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The feelings frontier: a review of No Feeling Is Final

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Abstract

No Feeling is Final faces a two-fold “feelings frontier” in an age of extreme podcast intimacy and empathy: navigating (1) how to convey the kind of deeply personal “big feelings” that are still often seen as off-limits and (2) how to maintain a hyper-awareness about the listener’s feelings. Taking place almost entirely within her mind, *No Feeling is Final* is a six-part memoir show about host Honor Eastly’s experiences struggling with mental health and what one mental health professional diagnoses as “too many feelings – about four times as many as the average person”. The ongoing tension between creating resonance with the listener and triggering difficult feelings is managed through a piecemeal, metaphor-laden approach. It tries to avoid leaving the listener with unwanted feelings but, at the same time, leaves them with some unanswered questions.

Keywords

Podcast; memoir; self-reflection; mental illness; feelings; intimacy; empathy; frontier

The feelings frontier: a review of *No Feeling is Final*

By Britta Jorgensen

No Feeling is Final, ABC Audio Studios, 2018.

6-episodes, 29-39mins.

Presenter: Honor Eastley

Producer: Alice Moldovan

Sound Engineer: Russell Stapleton

Executive Producer: Joel Werner

Listen at <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/no-feeling-is-final/>

No Feeling is Final is acutely aware of a podcast's capacity to make its listeners feel things. This is partly because it deals with what host Honor Eastly describes as "big feelings"; the kind of feelings that "make you want to die". She warns the listener at the start of every episode:

It's a show about feelings so it might bring up some feelings. If it leaves you with a few things rattling around in your head you might wanna go do something nice for yourself. Like me, right now.

These warnings are recorded in different settings where Honor is in the midst of doing something nice for herself, e.g. at the dog park with her boyfriend's dog or out of breath during a run. These are some of the only moments in the entire series that are set in the outside world. They give the listener a moment's pause to take a deep breath before being submerged in Honor's story.

Taking place almost entirely within her mind, *No Feeling is Final* is a six-part memoir show about Honor's life experiences struggling with mental health and what one mental health professional diagnoses as "too many feelings – about four times as many as the average person". The serialised podcast uses a tightly edited mix of Honor's audio diaries, narration, recorded conversations, music performances, simulated thoughts and recreated scenes. Non-linear in structure and looping back through Honor's memories and thoughts to the same conclusive feeling that she wants to die, the listener gets a sense, particularly if listening through headphones, of what it feels like to be stuck inside both Honor's head and the Australian mental health system. The outside world and outside voices are dampened and fade into the background as the story unfolds. The listener doesn't hear much from the people around her directly; instead, their conversations are internalised and revoiced by Honor herself.

No Feeling is Final's tone swerves back and forth between dark humour, sprawling sadness, light-hearted comedy, farce, self-deprecation, hopefulness and cynicism as it tries to keep a gentle hold of the listener. In this way, it faces a two-fold "feelings frontier" in an age of extreme podcast intimacy and empathy: navigating (1) how to convey the kind of deeply personal "big feelings" that are still often seen as off-limits and (2) how to maintain a hyper-awareness about the listener's feelings. The ongoing tension between creating resonance with the listener and triggering feelings that may cause disengagement is managed through a piecemeal, metaphor-laden approach that mirrors Honor's approach to articulating her own feelings.

At the end of each episode there are long, uninterrupted recordings of Honor performing songs that last up to six minutes and allow the listener to emotionally process what they've

just heard before resurfacing. She then returns to the various settings of her initial content warnings with follow-up information and resources, including:

Crisis lines

Lifeline on 13 11 14

Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800

MensLine Australia on 1300 789 978

Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467

Beyond Blue on 1300 22 46 36

Headspace on 1800 650 890

QLife on 1800 184 527

No Feeling is Final is written and presented by Honor Eastly, who is also the producer of independent podcasts *Being Honest With My Ex* and *Starving Artist*. It was produced by ABC Audio Studios, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's podcast production house. It was selected for production as part of the ABC's \$1 million podcast fund for new and emerging podcasters launched in 2017. It was also a winner in the 2019 Third Coast / Richard H. Driehaus Competition.

Storytelling

Honor is a compelling teller of her own story. Her narration is dry, self-deprecating and witty. It becomes clear in episode 3 why she has taken this approach. She describes her impressions of diary entries she wrote while in a psychiatric ward:

A breed of emo so lacking in irony and so dripping with sincerity and self-obsessed self-reflection that it is now physically painful to read. I guess that's part of why I keep much of this to myself. Why I think a lot of people keep these things to themselves. Like I know it's serious and I wanna die and everything but I don't wanna bother everyone with how desperate and self-pained I am.

Her casual, unrehearsed-sounding but heavily-scripted narration jars with the raw, vulnerable voice captured in her audio memos. She explains that she adopts this façade in telling her story to her loved ones:

And it's not just the story I tell my family. This is – and, if you hadn't realised, still is – most of the story that I tell the world. I package it into consumable little chunks... because the reality is a lot more sad and weary rather than funny or witty.

Honor draws on a jumble of metaphors punctuated by elaborate soundscapes, sound effects and recreated scenes, sometimes for comedic effect but often to convey feelings that require metaphor to be understood by the listener. For example, comparing the reaction of a barista she flirts with while she is a psychiatric ward patient to the reaction she had to creepy men as a teenager:

Now, staring at this routinely attractive barista, he looks at me like I am one of those creepy men and he is my prepubescent self: afraid of me. No one wants to be hit on by a crazy woman, I guess.

She uses the “vast wasteland” metaphor and its accompanying desolate tundra soundscape to describe the frustrating limbo many people with mental illness face where they are “struggling but not suicidal enough” and on the other side of which are treatment options. She takes this idea into the realm of farce with a recreated metaphorical game show on which she is a contestant:

“Are You Crazy Enough? Where the ultimate prize is the help you need.”

She compares herself and her experiences, among many other things, to a masticated maraschino cherry, a giant inflatable elephant, a surrealist image and a cheese baron in a cheese-based psychiatric ward economy. Throughout the first five episodes she sets up this comedic framework for talking about and understanding her feelings in a similar way that medical diagnoses and terminologies do. And then, in the final episode, she dismantles this:

That medical framework – the idea that I had an illness – it gave me something that now, in this moment, I miss: abstraction. It took these feelings and it held them at arm's length and at times now I miss that. I miss that distance. This way round, without all those words and abstraction, it feels closer somehow. Fleshy.

Despite Honor's rejection of limiting labels and embracing of her own descriptions of her feelings as "big" or "emotionally deluxe", she also struggles with the limitations of these nebulous descriptions:

I wanted someone to name it. I wanted them to tell me what it was and it to be a thing that was real and written down in a textbook somewhere. Something that says, 'This thing that is happening to you that you can't explain is real and true and not your fault'.

Honor concludes the series by reflecting on the almost impossibility of conveying feelings, even when those feelings are ones you have experienced yourself:

I still know intellectually that there was this great pain but I can't grab onto the visceral core of it anymore. I simply do not know how that woman – that vessel for existential agony – became this woman here now.

No Feeling is Final's narrative arc follows this trajectory within each episode. Honor starts every episode trying to verbalise her feelings in every way possible and ends every episode by drawing on music to achieve a deeper emotional resonance that the podcast, despite podcasting's celebrated capacity to evoke emotion, doesn't quite reach.

Originality and ethics

No Feeling is Final is original in its approach to the subject matter as it tries to convey to the listener not only a nuanced account of mental illness and suicidal thoughts, but also what this feels like from the inside. Honor embeds her rejection of these falsely dichotomous and

overly simplified media narratives into her own narration in the form of reflections she had while watching television in a psychiatric ward during Mental Health Week:

These nice-ending stories appear alongside doco series where people's lives seem to shatter into fragments. Maybe I am one of those 'anyone's that this could happen to. The rest of my life laid out in front of me in a series of quiet routine fragments – medication times, psychiatric notes, calls from family, painted mandalas.

She concludes her final episode by explaining that she wrote this podcast during that time when she didn't see or hear her feelings and experiences reflected anywhere in the media:

I wrote this show for little old me all those years ago when I was back in hospital feeling alone, confused and hopeless.

Although mental illness and/or suicide is the subject of many radio documentaries and podcasts, *No Feeling is Final* takes a unique approach to looking directly at the suicidal feelings themselves. It also takes the ongoing industry and scholarly discussions about podcasting's potential for empathy, intimacy and emotion to its limits and puts it into practice. It raises the question: if podcasting is an ideal medium for conveying feelings, what happens when those feelings may not be conveyable to the listener and, if they are, they might be triggering for them?

Honor embeds this struggle into her narration and her journey of trying to tell her story to herself and the people around her is the way she tells it to the listener. In episode 3 she says:

I keep trying to say the most honest thing and it keeps changing.

While this self-reflective approach to narrative voice has become a trope in podcasting, *No Feeling is Final* uses this reflection more as a series of attempts to convey Honor's feelings to the listener rather than as a narrative technique to drive the series forward. There is an open-endedness to Honor's reflections, which are sometimes contradictory. This allows the

listener, whose own experiences with mental illness are likely to vary widely, to resonate with some of these reflections and not others. One key way Honor does this is by not revealing her mental illness diagnosis at any point throughout the entire series. Despite this, Honor emphasises at the start of every episode:

This is a memoir show. It's about my experience trying to figure out some big stuff so that means it's really only one person's story.

There is a strong focus on ethical responsibility to the listener throughout. Rather than attempting to avoid triggering the listener entirely, it recognises that it might and offers suggestions to the listener about how to handle that. The fact that Honor tells her own story also largely avoids any exploitation of a vulnerable person. Given its ambitious goals, however, *No Feeling is Final* could have explored some of the existing ways mental illness and suicide is treated by the media. At the conclusion of the series, Honor thanks:

The long history of people who have been fighting for a more human way of seeing these experiences.

It would have broadened the impact of this series if this had been explored further. Honor's warning that "it's really only one person's story" absolves the podcast of any broader goal but it leaves the listener with a curiosity about what other people's stories are, this long history of trying to tell them and an uncertainty about where to find them. There is a strong focus throughout the series about the shortcomings of Australia's mental health system from the perspective of someone with a mental illness but no further examination of it.

Craft and artistry

No Feeling is Final is a well-crafted podcast in terms of sound and podcast techniques. It includes a well-balanced mix of highly produced soundscapes and mic-rumbly audio, unrehearsed conversations and voice actors, real-life recordings and recreations. It uses voice actors effectively to build a convincing soundscape of Honor's thoughts. For example, she caricatures the self-destructive voice in her head as "The Voice", an overly critical voice

that continuously tells her things that make her want to die. It is voiced by an actor and has conversations with the real voice of Honor to emphasise her internal struggles between different parts of her mind.

At times, however, the momentum of the episodes moves so quickly from one scene to another, one soundscape or sound effect to another, one metaphor to another, one tone to another, that it is difficult for the listener to keep up. Without the listener's full attention, it would be easy to get lost. There is more scope within *No Feeling is Final* for pauses and slow transitions.

Research and public benefit/impact

The most unusual element of *No Feeling is Final* is that it starts and ends in Honor's own mind and stays there throughout most of the series. The listener doesn't hear her story from the people who hover on the peripheries, apart from a sprinkling of conversations with her boyfriend, family and friends. What is it like to be the parent, the sister, the friend or the partner of a person struggling with these big feelings? The particularity of her experience and the up-close focus on her single perspective provides valuable insights but leaves out a significant part of the picture.

There is also a notable absence of any expert voices. While there is a tendency in podcasting and the media more generally to lend expert voices more credibility than lived experiences, the series may have benefited from some of this expert insight. There is a lot of criticism of the mental health system, including some particularly unsettling experiences, e.g. when a nurse at the psychiatric ward intake asks her, suggestively:

Would you give it up easily in here?

No Feeling is Final makes a number of creatively ambitious and original choices, and could have taken a similar approach to this issue. Some of this is bypassed by Honor's own work in the mental health system as a peer worker but this perspective doesn't take up much room

in the series. There also isn't a lot of transparency with the listener about some of the editorial choices, which is unusual given the subject matter.

No Feeling is Final raises a number of valuable questions for podcasting about how we convey feelings – especially “big feelings” – and how we avoid burdening the listener by triggering difficult feelings. It has a heightened awareness of not leaving the listener with unwanted feelings but it does leave the listener with some unanswered questions. Its potential to highly engage and resonate with the listener provides an opportunity for answering some of those questions and an opportunity for greater public benefit may therefore have been missed. It leads the way, however, for similarly ambitious podcasts to extend podcasting's “feelings frontier” even further into new territory in the future.





Britta Jorgensen is a practice-research PhD candidate at Swinburne University in Melbourne, researching independent podcasts and narrative journalism in Australia. She is a supervising producer at *All the Best* and has taught and mentored emerging producers at Monash University, University of Melbourne and the CMTO. She has produced documentaries for ABC Radio National, Audiocraft and the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia. She won a 2018 Burning Seed grant for her interactive audio installation, *The Complaints Department*. She is currently an ARC Discovery Project research assistant producing a podcast series about superbugs and the editorial assistant for *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*.