H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jessica Abel. *Out on the Wire: The Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio.* New York: Broadway Books, 2015. xi + 226 pp. $18.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-385-34843-0.

Reviewed by Sam Backer (Johns Hopkins University)

Published on H-Podcast (March, 2020)

Commissioned by Robert Cassanello (University of Central Florida)

By this point, most podcasts are no longer really "podcasts." Or to put it another way, when you tell someone that you're listening to a podcast, they now need to ask "what kind?"—the loose cohesion that once existed between technology, format, and aesthetics has almost completely vanished, leaving behind an increasing proliferation of distinct styles, forms, and genres. It wasn't always this way. When podcasts first emerged into national consciousness on the back of the massive success of 2014's *Serial*, they were primarily associated with a single, specific approach to production. A vibrant, expertly produced style that focused on character, voice, and narrative, it was carried by a set of shows that emerged from the nexus of NPR/ *This American Life* to (at least for a moment) define a medium.

Jessica Abel's graphic novel (graphic essay?) *Out on the Wire,* published in 2015, is a fascinating look at this early period of what she refers to as "narrative nonfiction audio stories" (p. 10). A follow-up to a comic exploring the ins-and-outs of the pioneering public radio show *This American Life* that Abel had created in collaboration with host Ira Glass during the early '90s, *Out on the Wire* dramatically expands the scope of inquiry. Interviewing a variety of leading producers from shows such as *This American Life*, *Radiolab*, *Planet Money*, and *Snap Judgment*, Abel attempts to get to the heart of their distinctive art by comparing the concrete details of their various approaches to writing, editing, and interviewing. Created in the years just before the massive expansion of podcasts swamped the once-intimate scene, in today's context, the book offers a clarifying distillation of the aesthetic approach that structured a highly influential strand of audio production. In doing so, it reveals many of the strengths, as well as some of the weaknesses, of a nonfiction genre that has done a great deal to define the intellectual discourse of the past decade.

According to Abel, a shared dedication to "telling a story" is at the core of this generation of producers—there are "propulsive and revealing tales," "beautiful, personal, direct stories," "first-person stories—told live," and (as a general description) "stories that ask big questions" (p. 42). For those who know the shows discussed in the book, this is by no means an inaccurate description. Breaking with traditions of a medium typically associated with the aesthetics of broadcast, one built around professional speakers whose words are aimed at a vast, invisible audience, these programs transformed radio by radically centering the act of listening. Rather than another member

of a vast group, audiences are placed at the tip of the reporter's microphone, fully focused on craggy details of an individual voice. As a result of this conceptual shift, these programs enabled a remarkable expansion of what could count as a story, let alone an engrossing one. The most revealing anecdotes in this regard come from the shows that push this question the furthest—the insightful discussion of how producers like ***Planet Money***'s David Kestenbaum or Jad Abumrad of ***Radiolab*** transform economic and scientific concepts into compelling narratives is worth the price of admission alone.

The focus on story, Abel suggests, runs through every element of radio production, from the initial pitch of a segment or episode to interviews, music, and production. This style of radio, she tells us, never simply has the topic "X happened" or "a story about X." Instead, she finds, it always requires a second part, a hook that explains why the topic is interesting. "I'm doing a story about X," she quotes Alex Blumberg of Planet Money explaining, "and what is interesting about it is Y" (p. 57). That Y, he says, is the real story. The rest of the process, from gathering tape to arranging a musical backdrop, is about constantly refining those two components, ceaselessly sifting and arranging and rethinking in order to create product capable of entrancing the audience. The ultimate goal is to create the mythical "driveway moment," in which the listener, having parked his or her car, sits there with the radio on, unable to pull away from the program.

An exploration of this honing process takes up the bulk of the book. Seamlessly interweaving the creative process from a series of quite different programs, Abel pulls together a compelling series of mediations on the creative process, filled with both concrete suggestions applicable to anyone engaged in such a project (always play it for someone else, never underestimate the benefit of a good editor), and moments of genuine beauty. The most striking of these may be the visual swirl that surrounds Jad Abumrad's discussion of what he calls "the German Forest." The term is ***Radiolab***'s name for points of fear and failure and confusion that are inevitably part of a genuine creative process. Abumrad believes this moment is a necessary component for anything that pushes beyond the entirely rote. At this point, Abel turns reflexive, connecting her own process in the construction of the book with the very topic that she is undertaking to explore. The result is both moving and inspiring, an exemplary moment of the fusion between word, idea, and image.

It is a testament to the strength of Abel's book that it brings the widely divergent creators being interviewed into such close conversation that it becomes possible to grasp some of the underlying dynamics that unite their art as a whole. In doing so, however, she also reveals some of the real intellectual issues that lie at its core. The idea of character is a critical element in all of this, perhaps (besides "story") the single most important concept to the many producers interviewed. A character is the person who is at the core of a story, the person to whom a story happens. That doesn't need to be an actual person, it's important to say—financial capital, for instance, is the character at the core of many episodes of ***Planet Money***. Even when the story is about something more abstract, the focus on character pushes producers to connect their stories to individual experience—to the people investigating, or exploring, or explaining it.

But while, without a doubt, there is a profound benefit to the vast expansion of potential topics that this approach to storytelling has enabled, it can also bring with it a troubling desire for simplification. Not everything is a character, and not every narrative is capable of being reduced to the streamlined flow necessary to create a "driveway moment." At its worst, this generation of audio storytelling celebrates the individual voice at the expense of social context, and pushes for connection rather than complexity. Indeed, the very success of such an aesthetic—the naturalness and power of its sonic approach—can make it difficult to grasp

the full extent to which its narratives have been shaped and controlled by producers.

From time to time, Abel's interviewees bump up against these questions, and while she includes their clearly expressed doubts, the overall rush of the exposition quickly pushes past them. The best editors and producers, *Out on the Wire* demonstrates, do not simply refine an interviewee's words. Rather, they remake them entirely, stripping the human voice from the control of the speaker and bending it to the will of the story. Julia Witt, a producer for *Snap Judgment*, explains that "when you change the order of something because [the subject] didn't necessary choose the most powerful way to say it, you enable them to be heard the way it *seems* they intended." This process, she notes, is "where things get a little hairy" (p. 106). A similar dynamic is explored in the use of sound and music to frame a radio narrative. In another of the book's most dynamic segments, Abel cuts between the imagined visuals of a violent firefight in an Israeli café and the gleeful producer bringing it to life through homemade sound effects. At once a testament to the ingenuity behind the audio, it is also a jarring reflection of the space between the apparent authenticity of the voice and the complex art necessary to make it seem that way.

This type of elision and shaping is, of course, essential to any creative act, and certainly is an integral part of any narrative product. What seems to set these producers apart, however, is how sure they seem that this act is done without cost, that the transformation of reality into a story is, almost by definition, to the benefit of both. This is not to say that the process of producing the story is without doubt and struggle—*Radiolab*'s "German Forest" reflects the centrality of genuine soul-searching to this type of work. But the end result, in which people can connect, can lose themselves in the pleasurable flow of connection? That is never questioned.

And maybe it should be. As podcasts continue to grow into an increasingly central element of the humanities (a trend that shows every sign of increasing), it is precisely their ability to generate this type of audience engagement that is often held up as their fundamental promise. In a world in which the humanities are routinely described as "in crisis," who wouldn't want that narrative firepower on their side? It seems important, however, to consider the genre on its own terms, and to think about what kinds of possibilities, core commitments, and values might be challenged by its embrace. That does not just go for the humanities, either. Podcasts have not just grown into a multi-million-dollar industry. They have also become a central medium for our time, determining the way a generation learns, speaks, and thinks. Given all this, it seems critical to engage more intensively with the history of the form, to consider what kinds of assumptions—about society, about individuality, about authenticity—are incorporated into its generic structure. *Out on the Wire* is remarkable in its ability to distill thoughts, aesthetics, and processes of many of the creators most influential on these developments. In doing so, it offers a vital opportunity to begin to ask a broader series of questions about their work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-podcast

Citation: Sam Backer. Review of Abel, Jessica. *Out on the Wire: The Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio.* H-Podcast, H-Net Reviews. March, 2020.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54730

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.