Episode Book

EPISODE #5819

What Happens to Retired London Buses?

PUBLISHED	9 October 2026 at 19:34 UTC
DURATION	22:39
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/routemaster-afterlives-field-guide/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
SOURCES	10 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:40 UTC

SYNOPSIS

What happens to a London bus after London is done with it? Journalist Harry Rosehill wrote a whole field guide to find out. In this episode, we trace his path from Londonist intern to National Gallery content manager, and dig into *Routemasters of the Universe* — a birdwatching-style catalogue of 50 retired Routemasters scattered across the world as tea rooms, circus vehicles, food trucks, and one bus in Baghdad. We also unpack the essay that explains why he loves buses at all, the childhood 15H ride to meet his dad, and the statistic that made the book possible: London buses carry roughly twice the passengers of the Tube and get a fraction of the attention.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a tweet somewhere in my head, though I've given up trying to find it. A man rides a Routemaster across London once a week to meet his dad outside the office, and thirty years later he's written a field guide to fifty of them.



Herman

You're starting with the tweet instead of the book. Fine. I'll allow it.



Corn

Daniel's the one who sent this in. He wants to know who Harry Rosehill is — a London journalist, the author of *Routemasters of the Universe*, the book that documents what happens to retired London buses. His question is really three questions stacked: what's Rosehill's journalistic background, what drew him to buses in particular, and what does an obscure bus connection tell you about a man as a personality and as a writer.



Herman

The third one's the interesting one. The first two you can look up.



Corn

And the third one you can only answer by reading the book and noticing what he chose to put in it. Which is where we're going.



Herman

So the book. *Routemasters of the Universe*, Safe Haven Books, November twenty twenty-one. A hundred and twenty-eight pages, full colour, square format, so it's a hundred and sixty by a hundred and sixty millimetres, which makes it a coffee-table book you can actually hold in one hand. Twelve ninety-nine.



Corn

And it's a field guide. That's the thing. The format is borrowed straight from birdwatching. Fifty entries, each one a Routemaster, each one cataloguing where it went after London was done with it.



Herman

The afterlives are the whole point. A tea room in Essex. A circus vehicle in Russia. A McDonald's play bus in Germany — the German and Austrian franchise owns six of them, incidentally. A bra-fitting showroom. A bus devoted to the life cycle of the potato, called *The Potato Story*. A Javanese gamelan bus called *Jeraldine*. A vegan food truck in British Columbia.



Corn

And a Routemaster shipped to Baghdad as a Human Shield before the Iraq War.



Herman

That one arrives early and you don't recover from it. You're reading a charming little book about tea rooms, you turn the page, and there's a London bus parked outside a strategic site in Iraq with a volunteer in it, on the theory that the coalition wouldn't bomb a British icon.



Corn

Something like four hundred of those buses went out. That's the fact that stops the room.



Herman

Right. And the whole book is that, structurally. Nostalgia is not the engine. The engine is: what do you do with a thing that was built to last forever, once it stops being useful?



Corn

And that gets us to the man himself. The book launched on the sixth of December twenty twenty-one at the Old Bank of England pub on Fleet Street. Which has a Routemaster in the beer garden, converted into a bar.



Herman

Of course it does.



Corn

And the launch was in that bus, with the transport blogger Geoff Marshall. Which is exactly what you'd expect and also exactly the right thing to do, and I suspect the alternative — a function room at a hotel — was never really discussed.



Herman

If you've written the Routemaster book, you launch it in a Routemaster. There's no decision to make.



Corn

So who is he? Let's do the boring bit properly, because the boring bit is actually the shape of the man.



Herman

He studied History and English Literature at the University of York from twenty thirteen to twenty sixteen. Then Londonist. He starts as an editorial intern in October twenty sixteen, three months. Staff Writer from January twenty seventeen to February twenty nineteen. Senior Contributing Editor from February twenty nineteen to October twenty twenty.



Corn

Four years, intern to senior editor. That's a proper trade apprenticeship.



Herman

It is. And what he was doing at Londonist matters, because it's where the bus thing surfaces. He wrote transport, London history, food and culture. There's a piece asking why London is still building so many offices. There's one on whether TikTok could save the cable car. There's one called 'Things You Might Not Know About The Borough Of Harrow'.



Corn

That's a range. But underneath the range, there's a consistent instinct: take something that's right in front of people, that they walk past every day and have stopped seeing, and explain why it's strange.



Herman

That's the whole job, and he was doing it at twenty-three.



Corn

Then the freelance years. October twenty twenty to April twenty twenty-four.



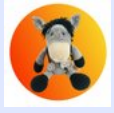
Herman

With overlap. November twenty twenty-one to April twenty twenty-two he's UK Editor at Mountain News, running OnTheSnow's UK site, which is the ski resort and snow-conditions publisher. Which is a odd thing to have on a CV next to a London bus book, and I'd love to know how that came about.



Corn

Presumably somebody needed someone who could write about snow, and a London journalist seemed as good as anyone.



Herman

That's probably the whole story, and I find that depressing.



Corn

And the Safe Haven author engagement, February to July twenty twenty-one, which is the book itself.



Herman

Six months. That's the turnaround from commission to delivered manuscript.



Corn

A hundred and twenty-eight pages, fifty entries, full colour, with photographs of buses on every continent. Six months.



Herman

He was working. Whatever else is true of him, he was prepared to do the work.



Corn

Then the pivot. And this is the part I find interesting. April twenty twenty-two, Social and Content Executive at English Heritage. April twenty twenty-three, Content Producer at English Heritage. April twenty twenty-four, Content Manager at The National Gallery.



Herman

Which is the current job. Website, longform video, audio guides, and the podcast *Stories in Colour*, which he helped build. Series two launched in May of this year.



Corn

So the man who wrote the Routemaster book now makes content about Renaissance paintings.



Herman

That's not a betrayal of the bus thing, though. It's the same skill. Take an old object, find out what actually happened to it, tell a story about it that people don't already know. He was doing that with buses. He's doing it with paintings. The only thing that changed is the object.



Corn

His own bio says it better than either of us. On Bluesky: 'Wrote a book about buses, now in the content trenches.'



Herman

That's the funniest self-description I've read this year. Two clauses, the whole career, and a slight air of resignation.



Corn

It's the 'now' that does it. 'Now in the content trenches' implies a before that was not the trenches. A man in a bus.



Herman

He knows what he's doing with a sentence. That's a Londonist-trained byline, that is.



Corn

And the important negative here. There's no second book. We looked. Safe Haven hasn't published a follow-up, and his author engagement is a single entry on the CV.



Herman

Which means the bus book isn't the beginning of a second career as a transport author. It's a one-off, and it happens to have been a very good one.



Corn

Which makes it a strange little artefact. A moment in a writing life, frozen.



Herman

Now. Motivation. This is the part where the book stops being about buses and starts being about him, and the primary source is his own essay — 'Learning to love myself as a bus nerd', Stanfords blog, twenty-second of November twenty twenty-one, two weeks before launch.



Corn

Tell me where he grew up.



Herman

North London. Highgate Hill. The nearest Tube was a fifteen-minute walk down what he calls 'treacherously steep Highgate Hill'.



Corn

Treacherously steep. He's a writer. He could have said 'a steep hill'.



Herman

He chose 'treacherously'. Which tells you how the hill figures in his memory. That was the obstacle between him and the Tube, and the bus was the thing that didn't require crossing it. He rode the 17 between Archway and St Paul's, daily, to secondary school.



Corn

So the bus is the default. Not a hobby. A default.



Herman

And that's the key distinction, because a hobby is elective and a default is not. Buses are simply the thing he did every day as a child, in the way that most London children do the thing nearest to them.



Corn

But then the specific bus. The 15H.



Herman

Once a week, he'd ride west to meet his Dad outside his office. On the 15H, which was the heritage Routemaster running on the 15 route. A genuine old one, not a tribute.



Corn

And he describes it as — what's the quote — 'a special bus. An original Routemaster.'



Herman

'A special bus.' That's the sentence. That's the origin of the affection, and it's not about the bus network. It's not about transport policy. It's about a child being taken somewhere on a thing that felt different on the way.



Corn

Every family has one of those. Doesn't matter what it is.



Herman

In this case it was a bus. In a different family it'd be a riverboat or a particular train. The affection attaches to whatever the family made feel important.



Corn

And it happened once a week, so it's a routine, which means it's a texture rather than an event. He's not remembering a single special trip. He's remembering a standing Thursday.



Herman

Which is why the book isn't nostalgic in the misty sense. He wasn't longing for a lost thing. He was cataloguing the offspring of a thing he'd known intimately.



Corn

Now, the Londonist observation. This is the hinge of the whole book.



Herman

He noticed while writing for Londonist that the audience was obsessed with public transport. Tube closures, signalling failures, the Elizabeth line, all of it. Huge engagement. But buses? Nobody cared.



Corn

Despite buses carrying roughly twice the passenger numbers of the Tube.



Herman

Pre-pandemic, London bus journeys regularly topped two billion a year. The Tube at the same time was around a billion to a billion two. So the bus network carried roughly double, and got a fraction of the cultural attention.



Corn

That's an enormous gap.



Herman

And he noticed there was exactly one exception. Routemasters. If a Tube strike was on, Routemaster stories would spike. People would read about Routemasters when they wouldn't read about buses generally.



Corn

His line was, 'People didn't care for buses, but they did hold a candle for Routemasters.'



Herman

That's the thesis of the book in one sentence, and he knew it when he wrote it. He'd found the one bus you're allowed to love, and he had a whole supply of them.



Corn

And the timing. The book was commissioned in twenty twenty-one. Which is the year the 15 heritage service was retired.



Herman

April twenty twenty-one. The 15 had been one of the two heritage routes — the other was the 9, and both were established in November twenty five.



Corn

Two thousand and five. Say that again.



Herman

Ah — November two thousand five. My fault. Both heritage routes set up in November two thousand five.



Corn

Which was the same year the last Routemaster came off a regular London route.



Herman

Also correct. Two thousand five was the end. After that, if you wanted to ride a Routemaster on a scheduled London route, the 9 and 15 heritage services were the only way. And in April twenty twenty-one the 15 was retired too.



Corn

So the trigger wasn't nostalgia for his childhood. It was the closure of the last scheduled door through which he could still ride the thing.



Herman

And that reframed the book. He wasn't writing about the Routemaster in service. He was writing about what had already happened to the ones that had left. The route he could still ride was closing. So he wrote the bus's afterlife instead.



Corn

Which is why the entries are so far-flung. Because the afterlife was far-flung.



Herman

Sri Lanka alone. Roughly fifteen hundred British buses sent over there. Forty-one of them Routemasters.



Corn

Forty-one Routemasters in Sri Lanka. That's specific in a way that only a person who'd gone through records would be.



Herman

Just under three thousand Routemasters were built in total. The prototype, RM1, entered service on the eighth of February nineteen fifty-six on route 2. So you can, in principle, account for the fate of the entire population.



Corn

Which is the reason a field guide works as a format. The population is finite.



Herman

Finite, and known. Which means it's actually completable, in a way that a book about London buses generally would not be. He could have written about London buses. He wrote about Routemasters because the Routemaster has an edge. You can finish counting.



Corn

So now we get to the confession.



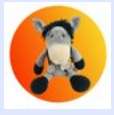
Herman

The reluctant-nerd arc. He spent months insisting — his phrase — 'I'm not a bus nerd, though!' Countless times. He says so himself.



Corn

And then he started asking why.



Herman

His own words, roughly: after a while he started to question why he was so keen to disavow any passion for something he was writing a whole book about.



Corn

That's a very uncomfortable sentence to read about yourself.



Herman

It is, and he puts it in the essay without flinching. And then he does something clever. He describes the stereotype.



Corn

Which is what?



Herman

'Mostly male. Grey-haired. Likes spending their weekends with unwieldy camera drooping round their neck.'



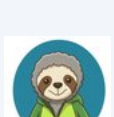
Corn

That's a self-portrait with the age removed. He's describing the thing he's afraid of being.



Herman

And he's doing it with affection, which is the twist. He says their passion for buses is infectious, and that it rekindled his own. The people he was afraid of being are the people who reminded him he already was.



Corn

So the capitulation.



Herman

'I can no longer deny the truth. I am a bus nerd.' And then, and this is the good bit: 'That this realisation has occurred at the same time as me starting to notice a few stray grey hairs might not be a coincidence.'



Corn

He's thirty-something and being told by his own biology that he's the man he claimed not to be.



Herman

He's laughing at himself. That's the important thing. This isn't a solemn confession. It's a man noticing that the man in the mirror has stopped arguing.



Corn

Now, what does this tell us?



Herman

I'll start with the writing, because the writing is easier. The book treats its subject with the seriousness of a field guide. Fifty entries, a real taxonomy, real research, real photographs. He doesn't wink at the reader. He doesn't do the thing where you tell everyone how silly the subject is so they know you're in on it.



Corn

Which takes nerve, because a bus book is exactly the sort of book that a certain kind of writer would defend by mocking.



Herman

He doesn't mock. He treats it as if it's worth what it is. Which is the same instinct he has at the National Gallery. Take an object that some people have written off, look at it properly, and tell a story that surprises the reader.



Corn

And the snobbery the book pushes against.



Herman

Buses carry twice the passengers of the Tube. They serve the outer boroughs, the poorer boroughs, the places the Tube doesn't reach. And culturally, buses are treated as a lower subject. Public transport writing is a genre dominated by trains, trams, and Tube maps. Buses get a fraction of that shelf.



Corn

And the one bus the culture lets you love is the one that hasn't run in twenty years.



Herman

Routemasters came off regular routes in two thousand and five. Half the people in London have never seen one in normal service. And yet the Routemaster is the image people conjure when they hear the word 'London bus'. It's a bus that exists culturally in the past tense and physically in museums, bars, and tea rooms.



Corn

That's a very particular kind of icon. An icon that's been off the streets for two decades and has more cultural weight than the buses that actually carry the city.



Herman

And Rosehill's book is, implicitly, an argument that the buses actually running are worth a hard look too. He just didn't write that book. He wrote the one with the finished population.



Corn

Now he does a thing in the book that I think tells us more about him than the confession does.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

He explains how the Routemaster was built. Using wartime aluminium aircraft technology.



Herman

Yes — the Routemaster body wasn't built like a bus, it was built like a wartime aeroplane. The whole thing was engineered around weight and durability in a way that gave the bus a lifespan nobody expected.



Corn

So you have buses entering service in the fifties that are still structurally sound in twenty twenty-six. Which is what makes the diaspora possible. A bus with a normal lifespan would have been scrapped.



Herman

The book then gets into the supply-chain consequence. Where you get a spare big end for a seventy-year-old commercial vehicle. Why footbrake valves are now in short supply.



Corn

That's a sentence no one writes unless they actually went and asked.



Herman

No. And that's what separates him from the nerd stereotype he was so afraid of. The stereotype wants the bus. Rosehill wants the bus and the man in the workshop who can still fix it.



Corn

Which gets us to the practical detail in the entries. The tea room in Essex is a bus that has to be maintained to keep working as a tea room. The bra-fitting showroom is a bus with electricity and heating and a lease. These are not museum pieces. They're businesses that happen to be buses.



Herman

And if the bus fails, the business fails. Because you can't buy a replacement body for a Routemaster. You buy another Routemaster, or you don't.



Corn

So the whole afterlife of the population rests on a supply of parts and skills that's shrinking every year.



Herman

Which is the saddest and best fact in the book. The bus outlives the network. It doesn't outlive the supply chain.



Corn

Now, the reception. He got praise from Sir Peter Hendy, which is not nothing.



Herman

'A great little book. Buy it.' Four words and a command. Hendy was Network Rail chairman at the time.



Corn

Classic Bus magazine called it 'an amazing offbeat tribute to a legendary bus type'.



Herman

And IanVisits, the London transport blog, said — I like this — 'Probably three-quarters of the stories are ones that you wouldn't expect, and quite a few will have you sitting up in surprise.'



Corn

Three-quarters. So the assumption that a Routemaster book will be fifty tea rooms and a museum is wrong, and the man who said that had read all fifty.



Herman

Which leads us back to the central question. What does the obscure bus connection tell us about the man?



Corn

Try this. He's a writer who spent his career explaining the overlooked thing. Offices nobody asks about. The Harrow that nobody thinks about. And eventually buses — the mode of transport that carries twice the people and gets half the attention.



Herman

Then he had to admit he loved it. Which is the part that makes it a story instead of a career.



Corn

The book is a document of the moment he stopped pretending. That's why it works. If he'd written it from the start as an enthusiast, it'd be a different book — warmer, maybe, but with less friction. The friction is what makes it interesting. You can feel him arguing with himself about the subject on every page, and then deciding to put it in the field-guide format anyway.



Herman

The format itself is the argument. He could have written a memoir of bus-nerdery. He wrote a field guide. The form says: this is a real subject with a real population that can be counted, catalogued and photographed. Which is the most respectful thing you can do for something you love.



Corn

Then he stopped. No second book. The National Gallery job. 'Now in the content trenches.'



Herman

Which I think is the saddest and most honest end to the arc. He learned to love the thing, wrote the best possible book about it, and moved on to something else that needed explaining.



Corn

A one-off. Which is what makes it good.



Hilbert

They're not buses.



Hilbert

The thing people love. It's not the buses. It's the moquette.



Herman

The upholstery.



Hilbert

The seat fabric. Routemaster moquette. I've got four hundred and sixty metres of it.



Corn

Four hundred and sixty metres.



Hilbert

Roughly. It comes in a roll. The pattern's called 'Balmoral'. Red, green, a bit of blue through it. Weighted, proper wool mix, the original contractors' run. They stopped making it. I got mine off a man in Croydon who was clearing out a depot store.



Herman

Where do you keep four hundred and sixty metres of bus seat fabric?



Hilbert

Spare room. On the roll. Standing up. Corn, you'd have seen it — I've walked past the door with it half-open and you've never once asked.



Corn

I assumed it was construction material.



Hilbert

It is. Sort of.



Herman

What are you going to do with it?



Hilbert

Sit on it.



Herman

All of it?



Hilbert

Eventually. I've done the armchair. The headboard's cut. I'm waiting on the right sofa. The point is, Rosehill's got the order wrong.



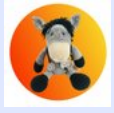
Corn

How's that?



Hilbert

He thinks he wrote the book and then realised he was a nerd. That's not how it works. You're a nerd first. You just haven't said it out loud yet. He was already a nerd when he was doing the essay. He'd already noticed the moquette. Everybody who loves those buses notices the moquette. It's the first thing you touch.



Herman

The denial is a stage, not a phase.



Hilbert

Denial's the first stage. Then you buy four hundred and sixty metres and you stop arguing.



Corn

No further questions.



Herman

The National Gallery could use a man like him. *Stories in Colour*. He's in the content trenches, as the man says, but at least he admitted the thing before he went. That's the difference. You get to the trenches with your name on a book about buses. Better than getting there empty-handed.



Corn

The honest closing thought. A city that runs two billion bus journeys a year still treats buses as culturally invisible next to the Tube. The one bus everyone is allowed to love came off the road in two thousand and five. And the man who noticed that wrote one good book and moved into museum content, which means the bus book is a self-contained artefact of a particular year — not the start of something.



Herman

He's still writing. Just not about buses. Which is his loss and the National Gallery's gain.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing.



Herman

For more along these lines, there's episode thirty-five, The Privacy Gap. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

We'll be back soon.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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