

SKYWRITING – MAKING RADIO WAVES

BY ROBYN RAVLICH

BRANDL AND SCHLESINGER, 259PP, \$34.95 RRP

REVIEW BY MIKE LADD

Robyn Ravlich's *Skywriting - making radio waves* is partly an extended dissertation on feature-making and radio art, and partly an autobiography. It's a very welcome addition to a literary field in which there are too few examples.

Before we begin, I should declare an interest. As a young producer I worked for *The Listening Room*, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)'s celebrated home of acoustic art and experimental radio, when Robyn Ravlich was Executive Producer of the program. I was in awe of her. She would back your ideas, fight for resources to realise them, and challenge you to be open to new forms. Later, when I was series producer for *Poetica* on ABC Radio National, Ravlich made ten stand-out features for the program.

Skywriting begins with a forthright preface that paints a gloomy but accurate picture of ABC radio today. One should always beware of nostalgia of course. Some things are better than they were in the '70s and '80s when ABC radio was dominated by middle-aged Anglo males. Now there are more younger voices, more women, more accents from non-English speaking backgrounds. Robyn Ravlich herself was part of the beginning of that cultural shift when she joined the organisation in 1975.

In other ways, the situation is demonstrably worse. Savage budget cuts from the conservative LNP government as well as a management culture that prioritises broad populism and talking-heads radio over more specialist and artistic forms have seen the complete destruction of the radio drama department and the radical downsizing of features. The plethora of "true-crime" and "lifestyle" podcasts and the occasional short audio fiction series do not make up for this loss. Despite more freelance producers contributing to the output, there is actually less risk-taking with form. The radio artists and eccentrics have been pushed out or

sidelined. I can almost picture the eye-rolling of upper management if someone were to pitch an idea like *The Listening Room* to them today.

Right from the outset of *Skywriting* we understand that Robyn Ravlich is a poet who appreciates the world of sound not just with her ears, but in her very soul. I was fascinated to read that one of her strongest memories of growing up in the outback town of Broken Hill was the sound of the change of shift whistle at the mine, that reverberated through the town. Sound as symbol, as a collective marker of time, had already entered her consciousness. In an early chapter she describes her approach to radio as “skywriting poetry... writing voices and sounds in the ether.” In common with Rudolph Arnheim, Ted Hughes, Colin Black and others, Ravlich is fascinated by the idea of “speech music”, radiophonic combinations of voices and sounds that communicate in a language that we feel first, then understand later in a deeper and more complicated way.

Beginning with her Croatian/Irish family heritage, *Skywriting* gives us insights into Ravlich’s youth in Broken Hill, university days in Sydney, the Balmain poetry scene, and her early years at the ABC, working on such programs as *Lateline*, *The Boyer Lectures*, *The Week in Film with John Hinde* and *Broadband*.

Later we hear about her productions for the *Radio National Arts Unit*, *Surface Tension*, *The Listening Room*, *Poetica* and *Into the Music*. She talks about the lives of some of the extraordinary people she has interviewed and reveals the background to their meetings: Bruce Chatwin, Ute Lemper, Xanana Gusmao, to name but a few. Ravlich also discusses the radio-makers who were early influences on her work including Peter Leonhard Braun, Kaye Mortley, and that most poetic of producers, Zvonimir Bajsic.

The mid-eighties was a time when ABC radio was throwing off some of its BBC modelling and embracing the continental European feature while trying to create a uniquely Australian sound, especially within the Radio Arts group under the leadership of Roz Cheney. Less expository than the BBC house style of the day, more interested in recording outside of the studio, and less driven by the ego-centric narration of the Americans, this Australian style was acoustically rich, I think partly because of Australia’s natural wealth in environmental sound. It can be clearly

heard in Ravlich's work from this period and in that of her colleague Jane Ulman. Lately I think we have shifted more towards the Americans, with many younger producers influenced by the sound of *This American Life*, *Radiolab*, or the *Serial* podcasts. I note the ABC did not even bother to enter a feature into this year's Prix Italia, signifying a further withdrawal from the European scene.

An aspect of *Skywriting* that will be of particular interest to feature makers is Ravlich's detailed descriptions of the genesis of several of her major productions. *Chatwinesque*, *Carnivale at the Club*, *The Eternity Enigma*, *The Raft of the Medusa*, *Vicki's Voice*, and *Afterimages – Carol Jerrems through a lens* are just some of them. Ravlich lets us into the process of their making, the often tangential gathering of material and accretion of ideas. Usefully, at the end of her chapters, she provides links to where the features may still be heard.

What strikes me is that these productions often take years. Recordings are collected, chance meetings occur, notes are jotted, ideas are formed, and then when the moment is right, it is all brought together in a shape that perhaps could not have been predicted at the start. Time is what defines feature-making. Not only because we are talking about a long-form listening experience where the way the material is brought to the listener's ears in time, the rhythm of the work, is crucial, but also the time spent in gathering and forming the material. But time is precisely what cash-strapped managers do not want to pay for, so the future of this kind of radio is precarious.

Skywriting is a wonderful insight into the life and mind of one of Australia's best radio feature makers and at the same time a valuable historical record of an often-neglected art.



MIKE LADD lives and writes in Adelaide. He ran *Poetica* on ABC Radio National for two decades and currently makes radio features for RN. He has published nine collections of poetry and prose and has experimented with poetry as video, in street installations, and in live performance with musicians. His most recent book is *Invisible Mending*, published by Wakefield Press in 2016.