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America's Best History Teacher Doesn't Work At A School

Dan Carlin has created a one-man podcasting empire by making the past as entertaining as a blockbuster.

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DAN CARLIN IMAGE: COURTESY OF SUBJECT; ALL OTHERS: GETTY AND SHUTTERSTOCK

The subject, naturally, is Genghis Khan and the moral depravity that is often a characteristic of transformative world leaders. The voice begins.

"Would you be willing, under certain conditions, to order the killing of an innocent woman or child, or old person?" the voice wants to know. "If you said that you would not be willing to do that," it continues, "you are already *off* the potential 'great person' list." It pauses for a couple of seconds.

"At least in terms of world leaders."

The gravelly, conspiratorial baritone belongs to Dan Carlin, a 49-year-old former talk radio personality who has achieved superstardom in the brightening [firmament of podcasting](#). On his show "[Hardcore History](#)," Carlin singlehandedly narrates epochal events of the last several thousand years ([World War I](#), The Black Death, the Norman invasion of England and [the rise of the Khans](#), to name a few). Recorded from a studio in his home in Eugene, Oregon, the show hasn't exactly gained household name status on the order of "Serial," the true-crime narrative that catapulted the medium [into the mainstream](#) last year.

But "Hardcore History" is firmly ensconced in the upper reaches of iTunes' most-downloaded list (No. 9 as of this writing), sharing coveted real estate with public-radio mainstays like "Fresh Air" and "This American Life" and long-established boldface names like Marc Maron and Adam Carolla.

Listen to Dan Carlin's thoughts about his podcasts, the future of warfare, and where he thinks America is headed below:



Audio feature produced by Katelyn Bogucki and edited by Nick Offenberg

Unlike most popular podcasts, "Hardcore History" has no guests, no interviews and no recorded segments. It's not a marvel of audio engineering like "Radiolab," nor does it benefit from a constantly rotating cast of characters like "The Moth." It's just Dan Carlin talking to you -- and he's a damn good talker.

A virtuoso orator with a master's feel for the rhythm of language, Carlin layers his winding sentences with conversational asides (on the Mongols' indefensible violence: "lemme tell you why it puts me in a weird position... I'm a fan of these people!"), piquant scene-setting (on the unspeakable horror at the Battle of Verdun during World War I: "This is *Mordor*"), artfully posed hypothetical questions and lots of pregnant pauses.

"He uses the medium about as well as anybody," said Adam Sachs, who runs Midroll Media, the parent company of the popular [Earwolf podcast network](#) (which is not connected with Carlin). "He really demonstrates the undeniable power of a riveting story."



COURTESY OF DAN CARLIN

"Hardcore History" episodes don't appear for months at a time -- there are only 56 total -- and when they finally do, they clock in at interstate-drive lengths, often crossing the three or even four-hour threshold. (The latest episode, released at the end of October, covers the ancient Achaemenid Persian empire and clocks in at 3 hours and 36 minutes; the six-episode World War I series totaled over 20 hours.)

But what it lacks in buzzy zeitgeistness, it has made up for with a committed -- and ardent -- fan base. A sampling of the show's thousands of [ecstatic online reviews](#) shines a light into the mind of the proselytizing listener. (Example: "This podcast is so good it's dangerous. I've started doing dishes and housework just so I can hide in the back of the house with my headphones.")

The way Carlin tells it, none of this was part of the plan. He grew up in and around Los Angeles, raised by parents in the film industry: his father was a producer, his mother the [Oscar-nominated actress Lynn Carlin](#). He graduated from the University of Colorado, where he majored in history -- his only traditional credential in the field.

After working behind the scenes in TV in Southern California for several years, Carlin snagged his own radio show at KUGN, a talk radio station in Eugene, the city where he still lives with his wife and two kids. On the air three hours a day, five days a week, he found himself sandwiched awkwardly between politically conservative hosts in the Rush Limbaugh shoutfest mold. Carlin talked politics, too, but prided himself on what he often calls his "Martian" perspective -- a hard-to-pigeonhole approach that criticizes all corners of power. This didn't

jibe with the station's black-and-white philosophy. Carlin described "knock-down, drag-out, borderline fist fight" meetings with management over the direction of the show and his overall tenure as "not the best fit."

After an on-again, off-again relationship with the station, he stepped into the podcasting world in 2005, when the medium was still in its infancy. The decision to abandon terrestrial radio for the online wilds was unusual -- and risky. "I wouldn't say I was dragged kicking and screaming to the Internet," he said.

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I can go places that real historians who worry about their standing can't. I can play the medieval king's fool.

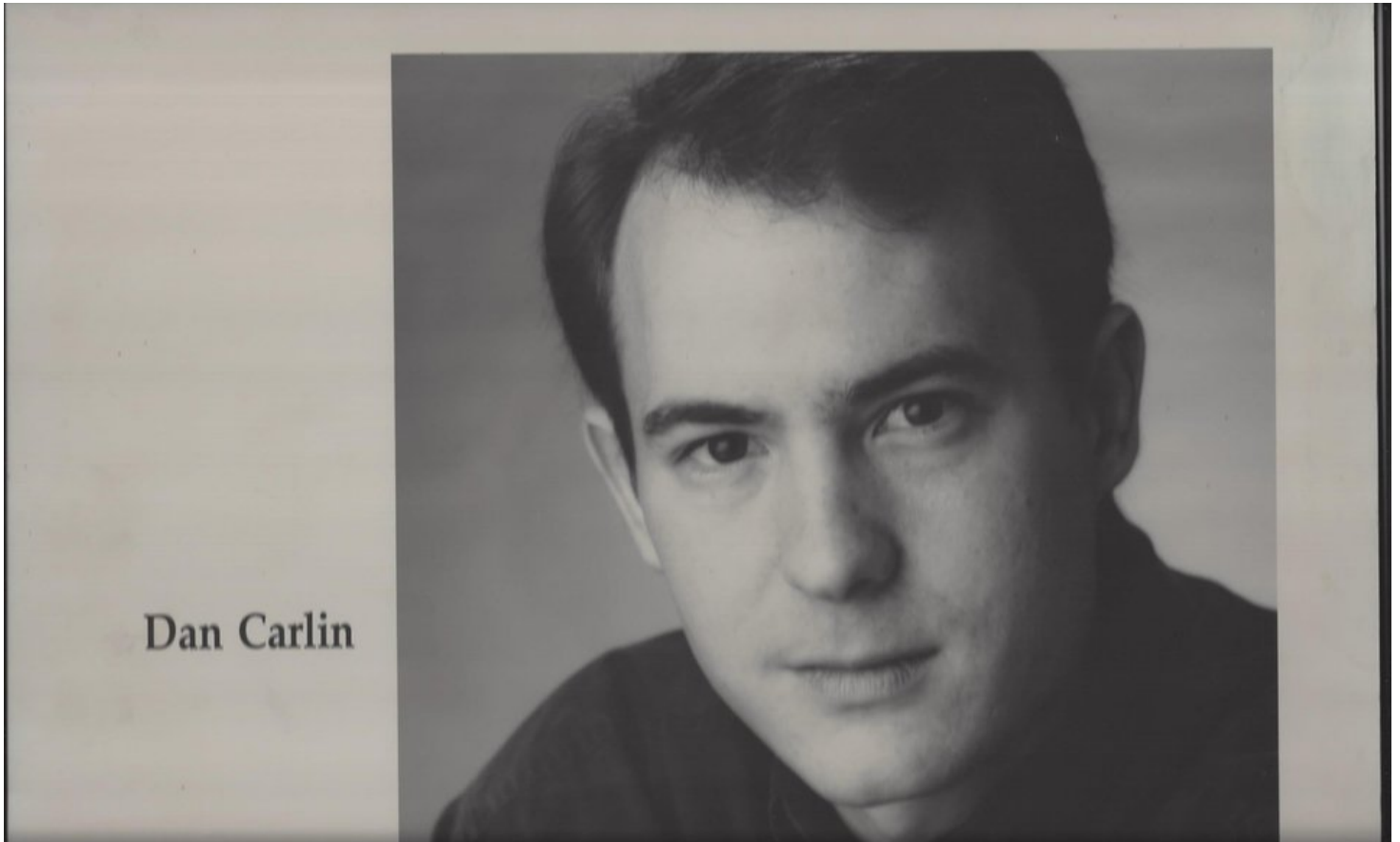
When he first ventured into the field, he created the podcast "Common Sense," an extension of his radio program, which dissects issues of the day through that Martian lens: strenuously nonpartisan, iconoclastic, suspicious of government. Carlin still hosts "Common Sense," which has racked up 297 episodes and is itself no slouch in the most popular rankings (No. 31 as of this writing).

That show was an outgrowth of Carlin's existing professional life, but "Hardcore History" was a departure: a manifestation of his expansive curiosity about the past and in particular, his lifelong infatuation with military history. "I have no idea why I'm into this," he said, specifying that he is a committed pacifist by nature. "My mom says I was born into this in a past life."

His mother was referring to Carlin's habit of holding forth at the dinner table, telling what he calls "horror history stories." But it was his mother-in-law who suggested, one fateful evening, that he turn the tales into a standalone show.

"Hardcore History" episodes began as sub-60-minute affairs ("Meandering Through The Cold War," "Darkness Buries The Bronze Age" and "Macedonian Soap Opera" were some of the early episodes).

Soon Carlin began stitching together series of episodes with common themes -- the first multi-part installment, a three-parter released in 2008, tackled the [Punic War](#), the ancient conflict between Rome and Carthage.



COURTESY OF DAN CARLIN

Carlin circa 1995.

The episodes grew in complexity, and listenership multiplied. As he watched the podcast hit the top 10 most downloaded on iTunes and cross the million-listener threshold for the first time, Carlin realized he had a hit on his hands. Along the way, episodes grew longer and less frequent. Carlin's research burden also became heavier -- though he tends to cover topics he already knows something about. "I'd be an idiot to claim that I start from zero," he said.

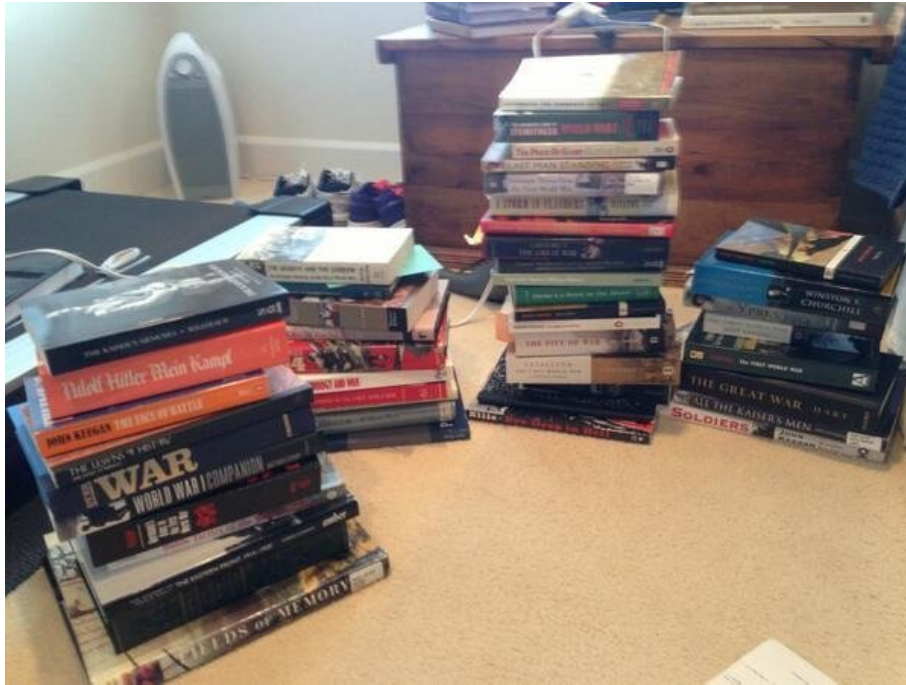
To prepare, he reads or rereads a stack of books on his chosen topic, from which he quotes liberally during the show. For the World War I episode, this meant about 50. After researching for weeks or months at a time, he records small chunks of the podcast working without a script. (He is not entirely alone in this process; he often makes cryptic reference to a lone producer named Ben, though whether this person actually exists is a long-running, playful debate in Carlinworld. Carlin's website pictures a "Harvey"-like rabbit perched behind Carlin and refers to Ben as "sometimes fictitious.")

Perhaps Carlin's most impressive feat is his ability to wrangle complex strands of historical record into an easily digestible narrative. A typical episode is a smorgasbord of facts, figures and conjecture that veers from political analysis (was Woodrow Wilson naive or savvy? How much sway did Rasputin really have with the Tsar?) to historical context (what did the world order look like before Genghis Khan swept through Asia?) to thorough military history -- with a special focus on the horror that is warfare.

"The story is guiding the length," said Sachs, of Midroll Media -- who isn't surprised that

listeners have embraced the intimidating running times. In his view, the podcast's meatiness is central to its appeal.

"One element that Dan has tapped into is that element of satisfying curiosity," he said. Carlin's programs deliver "sustenance, not just entertainment."



COURTESY OF DAN CARLIN

Research for the World War I series.

Carlin attributes his success, in part, to the Internet's ability to cut out old media middlemen like his former radio bosses, who undoubtedly would have vetoed the idea of a multi-part series exploring Russia's incursion into Arctic territory during World War II. ("Ghosts of the Ostfront," Carlin's take on the subject, appeared in 2009.)

"As a guy who dealt with gatekeepers" he said, "it's amazing to have a direct line with the audience and sink and swim on the merits of the work."

"I'm shocked at where podcasting has gone," he said. "I still can't get my mind around it."

Millions download every episode of "Hardcore History." Carlin's high-water mark was 5.4 million for the first episode of the World War I series, he said. But that number may actually underestimate the program's true reach, since it doesn't account for those who arrive at the show via other sources, like Spotify, streaming platforms or YouTube.

Quantifying how many people actually listen to podcasts, it turns out, is **notoriously difficult**. But **advertisers have noticed** that the number is a lot higher than it used to be. Pew estimates 2.6 billion total podcast downloads in 2014, compared to 1.4 just two years earlier.

The medium's rapt devotees make ideal targets for advertisers. Carlin is as deft at selling his listeners on familiar podcast sponsors like Audible and Squarespace as he is at narrating the Battle of Verdun, though he **makes most of his money** from listener donations and the sale of old shows through an Amazon affiliate program.

"We're pulling enough to say that we've got decent jobs," Carlin said, though he declined to share specific figures.

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But Carlin's influence goes beyond mere download numbers and dollars. A German listener told Carlin the story of listening to "Hardcore History" on a long drive with his father, which prompted the father to open up about his experiences on the Eastern Front for the first time. Then there was the time Stephen Colbert imitated Carlin on a "Late Show" podcast. (At about the [3:25 mark](#), Colbert zeroes in on one of Carlin's [most mimic-able verbal tics](#), his idiosyncratic pronunciation of the word "again.")

Not everyone is such an unabashed fan. While most history professors contacted for this story had never heard of the show, Dr. [Graydon Tunstall](#), who teaches at the University of South Florida and wrote a [book about World War II](#), made a point of listening to an episode from the World War I series. Tunstall lauded Carlin for connecting with what he sees as an ill-informed citizenry. But he also compared the podcaster to "someone who earned a brown belt in karate" and thinks that's all he needs to know. "That makes him dangerous, because there's much he doesn't know."

He singled out Carlin's treatment of the Battle of the Somme, which he said missed "major points," like the effect of the terrain on armies. At times, he added, Carlin "goes into so much detail that only an expert would know what he's talking about, and a novice would have no idea."

Dr. Leif Jerram, a senior lecturer in urban and European history at the University of Manchester in England, admires Carlin's ability to harness a "staggering" amount of evidence in the service of a compelling story. "I wish I was half as good at it as him," he said. But he also notes that Carlin is, in essence, just recounting a good yarn without deeply examining the of historical forces that shape events.

Carlin would be the first to admit that such gaps in knowledge are inevitable and that every storyteller brings his own set of biases to the story. On the podcast, he frequently qualifies his opinions with the disclaimer that he is not, in fact, a historian, and laces the narrative with self-deprecating asides. ("This is all... very controversial, very complicated, very complicated. You're getting the Dan Carlin condensed, possibly unreliable version.")

He sees himself as a "popularizer" who uses his regular-guy status to his advantage. "I can go places that real historians who worry about their standing can't," he said. "I can play the medieval king's fool."

"Historians and transmitters of history have rarely been the same people," he said in a [Reddit AMA](#), invoking Homer and Herodotus as early examples of great communicators. "Hardcore History," he went on, was "designed... for other 'history geeks' like me. The group that sat around a pizza and some beers after history class and got into the weird, fun questions on history (and getting into debates about things)."

The show's very first episode, which explored the gap between historical perceptions of

Alexander the Great and Hitler, is a testament to that idea. In it, Carlin pronounced Alexander a "top five nominee for greatest figure in history" before voicing his idea that 30 to 40 percent of historical world leaders (including Alexander) were so murderous that they would have tied for "the worst person of all time."

Carlin said he measures himself less against the rigid standards of academia and more against the likes of The History Channel, which he considers a "pretty low bar." The network actually tried to recruit him to host a show, he said, but its vision would turn him into "the Guy Fieri of history," a part he's hardly eager to play. Despite such overtures, Carlin isn't tempted to return to the old media he escaped more than a decade ago. He prefers to keep things the way they are: small, personal and tightly controlled.

At the end of a recent episode of "Common Sense," he issued a sort of state-of-the-podcasts address, acknowledging his own worries that, for various reasons, episodes are appearing less frequently than they once did. He spoke of new-media personalities who reach a "fork-in-the-road moment" after they hit a certain level of success, at which point they begin to staff up and start resembling a traditional organization. But despite the many listeners who have offered to lighten his logistical load by working for free or interning, he swatted down the prospect of being "a human resources director 30 percent of the time."

"I want to do exactly what I'm doing, right here, right now," Carlin said, which means sustaining, not modifying, the idiosyncratic approach that has gotten him this far. Judging by the last 10 years, his audience seems likely to follow him anywhere.

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