Escaping The BOX

A Conversation With Ira Glass, Host Of This American Life

Renee Lertzman

I first heard Ira Glass's voice over my car radio as I careened along the fog-shrouded curves of the Pacific Coast Highway. Scanning the dial, I came upon a program that was different from any other on the radio: intelligent, sharp, intimate. I found myself concentrating intensely on the story being told. I later discovered that I had tuned in to one of the first broadcasts of This American Life, Glass's weekly documentary program about the unexpected, hilarious, and sometimes dark details of everyday life.

We are not accustomed to being moved by what we hear on the radio. It's where we turn for news, for cop-forty music, for silly morning shows. It is a place we look for rich, compelling narratives that take us into landscapes and lives far from our own. As creator and host of This American Life, Glass is an accomplished architect of narrative. He understands what makes it work, how it forms a bridge between narrator and listener. Even his own life story does not escape his exacting requirements. Asked how he
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came to radio, he complains that his tale is too mundane: "It doesn't have what you need in a good story, which is a transforming moment."

Glass began his radio career as an intern for National Public Radio without ever having listened to NPR. He worked behind the scenes for ten years, including a stint writing copy for Morning Edition and as a producer on All Things Considered. Finally, he became an on-air reporter and fill-in host. In 1990 he was assigned to document race relations in a Chicago high school. It was his first opportunity to practice the style of reporting that would later become his trademark. Following the advice of a documentary filmmaker he knew, he "went into the school and treated it like I was at a big cocktail party, just noticing who I was drawn to." Glass's rule was simply to let the people who approached him speak as long as they wanted. "When I'm interviewing someone," he says, "and they open themselves up, I fall completely in love with them."

Initially picked up by only nine stations in 1996, This American Life is now
Lertzman: How did you move from Morning Edition and All Things Considered to a show like This American Life?

Glass: For five years prior to doing This American Life, I'd been hosting a free-form Friday-night show in Chicago called The Wild Room. We would follow somebody around in an odd situation and create a narrative, complete with characters, scenes, humor. It was much more pleasure-oriented than the documentaries you traditionally hear on the radio. The show was often quite terrible, but about once a month it would be kind of great. I was able to try out new things and I started imagining what I could do with a bigger show.

Lertzman: What was it you wanted to do?

Glass: I'd been noticing what grabbed my heart on the radio: the moments that got my attention, the moments when I could not stop listening. On a program like All Things Considered, for example, there is usually one moment like that in an hour, if you're lucky. I thought I could create a show that was just these moments.

Part of what makes those moments work is timing. In radio, what you control more than anything else is time. You need to pause after each moment, so the audience can feel it. We do that more than most radio shows. When something happens, we bring the music up and hold you there. Many of our stories are organized around a single moment.

Lertzman: When I first heard your show, I couldn't believe it was on National Public Radio. It was so intimate and "pleasure-oriented."

Glass: People often listen to public radio because they think it's good for them, like medicine. I hate that. For me, it's important that radio be pleasurable. I'm interested in narratives that draw you in, engages you, and gives you something — something really deep and satisfying — and then lets you off.

There's this notion that we should listen to or watch documentaries because it makes us better people; it helps us to understand ourselves and others better, and to understand more about our country. I think that's all true, but it leaves out the most important thing: that a show generate pleasure. Everything else can follow. And if you are on a mission — as we are — to broadcast voices and stories that aren't being broadcast anywhere else, then there's even more of a burden to be pleasure-oriented and savvy, to not just tell the audience: "Here, take this medicine; it's good for you." We see our program as documenting life in this country. But we are going to amuse ourselves each week, too.

Lertzman: How are your stories different from most radio reporting?

Glass: A traditional news story is structured around a strict rhythm: every forty-five seconds, you have a couple of sentences of script followed by a quote. If it's a story about say, welfare reform, you have someone for and another person against the reform, and you go back and forth between them. It's a predictable rhythm, and a rather dull one, I would argue.

We structure our stories the way most good nonfiction narratives work: we present an anecdote, and then we step back from the anecdote and reflect on what it means, and over and over, throughout the course of a show.

I studied semiotics in college. The main idea of semiotics is that any narrative or text that gives us pleasure is bad, and that we have to be on guard against it. I don't believe that, of course. But what I found useful about semiotics was the analysis of what it is about a text that gives us pleasure. For example, narrative tension: "She gets out of bed. There's no sound in the house. She walks downstairs, and still there is no sound. She walks out to the porch..." A question is implicitly being raised by the narrative, and you want to know the answer.

In constructing the show, we consciously raise these questions, and then we answer them. We set a narrative in motion from the moment the show begins. That's why the show doesn't begin with a traditional announcement of "what's coming up in this hour." We do give listeners a vague idea of what's going to happen, because you need something before the show starts to be like the candy-store window. But we don't lay it all out for them. As a result, a lot of listeners don't know what to make of the show when it comes on; there's something in the tone of it that doesn't feel familiar.

Of course, it's not narrative alone that makes This American Life different. After all, we are bombarded with narrative. Most commercials use narrative to sell us something. Most media are busy selling themselves to us with narrative. We are saturated with it. But when we hear a bare voice telling a real story, it feels like the uncut cocaine, with no additives: the real deal.

Lertzman: Your show often has an element of surprise to it. Is this by design, or does it just happen?

Glass: The rarest thing that you can experience when you turn on the radio or the television is to be surprised. If something on our show is surprising, that automatically puts us in our own separate category. So it's very important to us that the show be unexpected. We kill stories — good stories — because they are not surprising enough.

A different version of this interview previously appeared in Speak.
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For example, we did a show once about Frank Sinatra. It was a hard show for us to do, because Frank Sinatra has been so handled as a subject, so it was difficult to find anything surprising to say about him. The show was originally going to start with a narrative about the day that he became Frank Sinatra. There was literally a day, in 1942, when he was performing at New York's Paramount Theater, and he became a star. So we got the author of the authoritative book about Frank Sinatra to tell the story for us in the studio, and that was going to be the anecdote that set the show in motion. The day of the show, we killed it. He told the story perfectly well, but it sounded too much like public radio. It was exactly what you would expect.

Instead, at the top of the show, we played a tape of Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. and Dean Martin performing live in 1962: one minute Sinatra is the most romantic man in the world, the next he's a misogynist creep, and the next minute he's doing racial jokes with Sammy Davis Jr. The way he shape-shifts so quickly went right to the heart of why he's interesting. But it really did come down to the fact that, when you heard this tape, you just could not stop listening. It was magnetic.

**Lertzman:** I don't see *This American Life* as pleasurable so much as intimate. Many times, while listening to the show, I've found myself crying.

**Glass:** Our ideal story is full of laughs for the first third, and the rest of the time you are crying, or alternately laughing and crying all the way through.

Radio has a peculiar intimacy because you don't see the face of the person who is speaking. This lets you enter another person's experience faster than if you were watching television, especially if that person's life is very different from yours.

I thought about this all the time when I was doing stories on gang kids in Chicago. I realized that if I'd been doing television and the audience could have seen these kids — the girls with all the makeup, the boys with the leather jackets, the tattoos, looking tough — it would have been hard for people's hearts to go out to them. But they talked with such vulnerability that anybody just hearing their voices could immediately enter into their stories and understand who they were. We consciously manipulate that on *This American Life*. Often we withhold information about the people on the show, so as to allow empathy to develop quicker.

We once did a show titled "Escaping the Box," which opened with a story about Sylvia, a Mexican American girl. We completely downplayed her ethnicity. Instead, we said she's an American who, like a lot of Americans, has immi-

grant parents. She's had experiences typical of a first-generation American: Her parents don't speak the language, so she's translating for them. She is already more American than they ever could be. They want her to be a traditional girl, like in the old country — to get married and have kids at eighteen. But she wants to go to college. She wants to be an American girl.

**Lertzman:** And meanwhile, the listener didn't know what her ethnicity was.

**Glass:** Exactly. I said all of this before we revealed the fact that she was Mexican, so that all of the white, suburban public-radio listeners could enter into her experience, rather than thinking, Oh, *this is about some Mexican kid, not about me*. On television, you would have seen her face, and she would instantly have been somebody else. But listening to her on the radio, you became her so fast. All she had to do was talk, in her completely vulnerable and real voice, about her struggles with her mother, and you completely became her.

The idea for that show, by the way, came from a comment that Sylvia made to one of the producers. She said her mom just wanted her to stay inside "this little box," but she kept poking holes in the box, like with a pair of scissors. And her mom kept trying to tape over the holes. We used that image to build a whole show about people trying to escape the lives they are in.

**Lertzman:** How do you find your stories: for example, the piece by Kevin Kelly, editor of *Wired* magazine, about his mystical experience in Israel?

**Glass:** Luck is a huge part of it. The Kevin Kelly story was told to our senior editor in a bar. More often, we throw ourselves into situations and see what we come up with. We go through tons of stories for each show, waiting to find something we never would have expected. Usually a show's theme will come out of one story; there will be one story that we really want to get on the radio, so we'll build a show around it.

**Lertzman:** Do you sometimes see radio as a form of false
or substitute intimacy?

Glass: I think that criticism is too easy. Sure, sometimes you turn on the radio because you’re crossing North Dakota and you need human contact. In that case, it’s better to listen to Rush Limbaugh than nothing. Yes, Rush is perfectly good company in that situation! So radio can be a substitute for human contact, but I don’t see anything wrong with that. When you are drawn into another person’s story on the radio, it is partly about them and partly about yourself. It’s about seeing yourself in different clothes, seeing yourself born into a different body. We live in a rather superficial world where most of the time we don’t let ourselves experience deeply what is happening. When we listen to stories about what other people are going through and what they are feeling, we have no choice but to be reminded of who we are inside.

Lertzman: Before you started This American Life, you reported extensively on Chicago’s inner-city public schools. How did that experience affect your approach to radio?

Glass: I did two years of those stories and covered a lot of policy issues, but what people remembered later wasn’t the policy. They remembered the picture those stories gave them of what it was like to attend a Chicago public school. That knowledge is important. Talking about the public school system is like talking about Vietnam — it brings up this morass of ready-made ideas and images. Anything that puts a human face on that has value.

Lertzman: The Sun has been accused at times of being too dark, too sad. I’ve noticed a similar quality about This American Life. Why do you so often take on difficult or even painful material?

Glass: A great story has to have a great theme behind it. That’s the reason, I have to admit, our show focuses so much on death. It’s not as if any of us on staff have a particular interest in death, but so many compelling stories that come our way involve people who are either dying, or nearly die, or thought they were going to die. We were actually dropped by a station in Kentucky because it thought the program was “too sad.”

Lertzman: How does This American Life fit into the big picture of public-radio journalism, or does it?

Glass: The stories on This American Life are unapologetically small, and definitely not based on the day’s news. But small stories can be huge. These glimpses into people’s lives and experiences can help paint a larger picture of what this country is about. It is not the same picture that comes across on Morning Edition. We air stories because they are touching and funny, with no excuses. That, in itself, is a stance that NPR has a problem with. There is an odd puritanism in news gathering. I’m very wilful about doing this unconventional form of radio. NPR is lurching in the direction of becoming dryer and straighter. I would prefer it otherwise.

Public radio can be livelier. The call-in car-repair program Car Talk, for example, is the most popular single show on NPR. Its idiosyncratic vision created a space for us. I tell people our show is just like Car Talk, only with a different host and no cars.

Lertzman: What is it we are looking for on the radio?

Glass: It’s the same as what we want from art, or from somebody we fall in love with: we want them to be similar enough that we have some common ground, yet different enough that there’s an element of the exotic. There is a satisfaction in feeling connected to something that can transport us out of our world. We get this even from pop radio; usually you can see yourself in the song — or at least a sexier, more happening version of yourself. When we turn on Morning Edition to find out if the world is indeed going to hell in a handbasket, that also makes us feel connected to the world. We are searching for a better explanation of the world. Even if we are not searching for it, it’s still satisfying to stumble upon it.

Lertzman: With all the attention given these days to nonfiction narratives and memoirs, it seems documentary is in the midst of a revival, a renaissance of sorts.

Glass: Documentary is like soccer and world music: a phenomenon perpetually waiting to happen. People are always talking about how documentary is about to be “the next big thing.” If so, it will look more like The Jerry Springer Show than This American Life. There is a line between the two, and there are guards posted at the border. But they are not armed.

Lertzman: You’ve described radio as “both great and terrible.” What did you mean?

Glass: What’s terrible about radio is that, when I’m driving in my car, chances are better than one in two that I can’t find anything I can stand to listen to. Considering all the money and effort put into radio programming, you’d think you could find more interesting shows. Our show stands out, not because we are such geniuses, but because no one else is doing what we are.

The great thing about radio is that it can totally work: empathy can take place in a way that it can’t in other media. Radio has some of the advantages of print: it’s a writer’s medium; moments have a chance to stand alone and breathe. But unlike print, radio lets you actually hear the human voice, which, in itself, contains a huge amount of information. The sound of someone’s voice, and even their pauses, contains the full weight of human experience.

Lertzman: Have you had any distressing or disturbing experiences in your work?

Glass: For years, I have been working with teenagers, and once I was trying to do a story about a kid who was articulate and smart, but a bit of a liar. I had to figure out what was true and what wasn’t. In the end, I felt that I was not getting the whole truth. When I asked her if I could talk to her mother to get a sense of what was really true, she refused. I had to kill the story. It was hard to know how to handle it. Here was this kid, living in the projects in a really bad situation, and I felt I had failed in my interaction with her. When it became clear that the show was not going to air, things got chilly between us. Every aspect of it was upsetting. I felt inadequate as an adult and as a reporter.

This issue of getting too emotionally involved with the

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This program is the most public thing I have ever done, yet also the most isolating. A staff member said recently that the main difference between Ira Glass on the air and Ira Glass off the air is that the on-air Ira will have a half-hour conversation with someone.

Our documentary stories use the devices of fiction, and the fiction we use takes as its mission to document the world.

Lertzman: Is there a political bias to the show?
Glass: Sometimes we do political stories and sometimes we don’t. It’s more a matter of what captures our interests than a bias.

I met Ted Koppel recently, and it turns out he’s a big fan of the show. Apparently, the Nightline staff had been confronting the issue of what to do at a moment when people are not terribly interested in politics. As an alternative, he said, they talked about “speaking to people’s hearts.” Our program was cited as an example of that kind of journalism. So we are mapping out new territory, a direction where journalism can go when not writing about public policy. It is journalism applied to everyday life.

Lertzman: When you contemplate the state of the world today, how do you keep from feeling overwhelmed?
Glass: I am overwhelmed! [laughs.] Actually, I think we are being sold a phony bill of goods that says we are on a downward spiral. I feel that things have always been a mix of the really terrible and the really great. Years from now, we are probably going to look back on this time as a relatively docile and lovely period.

How people feel about the state of the world has nothing to do with rational analysis; it is more about who you are and what you observe. I tend to be both optimistic and dreadfully dark. I have seen in my reporting that situations are terrible, but also malleable. I’ve found that, even in extremely complicated and difficult environments — inner-city public school systems, for example — people are doing good work. Thirty years ago, it would have been hard for me as a white reporter to go into that environment and be treated with openness. The way I’ve been treated by people in such situations gives me hope.

The closer you get to any issue, the more complicated it becomes, and the more difficult it is to see everything as all terrible. Getting closer often gives us more reason to have hope.