

The Art of Audio Storytelling, by a Master of Her Craft

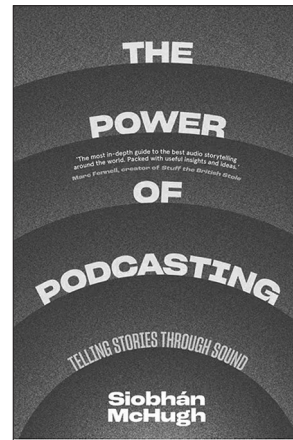
The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories through Sound

by Siobhán McHugh. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. Appendix. Notes. Index. Hardcover, £84.00; USD\$100; Paperback, 320 pp. £28.00; USD\$32.00; E-book, £28.00; USD\$28.

Reviewed by Ella Waldmann, Université Paris-Cité, Paris, France

In 2018, when radio documentary and podcast producer and academic Siobhán McHugh gave a free online course, 35,000 participants from 150 countries joined to learn about “The Power of Podcasting for Storytelling” (5). The success of this course speaks not only to the popularity that this topic has recently gained but also to the central role that McHugh plays today as one of the most generous and stimulating voices in the field. One of her greatest strengths is combining her hands-on experience as a producer and consultant for many acclaimed radio documentaries and podcasts and her academic expertise in oral history and literary journalism. Very early on, she identified the convergence between storytelling and the audio format, insisting on the power of aurality to create authenticity, empathy, and interest. With the coming of age of podcasting in the mid-2010s, audio storytelling experienced an unprecedented revival. McHugh was one of the first to acknowledge the shift that this new medium represented for the form with her seminal article, “How Podcasting Is Changing the Audio Storytelling Form” (*The Radio Journal—International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 2016) in which she drew on testimonies from renowned international professionals to elaborate new theoretical perspectives.

Until now, the existing literature on podcasts has fallen into two categories: on the one hand, practical guidebooks for aspiring podcasters and, on the other, academic works in the now-established field of podcast studies. Siobhán McHugh’s *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound* bridges this gap. This hybrid book is both a trove of information, analyses, and insights for scholars and students and a useful guide filled with practical advice for anyone who would themselves want to start writing and producing podcasts. The feat here is to convey knowledge that is always grounded in personal experience. McHugh applies the methods of storytelling to her writing: she often uses the first person and personal anecdotes to draw readers into the secrets of audio storytelling and does not shy away from introducing affect



by speaking to the reader's feelings to make concepts more palpable, without ever remaining at the surface level or veering away from her rigorous theoretical perspective.

The book begins with a case study in which McHugh relates an interview she conducted with an Australian woman who was an entertainer for U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. This woman, McHugh recalls, was a natural radio "talent"; yet she also recalls the elaborate editing process she had to go through to make the best out of her recording and reveal the "seductive power of sound."

In chapter one, "Podcasting: Why, Who, What" (8–25), McHugh delineates the contours of podcasting and discusses the various forms the medium can take, from informal conversations, known as a "chumcast" or "chatcast" (10) to extremely scripted and crafted narrative podcasts. What these productions all have in common is the centrality of voice, which is McHugh's primary interest and object of research. She then narrows her focus down to the genre that interests her specifically, the narrative nonfiction podcast.

The second chapter delves into the "The Backstory" (26–46) of audio storytelling, giving a historical overview of the genre, in which she pays homage to its public radio origins and founders such as Norman Corwin, Studs Terkel, and Jay Allison. McHugh does not restrict her analysis to the United States, as she also discusses the radio and podcast landscape in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, where she has lived and spent most of her career. This chapter does an excellent job of underlining the "cross-fertilisations" (33) that take place both historically and geographically, between different generations and countries.

With the advent of podcasting, radio experienced a digital revolution that sparked a renewal of storytelling through sound. McHugh retraces the beginning of the medium and ponders the ongoing debate around the distinction between radio and podcast—or whether podcasting can be considered a self-standing medium—which she settles by defining them, with a wink, as "kissing cousins" (48).

Chapter four, "The Aerobic Art of Interviewing" (69–98), deals with the interviewing process, a topic that goes beyond the field of audio and can be of interest for any format or outlet. Here, McHugh highlights the importance—and difficulty—of "active" or "aerobic listening" (70–73). McHugh draws again from her personal experience, breaking down several memorable interviews she conducted throughout her career.

Chapter five revisits some of the most notable podcasts produced in the last ten years, insisting on "milestones" (99) such as *This American Life's* spin-off *Serial* or *The New York Times's* indispensable *The Daily*. The following chapter, "Podcasting as Literary Journalism: *S-Town*" (128–55), adapted from an academic article published in this journal, is an in-depth analysis of the unrivaled masterpiece *S-Town*. It examines how the podcast fits the definition of literary journalism that was developed by Norman Sims in his 1984 book *The Literary Journalists* by analyzing it through the categories of immersion, voice and subjectivity, symbolism, structure, and accuracy, before questioning the impact and ethics of such a production—questions that may and should apply to any work of literary journalism.

The next two chapters are a master class in creating a narrative podcast, based

on McHugh's experience as a consultant for three recent Australian productions. The author takes the reader behind the scenes (or, as she puts it, "under the hood") (183) of the production process of a hit podcast. She dissects authentic scripts and offers a glimpse of the various drafts and revisions they go through—an invaluable resource for practitioners and researchers alike.

The book concludes by addressing the necessary questions of "inclusion, diversity, and equality" (216–49) in the podcasting sphere, and by speculating on the medium's shifting landscape and future. At the end is also an appendix listing recommendations and podcast reviews. Interspersed throughout the book are special sections featuring practical tips, short Q&As with producers, and lists of recommended links, podcasts, and professional networks—further evidence of its versatility.

McHugh shares her knowledge and skills with great generosity and wit. She is an integral member of the close-knit radio and podcast community, which she describes as follows: "It's entirely unscientific and I have no way of proving it, but I just think we audio-storytelling folk are generally a good bunch, softer than the average media apparatchik, more inclined to care about fairness and social justice." After reading *The Power of Podcasting*, one can only concur with her statement.