

## This American Life

In *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, the Persian king Shahryar is to be entertained every night by a fresh story from his wife, Sheherezade, or she is put to death. As the stories unfold, the King's life begins to become defined by his addiction to Sheherezade's narrations, and ultimately he chooses to spare her life. I too am addicted to a modern-day Sheherezade, one who weaves remarkable tales not of fiction but of reality, of a reality that is often neglected by all but this storyteller.

When I was introduced to Ira Glass' *This American Life* on the antiquated radio of my father's red 1987 Honda Civic, driving back from Arabic school during one of Boston's rare Indian summers, I felt like this voice somehow filled a void in me. The story was about a man who has been trying to outrun an antelope for 12 years, in the same way that Native Americans could outrun antelope many hundreds of years ago. The story startled me and intrigued me, not because of its unique subject matter but because of its intense coverage of something many people would consider irrelevant. Our day to day lives, from a young age, are conditioned by the calculus of utility—do your homework, so you can get good grades. Take the shortcut, so you can get there faster. Don't waste your time.

To me, Ira Glass was the muse that liberated my intellectual existence from the constraints of orthodoxy—if only for one hour at first. Many of the people I know deride *This American Life* for being pointless and inane, but to me this is precisely why it is so powerful.

In this pointlessness there is a point. In exploring that which is overlooked by the mainstream, Ira Glass has succeeded in vastly altering my capacity to perceive the world in general. The overlooked particular provides the most useful insight into the universal. From a story about a man trying to outrun antelopes I learned a powerful ethic of intellectual curiosity that has lasted to this day. Whether it is reading dense

political theory or listening to a show about dinosaur fashions, I carry with me an intense curiosity for all aspects of the human experience, from the inane to the effete.

As I grew older, the ritual of turning on the radio on Saturday afternoons or Friday evenings became more difficult as debate tournaments began consuming my weekends. When listening to *This American Life* as it aired became an impossibility, I turned to the show's website and downloaded the shows that I missed, listening to them on plane rides to tournaments or late at night as I did my homework. I even placed a radio in a Zip-Loc bag in an attempt to waterproof it so I may listen to the show as I showered before leaving for tournaments.

Through this arrangement I was able to continue nourishing myself with the esoteric tales I had become dependent on. The story of the antelope runners, however, is not the only one to have had a deep effect on me. Another story, aired also in 1997, about the American addiction to simulated environments, profoundly affected me. The ability to think about the way we think was something entirely new to me.

Some of the stories on *This American Life*, however, had the capacity to reduce me to tears. Act V, a show on the production of the final act of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by maximum security prisoners, was among the most poignant narratives I have ever heard. While it is difficult to render tangible the intangible emotions that enveloped me when I first heard that story, its humanization of people that are generally discarded as inhuman upon having committed inhumane acts moved me beyond belief. The importance of evaluating moral distinctions and understanding their fluidity was first brought into my sphere of consciousness as a person.

In the end, however, it is difficult to single out an episode of the show as the sole greatest contributor to my experience as a human being. Perhaps it is merely the hypnotic voice of Ira Glass that drives me to a radio or my computer speakers every week for an hour, seeking comfort in the obscure narrations.

While some draw on comfort foods to find inspiration, or a choice playlist of songs, the sensory experience I crave the most comes from this modern-day Sheherezade, and begins with, “From WBEZ Chicago, it’s This American Life distributed by Public Radio International, this is Ira Glass...”