

## Hardcore History: Occupying the Space between Academia and Entertainment

An interview with Dan Carlin, host and creator of the renowned online podcast *Hardcore History*. Carlin has now also written a book based on his podcast.

What happens when half the world's population dies, such as during the plague epidemic? Could your current residence ever be known as the new Troy, years from now? In his podcast *Hardcore History*, which is one of the most listened to podcasts of all time, master storyteller Dan Carlin gives the answers to these questions and “what if”-scenarios. Carlin recently wrote a book based on his podcast, which has been published in the Netherlands this year. Our editors Esther Smeenge and Christiaan Vonk had the opportunity to interview Carlin about his work and his perspectives on history.

### **Could you briefly introduce yourself?**

I'm a former reporter at a television station, who then started doing radio. I did radio for about a dozen years, and then I transitioned to podcasting when podcasting was very young, in 2005. I've been podcasting ever since!

### **What made you decide to switch your career to podcasting instead of being a radio host?**

Radio was frustrating. It used to have a lot of freedom to it, but radio became a sort of constrained environment. Doing radio was less and less creatively enjoyable, and podcasting, even that long ago, just seemed to give you so much space to explore. Podcasting gave me more creative freedom.

Interview Dan Carlin

**When it comes to history, were you also engaged with history when you were a radio host, or is it something you got interested in once you started doing podcasts?**

I talked a lot about current events because we were in a news radio station, but my aim was always to put the current events in some sort of historical context. I was always going back in time to explain how the story got to be the way it was. Also, I was a history major in college, so it was a natural thing for me.

**What exactly is Hardcore History?**

I was already doing podcasts before I started *Hardcore History*, but it sounded a lot like my old radio shows. There were not a lot of new things about it. *Hardcore History* was something we designed specifically to explore the space podcasts gave us. It evolved over time: I was just going to tell my listeners about the little fun and twisty things about history, and because of their feedback it evolved into this monstrous project that it is these days!

**How do you decide which topics to cover in your podcasts?**

I always say that, because you have all of history to choose from, there are a lot of wonderful stories out there. I always pick the events that are fascinating right off the bat, but I have to choose a subject I know something about. I can't pick a topic and then learn everything that I need to know. All the topics I covered are things that were interests of mine at one time or another. Usually, I get the new books and start reading so that I'll know what's changed since the last time I've read about a certain topic. And that's how we do the show!

**What are some of your favorite topics when it comes to history?**

I love the ancient world because it's so bizarre. It's so different from our world, it's like an alien planet, and it's populated by human beings just like us, but they are culturally so different from us. When you start getting close to our time, there are great and fascinating stories out there, but they are usually within parameters that we can relate to. In the ancient world, all bets are off; anything could be going on.

**When it comes to preparing your podcast, how do you choose your sources?**

That's something that grew over time as well as the shows started to become longer and more intense. There's a need to show multiple angles. I always try to get, what I call, "historical empathy." I want to try and see things from multiple viewpoints. I'm not a historian, so I cannot tell you "how things were", but I try to quote different statements and perspectives from historians. A lot of my audience finds it fascinating that historians actually disagree a lot with each other on certain topics. If you're a history fanatic, you'll know this of course, but many of the casual listeners didn't realize that history is not like math; it's not  $2 + 2 = 4$ , but a lot like the news business today where you'll have different news stations giving you different points of view. It's fun, helpful and interesting to show the different viewpoints of stories from the past. When I was a history student, we used to think that historiography, the process of how history is made, was just deadly boring stuff. But actually, we found that the listeners really like it when we talk about the trustworthiness of sources, or biases within sources. Or perhaps things like "is there a propaganda angle in this source?" The listeners really have found that much more interesting than I would've thought, but it is kind of interesting when you think about it. It's not the truth, it's a bunch of different opinions that originate from a bunch of different cultures, and were made by a bunch of different writers. We only have fragments of it sometimes, and at other times it has been translated multiple times. It's actually fascinating, I think, if you can do it the right way.

**You make history podcasts and have majored in history, but you don't call yourself a historian. Why is that?**

Well, I always say that if there's one thing a history major knows, it is what skills you need to have to be a historian. My main focus has always been original work, and you're out there in the field doing all the hard labor of the historian, just like the archeologist is out in the field doing fieldwork by digging up evidence. Thus, I can integrate their work into my podcast. If anything, I'm more like a popular historian, or a history fan, as I feel that it gives me the latitude to explore some of the weirdness and controversial stuff that professional historians might not want to do. I can get into some funky topics sometimes, or angles that are not very academic. I feel like that

I occupy this fun, little space between academia and entertainment; I have a lane of my own, as they say. I love asking little questions and presenting “what if”-scenarios in my podcasts, because I feel like that is what’s really interesting about history. It’s not the names and the dates, but it’s the questions that you come up with when you put your history books down sometimes, and you just think about them. Those analogies can get a bit crazy at times, which is something we always acknowledge, but sometimes it’s the easiest way to visualize something that is otherwise hard to visualize.

**You mentioned that you could be considered a “popular historian.” Could you perhaps elaborate on why you use this term to describe yourself?**

To be a historian, you should have a PhD, probably. However, some of my favorite history books that have come out on the bookshelves were written by people who really knew how to bring out the drama, and to make the past come to life again, but were not necessarily historians. Storytelling is really important. Some of my favorite history teachers might not have been good storytellers; and some of my favorite storytellers might not have been great history teachers! When I got into the news business, I found out later that some of my favorite news reporters were actually history majors themselves. There was something about having a history background, and having your mind think like that, combined with the journalist’s ability to tell a good story. That is my background as well, as someone who has worked in journalism with a history degree. Two jobs I’ve had involve talking about the past and telling interesting stories, and they kind of come together in the podcast. They always used to say that journalism is the first draft of history, so you can kind of see the connection. When I first realized that my favorite news reporters all used to be history majors, I thought to myself “How did I not spot that obvious connection?” but you don’t think about that, and they certainly don’t tell you that in history school, when you’re wondering what you’re going to make a living out of. They should say “Hey, you could become a news reporter!” but I had to figure that out for myself.

**When it comes to popular history, what kind of demographic do you attract?**

I can't pretend to know a lot about my audience. We don't do so much advertising because we don't want to bother our listeners so much. When I started doing the podcast, the listeners used to be tech-savvy employees at Google or Apple, but now that everybody listens to podcasts, there is a much broader audience. As a former radio guy, I'm used to my signal dying out at a certain point. With my podcast it is therefore strange to have an international audience.

**What is it like to convert your ideas from the podcast into a book? How do these ways of working differ from one another?**

Since I'm an old radio guy, I'm a very experienced vocal broadcaster. But when I started the book, I was like the new kid out of college again. So I felt a little uncomfortable at first because writing was an unfamiliar medium for me. It's probably not what people expect to hear, but I was much more tentative when I was writing than when I was speaking; speaking comes so naturally to me. But when you are looking at the same paragraph over and over again it can drive you crazy. Especially the patience and the discipline I admire more and more in other writers.

**When it comes to the doubts you had about your projects at first, in what ways do you think academic historians could benefit from your podcast and podcasts in general?**

I don't know if academic historians need to be listening to my podcast. But I always had the thought that when you look back at your time in college, you can probably think of a couple professors that really made a difference. It's a shame their talent was wasted in front of classes of about 30. If it were today, I would ask my favorite professors to come on my podcast so that millions can listen. Asking me if academics need to be listening to podcasts, I would say that a few amongst them should do a podcast and put their ideas out there. It's all about getting people interested, once they are interested you need to help people to get them to their next place.

Interview Dan Carlin

**When reaching out to new people or getting people interested in history, I notice that history can be quite complicated if you are not familiar with it. What is your approach to making history comprehensible to these people?**

I have a theory that in the US, the idea behind teaching pre-college level students about history is that every citizen should know some important historical events about America's history. My argument is that it does not matter what you think students should learn if they are going to forget it five minutes later. Then I ask myself, what is it you are trying to teach when you teach history? Well, here is the way I look at it. You are trying to teach how things evolve and how they change; how things lead to other things. Everybody is interested in history, because history is everything. So when reaching out to people who are unfamiliar with history, my approach is to try and find what a person already likes. So when you are teaching the history of this subject, you are teaching about historical processes and not a random collection of facts.

**For my last question, since your book is being published in Dutch as well, have you ever been to the Netherlands or considered going?**

Yes, as a matter of fact I have been to Rotterdam before. I actually loved that part of the world. So, to answer your question, it's been too long and I would like to get back.