

RadioDoc Review

The Dark Years - a radio conversation. Robyn Ravlich with Neil Sandell

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Abstract

In this conversational review Robyn Ravlich asks Neil Sandell to reveal the ideas and processes underlying his long form documentary, *France: The Dark Years*, on the experience of France under German occupation during the Second World War. An accomplished senior producer at CBC Radio, Neil Sandell is now an independent producer resident in France. His work has won many awards including Prix Marulic (Croatia), the Grand Prix Nova (Romania), and the Third Coast Festival (Chicago). In 2011, he was named the Atkinson Fellow in Public Policy, one of Canada's most prestigious journalism prizes. Sandell approaches this vital period of French history that still resonates today with intellectual curiosity and emotional nuance, displaying a command of radio craft and creativity. Robyn Ravlich similarly honed her signature radio feature skills over a long career at ABC Radio, with a commitment to a public service broadcast ethos. Her awards include a New York Festival Gold award, the UNAA Media Peace Prize for Radio and the HREOC Human Rights Radio Award. She has chaired the Prix Italia Radio Documentary jury and judged numerous New York Radio Festival awards. The author of *Skywriting, making radio waves* (2019), she writes about radio in her Substack, *PoeticResonance*.

This discussion is a masterclass in how such a feature is conceived and constructed: much more than a history feature, *The Dark Years* is to be experienced as a story of timeless resonances and emotional subtlety and depth.

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RR:

To begin, I think we should identify ourselves and locate ourselves, Neil. So, for our listeners and readers, I'm Robyn Ravlich, coming to you really after a long life in radio – 35 years on staff at ABC Radio, where I began as a sort of rookie interviewer in satellite linked studio discussions of ideas, and evolved into a producer of rather poetically inclined radio features, and I was also an executive producer for some innovative radio programmes such as *The Listening Room* and *Into the Music*, which was a dedicated music feature slot which I loved, and they're both now defunct. And I retired in order to live beside a river in a national park, as you know, on the southern fringe of Sydney, from where in daytime I look at the clouds outside my very large windows, and where I've made features for the ABC until recent years, when my focus has turned more to writing and writing about radio. I'm very passionate about long-form radio features of a certain kind, and that's why I'm linking here into this conversation with a very fine practitioner who has recently produced a gem of a radio feature, *The Dark Years*.

And Neil Sandell, can you perhaps oblige with a similar precis of your radio life?

NS:

Sure, I meandered my way into a career at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, always radio, but when I found journalism, I found my calling, I found something. I loved journalism because I got paid to be curious, and I loved radio because I love radio.

And so, I spent many years working at Radio Current Affairs at CBC, starting with local programming and then national programming. I was a generalist. I worked on science programmes, arts programmes, political programmes, all that kind of thing, lining up guests. You know, the daily grind, and I loved it. And at one point, though, I realised I wanted to do more, and I wanted to do documentaries because I was hearing work that really excited me that other people were getting to do.

Then I got the luckiest opportunity of my career, which was to be the executive producer of a programme called *Outfront*. *Outfront* was designed as a way of getting new voices in the door at CBC by inviting ordinary people to tell personal stories in documentary form. This kind of all-star team – not me – but this all-star team of documentary producers would pick and choose, and we would, together with this person who'd never held a mic, produce a documentary about their life.

So, I did that for five years, and that was... it was like a master class for me – to attend a master class. And I made sure that I had a chance to make documentaries as well. I spent most of that time editing other people's documentaries, and this is how I developed my skill set for making documentaries, developing stories, editing, all that kind of stuff.

You know, the thing about journalism and making radio is you learn by doing it. It's not something you learn through the book. So, I did that for five years, loved it.

Then the programme was cancelled. Worked in news at CBC for a few years, didn't really like doing news. To me, it was like being a short order cook. And then moved to France, left CBC, moved to France. This was a life goal for me and my wife. And I decided... you know, I was in a good position of being able to do work that I wanted to do, not that I had to do.

RR:

You mentioned, of course, *Outfront* before you came to make your way to France. And that, I think, is when I first became really aware of your work, which I loved, and broadcast in *The Listening Room*.

But I would make the point that I have really gained a great appreciation of the features that you've been making since you've moved to France. I've had an opportunity to hear quite a bit of your body of work that you've created in recent years, and I've just loved it, including *Between a Dog and a Wolf* [*Entre Chien et Loup*], *The Painting*, and *The Last Laugh*,¹ which is a real radio piece for me, par excellence, because it takes a radio idea, a radio archival piece, and makes something of it. I love them all.

And now comes *The Dark Years*, and I regard it really as pretty flawless, and that is despite repeated listening. It's very rich and resonant and beautifully made. And so, what I'd like to do, as we're about to start talking about it, could I perhaps just play in this little archival clip? It's a montage that really sets up the invitation to listen as it was broadcast on CBC Ideas.

The Dark Years Clip 1, Introduction on CBC Ideas

Montage – Naylah Ayad: France under German occupation.

archival audio: Pétain, Radio Londres, music, sfx

NA: 1940 to 1944, a period the French call les années noires, the dark years

RR:

What are the dark years, and how did the idea about them present itself to you and engage you, Neil?

NS:

The dark years are the period after France's defeat when it was occupied: half of it was occupied by Germans, and the other half was governed by the Vichy regime, which collaborated with the Germans. This was a five-year period, and a period that burdens France, has burdened France ever since. It's always lurking in the

¹ You can find these documentaries on Neil Sandell's [Soundcloud page](https://soundcloud.com/nsandell). <https://soundcloud.com/nsandell>

background and still pops up in conversations in how people think of the world and is still divisive.

This idea was a collision of some things that I'd been thinking about and reading. So, in the fall of 2024, I read *The Remains of the Day*. I finally got around to reading that, and it blew me away. Volumes have been written about what this book means, but essentially, it's a butler of an aristocrat describing life between the wars. And his lord is a Nazi sympathiser.

There were many readings of the book, but what I was taking from it was, it was a portrait of the slow creep of collaboration, which really interested me within the context of the American election that was going on, which I followed daily. So, I was thinking about that. And then I recall the gut-wrenching feeling of seeing Trump win. And I was despondent, scrolling through Twitter at the time, and I came across a tweet from a Canadian journalist who works in the United States by the name of David Frum.

He had written eight years earlier [2016], "This night, my son asked me, 'What do we do now?' I answered, 'We walk to the bar, strike up the band, and sing the Marseillaise'".

Oh, okay. Resistance.

And I started seeing just the glimmerings of resistance in the United States that evening on social media. And his reference to *Casablanca* resonated because, you know, that is such a powerful scene of resistance in the movie. I start thinking about it, and I realised that I wanted to do a programme about the political moment the United States was in, but I wanted to do it – I didn't want to be on the nose, very much did not want to be on the nose.

And then I was reading Tim Ryback's essay² in *The Atlantic* about the rise of the Third Reich a few months later. He's a scholar that I had spoken to in another lifetime. And it was so obvious, the reference without there needing to be a reference, and I thought, you know, I live in France, I need to know and understand this elephant in the room, in French life and French history, and that's where it went. And the idea keeps morphing the more you learn about it.

RR:

Well, that's really fascinating, because on two levels, one, you say you didn't want to be on the nose. Were you concerned about your, not so much safety, but your room to move had you made something explicitly about the American situation?

² Timothy W. Ryback, 'How Hitler Dismantled a Democracy in 53 Days' (*The Atlantic*, Jan 8, 2025) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/01/hitler-germany-constitution-authoritarianism/681233/>

NS:

Absolutely, it changed so quickly.

RR:

That is so interesting. And so, what you've in essence done is radio as metaphor, in a way. I mean, it's both an actual study of the experience of the dark years of occupation and resistance in France, but it's also a kind of metaphorical exploration.

NS:

Yes, and I think based on some of the feedback I got afterwards, I realized that it was open enough that people could draw their own conclusions. Some people immediately jumped to making the connection with the United States, but other people said, ah, you're talking about Gaza, aren't you? And I thought, you know, I could see how people would filter the programme through that lens.

So, in a way, I think my idea was to get people thinking about the nature of resistance.

RR:

That's absolutely fascinating. And so, what then was the next move, as it were, because it's quite a detailed programme. There's a lot happening in it. And there is an immersion that I feel is deeply into the French situation, as well as maybe these other aspects of it, the other meanings and layers of it. But what happened in terms of that absorption into the French story for you?

NS:

Learning what the French story was. I mean, I was really starting at ground zero. So, I read intensively. Robyn, this was a project of diving down rabbit holes and enjoying every dive and realising many of those rabbit holes were fascinating but were off focus. So, you begin to shape what you think the programme is about, start booking interviews, realising, no, that's not going to do it, or the interview or the tape doesn't support what you're hoping for. And you keep making adjustments.

I knew very quickly that history can be very dry. It can sound very academic. So, I was always looking, having done a few interviews that sounded really dry and academic, I realised that's what I wasn't going for. I was going for something that would move me, would surprise me, that would take me there, I suppose.

You know, there's a kind of approach that some people make when they're planning a documentary, which is to create a storyboard: this is going to happen, and then this is going to happen, and this voice will fill in this role. And I understand that as an approach to planning, but it can be a trap if you think that you need to tick every box, because things don't work out. And that approach can also blind you or deafen you, I suppose, to what is actually happening in an interview. So, I kept discovering things as I was going along, and I kept reaching out to new people. I liken it to a daisy chain.

You know, in another documentary, I made a long-distance friendship with an 80-year-old woman in Texas, who I knew loved reading history, and I told her about this project. She said, 'Oh, you know, do you know about this book?' And I said, 'Never heard of it'. She said, 'Oh, I really remember this book about that era'. And it was an eyewitness account written by an American who'd married a Frenchman and who'd lived in France during the war and worked for the Resistance. And so that was a revelation. I thought, oh, another perspective. And so gradually, I would acquire these new sources and learning about people who are writing and who are eyewitnesses of the events. They brought it to life for me.

So that was kind of the process, organic. But in the end, you can turn yourself into a pretzel trying to get something that isn't there. You need to follow the tape. I started my life actually using reel-to-reel tape. You need to follow what's there, what you're listening to. And so, the strongest elements jump out at you. Then you start crafting a story.

RR:

Very much so. And I think we have some more clips to listen to. This one I think is quite interesting because it shows how you've used archival material, sound material, to effectively bring the past very present:

The Dark Years Clip 2:

[Speaker 1]

"On the road out of the city, people were pushing baby carriages or pulling small carts.

Others were on loaded bicycles. And some were walking, carrying their children and their valises. Some were moving their families and possessions in wagons drawn by oxen.

Farther on, we saw dead bodies on the side of the road. French men, women, and children who had been machine-gunned by German Stukas. Cars were lying in

ditches, overturned, and men and women stood near them, weeping.”³

NS: Six days later, Maréchal Pétain, the new leader of France, calling for a ceasefire.

[Speaker 2]

“At 1.30, we listened to the news on the wireless.”

NS: Denise Domenach, a 15-year-old from Lyon, and soon a member of the Resistance, writing in her diary.

[Speaker 2]

“We hear a speech by Maréchal Pétain saying that France, invaded and defeated, had asked the enemy for an armistice. Grandpa stormed out of the dining room like a madman, and from a distance, we heard his sobs. All of us started crying when we heard this death warrant for France.

And we couldn't swallow a single bite of the meal.”⁴

[Speaker 3] You have a separation of families, many people have fled, and you don't know what has happened to them.

NS: The Swiss historian Philippe Burrin.

RR:

We're hearing there some fragments from a diary, we're hearing music, and we're hearing a glimpse of radio voices from the time, archival material. How important are these materials to actually bring the past to life?

NS:

Critical, I think. These are contemporaneous accounts of what is going on, and they're to be trusted way more than people writing after the fact.

There was a certain amount of people writing, I can't say this universally, but people who wrote their stories of resistance were patting themselves on the back to some extent, because there was value to be had, to be seen being a resister. There are very few people who wrote books about how they were a collaborator. So, I think the contemporaneous nature, or almost immediately after, was very important.

I was looking for ways of immersing the listener into that world. And so, the account of the mass exodus of Paris. I mean, it was a refugee crisis, and there were ample photographs of it. It was chaos after the defeat of France. Chaos, despair, a

³ Drue Tartiere & M.R. Werner, *The House Near Paris: An American Woman's Story of Traffic in Patriots* (Simon & Shuster: 1946)

⁴ Denise Domenach-Lallich. *Demain il fera beau. Journal d'une adolescente (novembre 1939-septembre 1944)*. (Lyon, éditions BGA-Permezel, 2001)

sense of betrayal, and all of this forms the backdrop for what happened in the next four years. So, there are the words.

I chose my music, I hope, to convey a sense of the mood. But, you know, I'd also say that hearing a radio clip of somebody speaking on the wireless in 1940 with all of that crackle, and bad audio, and the kind of harumphy quality of Maréchal Pétain saying, we're going to seek an armistice. There's emotional information in that as well, which is really critical.

This is the thing: there's a place in making, in telling historical stories for information, a critical role. But that doesn't work for me in this radio documentary.

It was about more than information.

RR:

I agree. I think there's so much feeling in it. It's tremendous. And what I'm particularly struck by is a number of things. First of all, I hear it in your narration; I hear it when you are struck by things, when things stop you in your tracks. There's a scene very much at the beginning of the programme where you're in a museum, and you hear and see something that just affects you. And I'm with you.

I'd like you to talk about that and ways of accomplishing it naturally. I mean, you don't set out to be yourself moved as a vehicle to move other people. But I do believe, I've referred to this in a way in a programme I made about Anna Akhmatova, where someone I was speaking to spoke about 'trembling moments'.

And I think they're so important. The ones that are going to make you have goosebumps are certainly going to make the listener have goosebumps and understand the sensitivity and the significance of the material by how you react. And I'd like you to talk about that. But I'm also very conscious that this is something that people can't set out to achieve. It has to come naturally, I think.

NS:

I agree. There's a British radio maker who I very much admire, and who's also a friend, Cathy FitzGerald, who I think is the gold standard for that sort of interview, which is [that] there's a sense of discovering what somebody has to say, and being moved by it and responding intuitively to it, as opposed to my natural instinct, which is to be a know-it-all, or to prove to somebody that I know it all, which can be deadly. So, Cathy has written beautifully about seeking moments of wonder, moments of discovery.⁵ And I would add to that, since some of this documentary is quite dark, moments of horror. But these are moments that jump out and surprise you, and you can't shake them.

⁵ Cathy FitzGerald, "Radio in Wonderland", (Transom.org 2017) <https://transom.org/2017/cathy-fitzgerald/>

You know, when I'm interviewing this guide at a Resistance museum⁶, my approach was to be surprised, and just to be open to it, and to ask maybe innocent or stupid questions, because I was kind of stupid about it.

Of course, there's always tape that doesn't make it. But we're looking at the identity card of a woman named Denise Goldstein, a Jewish woman. And the guide [Charlotte de Gail] is describing the card, because I want this picture of what it's like. And I'm asking her, well, how did people know she was Jewish?

Charlotte kind of says, well, she probably reported herself, you know? This was the way things were. And there was a certain obligation, and certain trust, because it was a law that you had to report yourself to the town hall as Jewish.

And I said, what happened to her? She said, she was deported to Auschwitz. That didn't make it, for important reasons. But I was always trying to be a bit surprised. Why didn't it make it? Because I think it would have taken the programme in another direction at that moment.

I guess another thing in considering the arc of a long documentary, Robyn, is the arc of the mood or the tone. It can't all be light, it can't all be dark, and one thing sets up another. There needs to be some variation and modulation.

Another example, right at the beginning, when this guide says, oh, and this building was the Gestapo headquarters. And it's like, oh, really? So, the listeners may or may not know that the head of the Gestapo in Lyon was Klaus Barbie, known as the Butcher of Lyon, who was years later brought to justice, and convicted of 341 crimes against humanity.

I mean, he was a monster. And after he was convicted, there was a movement to take this building and make it into, repurpose it. And so, she mentions Klaus Barbie. And I thought, if we start talking about Klaus Barbie now, where do we go? There's nowhere to go. It's like taking the horror meter up to a 10 in the second minute of a documentary or explaining everything about Klaus Barbie.

So, you make choices along the way about how much to include and what not to include. And it's not always informational choices. It is choices in terms of theme and mood.

RR:

In fact, I described this when I made a comment after hearing it the first time. It's really like an iceberg, a feature like this. And I said there was one seventh above water and the rest below.

⁶ Centre d'Histoire de la Résistance et de la Déportation in Lyon. <https://www.chrd.lyon.fr/>

But in fact, I've checked and it seems that with an iceberg, it's one tenth is above water and nine tenths is below. So, what you're saying, very much fits with this, that there's a sort of a mass of material that you accumulate – whether it's by this daisy chain method, I think something like that is the way to go rather than storyboarding for me as well. You really have to see where the idea is going to take you and then how, as you say, to shape the experience so that you really create a shape to the programme emotionally and intellectually that is going to lead people through the idea and make them feel it.

I think this is what radio is to me. It's something that you feel, you hear it, and you hear it deeply. Good radio, certain radio.

And it seems to me also location recordings are another element in this, that you're able to bring a sense of place to this, and tones of voices, and a great many different voices coming from different directions. So, it's a really big work. You must have recorded a mass of material in relation to what you actually finally chose.

NS:

Yes, as always.

RR:

How many hours?

NS:

But you know what: here's the thing. When you know you've got something great, you think, ah, I can build a documentary around that.

And those moments can come early, they can come late, but when you've got it, you kind of know that you've got what you need. It's just a matter of figuring out how to use it. And so, the two moments for me were early, interviewing Timothy Ryback, who's the American historian who's talking about Nacht und Nebel, the Night and Fog abduction programme of the Gestapo.

And then very late, interviewing Xavier Donzelli, the journalist who wrote the book about the poem. And he was, you know, he was gold.

RR:

Indeed. So why don't we hear this because this knocked me out.

I'm a person much interested in poetry and poetic radio and here we have something where poetry itself was so significant to the story and to the historical experience and to what we might feel about it.

The Dark Years Clip 3

[Xavier Donzelli:]

It was not a poem that was thought as a war poem. It was a love poem. Éluard said just before he died, he said that he wrote this poem for his wife, Nusch.

(Music)

NS: Nusch. Tell me about her.

[Donzelli]

Nusch. Inspiration. Softness. Elegance. Green eyes. Brown hair. Actress. Muse. Happiness. Freedom. Model.

He said that he realized that the love he had, the love he felt for his wife, was enormous, gorgeous, but it was not worth loving somebody if you had not liberty, if you had not freedom.

On every breath of dawn,
on the sea, on the boats,
on the demented mountaintops,
I write your name.

On the foam of the clouds,
on the sweat of the storm,
on the dense and dull rain,
I write your name.

NS:

Poetry as an act of resistance.

It's a very simple poem. It's a very repetitive poem. (fades)

RR:

A beautiful poem. So, poetry is an act of resistance I liked very much, I have to say.

NS:

Well, I'll give full credit to my editor [Greg Kelly] for suggesting that line, and it was bang on.

RR:

Here you are making the programme in France, and you're very capable, incredibly capable, of fashioning such a work, constructing, fashioning everything about it. Where did you find your readers for the readings that are in the programme?

NS:

Well, they're Canadians, and they're not actors, actually.

RR:

I sense that.

NS:

The male voice I'd used in a previous, he had been a broadcaster. He's a very fine journalist, Ian Brown, print journalist and author. So, he was somebody I thought about immediately and [he] nailed it.

Then searching for the female voices was more difficult, and you know, budget didn't allow me particularly to go out and get somebody who actually earned their living by acting. I hate to say it, but that was the case. And so, I started just asking around, and I started listening to talking books.

And this colleague of mine who produces talking books said, 'Oh, you know, this guy would be really good for your male voice'. And so, I listened to the book, and I thought, you know what, the preface is by the author, a woman named Melanie Schnell. I thought, wow, she could do this. So, we did that. And then we had her do reading the 15-year-old, and I thought, I'm not sure. So, we found a real live Canadian 15-year-old [Leah Kelly] who happened to be the daughter of my editor. And it was a good decision, I think, even with the uptalk.

RR:

That's great. I very much, as I say, enjoyed hearing poetry in the programme, and I was so astonished to hear that poetry was dropped from British planes over France. Incredible, particularly the poem by Paul Éluard. I love that story.

NS:

So, Xavier Donzelli had been immersed in this story to write his novel.⁷ His novel is a reimagining of the writing of this poem and all the different people involved in it.

⁷ Xavier Donzelli, *Et par le pouvoir d'un mot* (Paris, Editions Seghers, 2023)

He finds that it wasn't just wafting these poems down, but there was an air crew that actually lost their life doing this thing.

And he mentioned this to me because one of the aviators was Canadian. But these were rookie air crew. They were all so young, Robyn. They were all 20, 21 years old.

I followed this story, and like many things in the Second World War, there was documentation. And so, the surviving air crew who made it back told his story before an investigation. I thought, well, hold it – there's more to this story. There's a segue into something else. I loved what a romantic notion it was to bomb France with literature, as Donzelli says. But, you know, it was a terrible war. Imagine being lost as an air crew and flying around France in the dark, knowing that you're going to have to crash land the plane because the fuel runs out. That in itself could be its own story. But I thought, okay, then what happens? And so, again, it's just this daisy chain. What happens next? What happens next? And, what about it?

RR:

Should we hear that then?

NS: Yes.

The Dark Years Clip 4

NS: Four of the airmen parachute to safety.

The only one to escape capture is Sergeant Bernard Reeves. He comes down in the countryside just before dawn, wanders until he comes across a cottage. He sees a woman, gestures that he's thirsty, and she offers him some water.

And then... Well, let's freeze the frame just for a second, because what unfolds next is one family's moment of truth.

[HALIK KOCHANISKI ⁸]

What do you do with an airman who's been found in your house? There's nothing you can do. You are caught. The airmen will end up in a POW camp. You will get deported to one of the harshest work camps in Germany.

NS: The family feeds Sgt Reeves, gives him civilian clothing to wear. The father goes out and finds his parachute and buries it. And for the next four months, they hide him, keep him safe until they can hand him over to a Resistance escape line.

[HALIK KOCHANISKI]

The people in the Resistance were ordinary people. They weren't supermen and superwomen. They were ordinary people, and they did extraordinary things.

⁸ Halik Kochanski, *Resistance: The Underground War Against Hitler, 1939-1945* ([London: W.W. Norton, 2022](#))

NS:

So, the popular culture version of the Resistance is blowing up bridges, that kind of thing, very dramatic, very cinematic. I was drawn – and of course there was some of that – but I was drawn to the quiet acts of resistance, a family hiding an aviator at great risk, a man writing a poem. And I kept a list.

Every time I'd read a diary, I'd add to this list of people resisting quietly and making a difference in some way. Hiding a Jewish child. Drew Tartiere, the woman who witnesses the exodus, the refugee exodus at the beginning of the war, talks about a doctor near Paris who would fake x-rays, so it looked like you had tuberculosis. And if you had TB, which is highly contagious, you could avoid being put in a detention camp.

And these are people who, most of them after the war, they just kept quiet about it. They did their bit and wanted to move on.

RR:

Remarkable. Just a couple of things that I'd like to address, and that is the quality of voices themselves and what they convey in telling these stories or making us feel. What can you say further, perhaps, there's a lovely scene where you've interwoven an old man's voice and a girl's voice – a great age gap between them; and it seems to me to speak, therefore, of history and now, the future.

NS:

Yes. I mean, I think of it on two levels. I love the sound of different voices and how they rub up against each other. You know, a crackled old voice and the fresh voice of a child.

And the part of me that wears the craft, the crafter of a documentary, thinks about casting and the variation and the colours of voice. And so, I think about it. And I think it's not only what somebody says, but it's how they say it and their tone of voice and the emotion.

You know, there are people who work from transcripts and edit from transcripts. And it drives me crazy because half of the information is in what people are saying. And the other half, to me, the most potent part is in how people are saying it. It's in the pauses, the thinking about it. We're hardwired to hear that.

For example, there's a clip, a testimony made decades later by a Holocaust survivor named Rachel Jedinak who's being rounded up, and who escapes and her mother doesn't. And you don't need to know French to hear the tension in her voice

in telling that story. The tension and the sadness and the passion. So, how people say things is absolutely critical.

I have a keen ear for that. That gets to the emotional side of the storytelling. And that's what draws people in.

RR:

Yes, I think it does. And you've got a feel for it, but you've also got a touch where you're able to interweave things in such a way as to create something even more special, I think. We will just listen to this old man and girl clip, which I think demonstrates it very well:

The Dark Years Clip 5

[Speaker 1] (in French)

NS:

...Edgar Morin, sociologist, intellectual, 103 years old. At the end of the interview ⁹, the camera cuts to a close-up of a 12-year-old girl. She's introduced as the recent winner of a national elocution competition.

Her name is Joanne Samalens-Lagardère. Edgar Morin's eyes light up. The poem is "Liberté" by Paul Éluard.

At that moment, the poem becomes a bridge between the past and present, between an old man and a girl.

[Girl]

Sur toutes les pages lues.

[NS]

On every page read.

[Girl]

Sur toutes les pages blanches.

[NS]

On all the blank pages.

[Girl]

Pierre, sang, papier ou cendre.

[NS]

Stone, blood, paper or ash.

[Girl]

J'écris ton nom.

[NS]

⁹ "La Grande Librairie" on FranceTV, October 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1545327277107850>

I write your name.

[XAVIER DONZELLI] Éluard was some kind of a privileged guy.

NS: Xavier Donzelli, a French journalist. He wrote a novel about the poem called *Et par le pouvoir d'un mot*.

NS:

Let me tell you about a first version of that section. I spent some precious words describing what Edgar Morin looks like, and a little bit of describing what the girl, Joanne Samalens-Lagardère, looks like. And I cut that, because to me, the voice paints a picture. And it's better that that picture is in your mind's eye, rather than me telling you that he's a... a shrivelled old guy in a velour jacket with a, you know, whatever. I think you need to trust, you need to trust your listeners.

RR:

I think that's wisdom, and I think maybe this is where we're heading. I wanted to just raise the idea, you know, you and I communicate a lot about tennis. We're great tennis fans, particularly during the Grand Slams, we're in contact a lot. And the phrase tennis IQ is used, and I think we both know what it means, and also having good hands, things of this kind. And it is a radio IQ equivalent? What do you think?

And I think you've got it. I think you have a very high radio IQ.

NS:

Well, thank you. I think there is such a thing, but I think when you hear that, it's hard won. You know, I listen to a documentary by Alan Hall, or Eleanor McDowell, the two principals of Falling Tree Productions, and they're brilliant in so many ways, but the craft is impeccable. The craft is invisible.

I would say that about the late Chris Brookes as well, whose work I very much admired. The craft doesn't draw attention to itself. It's like a tailor of a fine suit. You don't want to see the stitches; you want to see the suit. And so, I think part of that IQ is knowing how far to go, knowing when to stop and let your listener take over. And you know, you don't always get it right, and a good editor will help you.

Let me give you a small example, okay? So, it's almost a hackneyed trope in documentaries, certainly American documentaries, to have somebody knocking on the door of the person they're going to interview. 'Hello, hi, my name's so-and-so'. 'Oh, yeah, well, come on in'.

You know, it's used as a transition device, and by now it's a cliché. But sometimes you can use that for purpose. So, I think the darkest part of the documentary is talking about the Night and Fog Decree, and the kidnapping of people off the streets,

and disappearing them, and how that destroys the trust in a society where you can't trust anybody, because you might be betrayed. Okay, so Tim Ryback is sitting in my living room, and I'm adjusting the microphones, and we have this giggle. And, I kind of purposely, well, I don't speak any German, so I knew I didn't have to deliberately mispronounce a German word, but I kind of get him to... we have a little bit of a light beginning.

So, what's the purpose of that? Well, the lightness sets up the darkness in a way that going straight to dark doesn't work, because it snaps your head back when you start realizing what this interview is about. So where am I going with this? You can learn about this by listening and by trying things, but in the end, it becomes intuitive, yeah.

RR:

That's wonderful, and I think you have, as we've spoken, you've really cast light on not only the dark years, but light on the process of making this kind of work, which is rare and important, and addresses not the past, but also very much the present that we situate ourselves in, that we can't avoid, and it makes us think and feel, and for that I'm very grateful. So, Neil, I think we may finish our conversation for the moment, and thank you very, very much.

NS:

My pleasure. Thank you.

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