

SO YOU WANT TO
WRITE RADIO DRAMA?

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Introduction

This book is written by two people who have had a long-running love affair with radio drama. We have also enjoyed working together on a wide range of projects, both original plays and dramatisations, in a collaboration that goes back more than ten years.

But our experiences are different. Claire has been a senior radio drama producer for the BBC and has intimate and extensive working knowledge of the way in which radio plays are chosen, commissioned, edited and produced. She's also been responsible for encouraging writers new to radio and helping them to secure commissions.

Claire: I love radio drama. I am a shamelessly enthusiastic listener and I've had the enormous pleasure of working in it for many years as a producer and director. Why do I love it? Because it can take me anywhere the writer wants to take me. It gives me the freedom to imagine complete worlds. It can take me to places where I could never actually go in life. I love the vast range of subjects that it embraces and the sheer volume of it splurging out of the radio on a daily basis. Thrillers, romances, fantasy, gritty urban; there's something for everyone here. I love the fact that the word is king, that I can imagine complete characters from the timbre of an actor's voice and that a sudden silence can stop me in my tracks because I simply have to discover what happens next. And it fits in with a busy life. I can listen to it on my iPod while I'm walking, in the car while I'm driving, or at home while I'm doing other things.

INTRODUCTION

Stephen is a freelance playwright who has been working in radio since the late 1970s, creating forty-five-, sixty- and ninety-minute original plays, as well as a wide range of dramatisations for radio. He's also taught a number of courses on radio drama and created the UK's first online radio drama course in collaboration with New Writing South and the University of Sussex.

Stephen: Where else would I have been allowed to write a play involving a talking Elgin Marble? Or allowed to burrow inside the minds of Alfred Hitchcock and Raymond Chandler? Or create a drama which moved between the nineteenth century, the present day and a Heaven filled with the music of Edward Elgar? There's something immensely liberating about the world of radio drama, and the people who work with you in it are a hundred per cent committed to doing the best for your play.

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This is above all a practical book, written for anybody who feels they'd like to write a radio play, whether they're a first-time writer or a writer currently working in a different medium. It's also intended to be of help to anybody already involved in writing a radio play who wants some guidance on how to improve it or where to submit it.

It would be perfectly okay to read the book from cover to cover without doing any writing yourself – and hopefully you would still find out quite a lot about the process of how radio plays are written and made. But throughout we've also included a number of practical exercises, to encourage you to create your own radio drama. It's up to you, of course, how many of these exercises you do, what order you do them in or, indeed, whether you do them at all. But we both believe that if you're serious about wanting to write a radio drama, then the exercises will help you to explore and develop your ideas and get the most out of reading this book.

INTRODUCTION

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When we were planning this book, we both felt that it should reflect our shared knowledge of how radio drama works but also our very different perspectives on how radio plays get to be written and produced. We've therefore written in our own distinct voices about what each of us knows best.

But in the first part, we join together to explore just what makes radio drama such an exciting and inspiring medium to work in.

Claire and Stephen

Listening In

Do you listen to radio dramas? This may seem a strange question to start with but it is surprising how often people decide to have a go at fame and fortune in a field about which they know very little. There are people out there who imagine they are going to write a best-selling novel, a Hollywood screenplay or a long-running television series without seriously considering what's involved or the competitive nature of the field.

Anybody who believes they are going to get very rich or very famous by writing a radio play is obviously suffering from serious delusions of grandeur. Current fees for a first-time writer for a forty-five-minute Afternoon Drama, for example, stand at around £2,500. Thankfully, in our experience, most radio writers and most aspiring radio writers seem to have a grip on reality – and enjoy listening to radio dramas.

If you don't, you probably shouldn't have bought this book.

The enjoyment is very important but if you want to write a radio drama, you'll now be moving into a different and more analytical way of thinking about how it all works. Listening is an essential part of the learning process and, in tandem with your use of this book, we'd like you to keep on listening. Although there are occasional opportunities elsewhere to hear short experimental pieces or independent local drama broadcasts, for all intents and purposes this means listening to the radio drama output of the BBC, and it's on this that we concentrate throughout this book.

We also have a suggestion, which we hope will prove helpful. Keep a radio-drama diary. We don't want to dictate how you do this or set you homework you don't want to do, but we do believe that buying a notebook – or creating an online file – and recording your thoughts on what you've heard is something you should seriously consider. You'll find that, later on in the book, we'll both be making references to the ways in which such a record can be useful.

Keeping a Radio-drama Diary

Here's a possible framework for your radio-drama diary. For each drama you listen to, write down:

1. Title of play.
2. The drama slot (e.g. BBC Radio 4 Afternoon Drama) and the date of transmission.
3. The writer (of course).
4. The director/producer. (If you like their work, you might want to contact them one day.)
5. A brief outline of the story. (Try to keep it short and describe the content in such a way that it will enable you to remember the core of what happened later on. There's no doubt this is often difficult to achieve because it involves stepping back from the detail and trying to describe an overall concept. However, practising the skill involved will also help you with your own work. We promise.)
6. Notes on anything unusual or interesting in the treatment, e.g. the narrator was a tree, or the play shifted between the present and Ancient Egypt, or the effectiveness of a particular scene in its use of sound.

The Secret to Getting a Commission

So what is the secret to getting your script commissioned? It's probably the main reason you are reading this book. You want to know how to get your ideas and scripts made into actual programmes. Well, the secret is this: there is no secret. Most producers and commissioning editors have few pre-conceptions of what they are looking for apart from the obvious: originality, an engaging story about a new subject, or a fresh take on an old one. They want intriguing characters who speak believable dialogue. They are looking for the ability to create a complete imaginative world that is interesting in itself and leaves the audience with something to think about afterwards.

The Radio 4 commissioning guidelines say they want drama to give the listener an 'insight into the way we live now'. This doesn't mean every radio drama has to be about whatever topic is currently in the news. As we saw in the last chapter, this is worth avoiding because, whether it is knife-crime, drug-taking athletes or restorative justice, there will be a stack of plays about these topics already piling up on producers' desks. Being passionate about your idea is very important. If you are passionate about your play then a producer can get passionate too and your script will have a fighting chance. And don't try to give the producer what you think he or she wants. Write what you want to write and you will find that is exactly what every radio producer is looking for.

Standing Out From the Crowd

There is no doubt about it, getting started as a writer in radio is hard. Like all aspects of the entertainment industry, radio drama is overcrowded and incredibly competitive. Ideas are thick on the ground but the talent and application it takes to develop them are less so. So don't despair. Every year Radio 4 commissions over forty dramas in the Afternoon Drama

slot by writers who are new to writing for radio. Radio 4 welcomes plays from poets, stage writers, journalists, novelists, short-story writers and complete novices. New, engaging, exciting ways of telling stories is what the Afternoon Drama is all about. So you have an advantage here: untried and untested writers are being actively sought by BBC and independent producers for this slot. All you need is proof that you can write dramatically. This could be an existing drama script or scenes from a drama that you want to write with an accompanying synopsis.

Think about the ideas you want to write, or the play you've written. What is it that uniquely qualifies you to write this play? A story you've heard, a job you did, a poster you saw? Why is it special? What makes you passionate about it? What is special about you? The place you are from, a hobby, a language, an unusual interest? Think about what makes you and your writing stand out from the crowd.

Making Contact with the Producer

Radio 4 and Radio 3 commission drama at least a year ahead of transmission. If you are pitching an idea in the spring of 2014 you will hear whether it has been successful in the summer or early autumn of that year, and your drama will be on air sometime from April 2015. So how do you get ready for this?

It is important to be bold and imaginative when you are getting started as well as being realistic about the fast-paced industry you are trying to get into. There is no single way of getting into radio drama, but here are some of the main routes.

1. Contacting a producer whose work you've heard and liked. You will find addresses and contacts for BBC and independent producers in the Resources section of this book, or you can contact them through your agent if you

have one. There is no particular advantage in contacting a producer via an agent. You don't have to have one at this point and, if you do, an agent specialising in fiction may not know much more about radio drama than you, so it's worth checking how up to date their information is.

In your letter or email to the producer, say why you are targeting them, i.e. what you've heard. You don't have to lavish the production with praise. Be straightforward and brief. I've had quite a few letters from writers along the lines of 'I heard your play about surfing, here is mine.' This isn't a helpful approach because it means the BBC has recently covered the subject and the producer may also want to move on to something fresh.

Make it clear in the letter or email whether your script is a sample of your writing or a radio play that you would like to have commissioned. Let the producer know what you want, e.g. that they read your script and, if they like it, you want to come in and discuss ideas. Also very briefly outline your writing experience or anything related to the play which will make it stand out. For example, that you live in a yurt in Wales and that's where your drama is set. If you haven't heard anything from the producer you contacted within a month then follow it up and check that your script has arrived. Be aware that producers are busy but we're a friendly bunch. Writers are the lifeblood of what we do so most of us will try to be as helpful as we can.