



By David Marchese

April 25, 2026

Bob Odenkirk has had one of show business's most wonderfully improbable careers. After decades as a cult hero in the comedy world — his '90s HBO sketch series, “Mr. Show With Bob and David,” is the apex of his work in that realm — he transitioned to mainstream success as, of all things, a serious dramatic actor. First in a supporting part as the amoral lawyer Saul Goodman on “Breaking Bad,” and then, to further critical and popular acclaim, as the star of that show's spinoff, “Better Call Saul.”

Lately, his career has taken another turn that few could've seen coming: to action movie star. In the “Nobody” movies, he played a family man/assassin. In “Normal,” which is in theaters now, he plays an emotionally hollowed-out small-town Minnesota sheriff who finds renewed purpose when he's forced to bloodily face off against, among other baddies with ill intentions, the yakuza.

You might think that at 63 years old, Odenkirk would be all gumdrops and lollipops about how his career — and life — have shaken out. But, in the best way, you'd be wrong.

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Before we started recording the interview, you were telling me about a novel you just read and how it affected your thinking about something important that happened to you.

Can you pick up where you left off? Yeah, so almost four years ago, I had this heart incident. One of the tributaries to my widow-maker artery was shut down completely by a plaque buildup. I went down on the set of “Better Call Saul,” and it was really scary, especially for everyone around me. I've talked about it many times, and people have asked me, How did that affect you? People want to hear that you saw a white light. Then they would love to hear that you watched your whole life pass before you on a film reel. That would have been cool, but that didn't happen. It was a blank for me. I came to, essentially, a week later.

So I've tried to answer this question for people, How did it impact you? And I've had a hard time because I've always felt I don't do justice to the experience. OK, so then I'm reading this novel [Odenkirk holds up the book], “On the Calculation of Volume,” and the character in this book is having a very unique experience of time. She's relating her experience of reliving the same day over and over. And I come to these passages and I'm

like, *That's* how I felt! That's *exactly* how I felt for weeks after having this heart attack. There are passages that I marked because I've never been able to express this to people.

Can you read one? Yeah. She says:

“I had a day to go and I went with it. There was no plan. There was an outline, one which I could follow, floating, gently. There was no goal, no prey to be caught. I was not a circling raptor, a vulture, a shark, a big cat poised to spring. I was not on my guard. This was something else. I was on a journey. On my way home, I thought. I was traveling on an open ticket, with no itinerary. I journeyed through the minutiae of the streets in a universe replete with minor incidents, a host of objects and occurrences and sensations all crowded together in my memory.”

Gosh, to hit upon that! I just couldn't believe how much these passages expressed this way of living that had something to do with experiencing time — this term “being present” — but it took no effort. How amazing it was! It was a beautiful way to live in the world. And I knew it would go away, too. I have to try to remember it. I have to try to live this way. The degree of freshness to the world around me and the amazement and the beauty of it was something I got to be in!



Bob Odenkirk in “Normal.” Magnolia Pictures

That feeling was going to fade. Can you get it back? Without ketamine? [Laughs] I think

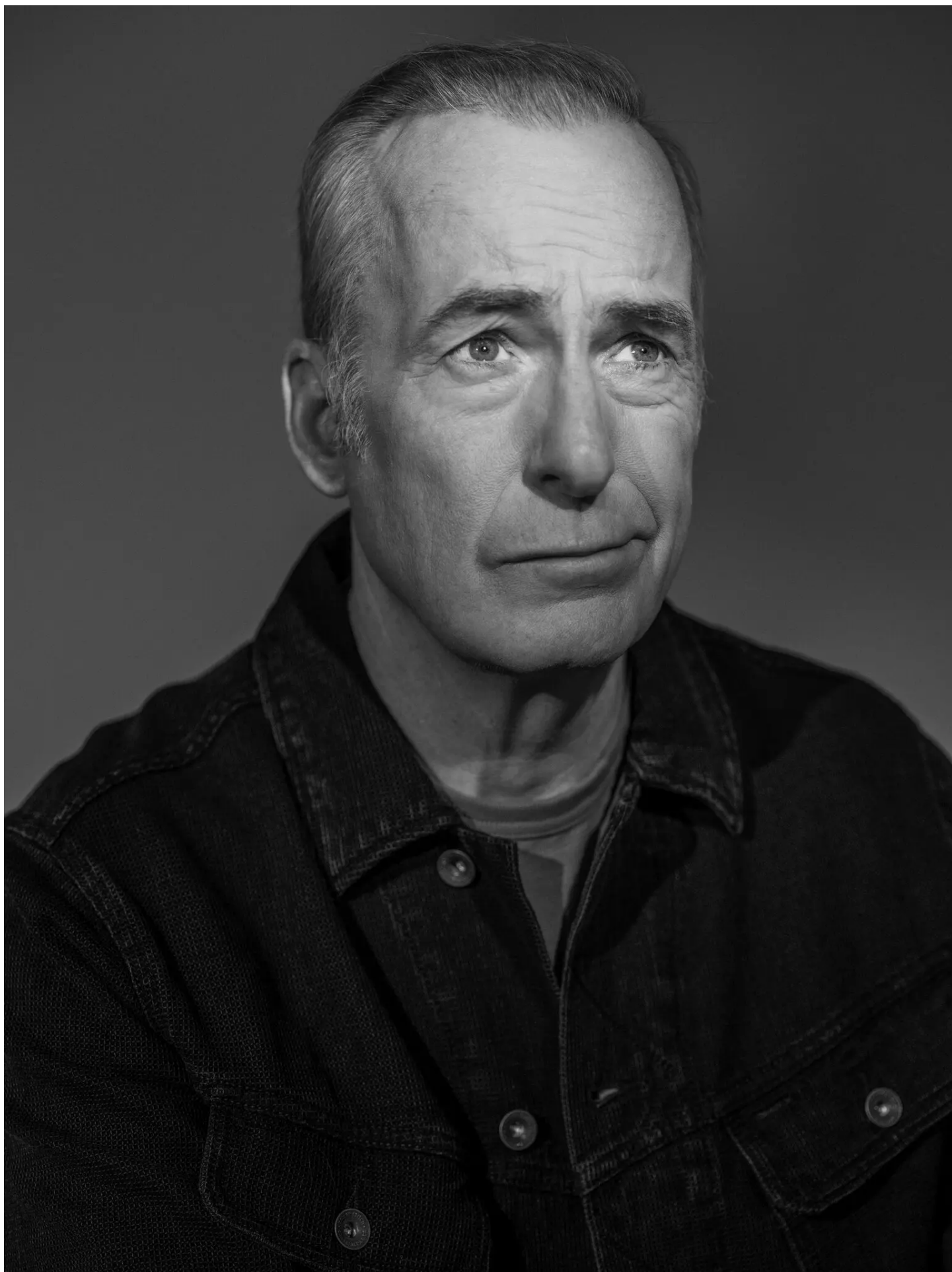
you can. I really do. Just reading those passages made me go: *Oh, right, that's what's going on here. That's how I can be in the moment and live in the world. I should challenge myself to do it more.* But even the burden of saying I should challenge myself immediately starts to ruin it with guilt and responsibility. [Laughs] You know, she says in the book, no, I'm not a raptor. I am not ready to spring. I'm *not*. We live in a world that is about achievement. You don't want to live without purpose, but all we're about is getting. It seems that the only way to feel of value is becoming a millionaire. Who wants to be a millionaire? Well, I guess everybody. But who wants to be happy? How about that for a TV show?

Well, it's possible that the path to being a millionaire is clearer than the path to being happy. Oh, it surely is. Most people think being a millionaire is what makes you happy, but go talk to a millionaire.

I would guess that you're a millionaire. Sure, I've done all right.

Did that make you happier? There's no question that the security that you feel from not being afraid of a health issue or housing is a great comfort and helps you to be more at peace with life. It's just not as much help as you think it should be. Yes, you can eat steak every night, I guess. But then you get sick of steak.

There was a clip of you from an interview you did earlier this year that's been kicking around my head since I saw it. You were being interviewed by Mike Birbiglia, and he asks if there's anyone you're jealous of. You say you're jealous of anyone who has young kids at home, because when you had young kids, you had no questions about what your purpose was. Did you understand that in the moment? Or was it only in retrospect? No, I understood it in the moment. I absolutely knew this was the best time I'll ever have in my life. No question. Also, it's not just a sense of feeling valued and purposeful. It's entertainment. There's nothing more entertaining than a little kid. It's funny, I left that interview with Mike Birbiglia, and I remember thinking, *They'll cut that out, because isn't that kind of depressing that this guy who has had so much achievement in his career, that that's the most rewarding thing?* Saying that the best chapter of my life is behind me, that's kind of sad. But what can I say? That's how I feel. There is not a freaking thing I can do that is going to match the value that I felt of being a parent of kids between 0 and around 14, 15.



Devin Oktar Yalkin for The New York Times

It would have been more depressing if you said the thing that brought you the most value and purpose in your life was “Better Call Saul”! The biggest thing I’ve done so far was “Better Call Saul,” but I forget that I was in this show completely. I lived so much of my life before that, and I achieved things that I cared about a great deal, almost to a strange extent. When I was writing my memoir, I wrote so much about sketch comedy, and I called it “Comedy, Comedy, Comedy, Drama” because I was worried that people would go, Oh, this is the “Better Call Saul” guy, I’m going to read about his journey to being on that show. And it’s like, no, I’m going to talk about 45 to 50 years of caring about and writing sketch comedy. I’m barely going to talk about the thing that you know me from, because that was such a small part of my life. Still, when I was writing the book, I was thinking: *There’s something wrong with this guy. This guy is like a broken toy. He keeps going in one direction.*

On the idea that you were a broken toy that kept pursuing sketch comedy — I’m glad you did, because I’ve really gotten a lot out of your comedy over the years. To the extent that when I watch a movie like “Normal” or the “Nobody” films, I still have moments when I think, *It’s weird that Bob Odenkirk is blowing people away.* It’s very weird.

What sort of cultural itch do you think is being scratched by these action movies about unassuming middle-aged men whose inner hero comes out? I’ve thought about this a lot. It’s wish fulfillment. First of all, for an evil so clear and obvious that it’s worthy of our anger. And I’m not magically delicious. I’m not super handsome, young, muscled up, any of that. You can relate. We go through life and there are frustrations everywhere and you can’t act on those frustrations in a physical way. In a movie, you *can*.

Prior to this big, relatively late career bump you had, did you have moments where you thought, *I don’t know if I’m going to get the success I want?* I did have doubts and concerns, but they weren’t about that. My bigger problem was once I was finished with “Mr. Show,” it was like: Now what? Now what do you want to do that’s going to drive you through the next 20 years of a career? And I was lost, because I had already achieved everything that I was aiming for in sketch comedy.

But what gives your life purpose now? Trying to find the next thing to do that will give it purpose? [Laughs]

You’ve had the opportunity to work with people that I would consider comedic geniuses, like Janeane Garofalo or Chris Elliott, who had success but never went gangbusters. You’ve also worked with people like Ben Stiller and Adam Sandler and Jack Black, who have gotten as big as someone in comedy can get. Do you have an understanding of why

one person and not another? Is there something innate that leads to massive success?

Some of the people I've known who have great talent and haven't achieved what you might call massive success, my experience of those people is that they don't really want it. There comes a point in their journey where they see this thing and they go: *I don't want that much pressure. I don't want that many people looking at me. I want 15 million people, not 800 million people.* I do think everybody has a sense of this threshold.

When my kids were about 8 and 10, we were on a vacation. We were in a supermarket, and somebody came over to talk to me because they knew me from "Mr. Show." This was before "Breaking Bad." I thought, This is the perfect level of success, because I can go out in the world and be myself. If there's a person in the room who knows who I am, I can tell you who they are: They will have a tattoo from one of my shows. They will love me a lot. And everyone else in the room will not know me at all and I can just be myself.

Then, with "Breaking Bad," you get into a level of now I'm in an elevator at the mall and everyone knows who I am. But *how* they know me is wildly varied. The person who's watched "Mr. Show" knows how I see the world. The person who knows me from "Better Call Saul," that's not even close. They don't know me. They know this character I played that is not me at all.

So when you ask about that, part of the question is: Is there a choice? Do you get to see this thing coming your way? Do you get to choose? I'm going to go ahead and be more famous and live in a world where there's a little bit of a discordancy between who I am and how I'm known? I get why people go: *No thank you. I'm going to stay in my littler world where how you know me means something to me. That I'm OK with.* I don't know if this chapter of our interview is weird.

Clockwise, from top: Odenkirk, Holly Wortell, Tim Meadows, Jill Talley and Chris Farley in

the Second City revue “Flag Smoking Permitted in Lobby Only” in 1990. The Second City

Weird is good. I’ve seen you mention that sketch comedy tends to be a younger person’s game. You’re 63 now. Is your relation to sketch comedy different than it used to be? I still have an instinct for it. But I do feel what I’ve said is true, that doing sketch comedy when you get older is a little strange.

Why? A young person’s energy is right for it. It fits. When you get older, it’s like: What are you doing? Why are you being so silly? It loses something.

What comedy speaks to you now? Honestly, the comedy that speaks to me most right now is a thing called “On Cinema.” It’s a pretend movie review show that’s on the internet by my friend Tim Heidecker. This is kind of a sketch comic thing, drawn out and slowed down. I think sketch comedy, I’m sorry to say, is the most profound expression of human existence there is.

Really? I don’t think any Kubrick movie or Freudian analysis or —

Shakespeare? Or Shakespeare, says as much about how humans operate and what is the ultimate problem with us as a species than sketch comedy. I wish it was not true. I wish that we were worthy of being taken apart and observed in subtle and complex ways. But I don’t think so. I think that ultimately there is nothing more profound about people than you can say in a sketch. They’re [expletive] idiots! People are sadly limited, so limited that you can define them and you can share everything that’s important about them in four minutes.

Maybe this is related: Near the end of your memoir, you write that show business is not curing cancer and that it’s a distraction, “which is inarguably key to life on earth because life on earth is so bleak and painful and the only and best response to that is to LOOK AWAY!” Yeah. [Long pause] You want me to repudiate that statement?

I wondered if you were being sarcastic when you wrote that. It struck me as — Bleak?

Pretty bleak. Too sad? I don’t know what to say, man. I pretty much do think that’s true. Obviously, there’s joy and reward in being alive and in the ways in which we look away to transform that horror — *the horror, the horror* — into something good, entertaining, comforting to another person, that’s beautiful. That’s the joy of life: turning [expletive]

into gold. Comedy gold, whatever gold you can make it into. To me, that's the good part.

I don't know. One of the challenges of this interview was that I have no unified field theory of myself. As you can see from my career, I go in a lot of directions and I don't have a very solid justification for the whole thing. The only thing I can say is there's a great risk that I am willing to take because I don't think much of myself. In other words, let's say I made a huge ass of myself in trying to do action films. So what? I can still do comedy and claw my way back. The bigger question for me is, What do I do now? I guess I have to do what I've always done: look for the next thing that seems curious, worthwhile, surprising. I'll have a hard time beating action movies, I can tell you that. I will have a hard time finding anything I can pursue that is as far away from where I started as that genre of film.

Devin Otkar Yalkin for The New York Times

You know, we talked a little bit about the beginning of your career with the alternative comedy scene. Back then, it was pretty clear what alt comedy was alternative to: a slick, show-business style of comedy. What comedy would someone be rebelling against now? I

think the manosphere comedy was the reactionary comedy movement of the last five years. I don't think it has a lot of depth, so it's running past pretty quickly. It's dissipating. But it was a powerful movement. What's next? I don't know. But what I call the alternative comedy scene, this world of Janeane Garofalo, Margaret Cho, Kathy Griffin, Patton Oswalt, Greg Behrendt, David Cross and Marc Maron — that kind of infiltrated comedy slowly and then it kept proliferating. It became podcasts. Then it became all of comedy. The format of podcasts lent itself to a lot of what we were doing, which was more impromptu, genuine, personal sharing. Now it's everywhere.

Why don't you find the manosphere comedy to be interesting? Well, it's definitely about low-hanging fruit. Like, literally on the ground. It's fruit that's on the ground rotting. Pick that [expletive] up and throw it at people. I don't have a lot of opinions on those guys. It's a movement that I'm happy to see transforming into something else and dissipating.

Why do you think it's dissipating? Because it's a dead end. It's just going to be boring after a while. It's like, let's use the stage to be as crude as we can be and as clumsy and oafish as we can be. That's always *kind* of funny. It's funny to hear that voice, but not from everybody. I think anything you do on a stage is a performance. That sounds obvious. But in other words, if you want to say something honest, then you should get off a comedy stage. A lot of comedians get credited for being honest or they get lambasted for the things they say in their act and are asked to explain or justify it. And the bottom line to me is if you're on that comedy stage, that's a *show*. You are not you. You are pretending to be a person named you. Everything you say is a construct. If you don't like that, and you want to tell an audience something genuine, earnest and honest, then get off that stage, because that stage is only a show. It is not real, and it is not genuine, and it is not direct, no matter how much you act like it is. I wish everyone saw it that way. If you know that,

then you can safely watch almost anything. It can have a lot of benefits. But the problem we got into was — and maybe the alt-comedy scene led us to it — a sense that whatever’s said on that stage is incredibly genuine and direct.

If you were to ask someone like Dave Chappelle, “Are you talking honestly to your audience?” I think he would say yeah. No. I think he’d say, “I’m performing.” I really do. I mean, we should ask him. My friend David Cross gets onstage and he says crazy stuff and he doesn’t believe everything he says. He just knows it’s a point of view that is funny to express and that, to some extent, people need to hear or be surprised by to get some perspective on their own point of view. I’m just thinking everybody has to understand what that line is. It got blurred in a way that I think was very damaging to what we can do as artists. We need to be able to do and say crazy [expletive].

Odenkirk in “Better Call Saul.” Lewis Jacobs/AMC, via Everett Collection

You’re saying that one of the negative repercussions of alternative comedy was that its emphasis on authenticity — or seeming authenticity — led people to give too much credence to what comedians were saying? And it led to line-blurring and censoriousness that’s damaging to comedy? I’m also saying that it goes two ways. The audience has to chill out and watch it as a performance, but the performer, if they really have something to say, if they want people to understand it directly, they should get off that comedy stage and say it somewhere else, where it’s *me* talking, genuinely *me*, and not for the sake of laughs.

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There's a holistic observation I want to make about our conversation. You talked about how the best times in your life were when your kids were little. Those times are over. You said the art form you love the most, sketch comedy, is a young man's game. That's over for you. Life? It's a farce. Yeah.

I know middle age may be a time of resignation or acceptance. But is there anything in your life or work now that makes you think, *This is great*? Or is it just managed decline? God, I'm sorry to be a bummer.

It's real. If you want to hear something positive, here's my positive.

Hit me. In the face of what I consider the limitations of being a person, which are strict and seem immutable, we've got to keep trying. I don't know what the future is if we don't hope to be better than we are right now. So yeah, I do have some wind beneath my wings. Just a draft. There's a breeze beneath my wings.

Before, you said that sketch comedy was the most profound vessel for — I know, David. I do stand by what I said. All the philosophy in the world, all the theories in the world, all the grand pronouncements —

The greatest poets. All the great poetry. Existential thinking.

Aretha Franklin's voice. All of Abraham Lincoln's speeches. It all boils down to Shakespeare's sound and fury, signifying nothing. You might as well laugh at it.

This interview has been edited and condensed from two conversations. Listen to and follow "The Interview" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, iHeartRadio or Amazon Music. Follow us on Instagram and TikTok.

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David Marchese is a writer and co-host of The Interview, a regular series featuring influential people across culture, politics, business, sports and beyond.