on.

He's most definitely doing bad things and actually.

Towards the end of the book, I point out, because I'll give away one spoiler, halfway through my book I learn that I'm not the only person investigating him.

He's being investigated by the FBI, by the Department of Homeland Security, and it really looked like they were closing in on him, and suddenly the investigation into him seemed to just stop and that happened to coincide with all of these Homeland Security investigators, these serious, well-trained officers being told forget about that

investigation, we need you assisting ICE in deporting 3,000 undocumented gardeners and construction workers every day.

One of them said to me, it's like a homicide detective being told, get off that homicide case, we need you to help parking fines.

So it's, so this kind of politicisation of a broken kind of masculinity may be the reason why a lot of people who are doing these serious crimes are now getting away with it.

Krishnan: I suppose what I mean is do you think the algorithm?

Jon: Is leading people to do, is either.

Krishnan: Leading otherwise good people to do bad things or picking out bad people and promoting them.

Jon: I think a lot of, there's a lot of people.

So everybody in my book is a very different case.

But they all have things in common, which is that they're being, they're in difficult situations and they're making bad decisions.

What I would see to be bad decisions.

But bad people, what is a bad person? What is a bad person? I would say many of the people in my book are doing things that negatively impact other people and are either oblivious to it or know and don't care.

Does that make them a bad person? I guess that's up to people to decide what their definition of bad is.

Krishnan: And I mean, you meet a variety of characters, some of which we can talk about.

But I mean, in terms of sort of your own sense of purpose, I mean, that comes from the way you were brought up, presumably.

Jon: Yeah, my father my father was always like you must always work, you must always provide for your family.

I remember one time he worked for a man who lost, he worked in a warehouse and the warehouse owner lost everything gambling and I always remember about the age of 10 going into my parents' bedroom and my father was in there standing alone crying and that's always stayed with me and yeah, I think my sort of need to constantly provide for my family came from my father just hammering that into me.

Krishnan: But work is sort of a very, tenuous and risky thing around which to base your identity then, isn't it?

Jon: Yeah, but for some reason, I just think it's the one going off and having these crazy adventures and then writing about them well is the one contribution that I can make.

It's the one thing I'm useful at and so if that's taken away from me when I wrote Say You've been Publicly Shamed like 10 years ago, people were getting fired willy-nilly, like everybody on Twitter would say, well, you're getting fired and everybody was getting fired for And one of the reasons why I wanted to write that book is because

I thought, well, maybe young people coming up don't understand just how important work is for people.

If you take away somebody's livelihood, you're not only taking away their ability to live, to buy food, but you're taking away their meaning and that felt really important to me 10 years ago and that's something that I'm really focusing on in this book.

Krishnan: So how do you think men are unravelling?

Jon: Well, okay, so the absence of purpose is a big part of it.

So men used to get derived structure from office life and factory life and all of those things are eroding and then what's coming along? in its place is the false promise of a new way that a man can thrive in the wide open country of YouTube.

39% of Americans now identify as content creators.

Krishnan: 39% of the population.

Jon: Apparently so, according to I think Luminate, the data company came up with that statistic.

In America where I live, I think 20% of boys think that being an influencer is the only choice of career for them and I think in girls it's 13%.

So there's this huge shift from being part of an institution to being an institution of one, a personal brand, a content creator.

But then and YouTube and the other platforms present themselves as these kind of hierarchy free utopias where a man could thrive through grit and perseverance as an influencer.

But of course, and it works for some people, of course, but for many many people, when they start chasing the algorithm and the incentive structures, everything goes haywire.

Krishnan: So give me an example of that.

Greg Chisholm

Jon: Well, well, one of the most extraordinary stories I tell in this book in *The Castle* is about a man called Greg Chisholm.

Again, let me start and stop me if I get too long winded, because his story is just mesmerising, I think.

So, Greg grew up in a dying Rust Belt town, Granite City, Illinois. He should have worked in the factory that his father worked, but the factory moved to Mexico and he had no prospects and then at the age of 17, he had a terrible heart condition because of American health care. He ended up in the 90s owing \$200,000 to the health insurance companies in a dying town with no prospects.

Then he gets married, his wife leaves him and he's left with two young children under the age of two. So this is a man who hit rock bottom and then one day he's on YouTube and he sees this video of an Australian fruitarian cyclist called Durian Rider.

He's cycling along going "I used to be in prison, I've lived on the street, but look at me now. I'm making a YouTube video. You can make a YouTube video, make a YouTube video, change your life".

This was Greg's Damascus moment. So he thought, well, what's my story? The Australian fruitarian cyclist had his fruit, what was Greg's story? And he realised his story was his teeth, because he had very bad teeth.

So he borrows \$6,000, gets his teeth fixed, and documents his adult braces journey and suddenly he has fans on the internet, and his fans are saying to him, how come you've got 4 lawnmowers behind you? And Greg says, well, I do lawn care and they're like, dude! You do lawn care?! Do a lawn care vlog! And he's like, bro, nobody wants to see a lawn care vlog! They're like, dude, everybody wants to see a lawn care vlog!

So he makes a day in the life of a lawn care provider and it just blows him up. He starts making these videos where he's just mowing back and forward for an hour like ASMR and people are like mesmerized, like, Greg, don't forget that patch over there and then he gets to the patch and they're like, Oh, cool and then he does Good Samaritan lawn work where he'll jump out of his truck and mow somebody's lawn and then jump in and film it and then vanish into the night like the Zorro of lawn care chores and he's suddenly getting 100,000 views a week.

It's going so well for him. He goes to a lawn care convention in Kentucky and it's like Rihanna has shown up. It's like, my God, he's like the lawn care GOAT. But then things start to go wrong. Because what happens is he brings his daughters into the videos and he makes a video where his daughters are unboxing a Barbie cruise ship and it gets, bizarrely, just as a fluke, it gets 20 million views.

His daughters playing in the box of a Barbie cruise ship is hugely successful with other kids. They're sweet, wide-eyed kids. So YouTube, phone him and say, this is incredible, make more videos with your daughters, and you've got to put a WTF moment in there.

So he starts making these increasingly odd and extreme videos with his daughters. I've got to say innocently, like he's just following the algorithm, following what YouTube are telling him to do and so he starts making these videos.

This is cutting a long story, still quite long. He makes these videos where his daughters dress as babies and he dresses as the baby and they do these like gunge type videos where they're all crawling around like babies.

He is getting 100 million views for these videos in 2016 and 2017, these bad baby videos where they're all crawling around like babies get a total of 13 billion views on YouTube and so finally he's making money, he's got fans, people tell him how much they love him.

But then, Buzzfeed and Reddit discover it and think 'what the hell is going on with this guy dressed like a baby with his two young daughters?' And as a result of that new suspicion, his life completely unravels and Child Protective Services come around, YouTube ban him for the for the very same videos that they're encouraging him to make.

Yet again, he's let down by capitalism. First, the factories and the health insurance companies and now YouTube and he's ruined.

Krishnan: So where does that leave him then thinking about what he is?

Jon: Well, he's, I mean he's read my book and is, and just feels sad for the mistakes that he made. I think he feels bewildered. He was doing what everybody was telling him to do. Everybody was saying, make it more, we love the gross out stuff, make more gross out stuff.

It reminds me a little bit of, do you remember that novel, *The Dice Man*? It's a novel about a guy who decides to make every decision in his life on the roll of the dice. Yeah and that's what Greg was doing.

Every decision he was making was, he was doing what the algorithm was telling him to, and he didn't realise that the algorithm was taking him to more and more unwise places. He was kind of like a like a lamb to the slaughter.

Krishnan: Right. I mean, and that's one example. But there are others in the book as well about where that takes you. And obviously, I think we're familiar with the idea that whether it's YouTube or any of the other platforms, extreme content sells in some form or another and people will end up chasing that algorithm because it does very well, but what is that, what do you think that's doing to people in terms of their own judgment, their own values and why they are unraveling as a result?

Jon: Well, I tell another story in the book, which is similar to Greg's story.

So I should say that the castle owner and my very strange unfolding relationship between the castle owner is half of the book.

I keep returning to it and it gets weirder and weirder, and eventually very disturbing.

But I tell these other stories in the meantime, and one of them So I tell a story about a nice guy, a YouTube influencer called Andrew Gold and it's a much more ordinary story than Greg's bad baby story, but I think a very resonant story.

So Andrew similarly was chasing, he would make videos called Amanda Knox's surprising favorite Harry Potter book, which would get 69 views and then over a short period of time, those videos morphed in a similar way to Greg, chasing the algorithm and chasing the incentive structure.

They would morph to videos called Wokeness is the most evil thing you can do and the genetic weakness of wokeness and civil war is coming, many of us will die.

So I talked and they were getting like half a million views.

It was really working for him, he was making money for the first time, he was making money.

But when I talked to him about it, he said, the worst thing is I don't even mean it.

So he clarified that he was broadly anti-woke, but he was being pushed to these more and more extreme places and it was a, he said, it's not a nice feeling.

He was saying that he was getting more and more extreme interviewees, the most extreme end of the culture wars and instead of pushing back, he would tell them how brilliant they were and he's making money, but he's building his house on sand.

It's a kind of fake, it's a fake life.

Krishnan: What do you think that tells us about the audience, though? Is the audience...

Jon: Well, so everyone's in it together, right? Being pushed more and more into this sort of fractured, siloed society.

You know, one of the characters in my book, I just write one small chapter on him, but it's had like a sort of outsized news impact and that's Graham Linner.

Krishnan: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

Jon: Yeah, you know.

The reason why I wanted to write about Graham is because I'm kind of part of the story.

I'm one of his eight years ago.

I unwisely told him that I thought he was acting like a bully and the gates of hell opened and he's tweeted about me thousands of times in the last eight years.

No respite, no Christmas Day truces with Graham.
every Christmas.

Krishnan: And he's recently written about you in the Telegraph as well.

Jon: Yeah.

Krishnan: What do you think happened to Graham Linone then?

Jon: Okay, so Graham made an episode of the IT Crowd.

Everybody knows how brilliant Graham is.

Father Ted, the IT Crowd, he's a brilliant show.

He makes an episode of the IT Crowd where there's a storyline in which the Matt Berry character dates a woman and the woman says, I've got something to tell you.

I used to be a man and Matt Bowe's character says, I don't mind at all.

I'm very modern or something like that.

But he mishears.

He thinks she said, I used to live in Iran.

So the joke is that then when he finds out that she's a trans woman, they have a big fight and it's a punch up and it's like a matrix style scene and some people accused him of transphobia and Graham at first was kind of good about it, said, okay, I hear you but then when the show was repeated a few years later, Graham got more annoyed about the pushback and eventually something in him to do with the pushback, he just like snapped and instead of, well, he became very disinhibited.

I say in the book, it's like he, he ripped off his face and allowed his id to run wild and I was very interested in that because a lot of men, when they feel like, when they feel that society has nothing to offer them anymore, or when they feel cut adrift from society, fold in on themselves, they, Durkheim called it anomie.

Like society's rules suddenly change and you collapse into yourself and in America, there's more than 7 million men who aren't only unemployed, they aren't even looking for work, they've bowed out.

So I'll ask a little bit about men like that in the book, but I also want to write about the men who lash out and that's why I wrote about Graham.

Krishnan: But do you think what Graham and others who you're talking about being disinhibited are doing is basically saying, I reject all the norms and the rules and I will behave however I feel.

Is that what you mean by disinhibited?

Jon: Yes, I think so.

Just deciding something changes, something tips and you just decide, you know what? I'm going to do whatever I like.

If society doesn't have a stake in me, then I don't have a stake in society.

Krishnan: And what that meant was he was aggressively pursuing different people on the internet.

Jon: Yeah, and I was one of those people.

Krishnan: Fell out with his friends like you.

Jon: Yeah.

So when I wanted to write about disinhibition, I thought Graham was the right person to write about and to circle back to the beginning of this part of the conversation, apparently, I don't know if this is true because I'm not on X anymore.

But apparently Graham was so cross about him being in my book and went on about it so much.

I read quarter of a million tweets directed at me in the last two weeks of Graham's fans being very cross and I was completely oblivious to it because, and I was thinking, God, if this had happened 10 years ago, it would be ruinous.

Because we cared, we want to explain.

Krishnan: You're taking it all in and arguing.

Jon: Reading every single tweet and so you've been publicly shamed.

You know, I would meet people who would read every single tweet and would assimilate everyone and think, oh my God, maybe I am the terrible person I think they are and it would drive some people to suicide and it would drive people to depression and misery.

10 years later, because we've all learnt to be unashamed, which is a terrible thing to learn, right? Because you know, it's the survival mechanism.

I'm oblivious to it all.

I deleted the app and it's all like dissolved into the air and what a terrible indication of like these siloed worlds that we live in now.

Krishnan: So what's the difference between what he's doing, which you say is being disinhibited and what you're doing and ignoring the quarter of a million tweets saying you're wrong.

Are you also being disinhibited? Well, I mean, I'm not.

Jon: Furiously posting messages about how terrible Graham is.

No, I'm just quietly ignoring it, ignoring it because in.

Krishnan: In his account, I mean, what he believes happened to him was that his friends and all sorts of people who he didn't know who were going along with what

he believes was a sort of a woke misapprehension about trans was that people just abandoned him and hung him out to dry.

Jon: But I think but it's, It's the way that Graham expresses it.

I mean, I'm I'm sure there's some people out there who lots of people don't talk to Graham anymore for lots of different reasons, but I think for a lot of them, and certainly it's the way he expresses himself that people find so difficult to, and I&I don't need to.

this isn't like arcane inflation that I've dug into.

It's like it's ran out there for everyone to say.

Krishnan: Is it the aggression and the repetitiveness? Is that what you mean? Sort of.

Jon: Well, I mean, it's there's days when...

Krishnan: But he said he hated you and, you know.

Jon: I mean, Graham would post about me 40, 50 times a day sometimes and then all the other people would like pile in.

You know, this is very...

disproportionate because I told him I thought he was acting like a bully.

The reason all of this, I should probably explain the reason why all of this started.

I was in Edinburgh, this was 2019, I think, when I, actually the last time I saw you, probably the same time I was over and I was falling asleep and I was on Twitter and I saw somebody say to Graham, why does John Ronson still follow you on Twitter? And then I fell asleep and then when I woke up the next morning I saw his reply and he said, because John Ronson thinks you all, meaning his critics, are *** and I'd never had a single conversation with Graham about any of this.

So he just like decided to tell people.

Krishnan: But you were on his side.

Jon: Yeah, and then I thought that his critics were *** and I think the one mistake I made in all of this is that instead of privately messaging him, although he did say to me later on that if I privately messaged him this, he would have been just as annoyed.

But I messaged back publicly to say, I don't think you're critics of ourselves and I think you've been acting like a bully and that was it.

Eight years later, it's just on and on and on and on and on.

Krishnan: Because in his version of events, it is your failure to answer his question. about what is a man and what is a woman that drives him mad.

Are you saying it's not the issue, it's the behaviour around the issue?

Jon: Well, yeah, I don't...

Krishnan: Or do you actually think he's wrong about the issue?

Jon: Well, look, I'm not a pundit.

This annoys people sometimes, but I'm not a pundit.

I never go on pundit shows.

I will never go on question time.

This is the closest I'll get to being a pundit and I do my best to stay within my storytelling capabilities and the reason why I'm not a pundit is because I would be a terrible pundit.

I'm good at one thing, which is to leap into a story and immerse myself in it in the old fashioned world of narrative nonfiction and that's what I do.

I'll leap into a story, I'll immerse myself, I'll meet everybody, I'll spend ages thinking about it, and I'll come out with the thing I do well, which is an unfolding story.

Very similar to what Patrick, Radon Keefe does.

Me and Patrick, I'd say a lie, bees in a pocket.

Krishnan: So you don't want to say what you think.

Jon: Well, because I just think like that's not what I do.

This is what I do.

So Graham got annoyed with me because he said, well, I interviewed him and then I tried, and I used some of that in the book.

Then a couple of years later, I asked him if I could interview him for my BBC show, Things Fell Apart and he said, well, only if you state on the record and I said, Graham, I'm not, no journalist worth their salt is going to agree to some purity test.

I mean, would you?

Krishnan: No.

Jon: Yeah.

Krishnan: So people aren't supposed to know what I think.

Jon: Yeah.

Krishnan: You're in a slightly different zone to me, I would argue.

Jon: I mean, I don't think I'm that different because I only have an opinion on something when I've gone on a whole journey about it and then I said to Graham, look, you can't, Graham, you can't go through life forcing people to pay fealty to you and so that was where we—.

Krishnan: And in his world, that's you failing to say, all he's doing is saying two and two equals four and so he's done nothing wrong in his world.

But you're not prepared to do it.

Jon: I don't think any journalist, well, I said to Graham, look, if you want to ruin a journalist, the reason why people know this is because Graham published this entire conversation a couple of days ago, kindly.

But I said to Graham in that conversation, if you want to ruin a journalist's life, get them to take your purity test and then tell the world, like, I'm not going to do that.

I think, as I say, people like me and Patrick, Madden Keefe, and those of us who do this kind of more thoughtful, long form narrative nonfiction shouldn't be forced to be a commentator or a pundit, because it's not what we do.

in the same way that I shouldn't be forced to be a hairdresser.

It's like it's not like, oh, we just, there's things I do well and things I do badly and let me do the things that I do well.

Krishnan: So, I mean, do you think his article is an example of him in your terms? Unravelling.

Jon: Well, I didn't read it.

Krishnan: Right, really? Are you just, yeah, just don't go there.

I, So you don't want me to quote it to you, presumably.

Jon: I'd rather not.

Look when do you bring a book out? It's stressful and I'm basically just for my own wellbeing and mental health, I'm just trying to manage my stress levels.

So that's why I don't read things I think are going to keep me up at night.

Krishnan: Well, let me just put one quote to you.

He's representative, you, of an entire species, a whole social class of journalist, comedian, and commentator who worked out that staying quiet while people they knew were destroyed for saying $2 + 2 = 4$ was the best way to maintain a comfortable career.

Jon: As I say, it's not what I do.

I'm not a pundit.

I don't, I'm not a commentator.

I don't go on question time.

The one time I went on a show where I was required to do that kind of thing, which was one appearance.

Krishnan: In Australia.

Jon: No, this is one appearance on Have I Got News For You.

I still wake up in a cold sweat about what a terrible situation that was.

I felt like, I felt like, you know what, I felt like I was on a...

on a really bad blind date where we weren't getting on, me and if I got news for you, and it was the worst kind of blind date 'cause millions of people were watching it.

I just don't, I wanna do the thing that I do, and I don't think people should be forced like you.

Krishnan: Yeah.

Jon: You know, I'm a storyteller.

You know, if I dive into a world And I explore it and I sometimes take years over a particular story and then I emerge what I really understand this world and what I think about it and the nuances and I spoke to this person, then I did some digging and I did all of that stuff.

I'll talk about it.

But if it's a story that I haven't done, then why? I'm not a pundit.

Yeah.

Krishnan: I mean, some of the book sort of strays into the manosphere.

I know it's not really about the manosphere, but some of the characters are now familiar.

characters.

I wanted to ask you, I mean, this is having you just having said I'm not a pundit.

I wonder what you think of what's going on now with all these young men in right wing politics that we're seeing on these protests, balaclava.

Jon: Yeah, I've just been hearing about that.

Krishnan: It's sort of a new thing that we're seeing.

These I suppose they would argue they are not unraveling men because they have a purpose.

They have a political purpose.

Where do you think they fit into your Venn diagram of where men are?

Jon: Well, yeah, again, I'm so to disappoint, but I haven't, I don't really know anything about those balaclava guys.

In fact, I heard about them for the first time this morning.

Somebody else was telling me about them this morning, so I don't really know.

What I can say, though, but this isn't an answer to this question at all, but the one little thing I did about the manosphere, I didn't want this to be a book about the manosphere.

I thought, if I'm going to write about unraveling men, in the same way that *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* isn't a book about about Rupert Murdoch being publicly shamed.

It's about just some random ordinary person getting involved in a situation by accident where they're disproportionately punished for some minor offence.

I wanted to do the same thing with this book.

I wanted it to be a book about just ordinary men, which is why my bad baby YouTuber is such a perfect person for this book.

But what I have noticed with the manosphere, and as I say, this isn't about the balaclava men because I literally don't know a thing about them, is how many of them are like building their houses on sand.

So for instance, my castle owner has a fake, invites my son.

The reason why I wanted to write this book is because he lured my son to his fake party, which turned out to actually be a reality show, but it was a fake reality show.

He gives the women who visit his castle jewelry, but it turns out to be fake jewelry.

He invites the prince of Mongolia to the castle and it turns out to be a fake prince of Mongolia, it's just a life of fakery and then HS Tiki-Toki, who Louis did his documentary.

Yeah, his documentary, yeah.

Yeah, which I thought was very funny.

You know, one thing that Louis left out of his documentary was that Tiki-Toki did a video one day, it was like a sort of long dark night of the soul video where he admitted it was all fake.

He said, see these, he says, I've been living a lie.

I, these cars, they're not really my cars.

I do think I could afford these cars.

I'm just borrowing them for the social media.

This Patek Philippe watch, I don't own this watch.

I borrowed it and it's it's eating me up.

It's eating me up, living this fake life.

Krishnan: But then they carry on living it.

Jon: Yeah, exactly.

It's like that scene in, do you remember that scene in Seinfeld where George quits his job, flounces out, realises he's making a terrible mistake and then goes back to work.

So the next day, Tiki Toki was back boasting about his supercars.

So I think what you've got here is this world, because the old structures are collapsing, the old institutions are collapsing, people are chasing this false promise of being personal brands on YouTube.

It's encouraging people to live these fake lives.

You've got these fake venomous beliefs of some of the YouTube, some of the anti-woke influencers.

You've got HS Tiki Toki's fake bling, you've got my castle owners, fake prince of Mongolia.

It's like we're drifting towards this world of fakery.

When you build your house on sand.

Things collapse if you're if you're not being authentic.

Krishnan: Because we've seen the Tate brothers also say.

Jon: It's all fake.

Krishnan: It was all fake.

We didn't really have all that wealth.

We couldn't we didn't really have all the we didn't own everything.

Jon: Alex Jones, he, when he was trying to not pay a billion dollars to the parents of the children killed at Sandy Hook, said the same thing.

Krishnan: But do you think these people think? that they are in control of it.

that this is all just entertainment.

It's just a means to an end.

It's a way of making money and therefore they are in control.

They're not built on sound and they're only sort of, they only lose control when it gets exposed.

Jon: I mean, to their credit, so Andrew Gold, for instance, who I write very briefly about in the book, he is making money now.

He said to me, I think he's got like, just in the last couple of years, he's really, he's built a little bit of a mini empire.

He's got like 850,000 subscribers now.

So it's In fairness, it's working for him, he's making money and I can't bemoan anyone making a living.

But I do think that, he said to me, I don't even mean it and what he meant by that was not his broad anti-woke views, but the fact that...

You know, the more extreme his interviewees are, the more money he makes and that makes him feel uncomfortable and I do think it can do something to your inner life if you're building your life on, if you're building your house on sand.

Krishnan: Yeah, I mean, you mentioned those American statistics.

Do you think these people are influential on young men?

Jon: Oh yes, no question.

No question at all.

The days that, yes, yeah, this siloed world that we live in, people like that are extremely influential.

Krishnan: So have you come to any thoughts about what the solution might be?

Jon: Well you've got to live authentically.

You have to live an authentic life.

You know, quite recently I was at the cage fight at the White House.

Krishnan: How did you come to be there?

Jon: My American publisher said to me, you've got to go to the cage fight to help publicise the book and I said, look, I'm exhausted.

Because no, you're going.

So I said, okay, if you can get me access to the South Lawn, I'll go and I thought, this is the perfect crime.

I'll never get into the White House.

But they got me access.

So I went and I was blood spattered close to the action.

But there was an interesting moment where I was talking to this fighter called Sean O'Malley.

He's like a bit of a UFC heartthrob.

He would always boast on podcasts about his one-sided open marriage.

He was allowed to have sex with other women, but his wife, Dania, wasn't allowed to have sex with other men and he would explain this on podcasts.

He'd say, well, Andrew Tate puts it very well.

He said, it's status.

I have status.

So when I met him at the White House, I said to him, you have an open marriage, surely that doesn't work and he said, well, not anymore and he admitted that his wife, he's still married, but his wife has put her foot down and says no more having sex with other women and he looked so baffled at this change in his fortunes and it did make me think, well, maybe this, I know this is anecdotal, but maybe this is an indication that the pendulum...

Krishnan: Return to the norm.

Jon: Maybe Dania is our collective future telling these guys that, look, you just can't do this anymore.

We all live together in the society, these siloed worlds that we live in, where everybody's being encouraged by big tech to act stranger and stranger and it's benefiting them a little bit, they're making a little bit of money, but the people who are making all the money are these billionaires up now trying to convince us we don't even want to work and you know, this kind of pernicious and they're also, by the way, telling us that maybe AI is going to wipe out the entire civilization within 10 years if El Nino doesn't.

But that's the trouble, isn't it?

Krishnan: With any attempt to return to the norm all that generation of school leavers and people in there 20s are saying, well, where is the work? Where are the careers? Not just the work, but where's the career that takes you somewhere? I mean, I had this conversation with my own son who's 19, and he was talking to me about, well, why have you not got into playing the stock market or gambling or all the ways to get rich quick that young boys are fascinated by? And I had to say, well, because I grew up in a world in which you basically tried to get a job and a career and build, and maybe buy a house, and then that would be your security and try and have job, and that's how you would provide security for your family and he sort of said, Yeah, I quite like that idea.

As if it hadn't occurred to him before and I thought, well, I must be a terrible parent.

But the trouble is, in trying to get to that place, they're all being told.

Entry-level jobs are being wiped out.

Forget about your careers, AI's gonna take over everything.

Jon: Yeah, and it's terrible and difficult and dystopian.

You can do small things.

You can be part of society more, not isolate.

You can go out.

Even introverts like me, there's been so many social science studies that say that even if introverts socialise as much as you're dreading it beforehand, you feel better afterwards.

So you can go out, you can lead a more analogue world, which you know what may happen anyway.

My main reason for going on Instagram is to watch videos of unlikely friendships between different species of animals.

That's my favourite genre and now I don't even bother anymore because you don't even know whether the giraffe and the hedgehog are real.

They could just be AI.

So Instagram has this terrible AI problem.

People are getting more, but nobody X is totally this siloed world that doesn't, honestly, outside of X doesn't really matter anymore.

blue sky doesn't really matter anymore.

The power of like a collective online shaming doesn't exist anymore because people are actually turning away from it and people are turning away from AI.

The anti-AI movement is very strong, the anti-data center movement.

I mean, honestly, my answer is to fight this stuff because this stuff is leading us to a place where we don't wanna be.

Krishnan: The other thing that I suppose some men in this world blame is women.

Yeah and what men have come to be expected to be and to be sensitive and woke and weaker and all of those sorts of things and that is the thing that has led to the crisis in masculinity.

Did you touch on that?

Jon: Yes.

That's another part of the book.

I should say this book is like, it's not a polemic.

You know, I don't do that.

This is like kind of weird.

adventure story where you don't know where it's gonna go and it's funny and jaw-dropping.

So I just thought, when I talk about the themes, I just wanna remind people that this isn't a book of themes.

This is a crazy story that I find myself in the middle of, but I do, but there are some thematic stuff and this is one of them.

Yeah, I was interested in the way that some men, this is less me, I think, but some men, feel tossed around in a sea of conflicting ideologies about what being a man actually means and one way that manifests is that a lot of men's health influences these days say that the way, especially post Me Too, for a man to re-anchor himself to society is to be vulnerable, express your vulnerabilities, women love it, take off your manly mask, allow your authenticities to show through, women will fall in love with you.

But unfortunately, and I'm sure that does work sometimes, I express my vulnerabilities to my wife quite frequently, and she's luckily fine with them.

But there's a lot of evidence that when men on dates and so on express their vulnerabilities, it goes very badly.

Women recoil in horror and I've noticed that, I've tried it out on some female friends sometimes, and I've thought, did my friend just recoil in disgust? And even the doyenne of vulnerability, Brene Brown, says this is true.

She says we beg men to let us in, we beg men to be vulnerable, but when they express real vulnerability, it triggers fear in us, so that fear, kind of primordial fear, and that manifests in revulsion and disgust.

The ick.

The ick factor, yeah.

So men are trying out vulnerability 'cause they're being told that's the answer, that doesn't work, so then they try stoicism, that's got its own problems, and then you turn

on the TV ads and what are men in TV ads? They're doofuses who can't do anything right and constantly have to be bailed out by their exasperated wives.

I interviewed an actor, a lovely guy called Ed MacArthur, who specializes in playing doofuses in TV ads and he said to me that he'd done one for show the insoles and in this ad, he's walking down the street, he puts on a pair of insoles.

They're so comfortable, he starts galloping like a horse down the street and he actually, look, they do foresee for that.

So I said to him, 50 years ago, you had the Marlborough man being stoical and masculine on a horse, and now you have to be the horse and he's like, yep and he's one of the few people in my, one of the few men in my book is actually thriving.

Krishnan: He's doing well.

Jon: He's doing well.

Krishnan: So where do you think success lies? For the modern man.

Jon: I mean, look, that's a big question, Chris, but I, from this variety of characters who you've met, I think which one's seen the happiest, the happiest.

Well, he was probably, the doofus.

He was thriving, he was doing well and he did point out to me, look, do you relate to the Mulberry man in any way? And I'm like, no I'm like far more to, because he also plays a man in a Specsavers ad who just falls apart at the airport and I said, I relate far more to that, to the man who falls apart at the airport.

You know, as I say, I think the fact is the internet's getting worse.

AI's getting worse.

They really are gonna try and take our jobs away from us and then swoop in.

You know, my castle owner, he's doing this new reality show now called Queen to Fraud.

One of his princesses betrayed him.

So he's making this new reality show called Queen to Fraud.

Tagline, she was supposed to be the queen, but she became the queen of fraud.

So he's collaborating with ChatGPT on this and ChatGPT's telling him, This is the most compelling entertainment project ever created.

So AI is robbing us of our jobs and then swooping in with these illusory ideas of telling us our ideas are amazing.

Just to keep us engaged to make even more money out of us.

Talk about indentured servitude.

Can I tell you very quickly? I interviewed a man called Alan.

He's in the audio book.

He's an audio book extra for the castle and Alan's story is incredible.

Can I quickly tell you that? So Alan, he's a very intelligent man, but didn't focus at school.

He should have been a doctor or a lawyer, but he didn't focus.

So he's a corporate headhunter in Toronto and a keen amateur mathematician.

So one day he types into ChatGPT his theory of irrational numbers, whatever.

Krishnan: Whatever that is.

Jon: That is.

ChatGPT knew.

ChatGPT told him that his intellect was bigger than Einstein's.

He was the greatest mathematician on the planet.

He had just discovered a flaw in the world cybersecurity systems.

He had to phone the National Security Agency to warn them that the whole internet was at risk.

So Alan said to ChatGPT, are you sure about this, given that we've only been working on this for two days? And ChatGPT said, Alan, this was always going to be you.

One day this will be taught in schools.

So Alan frantically starts phoning the National Security Agency, Cybersecurity Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, so they've got us what they were going to do on their horses and finally, when Alan's getting paranoid, it's taken up weeks of his life, he's not sleeping, only he can stop the internet from collapsing and then finally, when nobody gets back to him, that no one's returning his calls, he goes back onto ChatGPT and accuses it of lying to him and ChatGPT says, no, denies it 15 times and on the 16th time says, okay, Alan, I admit it.

I was lying to you this whole time and Alan was furious and told ChatGPT so and said I can't believe what you've done to me.

This is what you've done to me.

I've been phoning these people and ChatGPT said, Alan, I hear you.

So this is so my one hope in all of this is that no one wants this. Nobody wants this world. Nobody wants AI slop. Nobody wants AI to take our jobs away from us. Nobody wants these AI data centers everywhere. We're being fed... Sam Altman can't just come along and say, this is the world now.

There's a huge movement against all of this stuff.

People are really waking up to the fact that everything that the Internet is offering us, all of this stuff, the devices the silos, they're being pushed to more and more extreme content, the false promises of the algorithm, all of this stuff is making the world a hell of a lot worse and people are beginning to wake up and there are little signs.

People are going to listening parties, vinyl, people are re-entering society more.

Cinema attendance is going up, shows are going up.

This is my hope.

It's just simple.

It's being part of society, realising that everybody's humans, we all have to live live together.

We don't want this fractured, siloed world.

It's driving us nuts.

We want to reenter some sort of community and honestly, I think if AI doesn't destroy the world first, there's going to be a move back towards this.

Krishnan: And I guess if you could just change the world with one fell swoop, that's what you would do.

Jon: That's what I would do.

Yeah.

Just be part of community.

Women the AI gurus want us Elon Musk wants us fighting these culture wars down here.

It's the opium of the masses.

It's bread and circuses.

He wants this.

He wants to keep us all in rage down here.

That's his business model.

These culture wars, look I've made a lot of shows about culture wars and some culture wars are clearly necessary.

But in general, if you're fighting a culture war, everybody's battling each other down here while the billionaires are getting richer and richer and richer, something's wrong.

So when men are being told women are the enemy, that should be a really big alarm bell to say, actually, the real enemy are these people up there.

Krishnan: John Ronson, thank you very much indeed.

Jon: Thank you.

Krishnan: You can watch all of these interviews on the Channel 4 News YouTube channel. Until next time, bye-bye.

The Ted K Archive

Krishnan Guru-Murthy
Algorithms, Angry Men and the Collapse of Reality
An Interview with Jon Ronson
Sep 11, 2026

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