

Siobhán McHugh. *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories through Sound.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. 320 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-20877-2.



Reviewed by Dan R. Morris (Podcast Magazine)

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The rise of podcasting has been nothing short of meteoric in the last ten years. As with YouTube, the barriers to entry to the podcasting world include little more than a phone or recording device and internet access. Because of that over 2.4 million podcasts are now entertaining 100 million listeners. Siobhan McHugh has been an integral part of podcasting's evolution since her foray into radio in 1981. In her narrative/memoir, *The Power of Podcasting*, McHugh walks along with the reader as she recounts the milestones that morphed podcasting into what it is today.

To tell the full story of podcasting she has created four distinct narratives that are woven through the book from beginning to end. While the book is structurally divided into ten chapters, in reality the book doesn't need chapters as the four themes are woven without regard to chapter names or breaks. The four main narratives of the book are: the history and evolution of podcasting, the art of crafting an audio story, lessons for podcasters, and McHugh's personal experiences.

The Power of Podcasting draws you in from the very first words. McHugh storyboards a plot-line from an audio editor's point of view and explains the options she has in building that story. She discusses the words that can be edited out of interviews to bring life, gravity, and depth to the podcast. She discusses where, when, and why she might add music and sound effects. And along the way she ponders the precarious role the editor has in making decisions that can truly alter the experience for the listener. In other words, she ponders the power of the podcast editor.

It is after she sets the mood with the brilliant opening scene that she begins to weave the four main narratives. Her story of the evolution of podcasting begins back in the days of radio, continues through the invention of the RSS, and finishes with the current state of podcasting. The story covers the early adopters, important players, and first podcasts of the big radio stations across the globe. McHugh then spends a great deal of time on the moment that changed everything in the podcast industry, the arrival of *Serial*. Her experience and

global perspective make this part of the book beyond thorough.

The strongest plotline of the book is about crafting an audio story. Every chapter in some form or another covers a skill or insight needed in audio storytelling. McHugh uses actual before and after scripts to show what kinds of things were done in crafting the story. The creation of a soundscape, interviewing skills, the use of pauses to add emphasis, and deciding how to cut interviews down to mere phrases are all explored in great detail throughout the book. Sometimes it feels like the reader is getting a front row seat to the greatest behind-the-scenes moments of podcast editing.

McHugh's memoirs constitute the book's third plotline. Few have been as involved as she was in the evolution of the medium. Stories she has worked on, memorable interviews, impactful moments of podcasting, and highlights of award-winning podcasts are peppered throughout the 282 pages. However, some of the projects she references in the book, like *RadioDoc Review*, are cited so often that the references begin to read like promotional copy. She also weaves in issues she has personally encountered from a podcast perspective, such as the abortion laws in Ireland, Aboriginal culture, and the lack of multicultural representation in podcasting.

The final narrative and smaller portion of the book consists of her notes to podcasters, which are told partially within the main storyline but also in a series of vignettes that separate the chapters. The book doesn't talk about the building blocks of podcasting like "how to choose a microphone or hosting plan" but instead takes on the next steps of the process, including determining how to monetize, decide a show's length, whether to do one episode or a series of episodes, and, finally, how to find an audience. This part of the book reads more like a series of unrelated blog posts that seem like they were included simply to add girth to the book. They do nothing to add depth to the "power

of podcasting" theme and seem targeted to a different audience.

The book's title, "the power of podcasting," is the least explored topic. McHugh does highlight the intimacy that exists between a host and listener as the true hallmark of podcasting. And she identifies the feedback loop provided by the internet as being a feature of podcasting that makes it different and more powerful than other mediums. But the book does little else to prove the power of podcasting over other forms of audio like radio, although she does frequently mention how many thousands or millions of downloads the podcasts she mentions achieved.

This book is really written for the generation of people who took part in the radio-to-podcast evolution and are still active in the podcast community today. Much attention is paid to the people and podcasts that created pivot points in that progression of podcasting. Readers brand-new to the podcast industry will most likely fail to grasp a good deal of the book as the book largely assumes the reader knows who the players are and why they are mentioned. For instance, an interview with James Cridland is randomly added to chapter 8 (p. 214) without giving context to the role James plays in today's podcasting world, other than the fact that he runs a newsletter.

The book is also written in the first person and reads very much like a stream-of-consciousness piece, or a blog for McHugh's fans and readers. Statements like "I have no way of proving it, but I just think ... " (p. 27) and "my manager lied about having approved the guest" (p. 59) make it far from an academic book. She also uses the platform to deliver her personal opinion on social and political issues. Furthermore, McHugh was directly or indirectly involved in almost every anecdote related, whether by actually working on the project team or through friendship with the person highlighted, making the book a very personal account. That personal aspect may have also created some blind spots.

In one of the failures of the book, McHugh does not explore what podcasting has done for the blind and visually impaired community, which is to make stories that were traditionally made with video now fully engageable as audio. She mentions Malcom Gladwell's book *Talking to Strangers* (2019) but doesn't mention the impact podcasting has made on audiobooks, as most clearly indicated through Gladwell's audiobook version of *Talking to Strangers*.

Another blind spot an independent podcaster will quickly notice in the stories and advice is that the story is being told from someone with a corporate podcasting background. Most of what she recalls and suggests about putting together a podcast is too expensive for the everyday podcaster. Production teams, sound editors, story editors, field recording, and foreign travel for interviews is largely beyond the budget of 99 percent of podcasters today.

Finally, while the book mentions the Spanish-language learning tool that *Radio Ambulante* created for her listeners, it fails to mention the impact podcasts have had on language learning. There are now thousands of full books read aloud as podcasts that language learners use as they read along with the book to hear inflection, tone, punctuation, and pronunciation. And soon podcasts may be the reason dead languages make a comeback.

In conclusion, *The Power of Podcasting* recounts the incredible journey podcasting has taken from its birth through today. While that tale could be told by many, hearing it from someone with such intimate knowledge brings a sense of warmth and personality. It is like unearthing a time capsule and being part of the action all at once. If you've been a podcast fan for some time and are familiar with some of the famous shows like *Serial*, *S-Town*, and *The Daily*, you'll thoroughly enjoy this walk-through.

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

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