

On Writing and Radio by Jack Burnham

It was the radio that began my desire to write and when I wrote, I could not think of anything else but to write for the radio. As a medium, it is a writer's dream and as a long-time listener, it is a delight to be able to hear a story. There is no stage quite like it and no screen that can compare. Even the pages of a novel appear at once stale and still. Sometimes I wonder if I was born during the wrong time and in a fit of dramatic irony, sought to drag the past into the present. It all began one summer day with a story and an idea that turned, eventually, into True North. Even as I sit now, I can see the spot on the driveway where I had parked, still sitting in the car and listening intently to a reporter from Massachusetts describe a scene ripped from another age.

Until that morning, writing had been a passing fascination while radio had become a mainstay since the earliest days of my childhood. My first birthday involved a visit to the recording of a live show at Tanglewood, an outdoor concert venue that featured classical musicians, prominent speakers, and live radio broadcasts of classical musicians, speakers, and fittingly, National Public Radio. As a slight detour for Canadians, NPR is the CBC's smaller, more jealous cousin. While the CBC receives funding from the government and has a storied history as Canada's broadcaster, NPR receives funding from tote bag sales and sending voicemails to liberals' answering machines. Needless to say, given my Vermont heritage, it was running nearly non-stop. Before I could hum any nursery rhymes, I could hum the opening theme of Morning Edition. It was only natural then that the story I heard that morning was one from NPR, describing how playwrights had shifted their work to the airwaves after theatres across the country had been closed. Only thirty minutes afterwards, I had begun to outline and pull ideas together onto the page. The car engine had yet to even cool.

I've always heard the advice to write what I knew. Not knowing much, I decided to set my stories in my own backyard. My first story, fully fleshed out, was an episode of what was to become Every Night of the Year. Having taken a passing interest in the War of the Worlds and its place in the canon of radio dramas, I sought to tell a science fiction story in the same vein. One story became two became four became ten and a season was born, telling a series of strange oddities all relayed throughout the country by an unnamed radio network. After watching entire seasons of Star Trek, the X-Files, and the Twilight Zone, those were the stories that seemed the most accessible to a radio audience. The fear of the unknown, the odd dirt roads not traveled, cabins in the woods padlocked with chains, these were hallmarks of rural living. Children of Thomas came next, inspired by the desire to create a singular, unbroken narrative and to explore the power of belief in the face of the unthinkable, a facet of living through the unthinkable that occurred all across the country.

Deciding on radio was a necessity given the circumstances, but I hardly would have changed even if the option had become available. Radio has always been a source of calm during times of upheaval over the past century since its commercial introduction. It was not so long ago that the radio occupied the same place as television in every single household, holding a place of even greater significance due to its cost and the lack of a readily available alternative. This does not seem to sit well with us today, but in the past, isolation and vast silences were the norm.

True North Essay Series

Though our depictions of the period seem bent on portraying the lives of the very wealthy, full of drama and farce and tragedy, this was a fallacy for most households. Life was dominated by the certainty, the monotony, of agricultural expansion and its accompanying labor. The radio was different. The radio was freedom in the most literal sense. No longer were narratives trapped on the page or as gossip passed between church pews. Now even the president could visit the living room, or a soap salesperson, or an invasion from deep space. It had to be different. We could hear it.

Reflect upon this for a moment. Close your eyes and reflect on hearing a voice without seeing its source, for the first time. Not that they were hidden behind a curtain or in the depths of a crowd. They were a hundred miles, a thousand miles, ten thousand miles away, sitting in a studio or in their own sitting rooms, speaking into a microphone that hissed like a frying pan and had the same dimensions of a fist. The devastation of twin world wars, each more deadly than the last, the scourges of measles and polio, an economic crisis that shook the foundations of society. Each one seems impossible to comprehend on their own, much less occurring within a fifty-year period. But to hear them night after night, from that box on the counter, it made it real for millions of people. We could understand, in the same way we have always understood our stories. The moment that the switch was flipped, it became real.

It has been said that the United States lost Vietnam because of television. Johnson is noted as saying that when he lost Cronkite, he had lost the nation. Though such an analysis ignores the obvious, it also states something deeply human about a medium. Perhaps when the history of this time is written, we will have won because of the radio and a single voice, still speaking out into the void.