HOW TO MAKE RADIO THAT'S GOOD

WHERE DO STORIES COME FROM?

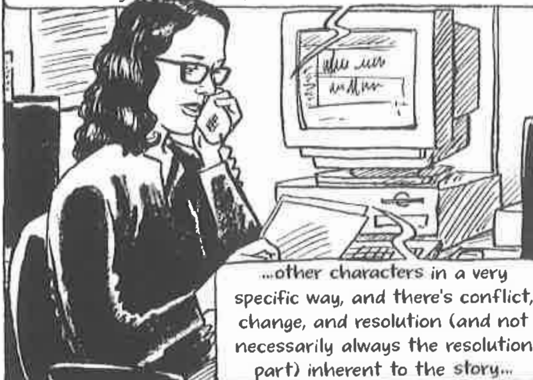
I was going through the internship process with an applicant, Mary Wiltenberg. I had asked her to pitch some stories, and in the interview, she pitched a story about this part of southeastern Missouri...

...in the Bootheel, where, in 1939, there was a sharecroppers protest all along Highway 61.

It's sort of a fascinating story in that it was both black and white sharecroppers, and it ended with the federal government giving them more or less what they wanted, but I explained why we wouldn't be interested, that essentially this is sort of an A&E type of documentary...

...which is great, they're great stories, but we feel like it's already represented in public broadcasting, and it's just not what we do.

I also explained that the stories that we *do* do are really character-driven, that... ...they follow the same structure, a literary structure, as a fiction story might. The story needs one character, a character that you identify with, who interacts with...



...other characters in a very specific way, and there's conflict, change, and resolution (and not necessarily always the resolution part) inherent to the story...

...and the characters change and they grow and they learn something new, and surprising. Especially with our show, that's always what we're going for, something surprising, a surprising situation—where somebody comes to a conclusion that you wouldn't expect.

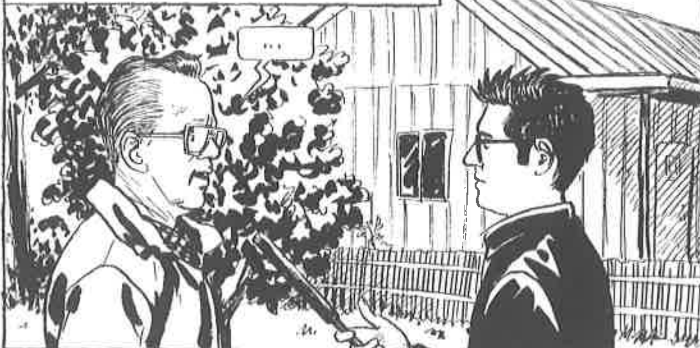
...is American Life
...BEZ Radio
...48 East Grand Avenue
...hicago, IL 60611

20 January 19...

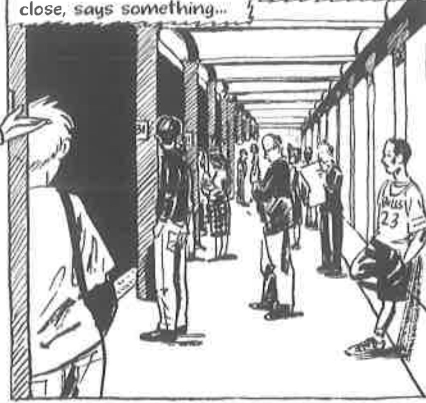
Dear Ms. Snyder,

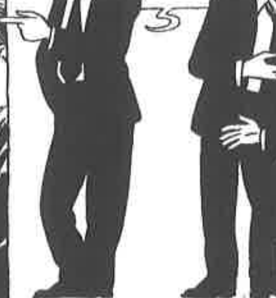
You mentioned, when we last spoke in Novemb... I thi... stories involving some kind of change in a person; ... the Bootheel, where I'm working on a social work/do... ...save their tiny, rural... you. It involves an intrepid couple, and the death of their dream to save their tiny, rural... town. The town--whose residents hate their lives, but fear change even more--is dying also, victim of the same forces that are now killing much of rural America. ...Whorton met in Canalou, Missouri forty-six years ago, when she w... ...and he was the boy next door who ...and lived

And then like three months later, she faxes me a letter saying that "I've thought a lot about what you said and the kind of ways that you structure stories, and I've been looking around and thinking about it a lot, and I think I have a story here where I live that fits the structure you were talking about."



FOR EXAMPLE...





And so the guy walks up to Brett, stands a little too close, and says...

TO STREET

You can stay.

And Brett felt...euphoria. There's no other word for it really. In his mind he knew there was no reason to get so excited. But in his heart, it made him really really happy.

There is just something about the judgment of strangers. When the clerk in the record store looks at the CDs you're buying and gives you a glance like "You are so lame."

It's as if by their status *as strangers,* they have some special insight into who we are.

This is the other thing you need.

I believe that radio is a peculiarly didactic medium. It's not enough to tell a little story. You also have to explain what it means. That's the way news programs work, that's how call-in shows work, that's at the heart of Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern and everyone else people love on the radio.

...and so, Mr. Secretary, tell us what this means. Does the UN have the power to intervene or not?

...this is what I'm saying. I don't see how Adam Sandler's funny. I want to like him but I just don't get it. Explain to me what you found funny...

...and so, once again, we see a presidency that makes us ashamed to *be* Americans.

If this story was just Brett's story, without that broader point about the judgment of strangers, it just wouldn't be as satisfying.

This is the structure of every story on our program—there's an anecdote, that is, a sequence of actions where someone says "this happened, then this happened, then this happened"—and then there's a moment of reflection about what that sequence means, and then on to the next sequence of actions.

It is an ancient storytelling structure, really. It's the structure, essentially, of a sermon; you hear a little story from the Bible, then the clergyperson tells you what it means.

Anecdote then reflection, over and over.

THINGS COME TOGETHER, OR: GLOMMING ON

The Blind Woman.

So this is the first piece you had, and you looked for other pieces to sort of go with it?

Nancy Updike

Yeah, I mean, I talked about this at a story meeting...

Story meeting. 10:25, Monday 1/4. Thirteen weeks before broadcast.

I have an announcement to make, everybody.

Ha ha ha ha

Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha

This is not my natural hair color.

Just want to keep everyone informed.

Is that like a late stage of the flu that I have now? Just at some point...henna?

Denial, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance...henna!

That is not henna, that is so much classier than henna.

I know, I'm sorry.

Henna. OK, so anyway, so...I was pitched this story about this woman who's going blind, and needed someone to drive her around. She hired this guy and the problem was...

...he was *too* helpful. He kept doing this extra stuff for her that she didn't want him to do. She felt invaded.

I think it's interesting because it's about the moment when helpfulness ceases to be helpful.

Sarah Vowell on the speaker phone.

We could do a whole show on good samaritans. There's that Ian Frazier story we've talked about, about those guys who go around clearing stuff out of the branches of trees.

The Canalou story came up during the week.

How did it come up?

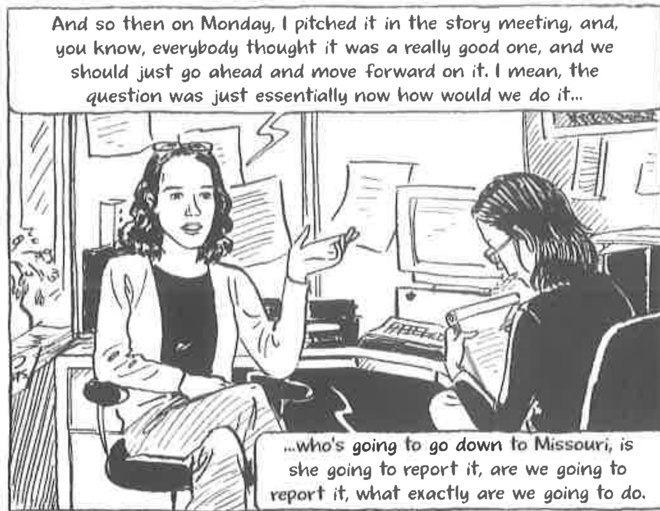
I don't remember—*oh*—I think it was (hee hee)...

...actually, we were in the car coming back from our *New York Times* photo shoot!

And Nancy had the idea for a show on do-gooders, she had the blind woman story, and I told her this story was faxed to me that I think would be really good for a do-gooders show.

The Canalou story.

...and I thought, This brings up all sorts of interesting ideas about help, and doing good, and that it seems like it's going to be easy and simple, and it really rarely is.


And so then on Monday, I pitched it in the story meeting, and, you know, everybody thought it was a really good one, and we should just go ahead and move forward on it. I mean, the question was just essentially now how would we do it...
...who's going to go down to Missouri, is she going to report it, are we going to report it, what exactly are we going to do.

Ira's Office, March 17. Three weeks, two days to broadcast.
So I'm in the middle of this Philip Gourevitch book*, and I just saw a story in the *Times* about humanitarian aid in the post-Cold War era, and it's stirring up ideas about what *is* the good we're doing, and where are we kidding ourselves.

And the Gourevitch book is a really beautiful example of that, about how international aid workers actually made things *worse* in Rwanda by aiding the side that committed genocide.

Do you feel his story's been told?
His book's gotten a lot of publicity. But I think it'd be cool to put a story on that scale with these other stories. Also, I think we'd be approaching it with a different sensibility than those other shows.

Okay, let's do it.
I heard Terry Gross do an interview.
Did she cover this?
No!

If it works, I think it would make the show...great.

...so we called Gourevitch up. And then, you know, Alix had seen this performance by Larry Steger, and thought, Oh, this could go in.

Story meeting. 10:42 Monday 4/5. Four days and ten hours to air.
OK, OK, this week for "Do-Gooders," here's what we've got: the blind woman, which I guess I should listen to finally, which is 7ish; Canalou, which is 30; and then Philip Gourevitch, which does have two parts in it, one where he talks about the humanitarian aid being such a joke...
...and another part where he talks about the guy who's like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, who really is an effective do-gooder.

And then the other things that are contenders for the show are the Larry Steger story, and Spy Music, and the bag story ...I mean, we don't have that much time...
Gourevitch I think realistically is like 16 to 18 minutes...

Wow, really? Then that's it...
...and worth it...
Then that's the whole show.

Once you get an idea going, things start to glom on to it; you know, you have a whole bunch of things, and the length that it's gonna be starts emerging, and some things drop out...
...and often, if they're good, they'll glom on to some other idea.

Yeah, I think we might want to try to make room for Larry Steger. It's only six minutes.
Is it funny?

Uh, no. Its not funny.
It's just a good entertaining story.
It's very dark.
This is going to be a really dark show.

Yeah. But whaddya expect? It's called "Do-Gooders." You thought maybe you were listening to a different radio show? ("Pimps," however, is just gonna be a laugh riot.)
Hee Hee Hee
Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha
Ha Ha Ha Hee Hee Ha!
You know, one little light moment of someone handing someone else a sandwich, perhaps, I dunno.

Usually, *This American Life* interviews—like our stories—have two major sections: the narrative, and the reflections.

Big plot points I want them to talk about

Possible details and details

Uh, that's sorta counterintuitive...

Yeah, but like, you give the audience something to picture as the story is told, something three-dimensional, and it comes alive.

This is the first thing we teach new reporters, right after how to work the equipment.

I was standing right here. And the shot was from right there.

So we're standing by the kitchen sink.

Yeah. I made coffee, took my cup...

Have the person give you a tour of the key places in the story, on tape, explaining the significance of each place.

And I turned and walked away and got in the chair. And, um, I *heard* something and then I got in the chair and then I heard something big.

You heard something like what?

Like—I thought somebody threw another beer bottle at the house.

So I'm looking around to see. And the next morning Kenny goes out to take the garbage. And he come in, and I noticed his face was as white as a sheet and he started down the hallway and he come back.

And he said, "You'd better call the police." He said, "Somebody shot through our house."

All I'm doing is prompting her to tell me the events, in order, and look how vivid everything suddenly gets—there's the "white as a sheet," and she gives me the actual words Kenny spoke. When you get dialogue, you know you've arrived at the center, at ground zero.

And so where's the shot?

The shot came through the bedroom, the room right on the other side.

It's a mess but I'll show you.

Is there still a hole?

Oh yeah!

That's it. Ha ha ha.

Wow. You could put your finger in it!

Well, yeah. I could put my thumb in it. Ha ha... I have small hands.

Wow. Yeah, you're right. That's way more gripping.

You're staging a little drama as you get the facts.

Doesn't this get a little hot to handle when you're there with the interviewee? What're your obligations to them?

I feel very protective of the interviewees.

My obligation is first to understand and document their point of view.

And, second, if I am going to say anything critical about them, I say those criticisms to their face, during the interview.

That sounds really hard.

It can be, but it's just simple fairness. You *have* to give them a chance to respond to the criticism.

It also makes for better radio. Their response will be a dramatic moment on tape.

You think people just feel like you've come to town and you're telling them what to do and they don't like that?

Sly.

How much of your problems do you think have to do with the fact that people see you as outsiders?

Do you feel you went around to people and actually understood what it is that they wanted?

OK, so then what?

The one other thing you need is a *reflection* on what it all means. I learned this as a tape cutter for Noah Adams on *All Things Considered*.

?

You think people just don't like do-gooders? That that's part of it?

He is the king of this. He loved doing these interviews with ordinary folks, about this or that, but whatever story they told, at some point...

What's this say about small-town America?

!

...he'd just start to try out hypotheses on them, Well, do you think it's this, or do you think that people are like this in this situation, do you think that people always do this...

And eventually something would stick, and they'd say something great, and we'd have an ending to the interview, and we'd put it on *All Things Considered*, do you know what I mean?

Do you think it's as simple as: there are a lot of people who feel defeated...

Ha ha!

...and so to see anybody who isn't as defeated, awakens all the feelings in themselves about, "Well, I should be getting myself together?" So they feel bad, and you're the reason, so they get mad at you?

Like, without that thing which says "In general, people, when they're in this situation, do this," it really, it just doesn't make sense in the context of radio. And some of these questions just go absolutely nowhere.

Mine? No! Nothing to do with the country. This is *America,* man! If you don't like one place, you go somewhere else. Like the Bible says, "You dust your heels off and go on."

But eventually something will stick.

Ha ha ha... "No good deed goes unpunished"?! Well, probably not. But maybe we haven't done such a good deed for these people here. Not what they wanted, that's for sure. Maybe it's more what we wanted than what they wanted.

Like I said, radio is a peculiarly didactic medium, unlike, for example, theater, or comics, where something can kind of happen, and you're in a setting where people will *infer* the meaning.

The way we're used to listening to radio is: something happens, and then they say, "Here's why we're talking about this. Here's what it means."

Also because it's more satisfying. If you tell the story without the moment of reflection at the end, it loses grandeur. Moving to the general statement takes you out of the province of bar story and into the world of literature...which is, you know, where you want to be... at this end of the radio dial!

What do you think it means that radio has to spell out for listeners the significance of the stories it tells, but, in other art forms, that sort of thing comes across as heavy-handed?

Just for that, I'm drawing you without hair for the next page. *Then* we'll see what's fun.

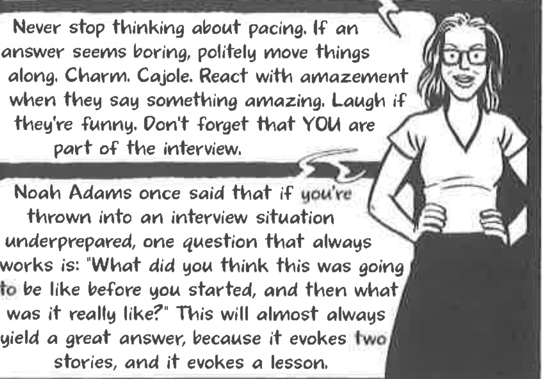
INTERVIEWING LIVE

In the original *Radio: An Illustrated Guide,* we took a moment here to talk about how to structure interviews that weren't going to be edited. Mostly, we did this because editing was still a bit technologically challenging in 1999. Now, of course, it's much more accessible. Still, there are reasons to think about how to interview live. Most interview podcasts aren't edited (even if they might benefit from it), and of course there's the advantage of planning ahead, no matter what the destination of the interview. Here are a few of the things we said:

Structure your interview carefully. *Choose* your sequence of events.

Think about when you are going to have the person tell stories, and when you are going to, as Ira puts it, "deploy them against them", i.e., when you are going to quote things they have previously said or written back to them.

Never stop thinking about pacing. If an answer seems boring, politely move things along. Charm. Cajole. React with amazement when they say something amazing. Laugh if they're funny. Don't forget that YOU are part of the interview.



Noah Adams once said that if you're thrown into an interview situation underprepared, one question that always works is: "What did you think this was going to be like before you started, and then what was it really like?" This will almost always yield a great answer, because it evokes two stories, and it evokes a lesson.

So you're done with the interviews, you go home, and then you do *what* with 12 hours of...stuff?

You have to whittle 12 hours down to 15 or 20 minutes, so the first step is to LOG the tape.

What's a log?

A log is like a transcript, but less exact. You don't need every word. You can type or handwrite. The key is: you want to take notes on what's in the tape *without ever stopping it.*

It's impossible to overstate how important it is to take good notes if you're making radio. After all, you're working in a medium which is just sound floating through the air. It's ether. Vapor. You need a representation—on paper—so you can see what the hell you've got and make hard choices.

Have a word or phrase for each sentence. You'll need this later, when you're editing, choosing which sentences to keep. The log will be a map of what's there.

have problems like big town s have these days.

SO 1950S GREW UP HERE?

yes for both of us.

DESCRIBE HOW TOWN WAS BACK THEN?

*****kenny: the towsn was relaly a booming town, on sa
had to get here early to get place to park. had six grocery
four or five restaurants and come to town to visit, no tv ba
then.

VISIT EACH OTHER?

visit each other. play checkers, old men play checkers, old
would be visiting and kids would be playing until two or th
the morning.

jackie: and they'd put us little ones int he back of the cars
sleep b/c we couldn't stay with them. they played rough.

Logging an interview in real-time is one of the tests you have to pass to become a tape cutter on *Fresh Air.* It's one of the first things we teach our interns.

Logs are long. 119 pages for the Canalou story. So next you go through and circle your favorite three or four moments from each interview. Then you take out a clean piece of paper, and make a list of all those favorite moments.

For Canalou, it was about 20. Suddenly—like magic—12 hours of tape is reduced to a one-page list.

Sure, if you have really small handwriting.

Then you just stare at your list, until it seems clear which piece of tape (or which script idea) should be the first moment in the story, and which should be the last. This is the Zen part.

When Kenny + Jackie were kids
- tour tape
- intvw
So decided to move back -
But a lot had changed
Brad + Susan + lot
Didn't think of himself as do-gooder
- everyone calling, yell
summarize

And from that, you build an outline.