

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS
NOVEMBER 19, 2018 ISSUE

HOW PODCASTS BECAME A SEDUCTIVE—AND SOMETIMES SLIPPERY— MODE OF STORYTELLING

In our frenetic age, audio narratives offer a rare opportunity for slow immersion. But this intimacy can become manipulative.

By Rebecca Mead November 12, 2018

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In 1936, Walter Benjamin, the German philosopher and cultural critic, published an essay titled “The Storyteller.” The piece, ostensibly about the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, offered its author an opportunity to analyze the meaning and function of storytelling. Long ago, Benjamin suggested, stories offered listeners practical or moral counsel, much as fairy tales now did for children. They transmitted common wisdom, framed by the personal experience of the storyteller, which was delivered in such a way that listeners could incorporate it into their lives. This kind of storytelling was falling victim to the forces of modernity, Benjamin argued. Soldiers returning from the battlefields of the Great War, for example, were less likely than earlier combatants to speak of what they’d gone through, finding ordinary language incommensurate with the horrors of mechanical warfare. But the principal cause of storytelling’s decline was a new form of communication: “information,” or verifiable and topical news.

The rise of electronic communication meant that news could be instantly transmitted around the globe. Although Benjamin noted that this mode of communication was not always more accurate than the forms it had overtaken, its authority depended on the appearance, at least, of accuracy. “No event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation,” Benjamin wrote. “By now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling.”

Eighty-odd years after Benjamin wrote about the decline of storytelling, we are living in a new

golden age of it, in the form of the podcast: on-demand audio that a listener can download and play while commuting or exercising or, given the right equipment, showering. A recent study conducted by Edison Research found that nearly a quarter of Americans listen to podcasts at least once a month. The most popular shows, such as “The Daily,” produced by the *Times* and featuring Michael Barbaro, a former reporter, as a winning, accessible interlocutor of his news-gathering colleagues, or “The Joe Rogan Experience,” in which the bluff comedian interviews public figures about things like masculinity and technology, are downloaded tens of millions of times each month. Some of the most acclaimed podcasts, such as Slate’s “Slow Burn,” which in its second season plumbed the painful history of President Bill Clinton’s impeachment, offer a provocative lens not just on the past but also on current events. When the show’s host, Leon Neyfakh, interviews Juanita Broadrick about her claim that, in the nineteen-seventies, she was sexually assaulted by Clinton, it makes for sobering listening in the era of #MeToo.

Beyond the top of the charts, there are half a million other podcasts available, fashioned for every conceivable interest or taste. If a person wants to know more about Walter Benjamin, she can listen to an episode of “Thinking Allowed,” a BBC Radio 4 show in which Laurie Taylor, a British sociologist, renders Benjamin’s work in plainspoken language; or download the National Gallery of Art’s podcast, in which the Princeton art historian Hal Foster delivers a Mellon lecture about him; or find the Clocktower podcast, dedicated to preserving archival audio, which offers recordings of several radio scripts, for children, that Benjamin wrote in the nineteen-thirties; or search out an episode of “Giving the Mic to the Wrong Person,” a left-leaning podcast, hosted by Jeremy Salmon, that features an off-the-cuff roundtable about Benjamin—“he’s one of the Frankfurt School guys, from what I understand”—in the context of

contemporary politics and culture.

In the first years of podcasts, a decade or so ago, technological limitations militated against their widespread adoption: they had to be laboriously transferred from a computer to an MP3 player or an iPod. Podcasts were made by geeks, for geeks. That changed in 2014, when Apple added a Podcast app to the iPhone, making subscribing almost effortless. Even better, it was usually free.

Still, the real explosion in the medium was creative rather than technological: the release, in 2014, of “Serial,” an investigation into the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee, a high-school student in Maryland, hosted by Sarah Koenig, an alumna of “This American Life,” the public-radio show, which also produced the podcast. “Serial” incorporated interviews conducted over a prison phone line with Lee’s onetime boyfriend, Adnan Syed—he had been convicted of her murder, despite his protestation of innocence—and also interviews with friends, police officials, and a forensic expert, along with archival recordings. It became the first podcast that listeners and cultural commenters dissected with the kind of avidity formerly reserved for TV dramas such as “Breaking Bad” or “Mad Men.”

“Serial” took the form of a quest, but it hardly provided a tidy ending to the questions raised about Lee’s murder and Syed’s conviction. The show had a distinctive tone: conversational, uncertain, informal, and, occasionally, faux-naïve. In the first episode, Koenig describes visiting the office of Rabia Chaudry, an immigration lawyer and a friend of Syed’s, who had tipped off Koenig about the story. “Her office takes up the corner of a much larger open space that I think

is a Pakistani travel agency, though it's hard to tell," Koenig says. Koenig, a former Baltimore *Sun* reporter, surely knew how to determine whether the office was a Pakistani travel agency: by asking. (Indeed, it's hard to believe that she *didn't* ask.) But Koenig knew from "This American Life," whose multiple segments are unified by the presence of a musing narrator, that she could conjure a cluttered office environment more vividly by sharing her initial confusion, rather than by resolving the question.

Early in the podcast, Koenig informs her audience that "we are telling this story in order," planting the conceit that listeners were accompanying her on all her reportorial wanderings. But the show's construction was more artful than that. The first episode was concerned principally with the observations of a classmate of Syed's, Asia McLain, who claimed to have seen him in the library exactly when the prosecution said that he'd murdered Lee. But, as Koenig briefly mentions in her narration, she didn't attempt to track down McLain until almost four months after she'd spoken to Rabia Chaudry—a third of the way into her yearlong investigation.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

How to Write a New Yorker Cartoon Caption: Andrew Yang Edition

The point of “Serial,” which was free but bookended with ads, was not so much to solve the mystery as to reveal the process of attempting to solve the mystery. This meant sharing granular details of Koenig’s investigation, such as an analysis of data from cell towers. (Koenig acknowledged that she handed off this research to a producer, Dana Chivvis, “because I am, technologically speaking, a moron.”) But the show’s real innovation lay in capturing Koenig’s psychological process—her inward struggle about what to believe. “I’ve got this thing in my head that I’ll catch him in a lie,” she says in Episode 6, midway through the season. Yet, she continues, “I talk to him and talk to him and talk to him, and I start to doubt my doubts.” The episode ends with a wrenchingly intimate phone call between Koenig and Syed, in which he tells her that he wants her to judge him innocent not because he seems too nice to have murdered Lee but because she’s found exculpatory evidence.

This highlighting of a reporter's tormented indecision is why "Serial" made for compulsive listening. The tell-as-you-go formula, interspersed with banalities—like Chivvis excitedly telling Koenig, during a drive retracing Syed's alleged route after the murder, that a local crab shack was having a sale on shrimp—was either charming or annoying, depending on your taste. (A YouTuber deftly parodied Koenig's hand-holding ratiocination: "Adnan made phone calls. He also received them. Why? What makes a person *receive* a phone call?") There was a sense of urgency to "Serial," heightened by foreboding theme music, that belied the fact that it was concerned with events from a dozen years earlier, about which there had been no pressing public concern. Koenig's account was so galvanizing that listeners began sending her tips, and public officials were obliged to take action: Syed was granted a new trial, which has yet to take place.

"Serial," borrowing equally from the conventions of investigative journalism, the memoir, and the potboiler, was a leap in narrative innovation on the scale of "In Cold Blood," Truman Capote's 1966 "nonfiction novel." Within a month of its launch, "Serial" had reached a million listeners, and since its *début* the season has been downloaded two hundred and forty million times. Season 3 of "Serial," which centers on the criminal-justice system in Cleveland, is sponsored exclusively by Zip Recruiter—an arrangement that is reportedly the biggest up-front podcast deal to date.

"Serial" was the first show to induce advertisers to take podcasting seriously. "It was like money trucks started opening up and pouring out money," Benjamin Walker, the host of "Benjamin Walker's Theory of Everything," an ideas podcast, told me. The creative and economic

accomplishment of “Serial” has spawned countless imitators, and many have shamelessly echoed its tropes: the wary, exploratory, methodical host; the true-crime incident, or other sensational event, which has been plucked from newspaper archives and transformed into a twisty narrative. To use the language of Walter Benjamin, these podcasts offer the sometimes lurid satisfactions of story bolstered by the apparent rectitude of information.

There are now dozens of podcasting companies vying to create a sensation on the order of “Serial.” Among them is Pineapple Street Media, based in a loftlike space in downtown Brooklyn, which was co-founded, in 2016, by Max Linsky, the co-creator of the “Longform Podcast,” which features interviews with narrative journalists, and by Jenna Weiss-Berman, formerly an audio producer at BuzzFeed. One recent afternoon, a group gathered in Pineapple’s conference room to discuss a project that was seen as a potential breakthrough hit: a podcast about solitary confinement in American prisons.

The series had been conceived by Adam Sternbergh, a novelist and journalist; although he had contributed segments to “This American Life,” it was his first attempt at podcasting. The idea was to combine his fictional and reportorial skills in a way that traditional journalism didn’t permit. Sternbergh intended to create a fictional prisoner in solitary confinement whose experiences and recollections would provide the series’s narrative spine. To provide factual ballast, the story would be interwoven with interviews of incarceration experts, former prisoners, and corrections officials. Sternbergh and Pineapple understood that their experiment would work only if the fiction and the reportage could be seductively and plausibly integrated.

“You must make it clear to the listener that the story they are following is fictional—that it’s not a dramatic reënactment of a real person’s case,” Sternbergh explained. He proposed doing wide-ranging reporting on solitary confinement, and then “funneling” the richest findings “into one character.” With a flicker of concern, he asked the Pineapple team, “Are you worried that that’s going to get too esoteric?”

“No, I *like* esoteric,” Weiss-Berman said. Podcasts often find an audience by exploring an exotic subculture. Weiss-Berman urged Sternbergh to reconsider using the dramatic-reënactment form, noting that it could provide a useful sense of whiplash: “What if you had an actor playing a real person, and then the real person comes in and says, ‘Well, that’s not exactly how it went?’”

Joel Lovell, Pineapple’s executive editor, who used to be an editor at the *Times Magazine*, proposed a different kind of bait and switch: “Imagine a show that starts with an expert telling us about how things work in solitary. Then we hear a prisoner talking about his experience. And then Adam comes in and says, ‘That prisoner you just heard? He’s an actor, and *that* story’s fictional. But the fiction of his story is based on an intense amount of reporting I have done. And the other voices you are hearing? Those are real people.’ ”

Weiss-Berman said, “I am for a narrator, but I feel like it could get didactic. I would be horrified if, in an NPR-y way, a voice comes in, like, ‘ *Last year alone, there were one million . . .* ’ ” Everyone laughed.

The solitary-confinement scenario posed a narrative challenge: where was the action in the

story going to come from, given that the character was trapped inside a small room? “It’s like ‘Castaway,’ but in a room instead of on an island, and no volleyball,” Sternbergh offered, in a mock-Hollywood pitch. Should the fictional prisoner’s guilt or innocence be incorporated into the plot? Though Linsky didn’t mention “Serial” by name, he recommended avoiding the did-he-or-didn’t-he game, adding, “That has become *such* a podcast trope.”

Podcasting is a peculiarly intimate medium. Usually transmitted through headphones to a solitary listener, or played over the car stereo during a commute, an audio narrative can be immersive in a way that a radio playing in the background in a kitchen rarely is. Podcasts are designed to take up time, rather than to be checked, scanned, and rushed through: they are for those moments when you can’t be scrolling on your phone. For a digital medium, podcasts are unusual in their commitment to a slow build, and to a sensual atmosphere. At the conference table, people were eager to discuss ways in which audio could deepen the story, as well as the visceral experience of the listener. “When you read accounts of people in solitary, all they talk about is what it *sounded* like,” Sternbergh said. “There’s nothing to say about the visual experience. Once you have described what the room looks like, that’s that. Their whole world is an auditory world.”

Jonathan Menjivar, a Pineapple producer, said that he’d been talking with a nerdy audio friend about how to precisely replicate the acoustics of a human voice in solitary confinement, based, in part, on the dimensions of a typical cell. This led to a discussion of unexpected sounds in solitary. Sternbergh noted, “One thing people will do is, if you put a crack in the toilet and flood it out, so there’s no water in it, you can talk to people through the toilet.” There were murmurs

of appalled excitement: this would make for great audio. He continued, “And I don’t think we want to get into this, because people will drive off the road if they are listening to it, but if you are in a cell next to someone, and you get into a fight with them, they might just sit and yell into the air vent for twenty-four hours—just to drive you nuts.”

“We should do some kind of re-creation!” Weiss-Berman said.

“‘This episode might be a *little* longer than usual,’ ” Sternbergh said, with a bleak laugh. “ ‘But we’re hoping you’ll stick with it.’ ”

In two years, Pineapple has grown from four employees to more than a dozen. A soundproof recording studio was recently installed near the company kitchen. The office is on hectic Willoughby Street, rather than on Pineapple Street, in Brooklyn Heights, with its town houses and river views. The name is aspirational: if the company prospers, its founders joke, they might get to own houses on Pineapple Street one day.

When the company launched, Weiss-Berman and Linsky had a smattering of projects in hand, including “Still Processing,” a cultural-conversation show featuring Jenna Wortham and Wesley Morris, of the *Times* . There was also a contract with Weiden+Kennedy, the advertising firm: unlike rival startups like Gimlet Media, Pineapple has not taken any venture-capital investment. It pays its bills in part by producing content for such corporate clients as Morgan Stanley and Nike. Pineapple now has a full roster of talk-show-style podcasts, including “Stay Tuned with Preet,” hosted by Preet Bharara, the former U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, who offers flinty insights into the latest machinations of Robert Mueller’s investigation

into Russian interference in the 2016 election. For a rather different listenership, there is “Unhappy Hour,” presented by the comedian Matt Bellassai, which is devoted to non-stop complaining. Bellassai distinguishes himself from other funny podcasters with an abrasive delivery and a habit of drinking throughout the recording. (Afterward, Pineapple employees sometimes find stray empties in the studio.)

Conversational shows are intended to sound informal, though this belies the care taken in making them. Pineapple often discards hours of tape, recorded before a new host finds her or his stride, and an hour-long episode can require dozens of hours of editing. Nevertheless, talk shows are relatively easy and inexpensive to produce compared with reported narratives, which the company also aspires to make.

So far, Pineapple’s biggest hit has been a show in the investigative genre, though the matter under investigation is not a forgotten murder but something rather less momentous: the disappearance from public view of Richard Simmons, the exercise and diet guru. “Missing Richard Simmons” was hosted by Dan Taberski, a former “Daily Show” producer, who had attended exercise classes at Slimmons—the studio that Simmons opened in Los Angeles in the mid-seventies. The podcast chronicles Taberski’s efforts to uncover why Simmons, who for decades had maintained an unusual intimacy with his fans, had suddenly closed up shop and stopped appearing in public.

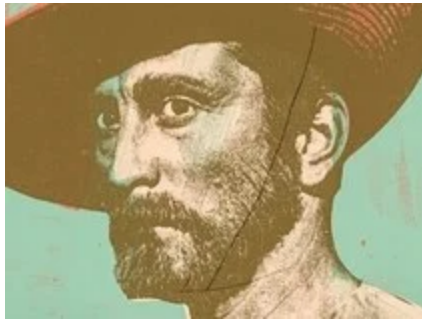
It was an investigation without a crime, although, as the six episodes unfolded, Taberski speculated about potentially nefarious causes for Simmons’s disappearance. Taberski cited a

rumor that Simmons was being controlled by his housekeeper, Teresa Reveles, and another that Simmons was undergoing a gender transition. Neither theory held up, Taberski decided, so he kept digging. The podcast adopted the investigative format of “Serial,” but had a far shakier claim of being a story in the public interest, rather than being one of interest to a prurient public.

It is sometimes argued that, because podcasts require a considerable time commitment, people don’t “hate-listen” to them the way they skim magazine articles that offend them or follow people on Twitter whose points of view they loathe. Yet many listeners who stuck with “Missing Richard Simmons” did so queasily, feeling enlisted in an uneasy complicity with Taberski’s fervid inquiry. The podcast’s originality lay precisely in cultivating that sense of discomfort: a listener longed to know not only what had happened to Simmons but also how Taberski would resolve the ethical dilemma of having subjected a faded celebrity to such scrutiny. The podcast quickly rose to the top of Apple’s chart, and, despite the *Times* characterizing the show as “morally suspect,” listenership kept increasing.

The show’s success took Pineapple by surprise, and it appears that the criticism precipitated a self-reckoning. The team revised the final episode half a dozen times before settling on a version in which Taberski concludes that Simmons did, after all, deserve to be left alone. Taberski acknowledges that the podcast might have caused Simmons distress by including an interview in which Simmons’s manager tells him, “I can’t say Richard feels better as a result of the podcast. Perhaps *you* do.”

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Times You
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By Katie N



Taberski's methods were unapologetically invasive: in the second episode, titled "The Stakeout," he goes to Simmons's house, in the Hollywood Hills, with the intention of knocking on his door. "I feel like somebody's house is their private place, and I don't want him to feel like I'm invading his privacy," Taberski says on the podcast. Yet, he notes, he considers himself a friend of Simmons's—"a *creepy* friend"—adding, "I have lots of creepy friends. They're not that bad." Reveles, the housekeeper, eventually emerges from the house and says that Simmons isn't

available. Afterward, Taberski offers a painstaking summary: “So what have we learned? We learned Teresa remembers me. Great—that’s a plus. We know that Teresa recycles, because she was clearly taking out the recycling. And we know that Richard’s home.” Taberski sounds as if he were parodying “Serial,” but Simmons isn’t in on the joke.

Weiss-Berman told me that she has no regrets about the content or tone of “Simmons”: “If you have made millions of dollars from extremely vulnerable people, mostly overweight women, and you have extremely close personal relationships with some of those people, and then you disappear, those people have a right to wonder where you are.” Taberski’s next project will maintain a satirical edge, but its focus will be broader: he will look back at people who became consumed with Y2K hysteria—the fear that the world would collapse at the turn of the millennium. (In hindsight, such fears were perhaps sixteen years premature.) Pineapple has an ownership stake in the Y2K show, unlike “Simmons,” for which it provided only editorial services.

Because critics focussed on the ethics of “Missing Richard Simmons,” not on its aesthetics, it was little noted that Taberski made use of the same arch humor and flamboyant pathos that had long been Simmons’s own stock-in-trade. After driving away from Simmons’s home, Taberski observes that Simmons had once been eager to engage with fans who sought him out, even at home. “Literally, if somebody sneezes, Richard Simmons would come running out of that house!” Taberski says. “Now, like, I could literally set the place on fire, like the Branch Davidian compound, and he would stay in there until he was burned to a crisp.” The show’s questionable premise aside, the most appealing aspect of “Missing Richard Simmons” was the antic persona

of the narrator—a witty, dogged, compromised, and overdramatic character who was, in some sense, a mirror of his subject. “Missing Richard Simmons” pulled off a grand gesture of camp—describing the failed pursuit of an impossible object of desire—but floundered in its effort to morally defend that pursuit. In commercial terms, however, the show was an undeniable success: it has been downloaded thirteen million times, and Amazon is developing it as a television series.

U ntil the podcast boom, nobody entered the field of narrative audio thinking that it might be a route to fortune or fame. Public radio, in which many narrative podcasters got their start, is not for profit, and aims at producing programming in the service of a better, and better-informed, society. Now a thrilling sense of possibility exists among the kinds of people who once might have tried magazine freelancing or blogging: that someone with talent can make a living, or even become rich, by podcasting. (Joe Rogan, whose show routinely tops the iTunes charts, has made millions of dollars from it.) Jay Allison, a public-radio veteran who produces “The Moth Radio Hour” and runs the Transom Story Workshop, a residential program on Cape Cod that trains radio and audio producers, told me, “It used to be that I would say to the students, ‘Look, we are going to train you to do this public-media storytelling, and I know you may have to take a vow of poverty, but it does have meaning, and it does create change in your community.’ Now they come here, and, pretty much as soon as they leave, they can get a job that pays pretty well.”

Several of the most well-received podcasts have been produced by public radio, including “In the Dark,” an investigative series made by American Public Media and hosted by Madeleine

Baran. The show, which has completed two seasons, focusses on abuses of power, and is animated, and dignified, by its adherence to a public-radio sense of mission. Baran's focus is less on solving a whodunnit than on exposing the failures of police work or the biases of the criminal-justice system. The second season delves into the case of Curtis Flowers, who has spent more than twenty years in prison for four murders that he insists he didn't commit. Remarkably, Flowers has been prosecuted six times for the crimes, because of a series of hung juries and mistrials. Unlike an NPR show such as "Morning Edition," which lays out facts in the clearest, most efficient manner possible, "In the Dark" steeps the reader in the racially divided Mississippi community where the murders took place, and Baran finds memorable characters—among them, Odell Hallmon, the state's chief witness, who is himself in prison for murder. Hallmon texted the show's producer on a contraband phone; he initially asked for money to talk, then decided to chat for free, offering both an account of his literary taste—"I'm reading right now a novel of dragons, know what I'm saying?"—and a recantation of his claim that Flowers had confessed to him that he had committed the crimes. The result was a multi-voiced stemwinder that mounted a persuasive indictment of Flowers's prosecutor, District Attorney Doug Evans. If Season 1 of "Serial" was an opera of ambiguity, Season 2 of "In the Dark" was a punctilious drama that systematically dismantled ten weak arguments made by the prosecution, leaving listeners with a definitive sense of injustice. Results, however, may not matter as much to podcast listeners as voice: Koenig's agonized portrait of Adnan Syed has been downloaded eighteen times as often as Baran's understated defense of Curtis Flowers.

Podcasting entrepreneurs argue that commercial pressures have generally enlivened audio programming—think of the preciously bland NPR programs that "Saturday Night Live" used to

mock with its parodic cooking show, “Delicious Dish.” (“Where to begin? We could do a whole show alone of the electrifying kaleidoscope of Ireland’s dry, flat breads.”) Weiss-Berman, who once worked at “StoryCorps,” which amasses audio archives of the experiences of ordinary Americans, told me that, when she got to BuzzFeed, “there was this kind of capitalistic view of diversity that I really appreciated.” She added, “At public radio, there is a lot of patting yourself on the back for efforts to be more diverse, but at BuzzFeed it was a revelation: we should make podcasts for people who haven’t had podcasts made for them, because it’s good for business.” One of BuzzFeed’s first hits was “Another Round,” a freewheeling podcast about pop culture, gender, and race, hosted by two young black women, Heben Nigatu and Tracy Clayton.

Podcasting has offered advertisers a new means of reaching demographically targeted consumers. Many podcasts feature extended endorsements, read by the host, that often include a discount code for a product or service. For listeners accustomed to a separation between advertising and editorial, the blurring of lines can be disconcerting (or embarrassing, such as when podcast hosts like Joe Rogan and Tim Ferriss expound on how much they enjoy wearing Me Undies). For advertisers that have spent heavily on podcasts, like the omnipresent Casper and Blue Apron, the effectiveness of such campaigns can be measured in increased sales. A representative for Blue Apron, which has launched its own branded podcast, “Why We Eat What We Eat,” in addition to advertising on hundreds of shows, told me, “We view podcasts less as an advertising channel and more as a content channel to win new customers and engage existing customers.”

Podcast advertising remains a relatively new science. Producers and advertisers can instantly

tabulate how many times a show has been downloaded, but it's harder to ascertain how many people have listened to the whole thing. A commercial marketplace puts pressure on podcasters to create content that can attract millions of listeners, which does not necessarily make for the strongest, or most subtle, content. Linsky, with some frustration, noted that it doesn't matter much to an advertiser if a podcast takes an hour to record or months to report; all that matters is whether it attracts a lot of listeners. New ways of monetizing podcasts are being explored, including a paid-subscription model; apps such as Stitcher Premium offer ad-free listening and bonus episodes.

The public-radio show that has had the most influence on narrative podcasting is undoubtedly "This American Life," which debuted in 1995 and was syndicated on NPR the next year. It has disseminated numerous producers and hosts into podcasting, most notably Alex Blumberg, the C.E.O. of Gimlet Media, whose first show, "Startup," was an entertaining and enlightening meta-podcast about leaving public radio to become a podcast entrepreneur. "This American Life," which is hosted each week by Ira Glass, and features reported segments loosely related by theme, has changed how stories are told on the radio, introducing the idea of a more personal, even fallible narrator, and establishing a narrative structure—exposition, complication, epiphany, and resolution—that has become so entrenched that it now seems inevitable. The auditory techniques and the verbal tics of Glass and his team (the long pauses, the squirrely delivery, the uptalk?) have been so widely adopted that it's hard to recall how radical they once sounded. Writing in the *Times Magazine* in 1999, the journalist Marshall Sella described Glass's on-air presence as "uncomfortably intimate." Today, it has become a podcast cliché for the host, however well versed in his subject, to display an air of naïveté, and for the audio to

incorporate mundanities of the reporting process.

The approach can still be illuminating. In Season 3 of “Serial,” Koenig includes an awkward exchange with a young black woman in an elevator, which highlights Koenig’s self-consciousness about the omnipresent dynamics of race within the criminal-justice system, and which underscores her discomfort with her cultural privilege. But Glassian flourishes can be distracting. The goofy Muzak that listeners hear alongside Michael Barbaro, of “The Daily,” while he waits on hold to speak with a congressman—and Barbaro’s subsequent banter with the congressman about the Muzak—can be at least as memorable as the interview that it introduces. For “The Daily,” the decision to emphasize the reportorial process—and, sometimes, the failings and frailty of the reporter—was made when the show was first conceived, soon after the 2016 Presidential election. “It was a direct response to the sense that we all had that we had let people down,” Barbaro told me. “Traditional journalism is all about delivering a final product to an audience and saying, ‘Trust us, here’s our omniscient authority that we have earned.’ Podcasting is, by definition, a more vulnerable, transparent medium. You can *hear* the reporter’s uncertainty.” Listeners often tell Barbaro how much they appreciate being invited behind the scenes—hearing him and his colleagues stumble toward an understanding of the news. In the podcasting era, reporters increase their credibility by peeling away the veneer of polished authority.

“**T**his American Life,” which now airs on more than five hundred stations, does well in the podcast marketplace, too, regularly ranking among the most downloaded shows in the U.S. In addition to “Serial,” “This American Life” also produced “S-Town,” another landmark of

narrative podcasting, which aired in 2017 and was hosted by Brian Reed. “S-Town,” or “Shit Town,” as it was less coyly called on the podcast, seemed at first to be yet another moody crime-investigation narrative—an alleged murder in Alabama had purportedly been covered up by local police. Reed’s investigation was prompted by a public-radio listener, who had sent in a tip in the hope that a reporter might solve the case. In this instance, though, the listener—an autodidact horologist named John B. McLemore, of Woodstock, Alabama—became the focus of Reed’s reporting.

The series, which is divided into seven “chapters,” chronicles the induction of Reed into McLemore’s baroque yet constrained universe—which includes a complex hedge maze that McLemore had designed for his family’s property, and a neighborhood tattoo parlor that provides McLemore with an intimate circle of friends (and with a lavishly decorated torso). The series also provides Reed’s listeners with a growing acquaintance with McLemore, by means of long excerpts from Reed’s phone calls with him. McLemore dilates on his obsession with climate change and on his contempt for the small-mindedness of his home town. Through such exchanges, his loneliness and despair are excruciatingly rendered. It comes as a shock, but hardly a surprise, when, at the end of Chapter 2, Reed learns that McLemore has committed suicide; the remaining five episodes are concerned not with the alleged murder—which, it turns out, never occurred—but with the precipitating causes of McLemore’s death, and with tracing the effect of his demise on others.

“S-Town” is a penetrating psychological portrait of a brilliant, troubled man who has an orator’s sense of timing and cadence, even when spewing profanities to Reed:

We ain't nothing but a nation of goddamn, chicken-shit, horse-shit, tattletale, pissy-ass, whiny, fat, flabby, out of shape Facebook looking damn twerp-fest, peeking out the windows and slipping around, listening in on the cell phones and spying in the peephole and peeping in the crack of the goddamned door, and listening in the fucking sheet rock. You know, Mr. Putin, please, show some fucking mercy. I mean, come on, drop a fucking bomb, won't you?

[SIGH] I gotta have me some tea.

It is also a sympathetic depiction of the poor inhabitants of Woodstock and their milieu of trailer parks and pick-up labor. The emotional power of the series has a lot to do with the distinctiveness of the audio. In a recording made at the wake after McLemore's suicide, a group conversation is punctuated by single-word interjections—"Death!" "Money!"—issued by Uncle Jimmy, a mourner who'd suffered brain damage, two decades earlier, after being shot in the head. (The producers at Pineapple speak of the sequence with jealous admiration: Uncle Jimmy is a podcaster's dream.) But the show also dared to do what "Serial" did not: arrange the material into a shapely, self-consciously literary form. Whereas "Serial" lurches from subject to subject, Reed crafted a supple narrative framed by a controlling metaphor derived from McLemore's vocation, clockmaking. "I'm told fixing an old clock can be maddening," Reed says, in Chapter 1. "You're constantly wondering if you've just spent hours going down a path that will likely take you nowhere." While reporting in Alabama, Reed went down dozens of mazy routes, but in the editing studio he transformed a small-town man's story into something larger

and grander: a meditation on time, and on what counts as a meaningful life.

Listening to “S-Town” is disquieting: it quickly becomes apparent that acute anguish has prompted McLemore to contact Reed. The story that Reed ends up telling is certainly not the one that McLemore asked him to report, and it includes an extended discussion of McLemore’s sexual encounters with men—something that McLemore had kept private while alive. As with “Missing Richard Simmons,” some commentators suggested that “S-Town” had exploited a vulnerable individual. (Gay Alcorn, in the *Guardian*, wrote that Reed and his producers “assume with a degree of arrogance that this is Reed’s story, not McLemore’s, whose agonies are laid out for our voyeuristic entertainment.”) This summer, McLemore’s estate sued the producers of “S-Town” for punitive and compensatory damages, claiming that McLemore had not consented to the use of his life story in the manner that Reed had molded it.

The podcast’s lawyers are unlikely to suggest that McLemore would have been pleased to discover that his life story had been fashioned into a masterpiece, even though McLemore gave Reed a selection of “bedtime reading” about the South, which included short stories by William Faulkner and Shirley Jackson. Novelists, too, have generally refrained from making this case to aggrieved parties whose lives they have plundered for inspiration. Reed’s narration, unlike the chatter of most podcasts, often has the density of literary writing, and his observations are made with a novelist’s eye. After several encounters with Charlie Lawrence, the husband of McLemore’s cousin Reta, Reed notes, “Almost every time I’ve seen Reta and Charlie, at probate court, at our Best Western hotel meeting, at John’s funeral, Charlie has been wearing some kind of Hawaiian shirt, as if he’s trying to will these unpleasant settings into the fun-filled retirement

he'd imagined." Among the half-million products released in podcasting's brief history, it is "S-Town," which depicts McLemore's life and death as authentic tragedy, that seems most likely to endure as a work of art.

If a stentorian voice once prevailed on public radio, the model of the host that Glass incarnates, and that Brian Reed embodies on "S-Town"—a sensitive, hesitating, transparently liberal male—has become equally ubiquitous today. One possibility offered by the podcasting boom is that other kinds of voices might more easily reach Americans' ears. At Pineapple, it is a point of pride that almost all its podcasts have been hosted by people of color, or women, or gay men, or by members of otherwise marginalized populations. Each show has built the kind of young and urbane audience that is unlikely to tune in to NPR over brunch.

In June, Weiss-Berman met Janet Mock—the writer, TV presenter, and transgender activist—at Soho House, in Manhattan, to see if Mock would participate in a podcast centered on two black transgender women, Chyna Gibson and Ciara McElveen, who two years ago in New Orleans were murdered within days of each other. Both were popular performers in drag bars. McElveen, who came from a small town, had felt rejected by her parents, who were both preachers; Gibson, a New Orleans native, had a supportive circle of friends and family.

Weiss-Berman said, "People are really into this true-crime space, but we've been avoiding it—we think it is often disrespectful to the victims, and trashy." But the proposed podcast would use the New Orleans killings as a vehicle for exposing a broader social problem—the "epidemic of trans women of color being murdered." (The murder rate of trans women is considerably

higher than for other populations.)

Mock, who last year launched a celebrity-interview podcast that was produced by Pineapple, sat on a banquette in loose patterned pants and a tank top, one foot tucked under her. She nodded in agreement and said, “So often we hear the name” of a victim, and “hashtag the name, and then we move on—until the next one.” She had recently been on the creative team for the FX series “Pose,” an evocation of New York’s queer ballroom scene in the nineteen-eighties, and she liked the idea of combining storytelling with activism. Musing on the podcast idea, she said, “It’s also a story about place.” In New Orleans dance clubs that play the local strain of hip-hop known as bounce, “you see trans girls with boyfriends—straight guys, black men, and it’s completely accepted. It’s a very black, super-masculine space, and these girls are accepted in this space. But what makes them super-visible also makes them vulnerable.”

Weiss-Berman said, “It could be a whole episode—the background of New Orleans bounce, and how trans women got involved in that scene.” Mock’s eyes lit up—the idea was feeling like something more than a true-crime tale.

Weiss-Berman added that she and Linsky had just been in Los Angeles, meeting with television and film producers. In Hollywood, there is considerable interest in podcasting as a relatively inexpensive means of developing an idea. Whereas it can cost five million dollars to make a TV pilot, an eight- or ten-episode podcast series can be made for five hundred thousand dollars. If the podcast becomes a hit, a TV or film producer will feel greater confidence in the story’s broad appeal—and will have a built-in audience for the adaptation. So far, only a few podcast-to-

screen projects have been brought to fruition, and the results have been mixed. Last year, Gimlet’s clever “Startup” podcast became “Alex, Inc.,” a feeble ABC sitcom, starring Zach Braff, that was cancelled after two months. But another Gimlet podcast, the scripted thriller “Homecoming,” has just been adapted into an Amazon series, starring Julia Roberts, and it is receiving strong reviews.

Increasingly, Hollywood producers are seeking to acquire the rights to podcasts, or to invest in them from the outset. Mark Ceryak, a partner at Pastel, the production company behind the movie “Moonlight,” has been discussing potential joint projects with Pineapple, ranging from the expected (true-crime stories) to the unexpected (a podcast for children about migratory eels). He told me, “Ten or fifteen years ago, people were really staying in their lanes—if you were working in film, you were staying in film. But over the last fifteen years we have seen that blow open.”

Weiss-Berman told Mock that, for the New Orleans podcast, Pineapple would seek a partnership with a film or TV company. She promised Mock that she, too, would be “involved in every iteration, attached to all the derivatives.”

Mock looked skeptical. “I don’t know how I would see it as a show,” she said.

“I could see it as a Netflix six-part investigation!” Weiss-Berman said.

Mock chuckled. “So—the podcast space is just an *incubator* ?” she said.

In the nineteen-thirties, Walter Benjamin, having fled from the Nazis, was living in exile in Paris, and his writings from the period express skepticism about the objective authority of information. But he could not have anticipated the ways in which such skepticism would proliferate in our own time, through new forms of media. “Fake news” has become a rallying cry for President Trump and his supporters even as his critics have documented thousands of instances in which he has lied. In this context, information, in the sense that Benjamin used the term, no longer appears to be distinct from storytelling. In the fractured American commons, there are competing streams of information, and the information offered by CNN is so different from that offered by Fox News that to believe one side is to be convinced that the other is telling a story, in the schoolyard sense of the phrase: telling a lie.

Unsurprisingly, several prominent podcasts have been accused of getting their stories wrong. Some listeners of Season 1 of “Serial” felt that it was reckless for Koenig to raise so many doubts about Syed’s conviction without arriving at a credible alternative explanation for the murder. One dissenting Reddit thread is outright hostile; it is titled “A Reminder: Adnan is Guilty and Serial was a Lie.” Reed, of “S-Town,” has been called homophobic for depicting McLemore’s history of fleeting entanglements, and his lack of a life partner, as something pitiable. Daniel Schroeder, in Slate, argued that Reed “turns to straight concepts, especially the obvious desirability of monogamous coupledness, to make sense of his subject’s queer life.”

But those podcasts have had a better afterlife than “With Her,” one of Pineapple’s first projects. Launched in the summer of 2016, the series chronicles the campaign of Hillary Clinton from the inside, featuring interviews with the candidate and her staff. Hosted by Linsky, the podcast was

not intended to offer objective, skeptical coverage; Pineapple was being paid by the campaign, and from the start Linsky declared himself to be in the tank. The podcast was essentially propaganda.

To revisit the show now is illuminating, as it reveals how persuasively the medium of podcasting can tell a story—the ascent of Hillary Clinton to the Presidency—in such a way that it seems not just plausible but inevitable. The final episode before the election features an emotional Linsky asking an emotional Clinton about how her late mother, Dorothy Howell Rodham, would have felt about the victory that—at the time—seemed imminent. “What do you think it would have meant to her that her daughter was going to be the first woman elected President?” Linsky asks.

“I think she would have had a quiet but profound satisfaction,” Clinton says. “I think she would have thought, ‘O.K. Good job, Hillary.’” Had Clinton actually won, the podcast might now be seen as an illustration of the intimate power of the medium’s mixture of storytelling and information. But the story that “With Her” offered turned out to be fiction. Listening to the podcast makes it painfully clear that, sometimes, a narrative can satisfy because it is beguiling, not because it is true. “With Her” may be a twenty-first-century creation, but, in its way, it tells an ancient kind of story: a cautionary tale. ♦

Published in the print edition of the November 19, 2018 issue, with the headline “Binge Listening.”



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