Sruthi Pinnamaneni on telling stories on the radio



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As told to Resham Mantri, 2991 words.

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Radio journalism allows for a storytelling experience by using both voice and music. How important do you think those elements are to the story?

I was trained in film and TV, and that was what my brain had automatically been drawn to when I was studying journalism. I'd watch documentaries like *Jesus Camp* and be like, "Wow, this is really powerful." I never listened to radio or thought about it much until I left New York after journalism school. I moved to Vienna, and for the first time, I was just trying to figure out how to start working again in a place where I was learning the language and learning the ways of the city. I would spend a lot of time wandering the streets. I'd just bought an iPhone for the first time. This was in 2008. I'd heard about podcasts, and I downloaded Radiolab.

The first thing I listened to was a piece called "Stochasticity," which every single person should hear. It was the first time that I'd heard something that was like a film pill—it just went straight to your brain and gave you all the best parts of watching a thing except you weren't watching it at all. It was like you were listening to these really gorgeous, funny landscapes of sound. It wasn't like sound effects; it wasn't radio theater at all. It was like a sound that gave you a feeling that was then translated into an image. For me, it was like watching a movie, and it was just smarter and more complicated in the way it was written and structured. Immediately, I was like, "This is what I want to do. Whatever this is, I don't know what this is, but I want to do it."

It's similar to when you're reading something as opposed to watching something. The joy of it is that the way you interpret what's being said is personal. I think about that with radio—it's not so literal.

It's hard to describe to somebody. I certainly had never been converted to radio. I had people I worked with who loved it and would listen to it and tell me why it was so great. But it's only when I heard the right thing at the right time that I was like, "Oh, this."

It's not a thing you can describe. Like, why is it interesting to hear somebody's voice in your ear? Why would that be a physical feeling that you wouldn't understand until you hear a sound that hits you in just the right way?

There are definitely people whose voices—and I think you have one of those voices—that you just want to listen to. I would think it's challenging to get into if you don't have the voice.

I actually don't have a radio voice. When I was working in Vienna for the first time, I went out and got a job at a radio station. It was the only station in Vienna that broadcast for, I think, half the day in English. It was a place where I could, as an English speaker, get a job. They had feature news, and they had by-the-hour news, like, "Here's the latest." Everybody wanted to be the person who read the news. In Vienna, everybody knows those voices.

I could never get that job because everybody said my voice was too high, and I sounded too young. There was a woman who was a BBC voice trainer who would work with us every week, and I got double sessions with her because I

was such a tragic case. She would talk to me about how to make my voice lower and deeper, and my accent more British. She would say things like, “You should try smoking.” It’s true.

I don’t have the right voice, except for in the U.S. This is because Ira Glass and a number of people like him came in and changed what’s okay for people to sound like on the radio. Ira has a total nasal, weird voice, but I remember when I started listening to *This American Life*, one voice that I really took to right away was Sarah Vowell, who has a really weird voice. I can’t even imitate her, but it was so compelling. Then there was Starlee Kine, who has an insanely great voice, but again, it’s a weird voice. When you hear it, it gives you a physical sensation that’s very pleasant. It’s also because she’s an amazing writer, so it’s a combination of what a person sounds like, the kinds of stories they tell, and the wit and attitude they bring to it. It’s hard to disentangle those things.

In Vienna, did you learn German in order to do interviews there?

Yeah. This place where I worked did bilingual stories. All the reporters, even if they narrated a story in English and reported it in English, were expected to speak to a native German speaker in German. It was interesting. Every story would be a mix of German and English. If I was interviewing a pig farmer who didn’t speak English, I would ask them questions in German. Especially in the beginning, I never understood what they said back. I would just nod and ask all my questions and take the tape back to my husband and be like, “What is this person saying?,” because the dialect is so intense. Then at some point, I was comfortable enough in German to be able to interview people, whatever their accent, and be able to actually have a conversation with them in German.

My husband’s family is Austrian, but they speak German. The second I moved there, that was the second they stopped speaking English to me. I went to a big family dinner, and they were all speaking to me in German as if I understood, as if I had anything more than Berlitz German 101. I remember going into the bathroom and crying and then coming back out and just continuing to nod and smile. It was actually good because it forced me to learn German fast enough that I was able to actually work in it.

What kind of stories stand out to you as the ones waiting to be told? What stands out about a person?

There are certain people that I’m drawn to, and there are people who’re really obsessed with a thing. The people I’m drawn to tend to be people who are really obsessed with something. To give you an example, there was a man that I did a story on a couple of years ago. He was a Jewish writer. He was ex-Hasid. We first met because he was telling me, “Oh, there’s this thing called Hasidic Reddit, and I spent a lot of time on it.” Which I thought was interesting because he’d left the Hasidic community, and then I went over to watch him be in this community for a while, online. He was showing me how it works, and letting me hear what these Hasidic people are talking about and what they’re into, like, “Oh, here’s them talking about Serial.”

What I was gathering from watching him is this man had left this community, but subconsciously, his entire brain was there. He needed a way to spy on them or watch them and see what he was missing out on, like, “Oh, it’s great that I left, and I’m better than these people—but also, really, what are they doing?” There was a little bit of complicated emotion in this person’s relationship with this thing that he couldn’t get away from.

These people, I find, the more I talk to them, the more I realize that there is deep loss and pain in their stories—like a thing happened to them that was traumatic, and they’re continuing to cope with it. These people are fascinating because they come in layers, and you need to spend time with them to really unpack their experiences. These are the people that it’s really fulfilling to do stories about, because I discover things about them as I go on.

I’m also really interested in people that I have mixed feelings about—people who I like, but there’s something about them that’s really distressing. They say things which are disturbing, but at the same time, I just want to understand them. I would say people who are a little bit, I’m not sure what the right adjective is, but the way I say it is “darker sorts.”

Then there are people who you don’t quite know how to feel about, like in your series on Paul Modrowski, “On the

Inside.” That was a complicated person to interview, and I’m sure as you went along, it became more and more complicated. Did you learn anything from making that series after you were done?

Yeah, I learned I never want to do anything about crime again. It’s really hard. I learned that it’s great to be able to speak to a person that you’re interested in without having a specific agenda. One of the luxuries of my job is that I can work on multiple stories in parallel, so I can be producing stories for a reporter or for a host or for some other smaller story of mine, and at the same time, developing a relationship with the person, not knowing exactly what that person’s story is, just knowing that I find them interesting and just allowing myself time to figure them out. In the case of Paul, I became interested in him because he had a blog that he’d been keeping for several years.

It was this very outdated, 90s-ish looking blog, and I started to read it. You find out right away that this guy, who’s been keeping this blog, is in prison. He’s been in prison since he was 18 years old. He just turned 40, or he’d turned 40 at the time that I was reading it. He was just this really misanthropic, very angry guy, who felt a deep injustice had been done and that he’d been tossed into prison without due process. He said he was autistic, which complicated the story, but the thing that I was drawn to right away was just the blog. It was written in a voice that was so distinct and weird. The stories were really funny and dry. I wanted to know who this person was.

I called him. We started to speak. It’s not like he took to me right away, or I took to him. The conversations were very stilted and awkward. Once we found a rapport, it was really easy to speak to him, and it was a weekly ritual that I had. We talked about all kinds of possibilities. He turned out to be kind of a white supremacist, and a really big fan of Trump. This is in 2015 when Trump still seemed like a person about to become marginal. I found it really interesting that this guy in prison was like, “This is it. He’s the future.” I wanted to understand why. For a while, we were like, “Let’s do a politics story where Paul is our prison correspondent.” We tossed around all these different ideas that were anything but “Let’s do a story about a person who may or may not have committed a horrible crime.”

It just meant that sometimes, when you’re talking to a person and you’ve already formed an idea of what this person’s about, you sometimes don’t see what the person’s *actually* about. With Paul, it was nice to be able to just talk to him, and then do a story many, many months later.

I can see it being challenging and also part of the appeal of doing this type of work—you don’t exactly know where you might end up when you start.

Yeah, even though I hate it every time—every time I’m like, “I wish I knew the beginning, the middle, and the end.” It feels really scary to be working on a story, have a release date looming above you, but not know the last sentence, like, “Where does this story end? What’s the moral?”

How often do you start a story to later decide it’s not worth finishing?

The only stories I haven’t finished are stories where I don’t yet have access to a main character. There’s a story I’ve been working on for a couple of months now where it’s funny and odd, but there’s a person at the top of the pyramid who keeps refusing to speak to me. I have it filed away in the back of my head as “a thing that I may or may not complete.”

Do you find there’s some value to most of the stories that you start telling, even if they end up differently than what you thought they’d be?

Totally. Obviously I don’t work in a vacuum here—I have people who push and support me. The executive producer of the show, Tim Howard, who’s also our editor, he’s the kind of person who if I’m working on a story and the main premise of the story suddenly comes undone—where I’m like, “Oh no, the story’s dead”—Tim’s like, “Oh no, the story just got better.” He’s definitely pushed me in the direction of, “If something scares you, then you’re going in the right direction.”

It’s not always like that. I’ve worked in places where they’re much more risk averse, and people don’t embrace that coming-apart feeling in the same way. I feel like everything’s just always sitting in the cupboard, kind of unborn… waiting, but not actually killed.

But I feel like most of the stories I’ve done in the last few years, I didn’t know how they would end. I didn’t know what it would be like to spend time with the person. All of them involved assumptions that I had, which later turned out to be incorrect. If I didn’t have the kind of support system that I had at the show, I don’t know how I would’ve made them. I freelanced for years before this, and as a freelancer, you certainly don’t have that kind of system to plug into.

Besides deadlines and pressures from other places within your organization, how do you know or feel when a story you’re working on is close to being done or finished?

There’s always a time in the reporting where I’m like, “Okay, this story needs to be done.” Because I will report something until the cows come home. To me, it’s the most fun part, just talking to people, reading tons and tons about whatever random subject—whether it’s some clause in immigration law or some specific loophole in one state’s criminal system.

All of these things are interesting to me, and so usually what happens is somebody says, “Hey, we have a hole in our schedule this month. Can you fill it with this story?” I will commit to it, and I will try to get it done by then. There are situations where you say, “Oh, it can’t be done because I’m waiting for this thing that needs to happen for the story to finish.” In those case, we postpone, but otherwise, we just get it to the finish line.

I know you have two children. How has having children changed the way you work?

I would never have believed this, but yes. I was devastated when I first found out I was pregnant. An editor, a former boss of mine who had twins, wrote me this very comforting email. It said, “You don’t realize it now, but they’ll make you a better journalist.” I certainly don’t think you need kids to be a really good journalist, but I think in my case, I just relate to people differently. There’s a lot of things that I didn’t feel or understand that I feel very deeply now.

I did a story a couple of years ago about a family that had lost a child. The death of a kid is always a heart-wrenching, sad story, but I think I was able to ask questions that I wouldn’t even know to ask otherwise. Kids are weird, curious creatures. And the questions they ask make you ask your own questions. They’re a pain in the butt to deal with in terms of scheduling, and it’s hard for me to travel a lot, knowing that somebody needs to pick them up from school, but in a human way, they’ve definitely deepened my questions about people.

Is there specific advice that you would’ve loved to know when you were starting out?

There are a lot of different paths to where you want to go. I remember leaving journalism school and being “stuck” in Vienna and watching a lot of my peers doing war reporting in Africa and doing all this really great adventure journalism and feeling like I was missing out—just feeling like, “Oh, that’s what I need to do in order to learn journalism. I need to go off to a war-torn country and be using satellite phones.” Honestly, if this was 20 years ago, I would love to do that. I think you learn a lot. I think that that’s in many ways the most important reporting, but I had kids. I just had to find my own way. I’m really happy with where I’ve ended up, but certainly 10 years ago, it would’ve been hard to believe that what I was doing would’ve resulted in anything that was actually fulfilling.

Sruthi Pinnamaneni Recommends:

1) *Phantom Tollboth* (a children’s book)

2) Any article by David Grann (here’s one)

3) *The Medical Detectives* by Berton Roueche

4) *Homogenic* by Björk

5) S-town

Name

Sruthi Pinnamaneni

Vocation

Producer, Reporter

