



The Transom Review

Vol. 1/Issue 2

Paul Tough's Topic

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About Paul Tough

"I grew up in Toronto. When I was a teenager, I was on the radio more than I ever have been subsequently: I was the co-host of a nationally broadcast radio show for kids, called "Anybody Home?" I did the "hard-hitting" interviews. In 1983, the CBC canceled the show, and I turned to a life of petty crime. Not really. I dropped out of college twice, the first time to go biking through the south, the second time to become an intern at Harper's Magazine.

I stayed in New York for ten years, mostly as an editor at Harper's. In around 1992 I met Dave Isay, at the bar on my corner, and marvelled at the radio he was making; around the same time I met Ira Glass, and again marvelled. I helped out with *This American Life*, in various ways, beginning back when it was called "Three from the Combination Platter"; the most involved I got was in 1997 and 1998, when I was the show's senior editor. Then I went back to Canada to work as the editor of Saturday Night, a magazine, and then quit that and started Open Letters (www.openletters.net), an online magazine of first-person writing in the form of personal correspondence. And then I quit that, too, in January. I live with my girlfriend, Deirdre, in a house on the beach in Milford, Connecticut.

A Word From Jay Allison

Welcome to Paul Tough's topic. I'm very glad Paul agreed to join us as a Special Guest, even though he warned me he might run out of things to say about radio and have to talk about journalism and writing and communicating in general. No problem. One idea behind this site is to get some cross-current, some breeze through the windows. Indeed, some people say that public radio can be stuffy. I'm a big fan of Paul's site, openletters.net, and of his general effort to sort out personal narrative and journalism. Another thing: my daughter wrote a letter for Open Letters. Lillie showed me Paul's edits. They were perfectly thoughtful, out-of-your-face and helpful, not just for a twelve-year-old, but for anyone. In considering good editors to be Guests here -- people with a track record in radio, writing, the internet, and encouraging new voices -- Paul's name came first to mind. He wrote something to start things off, a "nonifesto" he called it, and he'll be here soon to post it.

Welcome, Paul.

Paul Tough's Nonifesto

Special Guest Paul Tough
03.07.01

Thanks, Jay.

About this "nonifesto" thing: please allow me to explain. It's not like I have a big anti-manifesto to post: no more rules, smash the radio-industrial complex, microphones for the masses. Not at all. My reluctance in writing something manifesto-like is merely a symptom of the anxiety I feel following Scott Carrier, who is an actual radio producer, and a great and innovative one. I am not a radio producer, not really, and so in Scott's footsteps, I'd feel silly trying to give advice or sound wise, or even astute. Instead, out of necessity, I'm going to try to define my job here differently than he did: as a radio listener, rather than as a radio creator.

As I explained to Jay in those paragraphs he quoted for my bio, I started working in radio at a young age, doing interviews for "Anybody Home?," a weekly kids' show broadcast on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. I believe I am still the only twelve-year-old ever to interview Chaka Khan. After doing a couple dozen interviews, I became one of the show's two rotating underage co-hosts, which meant I got to do the top-ten countdown every other week. Back in the early eighties, that meant a lot of intros to Hall and Oates songs. I was very enthusiastic about "Maneater," as I recall.

The program was cancelled in 1983, and then I didn't have much to do with radio for about a decade. In the early nineties, though, I met David Isay and Ira Glass, through different circumstances, and they started to change my mind about radio and what it could do.

I met Ira by phone in 1992, I think, and we got to be friends, and he started sending me tapes of "The Wild Room," a weekly local show that he was doing with Gary Covino in Chicago. I remember one that had a long segment of clips from the Clarence Thomas hearings played over a hip-hop beat. That was pretty cool. Another episode, a piece by Ira about a haircut, was a real masterpiece of personal storytelling, and I listened to it over and over.

I met Dave Isay through Rose Ortiz, a bartender at the International Bar on First Avenue in New York, which Dave and I were both frequenting back in 1992. He gave me a tape of Ghetto Life 101, which also kind of blew my mind. It was flawlessly produced, another masterpiece of narrative -- but it was also defiantly democratic, in that it was created by two kids who were way, way outside the corridors of media power.

Getting to know Ira and Dave and their work got me interested in radio again, and eventually led to me working for This American Life, in various capacities, and recording a few stories for them. I'm still a contributing editor there.

A lot of what I've liked in public radio over the past decade has seemed to follow from those pieces by Dave and Ira that I listened to on cassette: journalism that emphasizes story-telling, that showcases a broad and surprising array of voices, and that uses imaginative and entertaining production styles.

The last thing I heard that I loved, that has all of those qualities, was this show, which This American Life ran a couple of months ago. I listened to it on tape last week, driving around Milford doing errands. I rushed through the aisles at the Stop and Shop, eager to get back in the car.

So I like radio because it's democratic (or at least it can be), and because it's so well-suited for narrative story-telling. The other thing I like about the radio is that it's random. When I listen to the radio these days, I usually stay away from public radio, or at least the national kind, and instead I flip around, trying to find something interesting, or at least different. What excites me the most about the flipping approach is the possibility of finding something new and surprising in an unexpected place.

My favorite piece of writing on that subject is by a zine writer named Iggy Scam. In his zine, Scam, he wrote this beautiful description of his repeated mysterious encounters with an underground radio station in Miami. When I worked at This American Life, we put it on the air as part of a show about the mystery of radio. You can listen to it, along with a great set-up by Ira, here. (Iggy's piece is about seven minutes in, but I'd suggest that you listen from the very beginning.)

Since my CBC days, I've only done a few radio pieces, all for This American Life. The first one I did was an interview with Catherine Chalmers, a Soho artist who raised little animals, and then took photographs of them eating one another. It's in this show. I also co-hosted this hour with Ira, about obsession; in it I interviewed an artist named Liza Lou, about beading, and also a former girlfriend, about the number two and its role in her life and our relationship. The main reason that Jay asked me to be this month's guest, though, probably has less to do with my radio work, and more to do with my work as the editor of Open Letters, a currently dormant online magazine that published a daily dose of first-person writing, in the form of personal letters.

One of the questions I hope we'll be able to discuss in this topic, and elsewhere on these boards, is whether any of the letters in our archives would benefit from being turned into radio pieces. I think it's happening to one of them already -- a letter by Paul Maliszewski is going to be on "Savvy Traveler" soon, I think. But perhaps some of the other letters archived on our site would work well if they were put through the Transom process. Suggestions welcome.

The other question that I'd like to bring up is something that was on my mind a lot when Open Letters was publishing regularly. In order to find material to publish, I pursued a lot of writers that I liked, but just as the Transom is doing, I invited submissions from the public, as well. What I found was maybe not too surprising: the batting average for the public submissions was quite low -- I got hundreds that I couldn't use, and often felt like I wasn't able to respond to them helpfully (or on time).

One of the things that surprised me the most about reader reaction to Open Letters is that readers liked it best when we published someone they'd never heard of. We'd publish sublime pieces by established writers, and readers took them in stride. But whenever we ran rawer stuff, from teenagers and weirdos and drug addicts, readers responded with great enthusiasm.

I'm sure that's one of the things that draws people to the Transom, as well: the chance to hear an authentic voice, before it's put through the media meat-grinder. My experience as an editor, though, is that it's very hard to make that work -- it's hard to find unprocessed voices that are coherent and honest and clear. I'm guessing that Jay and the other producers at the Transom are finding that true as well.

So that's another thing I'd like to talk about -- how to make that process work well, how to help the Transom people find new and different voices, and how to help make those voices effective on the air.

I'm also here to answer any questions anyone might have, to comment on new pieces as they go up, and to help the contributors and potential contributors as much as possible. Just ask. I'm glad Jay invited me to stop in.

Highlights From Transom Discussion Board

Barrett Golding 03.07.01

i've been wandering this web for 5-6 years now. *used to visit lotsa sites, but my interest waned over time* to where i would regularly visit only a very few urls: several trade sites (audio, computer), and just a single site i could depend on for entertainment and inspiration, <http://www.openletters.net>. so, first, thanks. so much great reading there. my fave might be the women who substitute taught six-graders poetry, Poetic Licence:

<http://www.openletters.net/000724/oneill000725.html> from: ``There was nothing personal in any of the poems. You couldn't even tell whether a boy or a girl had written it. What a waste of time..." to: "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Toilet" and: "Laurence, meanwhile, was comparing Salma Hayek's eyes to faucets leaking grape juice... Alex said his purest desire was to have twelve Japanese women dressed in blue lingerie singing him Britney Spears songs every night. 'Whoa,' I said. 'We're in school. I could go to jail for letting you write that stuff.'" and, of course: "One boy asked for 'poetic license' to punch his best friend in the head." that story, and many other openletters, was radio to me. i could hear the sounds, the chatter in the classroom, the kids arguing and spouting off.

kinda thought some publisher would come along and drop a load of advance cash in your lap, and say "make a book out of openletters" guess it hasn't happened yet. won't wonder why you had to drop it. do wonder you could keep it going

Open Letters Online

A. Knight 03.07.01

I absolutely agree with the "raw voices" statement. Personal favorites were Mike Welch's Birthday letter, the X series, the Cancer series (Aliza Pollack), the Other Peoples Mail week, the interviews, Lauren Zalaznick, Eilis Dolan Klein, Dishwasher Pete (who writes like a pro but is always quite raw) and the guy who applied to Microsoft.

A great many of the OLs would translate to radio well. Two quick questions for Paul: what's happening as far as online OPM? Was the Starlee in your TAL piece (Kindness of Strangers) Starlee Kine?

Drawing Definite Lines

Gibby 03.05.01

I like what you and the guys you mention do. It's real thoughtful and deep. But don't you ever get angry and want to draw some definite lines? Sometimes I'm listening to these stories or reading openletters and its like "jesus, why is everything so inspirational with some lesson to learn?" I think that's why I like the raw voices you speak of because you can hear it. The decisiveness.

Paul Tough 03.07.01

Gibby: I think I take your point, but I'm a little unclear on what you mean. Can you expand a bit on that idea of "drawing definite lines"? Are there any particular stories or books or radio docs or other forms of expression you can think of that accomplish that particularly well?

The story A Knight is talking about was rebroadcast last weekend, but originally aired three years ago. It was about two neighbors who lived down the block from me: young Starlee, a recent NYU graduate, and less-young Olga, her next-door neighbor who had lived in the building for thirty years. Olga had become convinced that Starlee was a drug dealer, and had begun a campaign of intimidation, via weird notes, to get her out of the building. That's what the story was about. You can listen to it here.

Yes, Starlee is Starlee Kine. She's now working at This American Life, which is a nice ending to the story, I think. You can see her photo on this page. As you can see, she really does look like a drug kingpin.

I haven't heard anything recently about the OPM web site, but I hope it happens. I'll email Abby and see if she'll drop by to answer that herself. (Meanwhile, you can read the OPM/OL letters here.)

Barrett, I agree, Heather O'Neill's first letter was a rare gem. It would be great to get her to turn that into a radio piece. Here's a question, and it's one Jay's asked me in the past about open letters becoming radio pieces: What would it gain by being heard rather than read? Would it need something extra, like sound or music or other tape, or should we just ask Heather to read it into a mike?

Your opinions, please.

Letters -> Radio

Jay Allison 03.07.01

Some of the best radio is just someone talking. My question to Paul was about the fact that many of the open letters were perfect as they were. They were letters. There was no need to make them anything else.

On the other hand, a lovely read can elevate/transform what's on the page, can add layers of information. If that could happen, I thought it would be worth trying and putting it here.... and eventually on public radio, where of course it would enjoy a much bigger audience and surprise people in their cars, which may be enough incentive.

Music and sounds and other voices are options, of course, but mostly I just didn't want to take something perfect and expend effort making it less perfect.

Examples of Drawing Definite Lines

Gibby 03.07.01

Paul wrote: I think I take your point, but I'm a little unclear on what you mean. Can you expand a bit on that idea of "drawing definite lines"? Are there any particular stories or books or radio docs or other forms of expression you can think of that accomplish that particularly well?

Examples: Nightline, CNN, New York Times. Look I mean why do public radio/open letter people feel they can only work in the background, the world of grants and endowments.

If TAL and OpenLetters are so good, which I feel they are, why not reach a bigger audience?

Why not challenge the big boys? Why be quaint?

Paul Tough 03.08.01

Jay,

It's an interesting question -- under what circumstances can something in print can be improved by putting it on the radio? That piece by Iggy Scam that I mentioned (and linked to) above: it improved it for me to be able to hear his voice. The connection was stronger for me once I heard him telling the story.

One Open Letters writer I was wondering about vis-à-vis Transom is Sharon O'Connor, who lives in Cabot, Vermont. She did two letters for us: one, right here, about her daughter; and the other one, here, about a pregnancy. It's the second one that I'm wondering about, especially. Any thoughts on how that would work on the radio -- or what to do to make it work on the radio -- from Jay, or anyone else?

Gibby: I'm not trying to be dense, here, but I'm still not entirely following you. What makes stories in the Times or on CNN more "decisive" than stories on Open Letters or This American Life?

And in terms of reaching a larger audience -- I've never worked for any media organization that didn't want to reach a bigger audience. But I don't think small necessarily equals quaint. Smaller places are often more imaginative, risky, unorthodox -- not to mention angry and decisive.

Personally, I like getting my news from a mixture of large-audience and small-audience shows and publications. The New York Times (circulation over a million) gives me one vision of the universe; Scam (circulation several hundred) gives me another. I don't think my mediascape would be complete without both.

What Audio Could Add To Print **Cheryl Wagner 03.08.01**

Paul wrote: What would it gain by being heard rather than read? Would it need something extra, like sound or music or other tape, or should we just ask Heather to read it into a mike?

You would ask Heather the writer to do not the same letter but another piece entirely. You would ask Heather the writer to become Heather the talker. If you want to keep the letter form for some reason, you'd tell her to send a tape letter to a friend. I've gotten lots of tape letters and they have nice surprises that written letters don't. Snakes in the can that pop out and gurgle and what not. It also depends on if you're talking about a "real" letter of course or an orchestrated and edited down audio story that sounds like/appears to be a letter.

I agree with whoever it was that said they were hesitant to take something perfect and try to make it better. In the effort to make something different, rehashing often happens.

Tape letters are often audio diaries. The ones I've gotten anyway. With not even four track (okay sometimes 4 track) mixing/editing capability. One long piece of linear goodness or clock or a combination of the two. It's kind of like asking someone to draw a picture w/o picking up the pen. That's what a real tape letter is I think.

Revealing the Self **A. Knight 03.09.01**

Waaaay back in the early weeks of OL.net (about 9 months ago) Paul made sort of a plea, or off-handed request for submissions from people who were going through something big, or going through a big change or whatever. This brought about the great, touching, might be made into an Oprah movie-of-the-week, cancer series. Paul, have you considered writing/recording something about the big thing you've gone through, from leaving Saturday Night to starting your own publication to shutting the doors on it less than a year later? I'm sure that between your daily editor's letters and some undeleted correspondence you could piece something really good together.

How 'bout you, Jay - have you considered putting something together to follow you through your experiences with Transom? How long do you think it will be before you get fed up (with us) and go back to dealing strictly with pros?

Paul Tough 03.09.01

When I started Open Letters, I was hoping that the experience of editing all that good first-person writing would help me get better at writing about myself and my own life. But it didn't work out that way. Instead, I just got intimidated by the ease with which our writers were able to reveal themselves.

I'm not sure why it is, exactly, but it's true: Paul Maliszewski writing about sitting by the side of the road, watching people walk into a house = endlessly fascinating, to me. Me writing about quitting a couple of jobs and roaming around the country for a year = boring, boring, boring.

I recognize that I have some issues.
And Jay, how about you?

Jay Allison 03.10.01

I'm with you. Once in a while I find myself intriguing, and even make a radio story or write an essay about ME AND MY LIFE, but it's mostly other people who interest me. Plus, there are more of them.

Writing first-person helps keep in mind what it's like to reveal yourself (er, I mean MYself)... but if I don't have something I'm burning to say, it's more considerate to shut up about it.

What Writers Think About Producers

Carol Wasserman 03.15.01

My ambition, as a child, was quite ordinary. To become a ballerina. The working conditions seemed ideal: sublime music at the jobsite, pink tutus, the company of other ballerinas, and - of course - the applause and fixated devotion of well-behaved strangers sitting in the dark, watching all the leaping and bending.

As you have no doubt guessed, my career ambitions were derailed early on, for the usual reasons. I do not have a dancer's body. And I lack any kinesthetic sense. With or without music, I don't have a clue where my arms and legs are supposed to be or what they are supposed to be doing.

As it turns out, though, a facility with words, and an unreasoning love of stories, can get you a job in radio. Which is a pretty good second choice. Plus they let you wear a tutu into the studio if you absolutely must.

Anyway, there are probably tired ballerinas who listen to public radio on their way home from work, and think, "Oh, Tatiana, if only you had gone out for the school newspaper, or at least paid attention in English class, you could be on the radio, instead of in these stupid toe shoes!"

Which is to say that none of us are ever completely happy with the particular set of talents, skills, and limitations which are assigned to us by the Great Program Director. Those of us who can write a broadcast script feel feeble and silly when we compare ourselves to those brilliant, gifted people who record and produce tape.

And we are baffled to hear them express oblique regret about the 'intimidating ease' with which other people dance around.

Finding Stories/Constructing Narratives

Cal 03.10.01

I'd like to get a better perspective on how you (Mr. Allison and Mr. Tough) envision(ed) the democratizing of both radio and online print stuff actually working. Technically the Open Letter forum

seems easier - pretty much everyone can type - but Mr. Tough mentioned that finding good pieces from unknowns was hard. Add the equipment/production issues of radio and, although still accessible, you've just added more obstacles to the already tough job of constructing good narrative. Because isn't that the real trick? In the introduction to her new book, Susan Orlean talks about first convincing her editor to let her do the kinds of pieces she does. Her description of their major concern was something like "When these kinds of pieces fail, they fail in a big way." It seems to me that Open Letters and maybe Transom offer pieces with the same potential problem. With so many of them there's a sort of wispy quality that is just so delicate and whether it works really depends on the narrator.

I think your posting of the behind-the-scenes Neal Pollack piece is a really great, honest, perspective-giving thing. It's harder than it sounds-- technical stuff is doable, but not without an investment. That's workable. But what about the narrative? What about the gut-feeling, going on faith, won't know if I can pull it off until I'm in there sort of thing...that bit that makes the wispy piece work or not work. The only way I can think to illustrate what I mean is...well, the Neal Pollack piece (not to undermine the amount of work or qualify the quality at all! No, no.) seems to me to have a bit of an edge simply because of the subject. My guess is a fair amount of NPR people have heard of Dave Eggers and thus Neal Pollock. There is at least a bit of a nugget built in there. But what if the story doesn't have that name-recognition nugget? The subject is interesting and there's some sort of story, but won't things depend more on finding a story and then effectively telling it? Can you offer some tips, ideas, guidance?

Mr. Tough - if those archives do make the transformation to radio, please consider working in the editor's letters. I loved that bit of context and maybe that could somehow work-I think of weaving the letter with the editor's letter somehow (like Mr. Allison's Freaks radio piece) and overlaying the voices.

Paul Tough 03.10.01

Good question, Cal. I hope that Jay will give his own answer to it here, since the Transom is his brainchild. But I'll jump the gun on him a bit and give my answer first.

I think the idea of the Transom is to try to remove that extra technical obstacle you talked about -- the "equipment/production issues." To give tools to people with a good story to tell but little idea of how to make it into a radio piece.

But I don't think it's about putting any old story on the air. My sense is that a good narrative is a prerequisite for assistance from the Transom. They/we won't make up a good story for you, but they might help you tell it. That help will be partly technical, partly editorial -- and partly practical, in terms of helping you figure out how to negotiate the public-radio bureaucracy.

Check out this great project that Sound Portraits is doing right now. It's called Youth Portraits. (The two people who are working on it, Stacy Abramson and Susan Burton, were both involved with Open Letters, but I think that's a happy coincidence more than anything else.) The site describes the project thus: "Youth Portraits seeks to give voice to young people who have been in prison -- to help give them the tools to tell their own stories, teaching them an important set of skills and empowering them to speak up about their own experiences." As I understand it, Susan and Stacy are working with these kids closely, helping them turn their life stories into good radio.

I think that's what the Transom is about, except not just for young people who have been in prison. (Youth Portraits' focus makes it both harder and easier to pull off than the Transom's project: harder because young people who have been in prison sometimes have short attention spans, and easier because young people who have been in prison often have pretty compelling stories to tell.)

So to answer this question: *but won't things depend more on finding a story and then effectively telling it?* I'd say yes, absolutely. The Transom's editors and producers can help that process along as much as any editors and producers can, which is to say: a little. But any potential Transom participant -- like any open-letter writer -- has to start with a good story, and a good voice to tell it with, before the Transom can be much help.

Jay, is that right? Or am I just free-associating at this point?

One additional comment, on Cal's question: One thing that I think links the Transom and Sound Portraits/Youth Portraits and Open Letters is this idea: True, not everyone has a story to tell, but the best stories often come from surprising people.

That's what Dave Isay demonstrated with Ghetto Life 101 -- before he made that documentary, no one really thought LeAlan and Lloyd had an important story, or the ability to tell it for themselves. (Note to Gibby: They sure weren't getting calls from Nightline.) Dave showed that they did, and he helped them tell it, and get it on the radio.

The ability to tell your story in a compelling way is certainly not universal -- in fact, as Jay and I both copped to above, neither of us really thinks we're all that good at it ourselves. But it's a talent that shows up in the weirdest places. Like check out this story. It's by a teenage girl burnout (and proud of it) in suburban Ottawa, Ontario -- traditionally not a demographic with access to the media, or even to a patient ear. But man, she can really write -- she brings her story to life as vividly as Frank McCourt does.

Getting stories like hers exposed to a broader audience -- that's part of what Open Letters tried to do, and sometimes succeeded at. And I think it's part of what the Transom can do -- and should do, for that matter.

Writing, Radio Style **Cheryl Wagner 03.13.01**

I agree that there seems to be a terse style one has to adapt for radio. But is this because the listener truly won't "get it" or because that structure has become standardized and enforced by editors? I personally find that the lack of diversions and tangents challenge me (the rambling writer). Even if I loop back to the "main point" to remind the listener what they're listening to, I wonder if I'm cutting enough and if what is left is any good. This is the number one problem I am currently having in converting my free associative writing style to radio script.

Jamaica Kincaid is a great writer who works well with short sentences that always seem to be teeming with importance. She can also get a nice flow going even though much of what she writes is simple and

declarative. For reference for writers who are trying to go from long winded to short winded, I suggest taking a look at her books: *Lucy, An Autobiography of My Mother, Annie John*, and others.

Finding Surprising Voices **Jay Allison 03.13.01**

I hold with all that that Paul said. Transom hopes to do that, and also work in another direction too. Yes, we want to encourage voices from “nowhere” to come out and be heard. We want to use the Internet to find and encourage those voices, and then bring them to a much larger audience through public radio.

But along with the general citizenry, we also want to offer tools to people already in public radio or in college radio, people who’d like to be “producers”, who might want to tell more stories than their own, but in new ways. We’d like to build a place where public radio can examine the way it tells stories, the assumptions it makes, the tone it takes. Perhaps in some public radio news rooms, they are lucky enough to have these discussions every day. Many are not. Maybe that’s something we can help with, by creating dialog here, based on material that gets posted.

So not all Transom pieces will be from unknowns. I’d hope we can keep the focus shifting, accommodate many styles, avoid stereotyping. One goal here is to make it impossible to say, “oh, that’s a transom.org type piece”

The Editorial Process **Oakland 03.15.01**

Paul, can you tell us a little bit more about Openletters' editorial process? If the process of how a piece of writing became a finished, polished url-ready openletter varied greatly, as I imagine it did, please tell us about a couple of specific and different examples. Also, perhaps you could tell us about a case where you received an "unprocessed" submission and were able to make that work. What did the editing entail? Lastly, was there any particular common-denominator to why most of the public-submissions, left you at a loss? How did most of them fail?

Results Not Typical **cal 03.17.01**

I didn't ask, but I *was* curious about the editing process of Open Letters. Not so much the process, I guess, but in Paul T.'s early post he says the "batting average for the public submissions was quite low" and if you're someone who's never been published but who wants to be, well, you can't help but wonder if there's some common mistake or illusion being made. He got hundreds of submissions he couldn't use and I don't want to waste his (or transom's) time and I don't want to be one of the unusables. Are we kidding ourselves, being fooled by the modesty of talented people who produce accessible, deceptively small pieces? Inspiration is great, but should there be a disclaimer, "Results are not typical"? Just how many single moms on public assistance are going to show up on NPR's doorstep and be Carol Wasserman? Or housecleaners turn out to be David Sedaris? So, yeah, I wonder if most of Paul T.'s

hundreds were from wannabes and the real potentials were at Kinko's quietly photocopying their 'zine or at home, posting their online diary.

Schrodinger's Cat **Carol Wasserman 03.17.01**

Now listen up! If you intend to do creative work, and be an artist, you have to grow a thick skin. You can't spend the brief days allotted to us worrying about being "one of the unuseables". No editor with whom you would care to do business would ever think in such terms. So, your question is, "How do I know if this piece I've just written is any good?" You don't. Let me use the famous example of Schrodinger's Cat.

Schrodiner was a theoretical physicist who came up with the following thought experiment, in order to illustrate the principle of quantum mechanics which says that stuff exists as both particle and wave (those of you who actually know about quantum physics, bear with me as I mangle the more technical parts of this little parable):

Take a cat. Put it in an air-tight box. Calculate the amount of time the cat can stay alive inside. Wait until that moment. Ask, "Is the cat alive or dead?"

Answer: neither, both. Until you open the box and look inside.

Ok. Your manuscript is the cat. By which I mean that you write something. Then you make a fearless second pass at the thing, correcting all the mistakes you didn't notice the first time through. You decide it's finished. So is it dead or alive?

Answer: you can't know until you send it off, until you get someone to open the box. In art, however, unlike physics, your cat may just look dead to the first eighty-five editors who see it. Your job is to find an editor who senses some life in the thing. And then will work with you to make it purr.

If, however, you don't open the box, your cat is a goner.

Paul Tough 03.18.01

First of all, apologies for my absence from this board the last few days. While you-all have been discussing Faulkner and Schrodinger, I've been listening to country music down here in Austin, Texas. Which is sort of like reading open letters, except you do it standing up, and you can drink more.

Oakland, that's a perfectly reasonable set of questions, and I wish I were able to answer them as cleanly as you posed them. You're quite right, the editing process was quite a bit different from letter to letter, depending I think mostly on the style of the author.

I can say this: editing open letters was different than the magazine editing I'd done previously. When I worked at magazines, I tended to be a fairly hands-on editor, quite certain of the voice I wanted, willing to rewrite sentences and move paragraphs around in order to achieve it.

With Open Letters I didn't do that very often. Usually what I'd do after getting a first draft is ask questions, via email: suggest that the writer think more about Question A or expand a bit on Topic B. That was most of the job, actually -- our authors responded well to those questions, and the second drafts were almost always just right.

At the very end of the editing process, on certain letters, I'd wrangle with the writer more about specific words and phrases. (I just looked back through some old email, and discovered that Paul Maliszewski and I exchanged about a half-dozen emails about this sentence: "Later that night, after more fruitless searching, we ended up not quite parked in front of a payphone outside a Ben & Jerry's," each containing a slightly different version.) But usually after the second draft it was just copy editing.

The main reason for that relative laissez-faireism was that our writers wrote quite differently from one another, and I wanted to avoid making them sound the same.

So with "unprocessed" submissions, I tended to do less, rather than more, because the risk of changing or losing the author's distinct voice seemed greater.

About the common denominator on rejected submissions sent over the transom: I'd say two things. The first is that it's hard to edit someone you don't know anything about. I'm sure there were many cases where I got over-the-transom submissions that could have been turned into fine open letters, but I didn't understand the author well enough to know which direction to encourage him or her. That's why writers and editors often work together for ages; they get to know one another's quirks.

The second: The letters that I thought worked best on Open Letters combined personal revelation with a respect for the audience: Public writing with a personal feel. Some of the letters that didn't work out fell short on one side of that equation or the other. Some didn't feel personal enough: instead they felt like they were hiding something. And others didn't feel public enough: they were about an event that had great meaning for the writer, but wouldn't resonate, I thought, with a broad audience.

...when OL was running did you ever consider turning it into a radio show? I'm also dying to know what that non-disclosure agreement you signed was all about, but I guess I'll never know.

No, the idea of a radio show never really occurred to me. I hope we'll be able to get some of the letters to make the web-->air transition, but I don't think they all would make it across that divide successfully.

The non-disclosure agreement that I mentioned in this editor's letter was with Amazon, and had to do with their Honor System program. They were originally going to have it up and running in November, and it might have been an effective way for us to raise money while still publishing. (You can see our current page here.) But they didn't get it up in time. And when we finally did pass the hat, we went with PayPal, which was in many ways better than Amazon after all.

**The Secret Formula, Please
Cheryl Wagner 03.31.01**

paul and jay- is it possible to tell 3 stories at once in 20 minutes if there are large chunks of music involved or only 2? know it's hard to answer this w/o the material at hand, but in general... intersecting narratives. can they be told in 20 minutes w/o confusing the listener who is driving and talking on cell phone simultaneously while listening to npr? and if so, how many? all i want is a cut and dry formula, dammit, where i know there isn't one. gimmee.

Formulae: Cut and Dried
Jay Allison 03.13.

all i want is a cut and dry formula, dammit, where i know there isn't one. gimmee.

Go to your room and come out when the script is finished.

Then, start a topic in the General Discussion area and, with appalling bravery, paste your script into it. All available formulae, sensibility, taste, editorial judgment will be directed toward your script. You pick the advice you like.

Seriously.

Paul Tough 03.31.01
Bring on the Kitchen Sisters!

I'm in a motel behind a McDonald's in Pennington Gap, Virginia, way down in the pointy west corner of the state. Kentucky is twenty miles to the north; Tennessee is twenty miles to the south: that's how pointy it is. I'm down here with one of Jay's tape recorders reporting a story for a magazine and, Insh'allah, coming back with enough tape to create a spin-off piece for the Transom.

Let me say, first of all, that I love the Sony TC-D5M. When I was doing stories more frequently for *This American Life*, back in the second millennium, I was using one of those Sony DAT walkmen that was like a fragile little hummingbird. Breathe on it wrong, and it'd erase a two-hour tape of Dishwasher Pete wandering around the National Restaurant Convention (just as an example). And when you ran out of tapes, you had to special-order them from a warehouse in Wisconsin. The TC-D5M, though, uses tapes and batteries that are available in every coal-country K-mart, and it's sturdy enough that you can use it to hit rocks in a parking lot, or as a seat cushion to raise a whiny toddler up to table-height. I'm having trouble bringing myself to close-mic interviewees, though. Maybe it's my Canadian reluctance to invade others' personal space. Next time: a lapel mic.

As I think he said above, or somewhere, Jay's generously offered to let me continue to be a Transom editorial person on a part-time basis once my month ends (in a few short hours). I think it'll be considerably less than full-time, to answer your question, A. But I'm glad I'll be able to stay connected, officially, to the organization.

Ben, I sadly didn't get to hear the Savvy Traveler today; the radio dial around here is more bluegrass and kickin' country than public radio. And I don't have my computer wired to play MP3's, which is, I

believe, the form that Paul M's story takes on your own site. Now that it's aired, is it possible for us non-MP3 people to hear it on RealAudio anywhere?

You May Keep Your Badge
Jay Allison 03.31.01

"I'm having trouble bringing myself to close-mic interviewees"
Note to Paul Tough: CLOSE-MIC! This is no time to be shy.

"I love the Sony TC-D5M"
Note to all: There are a few of these on Ebay now. It's the "Pro" model which is a little less desirable than the consumer "M" model, but certainly not bad if it's in good shape and you can get for under \$200.

"I'm glad I'll be able to stay connected, officially, to the organization."
Note to Paul: We're glad too!

"it's sturdy enough that you can use it to hit rocks in a parking lot"
Note to Transom Team: check head alignment on Tough's D5

About Transom



What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.

Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere -- by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

Staff

Producer/Editor - Jay Allison

Web Director/Designer - Joshua T. Barlow

Editors - Viki Merrick, Carol Wasserman, Paul Tough, Jeff Towne

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ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH-Boston*.

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ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA