

# Will Kate Survive Kate?

Produced by Masako Fukui with technical production by Timothy Nicastrì  
for ABC RN 360 Documentaries (Australia, 2013). 50mins.

## Reviewer: Kate Montague

Masako Fukui's radio documentary *Will Kate Survive Kate* is a tender portrait of a young woman's battle with an eating disorder. The program first broadcast in December 2013 on ABC Radio National's *360 Documentaries* program and has since won a gold medal at the New York Radio Festival Awards. The documentary explores a year of Kate's struggle and admission into a three-month-long intensive eating disorders program. *Will Kate Survive Kate* is an important and powerful story. It shares Kate's deeply personal perspective of her illness and highlights the shortcomings of an under-resourced health system that can barely provide the ongoing support she needs. Producer Masako Fukui employs a variety of audio storytelling techniques that draw the listener deep into Kate's psychological experience. The use of conventional interviews, recorded conversations, audio diaries, and fly-on-the-wall style observational recordings, contribute to a rich and layered documentary work.

In addition to Kate's personal narrative, we hear from her mother, father, brothers and her twin sister who returns home from London to be by Kate's side. The candid and intimate audio recordings that Masako Fukui gained with Kate and her family indicate a deep level of trust between the storytellers and producer. Kate and her family share raw and honest accounts of their journey – so much so that when I first listened to this piece I wondered: what was the documentary experience like for these storytellers, and what compelled them to share such a difficult chapter of their lives?

As a radio producer, and avid listener to personal audio stories, I am often surprised by the generosity of people who share their personal narrative for public broadcast. Particularly when the story involves difficult experiences that may be challenging to talk about. Radio producers are often comforted by a sense that the storytelling experience may be cathartic or therapeutic. However, once the documentary product is broadcast, we often don't have the opportunity to

follow up with these individuals. Thus for this review I chose to speak with Kate and her mother.<sup>1</sup> We discussed what motivated them to document their story; how sharing their story on the radio and in *sound* was unique, and if their feelings about their story changed after it was broadcast.

Kate's mother and Masako Fukui have been friends for over 20 years and this relationship was key to the family's decision to share their story. Kate's mother was aware of Fukui's radio work and approached her with the idea. She thought a documentary would be an effective way to increase awareness and lobby support for more public hospital beds for eating disordered patients.<sup>2</sup> Thus Kate's mother was motivated by her personal struggle accessing medical care for her daughter, and her sense of a broader need:

It wasn't that I had this burning desire to share my story with the world; I wanted to achieve a goal. I wanted recognition so that people could see that....families aren't getting the support they need for mental health, and it's not just anorexia, it's right across the board... I wanted something that had some teeth, and [that] actually could have...a positive effect and make changes...And it did. It did make changes.<sup>3</sup>

('Kate's mother' 2014)

Kate's mother's long-standing relationship with Masako Fukui made her the obvious choice as collaborator. Listening to Fukui's interactions with Kate and her family you can hear the importance of this familiarity and trust. Throughout the documentary Fukui gently steers her storytellers through some challenging moments. At one point Kate's mother talks about grappling with issues of trust and deceit as a consequence of her daughter's illness. This audio moment captures a clear intimacy between the storyteller and producer and illustrates the role of producer in setting safe boundaries for difficult storytelling experiences.

**AUDIO CLIP:** *Will Kate Survive Kate* (1)

<https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/audio-clip-1-will-kate-survive-kate>

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this review I have maintained the anonymity of the characters and have used the same names as in the documentary.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of production only two public hospital beds were available for eating disordered patients and Kate's mother was amongst a group of parents lobbying local and state government for more health resources.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of the documentary's re-broadcast in October 2014, the hospital where Kate was treated announced two new public beds for eating disordered patients.

Masako Fukui's compassionate approach is reflected in the deeply personal quality of the storytelling that is shared. While the family may have been politically motivated to share Kate's journey, I feel that the impact of the documentary can be measured more in terms of its ability to convey first-hand experience. It is the personal narratives at the heart of *Will Kate Survive Kate* that offer the listener a point of connection and provide a deeper appreciation of Kate's illness.

While Kate was motivated to share her story for the benefit of others, she was initially more reserved. The anonymity that radio afforded her was an important factor in her decision to participate:

There was no way I would have done it if it was on TV, it's a lot easier to be anonymous [on the] radio ... and I thought, where [Masako] works, it might get to more appropriate people. She's not a tabloid person.

('Kate' 2014)

Kate's and her family's familiarity with Fukui's radio work and perception of the ABC as a broadcaster were thus important factors in their decision to take part in the documentary. Kate's mother also commented on this point:

With the ABC there's a different type of listener that might be more ready to listen to somebody else's story. Rather than on television [where] it's not in depth, it's fleeting and then it's gone. Whereas on the radio....you've got to really think about the story; you use your own imagination; you think about what that person might look like, what that person might be feeling; but when it's on the television, it's all there, you don't have to think – it's gone in a heartbeat...I [also] thought it was better than it would have been had it been on television because the visual thing of somebody who's really ill, I often think there's a little bit of compassion fatigue that goes on.....

('Kate's mother' 2014)

These comments suggest that without the distraction of the visual, the radio listener can connect with Kate's experience in a more direct way. This is an important point given anorexia is so often misunderstood by its physical manifestation. A healthy-looking weight is not necessarily indicative of stable mental health, and a body in physical crisis might distract from the deeper psychological aspects of the illness. On the radio, and over the period of time this documentary was made, Kate

was free from her visual representation and able to more directly communicate her emotional journey.

These ideas were echoed in a recent discussion between writer Peter Blegvad and radio producer Iain Chambers on ABC Radio National's *Radiotonic* program. Blegvad and Chambers (2014) produced *Eternal Moment*, a feature-length radio play that ventured into the mind of a psychiatric patient. As a prologue to the program's broadcast on *Radiotonic*, Blegvad and Chambers discussed the particularities of radio as a medium when exploring stories about mental illness. Blegvad reflected:

I would say that there is no other medium I can think of, including literature, which puts you inside the head of the protagonist, so that you can imaginatively experience, at least a metaphor for a psychological state..... I'm a strong believer in the eidetic, or mental image, the phantom image, being somehow clearer. Because you create it yourself.... you're not given it, you make it, so you're invested in that..... you're collaborating with us.....much more than you would be if we were showing you a film.

(Blegvad in *Radiotonic* 2014)

This *active* listening (Douglas 1999, p. 27) and deeper engagement with the interior world of the person sharing their story, has immense implications for the storytellers themselves. Not only is Kate free from the visual and physical representations of her illness, but in *sound*, she is afforded a unique combination of anonymity, direct (verbal) communication, and intimate connection with her listener.

The use of audio diaries in *Will Kate Survive Kate* furthers this sense of connection. This style of storytelling is heard in Joe Richman's *Radio Diaries* series and documentary works such as David Isay's *Ghetto Life 101* (Jones and Newman 1993) and *Remorse: The 14 Stories of Eric Morse* (Jones and Newman 1996). These works capture the spirit of autoethnography, with characters who record their own stories in their own time (Ehrlich 2003, p. 424). It is a deeply immersive style of audio recording that can have profound results.

By turning the tape recorder into a constant companion.... It's like bringing the microphone backstage, to a place where truth and understanding are not found just in the words but between the words- in the pauses and accents, in the sighs and silences.

(Richman 2010, p. 130)

The audio diaries in *Will Kate Survive Kate* capture interactions between family members and delicate moments of private reflection. The listener is drawn into the private and domestic spaces the characters inhabit and given a sense of sharing the same space. These recordings also invite the listener into the interior world of the characters. In one of Kate's audio diaries she articulates her internal conflict between wanting to be honest and cooperative with her family and caregivers, and succumbing to the harmful rewards of her illness.

**AUDIO CLIP:** *Will Kate Survive Kate* (2)

<https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/audio-clip-2-will-kate-survive-kate>

These confessional moments offer small windows into Kate's personal struggle and rare insights into the complicated nature of her mental illness. We are invited to feel, hear and interact with the world as Kate does – and the fact that she is in control of what she shares, gives the listener a sense of her narrative intent. However, I was often struck by Kate's candour throughout the documentary, and was curious if the intended broadcast of the piece affected the way she told her story:

I just tried to focus on what I was talking about and not think about where it was going to go. Because I probably would have been a lot more censored if I had've done that...I knew my family were going to hear it, [and] sometimes I thought 'oh I wish I hadn't said that', but....I wanted it to be genuine, I didn't want it to be sugar-coated or anything, 'cause what's the point? It was hard doing it, so I might as well do it fully...

('Kate' 2014)

In addition to her audio diaries, Kate kept a written diary whilst she was in hospital and shared this with Fukui throughout the production. Some of these written entries were later read by Kate and recorded in the studio. The use of this audio is a clever substitute for more conventional documentary narration. Along with the spare use of Fukui's own script, Kate's diary entries give the story structure and a sense of time passing as she counts down the days she is in hospital. But more importantly, this style of narration keeps the listener inside Kate's personal experience. This technique is established in the opening minutes of the documentary.

**AUDIO CLIP:** *Will Kate Survive Kate* (3)

<https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/audio-clip-3-will-kate-survive-kate>

At times the studio recordings of Kate's written entries lack the intimacy and natural ease of her audio diaries, but I could appreciate how important it was for Kate to maintain a sense of ownership around the way she communicated some aspects of her journey.

It was easier to write it down, and the thing I liked about that was...I could censor it a little bit. Like I wrote out exactly what was...my train of consciousness kind-of-thing, and some of that I wouldn't want to be in there. So I could edit it enough so I was comfortable with it...I think writing stuff was good in that way, because I could think about it a lot more and I had a lot more control over it.

('Kate' 2014)

The use of a written diary thus not only gave Fukui access to the inner thought world of her protagonist, but it also afforded Kate a degree of authorship. Fukui also allowed Kate to choose much of the music included in the program, as a further outlet for her self-expression.

In terms of the ways Kate's story was captured in interviews, Kate raised the value of having some direction from Fukui.

Sometimes it was easier when she asked me questions because sometimes I just didn't know what she wanted from me. Or sometimes I didn't even know what I was feeling, or I wasn't sure how personal I should go. So sometimes it was easier when it was one-on-one interviews...

('Kate' 2014)

Kate's comments suggest an underlying pressure to perform the narrative, and her uncertainty around 'how personal to go' reveal the more vulnerable aspects of sharing personal stories as part of a documentary. This highlights the importance of the producer's role as storytelling guide, and it is therefore interesting to consider how the relationship between producer and storyteller shapes the storytelling experience itself.

The question of why people share their personal narrative with the media often raises ideas about the therapeutic nature of storytelling. Sharing one's own story is often seen as an opportunity to be heard, and to speak about experiences that might benefit others. These notions can comfort journalists and radio documentary producers who are entrusted with personal and at times difficult stories (Lindgren 2012 p. 40, and Gearing 2013, pp. 73-74). However we hear less from the storytellers themselves. I spoke with Kate about her experience.

I guess because I've had lots of therapy, I've talked to a lot of different people about my story...[Masako] wanted me to [talk] about how I felt and things like that, but that's really what I would have done anyway. Because being in a psyche ward, that's pretty much what they want you to do all the time...talk about your feelings.

('Kate' 2014)

In Kate's case, sharing her story for the documentary was in some ways an extension of the therapy that she was undertaking at the time. But her description of Fukui's role in the documentary process underlines how the radio documentary interview might be mistaken as therapy. The radio producer (like the therapist) undertakes the important role of listening and coaxing the narrative (Smith and Watson 2001, cited in Poletti 2011, p. 73). A process that Michael Rabiger (2004) describes as:

the midwifery of testimony and heartfelt eloquence, particularly by those unwilling to hazard the egotism of talking about their inmost lives. (p. 331)

However the key difference between the documentary interview and therapeutic listening is the narrative goals of the producer. The producer is constantly searching for the essential pieces of the broader story. The documentary interview is thus a storytelling exchange often under the pressure of narrative objectives.

Kate raised this aspect of her own documentary experience.

There was one time when I felt pressure to recover for the documentary because I know that Masako wanted to...have something that had a beginning, middle, and an end. And the end would be me being discharged, and being recovered, which is a lot of pressure. So there was a time when....I didn't know what to do with that....but I got over that eventually and just kept going with how I was going...

('Kate' 2014)

Kate's mother also remembered this dynamic:

I think there was a little bit of idealism there with Masako; she probably thought there was going to be a happy ever after... I think she was balancing on a fine wire there because realistically she knew that mental illness is not fixed like measles – mental illness comes and goes; it has its flux. But I think for the purpose of the story it would have been fantastic had that been the case...

('Kate's mother' 2014)

The challenge was thus how to tell Kate's story, with all its complexity, unresolved elements and ongoing issues, *and* meet the expectations of the broadcaster and listening audience, *and* avoid deleterious effects on the storytellers themselves.

Maria Tumarkin (2014) touched on these issues in her recent article *This Narrated Life* in *The Griffith Review*. Tumarkin critiques the rise in popularity of neatly formulated personal narratives like those heard in radio programs such as *This American Life*. She argues the growing pressure to tell personal stories with a clear narrative arc and resolution might limit the way we discuss and debate the intricacies of life experiences (Tumarkin 2014, p. 175). In *Will Kate Survive Kate*, Kate's illness is ongoing and a clear ending may not have been in sight. However there is the sense that Fukui wanted to give Kate's story a sense of hope. The documentary ends on a positive note when Kate is released from hospital, but Fukui subtly includes her character's trepidation. There is an aspect of resolution, but a sense that Kate's journey is not over. This balance of optimism and uncertainty thus honours the real life experiences of Kate and her family.

**AUDIO CLIP:** *Will Kate Survive Kate* (4)

<https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/audio-clip-4-will-kate-survive-kate>

A year on, I was interested to hear how Kate feels about having an audio record of this difficult period of her life and whether she feels differently about her story since its first broadcast.

I guess because I still feel a lot how I felt in the documentary, I haven't had enough separation to listen back to it and think 'oh that was a hard time', because I still feel like that a lot of the time....I hope in 10 years, that I can listen to it and think 'oh god, I'm so glad I don't feel like that anymore.' ....Hopefully it'll just be confronting because that's how I *felt*, not how I feel [now].

('Kate' 2014)

While Kate's personal struggle may continue beyond the documentary, there is still the feeling that the project served its awareness purpose. When *Will Kate Survive Kate* was rebroadcast in October 2014 as part of the ABC's Mental Health Week initiative, it was announced that the hospital where Kate was treated is planning to open an additional two beds for eating disordered



patients. How much the documentary contributed to this progress is hard to ascertain, but looking back on the documentary experience itself Kate's mother reflected:

For what it was, it was a good documentary; I'm glad we did it. It achieved the purpose of what I wanted to do. [Kate] was able to reach people to try and get them to understand what it is like to be an anorexic and have that disorder; so ...[now] I can put that to bed and let that go, and say 'that's yours now Masako'. I'm more involved with what's happening now [and] it's a work in progress.

('Kate's mother' 2014)

This feeling that the story now belongs to the producer, Masako Fukui, is an insightful reminder that those who participate in the radio documentary process share only a sliver of their life's experience. The personal story that exists within the confines of the documentary will continue to live, breathe and develop further beyond its broadcast.

My conversations with Kate and her mother revealed some of the unique aspects of sharing personal narratives on the radio. The anonymity of radio provided Kate the opportunity to articulate her experience without the distraction of her visual representation. And the use of intimate audio diary recordings, and script from written diaries, allowed Kate a degree of co-authorship in the documentary. The depth and detail of the personal storytelling captured in *Will Kate Survive Kate* is a testament to the time Masako Fukui invested in the documenting process, and reflects the level of trust she had with her storytellers. *Will Kate Survive Kate* is an example of how well-guided audio storytelling can be a positive experience for its participants, and one only hopes that Kate reaches a point in the future where this difficult chapter of her journey is behind her. Further research with individuals who have shared their personal story on the radio may reveal a diverse range experiences and motivations, and generate a broader discussion around how radio producers might facilitate positive storytelling experiences in the future.

## **AUDIO LINK:**

PODCAST of Will Kate Survive Kate available [here](#) on ABC RN 360 Documentaries website

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