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Editorial: How Women are Reclaiming their Power in the Podcast Sphere

Siobhán McHugh
University of Wollongong

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Abstract

This issue considers intimate stories, mostly by women - particularly germane in this era of #MeToo.

Keywords

personal storytelling, audio storytelling, women's stories, podcasting

EDITORIAL:

How Women are Reclaiming their Power in the Podcast Sphere

More through serendipity than design, stories by and about women predominate in this issue of *RadioDoc Review*. They include stories of awful violence and of peaceful death, of resistance and survival, of skullduggery and murder, and of love in all its mystifying forms: families dealing with loss, daughters seeking to understand mothers, a granddaughter honouring her grandmother's full life. The settings range from China, Pakistan and Australia to the US, UK and France. This "extraordinary flowering of intimate storytelling, much of it told by women" flows from the new and untrammelled freedoms of the digital era, argues eminent media studies scholar Michele Hilmes. Many of the stories critiqued in this issue would probably not have been commissioned by the male-dominated public radio sector of old; others would have contravened the unspoken "kids in the car" code that restricted explicit or adult content on the radio.

Hilmes explores two very different works: "A Life Sentence: Victims, Offenders, Justice And My Mother" by Samantha Broun and Jay Allison (Transom.org, US, 2016, 55mins) and "Mariya" by Mariya Karimjee, Kaitlin Prest, and Mitra Kaboli (The Heart, Radiotopia.fm, US, 2016, 35mins). Aesthetically, they are poles apart. *A Life Sentence* weaves together the personal and the political, using archival audio, interview and a strong anchoring narration by producer Samantha Broun, who is part of the philanthropic US public radio organisation, Transom.org, based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Her co-producer, Jay Allison, who has been described as "the godfather of public radio", has over four decades' experience in making audio. "My favourite thing to do is to collaborate because that opens my mind beyond my own thinking," Allison told me when I visited Woods Hole in 2011. Here, he provides a valuable counterpoint to Broun's tense recounting of a trauma her mother survived. *Mariya* is an almost monotonal yet mesmerising account of one woman's attempt to understand Female Genital Mutilation and its transgenerational impact in her own family. As Hilmes notes, "both stories plunge us into the dark complexities of power and victimisation, innocence and complicity, love and pain."

"Swansong" by Hana Walker-Brown (Falling Tree Productions and BBC Radio 4, UK, 2016, 28mins) and "Losing Yourself" by Ibbby Caputo (Scene on Radio, US, 2016) are both compelling meditations by young women on the subject of death. Other than that they are very different pieces. Walker-Brown builds a dreamy, tender picture of a family gathered at the bedside of the terminally ill yet composed matriarch, there to honour her mostly joyful life. As Canadian producer Cristal Duhaine writes in her critique, "Grandmothers are easy to love, but Hana's was someone you'd spend your Saturday night with." Caputo meanwhile uses the raw intensity of an audio diary to convey the terror of a young woman diagnosed with cancer. Both production approaches are effective, says Duhaine. "Whereas *Swansong* builds its experience through layers, the emotional intensity of *Losing Yourself* comes from its bareness."

Families grieving the loss of a loved one are at the core of two Australian podcasts, Bowraville (*The Australian*, 2016) and Phoebe's Fall (Fairfax Media, 2016), reviewed by investigative journalist Wendy Carlisle. Interestingly, both were made by newspapers, not broadcast organisations, an increasingly common trend, as the success of podcasts by newspapers such as *The New York Times* (The Daily), the *LA Times* (Dirty John) and the *Atlanta Constitution Journal* (Breakdown) shows. But print journalists do not morph

overnight into sophisticated audio operators: they either get audio production training, as did Breakdown host Bill Rankin, or they collaborate with experienced audio producers – *The Daily* employs about eight audio staff and it shows, in the deft deployment of actuality, real “tape” excerpts and carefully placed and tonally apt music. With *Bowraville*, host Dan Box was a former BBC producer, so, as his introductory narration shows, he is adept at writing for audio.

DAN BOX:

I’m a newspaper reporter.

A couple of years ago I sat down with a cop, who told me about a murder.

Or rather, he told me about three murders.

Of three children.

The first was Colleen Walker, a popular, outgoing 16-year-old girl who always kissed her mum goodbye when she left the house.

The second was Evelyn Greenup, who was quiet, pretty, with a head of tight curls. She was only four years old.

The third was another 16-year-old, Clinton Speedy-Duroux, a sporty kid who cared about his appearance. He was never seen without his favourite pair of sneakers.

The detective told me all three children had disappeared within five months of each other, all from the same small town in country New South Wales.

He told me he was certain who the killer was, but no one had ever gone to jail.

As Carlisle points out, the tone is “pitch perfect and slotted right in the true crime genre. He works the microphone closely and intimately. His eye is for the telling small details: there’s the girl with tight curls; the sporty kid and his favourite sneakers; the teen who always kissed her mum goodbye.”

With *Phoebe’s Fall*, hosts Richard Baker and Michael Bachelard were top print journalists with zero experience of working in audio. So they developed a team to supply the missing audio expertise. It included me, as a co-producer, so I will not comment further on the critique – to which I had no input; due to conflict of interest, it was handled by Associate Editors of *RadioDoc Review (RDR)*. What is interesting to note though, is how Baker and Bachelard gradually came to understand that audio storytelling had a completely different grammar and logic than print. “Audio is a temporal medium”, I pointed out; “it only exists in real time – you can’t freeze-frame audio.” Thus, timing is both a strength and a weakness. If you butt two resonant comments up too tightly together, both will lose impact – the listener needs a pause to absorb the first before the second hits. Silence is as potent as any words – and there is as much meaning in *how* something is said as in what is being said. As for music, that brings a whole new dimension of interpreting the story. The journalists were astounded by the difference the medium made – the emotion that could be conveyed in a voice, that did not need flagging by the writer. As for timing: in print, Baker told my co-producer Julie Posetti, “space is just a thing you hit on the keyboard”. Bachelard was surprised by how much sound itself revealed. “Audio is this incredibly honest medium that really puts your nose to the grindstone and makes you structure things in ways that make sense to people,” he told Posetti. “It’s a real discipline.” Michael Barbaro, the well regarded host of *The Daily* at the *New York Times*, used almost the exact same words: “It’s a very honest medium”, he told the podcast longform.org. In the same interview he noted a second truth, ruefully familiar to all audio storytellers: “audio is *unspeakably* time-consuming to turn around”.

The documentary “The Sex Workers’ Revolt” (Earshot, ABC Australia, 28mins, 2016) originally broadcast as “La Revolte des Prostituées” ([Radio France Culture](#) and Radio Belgium, 50 mins, 2015), produced by Eurydice Aroney with Julie Beressi, is testament to that intense input. Australian documentary-maker and academic Eurydice Aroney is a long-term researcher and activist for sex workers’ rights, so when the fortieth anniversary loomed, of a moment when French sex workers occupied a cathedral in Lyon to protest against their working conditions and harassment by police, she set out to capture the voices of those who could recall it. Though she did not speak French, there were ways around this and other issues. “The transcultural challenges of producing a radio show in a language I barely speak were overcome through a combination of funding, resources and team work,” she told me. Generous collaborators such as RDR’s Irène Omélianenko (Radio France EP) and the acclaimed France-based Australian expatriate producer Kaye Mortley played a key role, while Aroney’s contacts among Australian sex workers provided realistic voice-overs for their French counterparts. The result, says Canadian producer Sean Prpick, “grabbed me from the very beginning... Re-telling this story is of great public benefit: it tells listeners about an important, historic event of the past that resonates down to the present day... I felt I was in the hands of a mature, expert storyteller at the peak of her powers.” In a marital dual analysis that was a first for RDR, we asked Prpick’s wife, fellow-Canadian producer Maud Beauchamp, to assess the French iteration, applying RDR’s reviewer guidelines. The program is further contextualised as an academic Non-Traditional Research Output in an interview with Aroney, who compares her audio productions now with those made during her former career at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. “If audio [works] are to be counted as non-traditional research then in some ways they should demonstrate a deeper degree of research or experimentation than what is possible in an ordinary commissioning process... I have always attempted to produce radio that is edgy, experimental, involves a deep investigation etcetera.”

The final work critiqued in this issue takes us to China, for a rare insight into money, sex and politics in this rapidly emerging global power. “Intrigue: Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel” (BBC World Service, BBC Radio 4, UK, 2017, 6 x c. 25mins) is a rollicking, riveting account of the toppling of Bo Xilai, the man who could have been where Xi Jinping sits now – one of the most powerful leaders in the world. Reviewer Drew Ambrose of South-East Asia’s *Al Jazeera* describes it pithily as “a Chinese House of Cards meets Agatha Christie”. He praises it as “very different listening to the straight-laced reportage from the BBC’s network of correspondents around the world... a blueprint for what is possible in terms of creative podcasting.” Our second reviewer, media analyst Sonya Song, is a native of China and was actually based there as a Google News Fellow when the downfall of Xilai and his Lady Macbethian wife, Gu Kailai, occurred in 2012. She praises it for its style and its insights. “Not only informative and entertaining, Gracie has also interpreted how a distinct Chinese polity functions, or in fact malfunctions, and laid bare to Western audiences the absence of privileges they enjoy and probably take for granted, such as freedom of press and expression, judicial independence and universal suffrage.”

Intrigue... was made by veteran BBC China correspondent, Carrie Gracie, whose expertise in this journalistically difficult terrain is abundantly clear. Fluent in Mandarin, Gracie became China Editor in 2014, at considerable personal cost. “I knew the job would demand sacrifices and resilience. I would have to work 5,000 miles from my teenage children, and in a heavily censored one-party state I would face surveillance, police harassment and official intimidation.” That statement is drawn from an [open letter](#) Gracie penned to the BBC on 8 January 2018, after she resigned her post. The reason? She found out that of four BBC international editors at the time, two who were men were being paid at least 50% more than the two, including her, who were women. This was not just inequitable – it was illegal.

When she asked for redress, the BBC “offered me a big pay rise which remained far short of equality”. So she resigned.

At *RadioDoc Review*, we salute Carrie Gracie, and not just for producing a highly original podcast about a seminal aspect of Chinese political life. In the #MeToo era, when abuse of male power has been shown to cause so much harm to women, her stance resonates with the stories reviewed in this issue, where women reclaim and salute their own power and integrity. And where, like Gracie, women will no longer be silenced.

Siobhan McHugh
Founding Editor, RadioDoc Review