

Presto!: How I Made Over 100 Pounds Disappear and Other Magical Tales

By Penn Jillette

An unconventional weight loss tale from an unconventional personality—Penn Jillette tells how he lost 100 pounds with his trademark outrageous sense of humor and biting social commentary that makes this success story anything but ordinary.

Legendary magician Penn Jillette was approaching his sixtieth birthday. Topping 330 pounds and saddled with a systolic blood pressure reading over 200, he knew he was at a dangerous crossroads: if he wanted to see his small children grow up, he needed to change. And then came Crazy Ray. A former NASA scientist and an unconventional, passionate innovator, Ray Cronise saved Penn Jillette's life with his wild "potato diet."

In *Presto*, Jillette takes us along on his journey from skepticism to the inspiring, life-changing momentum that transformed the magician's body and mind. He describes the process in hilarious detail, as he performs his Las Vegas show, takes meetings with Hollywood executives, hangs out with his celebrity friends and fellow eccentric performers, all while remaining a dedicated husband and father. Throughout, he weaves in his views on sex, religion, and pop culture, making his story a refreshing, genre-busting account. Outspoken, frank, and bitingly clever, *Presto* is an incisive, rollicking read.

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Presto!: How I Made Over 100 Pounds Disappear and Other Magical Tales Summary Details

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Review

"This hugely entertaining book chronicles Jillette's weight-loss odyssey, but it really does much more than that...funny and profane...undeniably inspiring."—*Booklist*

"Penn Jillette of the comedy-magic duo Penn and Teller holds nothing back in 'Presto!' as he describes how he lost almost a third of himself in a rather unconventional way. Using honesty and humor, he takes readers on his journey to discovering a healthy lifestyle....Jillette has written an extremely funny and somewhat profane book that will motivate others to seek weight-loss solutions."—**ASSOCIATED PRESS (AP)**

Praise for GOD, NO!

"Penn Jillette is a 21st-century Lord of Misrule: big, boisterously anarchic, funny, Rabelaisian, impossible—and unique. There isn't—couldn't be—better not be—anybody like him." (Richard Dawkins, bestselling author of *The Greatest Show on Earth* and *The God Delusion*)

"There are few people in the country who question more boldly, brashly and bravely than my friend Penn Jillette. This book is funny, provocative and profane. But is it right? God, no!" (Glenn Beck)

"This planet has yielded exactly one mutual friend for Glenn Beck and me and that friend has written a brilliant book called *God, No!*. Penn reveals 'the big secret of magic,' tells you why tattoos are perfect expressions of atheism and exactly what to eat when you know you're going to vomit later." (Lawrence O'Donnell)

"People who say that libertarians have no heart or atheists have no soul need to read this book. Because Penn Jillette has a lot of both." (Matt Stone and Trey Parker, creators of *South Park* and award-winning Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*)

"Jillette has made a career as a provocateur, and it is tempting to dismiss this book as another piece of carnal shtick, but there is a forceful intelligence at work here that demands to be taken seriously. He has shaped his argument with care." (Daniel Stashower, Washington Post Book World)

About the Author

Penn Jillette is a cultural phenomenon as a solo personality and as half of the world-famous Emmy Award-winning magic duo Penn & Teller. His solo exposure is enormous: from *Howard Stern* to *Glenn Beck* to the Op-Ed pages of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. He has appeared on *Dancing with the Stars*, *MTV Cribs*, and *Chelsea Lately* and hosted the NBC game show *Identity*. As part of Penn & Teller, he has appeared more than twenty times on *David Letterman*, as well as on several other TV shows, from *The Simpsons* and *Friends* to *Top Chef* and *The View*. He cohosts the controversial series *Penn & Teller: Bullshit!*, which has been nominated for sixteen Emmy Awards. He is currently cohost of the Discovery Channel's *Penn & Teller Tell a Lie* and the author of *God, No!* and *Presto*.

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Presto

ONE-THIRD THE SIZE OF A COW DRESSED AS AN ELEPHANT

In 2014 I made a movie called *Director's Cut*. I wanted to play a bad guy. I wanted to be the psycho villain. I also wanted a villain who was an outsider. In the early drafts of the script, I named the character Herbert Khaury, which is Tiny Tim's real name. Tiny Tim is a hero of mine, but he was also an obsessive nut and a bit of a stalker. Maybe he was a bit more than a bit of a stalker. Maybe Tiny was a little dangerous. Tiny Tim had his problems. For the movie, I parted my hair like him and shaved my stupid beard. Tiny Tim didn't have a beard. Tiny was tall—not as tall as me, but still pretty tall, and Tiny was also pretty overweight by the time he was my age. So, being fat was good for the part. I was very happy being fat. At the time of that movie, I was the fattest I've ever been in my life. I thought fat was good for the part.

If you're reading or listening to this book right when *Director's Cut* comes out, you might see me on some talk shows pimping this book or read an interview or two with me. If you do, you'll hear me talk about gaining all that weight to play my character, Herbie, in the film. You'll hear me spin how fat I was. I don't like the word "spin." I prefer the word "lie." I'm going to be implying very strongly (lying) that I gained all that weight to play my character. It's the worst kind of lie, because by the time I'm done with it, I'll believe it. There will be some truth in it, so I can focus on that little truth until the big truth goes away. The weight sincerely was great for the character, and it really made everything perfect for that movie, but I hadn't spent thirty years getting fat because I was planning to play Herbie. I wrote the script about ten years before we shot it . . . but I can't produce any notes that are time-stamped from those days saying, "I sure better start eating like a pig to do my best acting." Maybe De Niro just got a hankering for spaghetti while working on *Raging Bull* and then just spun the press accordingly.

By the time you read this, I will believe that I gained over a hundred pounds for my movie; that in order to gain weight for my art, my sacrifice to the muses was to eat everything I saw. I know what it feels like to start spinning, progress to lying, and eventually believe the lies so much that you don't even remember that they started as lies.

In 2012 I went on *The Celebrity Apprentice* with Donald Trump, who has hair that looks like cotton candy made of piss. Before the show was over I published my previous book, *Every Day Is an Atheist Holiday!*, which stated that Donny's hair looked like cotton candy made of piss. I created the most perfect description of Donald Trump's hair ever given by anyone. "Hair like cotton candy made of piss" is also the phrase that Trumpy said was his reason for my coming in second a year later on *All-Star Celebrity Apprentice*. I love

that about Trump. He comes out and admits crazy shit like that. He doesn't pretend he's not being arbitrary and petty. His charm is arbitrary and petty. It's supposed to be my job, as bitter loser, to claim that his real reasons were arbitrary and petty, but Trump fucked me on that. He's enough of a real, inspired nut that he just says outright what I would have to claim, and after he does that, all I can do is lie more and write that it was just that one joke, which it wasn't. Trump is the hero here, and I'm the bitter loser liar. He just made it easy for me.

Part of the final challenge was coming up with an ice cream flavor. If Trump had said that my competitor's ice cream really was better, which it wasn't, I'd have a beef; but nope, he was straightforward and honest, and I'm the weasel. My hair doesn't look like cotton candy made of piss, but it does look like the tail of a pathetic, aging roadkill raccoon. And if you said that to me, I wouldn't let you win a game I was running even if your ice cream made me cum, but I wouldn't cop to the real reason like Trump did. Trump was a better man than I . . . in this one very specific instance, on his show, with me, on that exact day. I'm as aware as everyone else that, since that one day with me, there is ample evidence that in general he is at very best the worst person who ever lived, and the best thing about him is that his hair looks like cotton candy made of piss. Believe me, I'm as horrified as you are. My ice cream was better, and my marketing was more successful, but I can be rude, weird, and crazy (and I guess I was), so I shouldn't have won. That's fair, but if I'm going to spin that fat ain't my fault, why not lie and say that Donald Trump's temporary, accidentally brave honesty is petty and arbitrary? I'm on a roll, spinning down a hill with my old-dead-raccoon-tail hair blowing in the wind.

Because of my arbitrary and petty rudeness to Mr. Trump, the people with intellectual disabilities at Opportunity Village, the charity I played Trump's game for, didn't get the quarter-of-a-million-buck first prize. But, thanks to Trump's honesty and my dishonesty, others involved with The Celebrity Apprentice wrote checks that actually totaled more than two hundred fifty grand. Exposure on Trump's show sold a metric shit-ton of tickets to The Penn & Teller Show at the Penn & Teller Theater in Las Vegas. So, I'm a bitter loser who won big by being rude and lying just a little bit. I'm actually the big fat bitter loser, because, you know, I gained all that weight to play the part of Herbie in my movie. I'm a real artist—a bullshit artist. I lie like a rug.

The ice cream I created, Vanilla/Chocolate Magic Swirtle, is still available at some Walgreens locations, but it'll probably be gone by the time this book comes out; as I remember, though, it's really good. I added sea salt (which is just salt) to dark chocolate, swirled that into vanilla ice cream, and threw in some caramel "turtle-like" candies. It's good ice cream. La Toya Jackson helped with the great name, and Dennis Rodman let me borrow his palate to get the vanilla base to just the right level of sweet and rich. It tastes great. It's sweet, rich, and comforting. I'd have an argument with my wife and then eat a whole container, and that's the grown-up way to live. It's really good ice cream, and you should try it if you ever get a chance. My share of the money goes to Opportunity Village, and it'll be your favorite food ever. And then you'll read the rest of this book and you'll never eat it again. I giveth, and I taketh the fuck away.

I take my acting fat seriously. Before the script was really finished, I changed my character's name from Herbert Khaury (it's not right to use Tiny Tim's real name) to Herbert Blount—Blount being jazz great Sun Ra's real last name. Sun Ra, another crazy hero of mine, was also really fat. Sun Ra was also from Saturn, so he had an even better excuse than gaining weight for a movie. As part of my dedication to the craft of acting, I'd have big fat steaks at the Musso & Frank Grill in Hollywood. I'd have big fat steaks everywhere. I ate a shit-ton of bread and butter and buttered popcorn and candy. And grilled cheese. And grilled cheese with bacon. And pizza. And pizza with bacon. I'd eat dozens of raspberry-filled Krispy Kreme doughnuts, which, I either read somewhere unreliable or made up, were Elvis's favorite doughnuts. Yum. And Krispy Kreme doughnuts with bacon. Yup. For the past several years, I've hosted Penn Jillette's Private Bacon and

Doughnut Party, a private party coincident in time but not associated with James Randi's The Amaz!ng Meeting for skeptic and atheist cats and kitties in Vegas. I'd give everyone free bacon and doughnuts and play dirty-ass rock 'n' roll with nearly naked men and women all around me. It's all part of my plan:

Sell ice cream.

Give away bacon and doughnuts.

Get really fat for a movie.

Write this book to inspire all the fat fucks I helped encourage to get that fat.

I am Wile E. Coyote, Super Genius.

By the time we were done shooting Director's Cut, I was fat, depressed, tired all the time, and couldn't walk up a flight of stairs without panting. That's what a serious actor I am. At the end of every Penn & Teller Show, I run up the aisle to the back of the theater and into the lobby to meet audience members, sign autographs, and pose for pictures, and will do so for as long as I'm still lucky enough to have people who want those things from me. At my fattest, at my Herbie movie weight, I couldn't do a very light jog down the five stairs from the front of the stage to the aisle without being winded. Even talking in the show was a bit of a strain. Yup—I'd get winded talking, and all I know how to do is talk. What the fuck? I don't know exactly what I weighed, because when I got that fat, I didn't really weigh myself much. But I was definitely north of 320 pounds. Truth be told, I probably hit 330. If I'm willing to beef up my accomplishments, let's spin that with a little goose and make it $333\frac{1}{3}$, a little more than half the number of the beast and one-sixth of a ton. Yeah, I like that. One-sixth of a ton. Just six of me would make a ton. Wow, that's one-twenty-seventh of a shit-ton. Shit.

Around this time, we started using a live cow in the Penn & Teller Show in Vegas. A cow isn't a very glamorous animal for the Vegas Strip, so we dress her in elephant drag and call her an elephant. We think that's funny. An American cow with a feedbag trunk to make her look like an elephant—will that be viewed by future social critics in the same way we now view blackface? I don't know. I plan to be dead by then. The "elephant" in our show is the size of a small cow. A small cow that we call Elsie onstage. The two cows that play the part of Elsie are actually named Gecky and Star. We had nothing to do with those names, and I have no idea how much weight they each gained for the part. Gecky weighs 1,117 pounds. That's small for an elephant, and even a little small for a cow, but when the Vanish of Elsie, the African Spotted Pygmy Elephant went into the Penn & Teller Show, Penn weighed about one-third of her fake-elephant/real-cow weight. I was a third the size of a cow dressed as an elephant. I was a fat fuck. I was that fat because I take my acting craft seriously, and I like bacon.

I couldn't run or really talk, and I had hypertension that was supernatural. I used to walk around knocking on two hundred for the top number (I never notice the bottom number; who cares?). My permissive doc had me on massive doses of six different blood pressure drugs. I got up in the morning and took drugs that made me piss so much and so fast that I couldn't take them before I had to ride to the airport. I had to take them at the airport, because it's more convenient to piss five times on a flight from Vegas to L.A. than to pull the car over during the fifteen-minute ride to the airport.

Why did I have such bad hypertension? Because I was one-third the size of a cow dressed as an elephant! But I didn't see it that way. I knew that was part of it, but I couldn't believe that was all of it. I figured I would have high blood pressure anyway. My mom and sister had it, and I have some African- and

Aboriginal-American ancestry, and it's . . . you know, genetic. I was born a fat fuck like you were born gay. Jesus fucking Christ, I'm an idiot.

My doc would tell me to lose weight, and I knew he was right, but . . . I didn't see myself as fat. Or, rather, I saw myself as fat but didn't see fat as a problem. My job didn't depend on my weight one way or the other. When I got acting jobs, I either played myself or a fat guy just like me. Penn & Teller were never sold as attractive sex symbols; we didn't have the sex-symbol hand to play. My showbiz success was not tied to my weight. I was married and didn't have to worry about getting fucked. Some people didn't use "fucking fat" as the first two words to describe me because I'm also fucking tall. I'm six foot seven, so I'm a big guy. "Big guy" includes "fat," but it's not just fat. I carried my weight really well, except for the blood pressure that was on the verge of making me drop dead or stroke out every second of every day. I was fine. I was happy, except for the constant depression and being winded just thinking about running to play with my children. I was a miserable fat fuck with such a great job, a great family, and wonderful friends that I was theoretically and psychologically happy even at one-third the weight of a cow dressed like a fucking elephant.

Oh, the things I've done for art!

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