[Snap Judgment theme]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Okay, you feel me, Snappers. With the podcast, you can press a button and there it is, a great story, cold and sound. And when the story hits, it's magic. But what if you could get a glimpse behind the scenes and see what it really takes to make magic happen? Rob Rosenthal can help. Rob has a show called Sound School Podcast. He's produced the show for PRX and *transom.org* for over a decade, hundreds of episodes. You may know it as *How Sound*. Yes, there has been a name change. And in every episode of the Sound School Podcast, Rob dives into the nitty-gritty. He interviews radio and podcast producers, and reporters about the craft of audio storytelling. People like Roman Mars from 99% Invisible, Alix Spiegel from Invisibilia, Al Letson from Reveal, and Ruby Schwartz from Snap Judgment.

On this week's Snap, The Wedding Guest, it's in your podcast feed right now, Ruby tells the story of Ayik, a child soldier in Sudan. Captured as a young boy, abused by paramilitary forces until he finally, at great peril, makes his escape. And years later as an adult, Ayik runs into the very same man who tortured him as a child, runs into him at a wedding. It's an amazing story. But for the Sound School Podcast, Rob interviewed Ruby about how she produced the story. And like I said, you're not going to believe what it took. Here's Rob.

**Rob:** Last year in the middle of the pandemic, Ruby Schwartz was anxious.

**Ruby:** I was just having a creative panic.

**Rob:** Australia was in lockdown and Ruby works on a daily news show there.

**Ruby:** All I'm reporting on is COVID and everything is-- I don't know, I was just sick of news, and I was feeling like I wasn't really using my creativity.

**Rob:** Ruby took to the internet hoping to find a story to produce. It could be anything really, just something to inspire her. One rabbit hole brought her to a book she ended up ordering, *The Lost Boy: Tales of a Child Soldier*. It's a memoir by Ayik Chut Deng. Reading it, Ruby thought, "Radio story."

What was it that was in that book that made you think, "Oh, I could turn some aspect of this into a radio story." And I ask you this, Ruby, because I read tons of books and I at the end go, "Oh, radio story."

**Ruby:** I agree with you that I read a lot and not a lot stands out to me as a radio story. But I think that his story was so full of surprise. Every few pages, I was shocked at all of the things and that creates a perfect radio story, which is like, "And then this happened, and then this happened. And then, oh, my God, that happened," which was continual throughout his story.

**Rob:** Ruby, who, by the way, is a former student of mine at the Transom Story Workshop. She says she pitched the story to Snap Judgment about Ayik's life. His life as a young soldier in Sudan, and how that horrendous experience affected him as an adult. She thought the story was a perfect fit for Snap Judgment. That's a radio show and podcast from PRX and it features stories that they describe as cinematic, dramatic, and kickass. [chuckles] Those are their words. Snap said yes to her pitch, but then, of course, Ruby had to produce the story. How? Ayik's memoir runs 320 pages. Snap Judgment is only an hour. So, how do you squeeze the lengthy memoir into something the size of a short radio documentary?

From PRX and Transom, this is How Sound, the backstory to great audio story telling. I'm Rob Rosenthal. I should let you know that in this episode of How Sound, there's frank discussion of torture. One issue Ruby wrestled with, the eternal question for storytellers, I think, "How do I start the story?" In this case, she already had a roadmap, Ayik's book. She could just do what Ayik did. Start at the very beginning of his life. But that didn't really feel like it would hook listeners. So, then Ruby thought, "Well, maybe I can kick off the piece when war breaks out in Sudan and Ayik joins the children's army." That didn't seem to work either. "Still not grabby enough," she thought. So, instead, she launched the story this way.

**Ruby:** In late 2004, Ayik Chut Deng was on the road. He was driving to a church in Brisbane, a city on Australia's East Coast. He'd been invited by a friend to the wedding of a South Sudanese couple. He didn't know them all that well, but he still had that giddy, excited feeling you get before a wedding, which drove him to formalities he might not otherwise subscribe to.

**Ayik:** I'm not a suit person. I like to wear a Polo shirt. But I think I was wearing a nice button up shirt, just for respect of the wedding.

**Ruby:** In the church, the 70 or so guests milled about making small talk before taking their seat on one of the wooden pews.

**Ayik:** And then, the bride and the groom got married. Everything went all right. People ate food and all that. So, it's all the Sudanese food. Lamb stew, fish stew. Because we are Dinka, it's all stew. And then at the end of the service, I was sitting to the left side of the building of the church. I was just looking around.

[suspenseful music]

**Ruby:** And Ayik recognizes this guy off to the side on his right.

**Ayik:** He was just a few seats in front of me. He was talking to someone. I said, "This guy can't be here. Nah, no way. That’s not him." I look again, I just say, "No, it can't be right." I've thought maybe something's wrong with me in church. I just couldn't believe that. This guy's gone years ago. "That can't be him. He's not here. He's in Africa, he's dead." And I look again just to double check, to make sure that it's him and it was him. Honestly, just the eye, it was the thing I'll never forget, the look. His face never changed. After I realized it was him, my brain was about-- It's just like a bomb just about to explode. I felt so angry.

**Ruby:** Ayik had always thought that if he ever came face to face with this man again, he'd kill him. But at this point, many years had passed, and he was a different person now.

**Ayik:** I said, "This time, I can do anything to him, and he can't do anything to me because I'm not a kid anymore. I'm not that skinny child anymore." So, what I did, I walked straight back to my car, jumped in the car, went home. While I was at home, everything started pouring back in my head. I went back to when I was a child again, when I was a child under his power. I never went through so much pain in my life until I met Anyang.

**Rob:** That's how Ruby opened her story, which is called The Wedding Guest. Now, why is that a better lead than starting with Ayik's early life or joining the children's army?

**Ruby:** One of the things that I was thinking is, you want a question that's driving something all the time. And so, I think that by starting it instead with this slightly more mysterious piece of action, where it's someone sees someone from their past and they're like, "Holy crap, how is that person here?", the question that listeners are left asking themselves is, "Well, who the hell is this person? I want to know more." And I feel that was also a big part of how I structured it. It was like, "How can I make sure that listeners are asking--" They have a question in mind through the course of listening to it.

**Rob:** I talked to Nate DiMeo of The Memory Palace Podcast once. And he said a story is a series of raised questions.

**Ruby:** Hmm.

**Rob:** I feel that's what you're describing.

**Ruby:** Yeah, I think so. I think so, because I feel for me, when I listen to things and then I dissect what's kept me listening. And it's always the fact that there's some question in the back of my mind that I'm trying to answer and I'm hoping to find out through keeping on listening.

**Rob:** Okay. So, out of all the possible places to start this story, Ruby narrowed it down to the church scene. But what about the other 300 and some odd pages that laid out all the details of Ayik's life? How he joined the army, how he escaped only to be captured and tortured. How he escaped again and again only to be tortured again and again by the man he eventually saw in the church. Yes, sorry, had to give that point away. Anyway, there's also Ayik's immigration to Australia, the PTSD he suffered, his drug use in prison. And of course, what he did after he saw the man in the church. How do you pick and choose what to include in a story this complex and whittle it down to a manageable narrative for an hour-long show? You need more than a carving knife. You need a chainsaw to get it under control, which proved to be a challenge. And the challenge may have started with her first interview with Ayik. Ruby says it ran about two and a half hours.

**Ruby:** People are often bad at identifying for themselves what the most interesting parts of their life or story is. And so, when they're telling you the story, they'll go on all these tangents and they really expand on certain things that you're like, "Oh, what? I wasn't expecting to include this. But maybe because they're talking about it so much, this is important and I definitely have to include it." I think it's basically, yeah, losing yourself in the person's story and also kind of beginning to question your own choices about what you've decided to include and not include.

**Rob:** After that first interview, Ruby took a stab at writing a rough draft of the story.

**Ruby:** Which was extraordinarily long. It was much too long.

**Rob:** But she sent it to her editor anyway.

**Ruby:** And they were like, "You're going into plot march territory.

**Rob:** Plot march territory. I had not heard that phrase before. Neither at Ruby. Plot march.

**Ruby:** I think they also refer to it as a life story kind of story. You're just plotting out this person's entire life story right now and you've forgotten that there's a reason that you're telling the story and I think you need to remember what that reason is. I think it was actually at that point that I took something that I had learned with you at Transom, which was focus sentence.

**Rob:** It makes my radio heart go pitter patter that you wrote a focus sentence.

**Ruby:** [laughs] It's such a useful thing to do. I don't know how everyone doesn't do it.

**Rob:** Longtime listeners of How Sound know I have a thing for focus sentences. It's a great tool for wrangling a story. This is a focus sentence. "Someone does something, because but." A focus sentence can help determine the central character, the central action, and motivation. It can also help shine a light on the conflict in the story. Someone does something, because but.

**Ruby:** Yeah. I wrote, "Ayik moved to Australia from Sudan because he was a child soldier there, and he wanted to escape the war and in particular, the man who tortured him at the children's army camp. But when he finally arrived in Australia, it turned out that his torturer had moved there too to the same state, same town." And then, I wrote as well that there was this additional layer to that, which was, "But then he finds that his childhood tormentor is actually the only person who really understands him."

**Rob:** With that focus sentence, Ruby had her chainsaw. She cut away at the memoir and kept only the parts of the story that supported the focus sentence.

**Ruby:** Outside of that, I was just dismissing tens of pages at a time just being like, "No, no, no."

**Rob:** In essence, Ruby ended up cutting Ayik's story down to a three-act play. Not exactly, but close. And I should say this is my observation, not hers. After the prologue, if you want to call it that, where Ayik sees the man in church, Act 1 focuses on Ayik joining the army.

**Ruby:** That first day, when he arrived at the base, this sprawling encampment with tents started all over the red dusty earth.

**Ayik:** I look around, children everywhere. There were hundreds of them, I felt like, "This is good. Now, I'm going to get trained. I'll get my uniform, I'll get my boots, I'll get my gun." I wasn't really scared. I was excited.

**Rob:** The training was brutal, very physical with no respite from the heat. And if you made a mistake, you're whipped. Ayik wanted out. So, he escaped and found help at a refugee camp.

**Ayik:** And then a few weeks later at the refugee camp, the army come at nighttime. They get a bunch of grass, light it up, they walk into this little hut, light it, looking for boys.

**Ruby:** Every few days, the bosses from the children's army camp would do a sweep through the refugee camp looking for children that might have escaped. During one of those sweeps, they found Ayik. They pulled him out of the hot he was sleeping in.

**Ayik:** And they caught me and took me back to the camp, to the Red Army camp. We got thrown into this-- it was a makeshift little prison made out of branches of tree. During the day around 12 o'clock, they bring you out.

**Ruby:** That's when Ayik met the army's prison guard for the very first time. The guy responsible for punishing those who tried to escape.

**Ayik:** And his name was Anyang.

**Ruby:** Anyang was 16 years old. He was solid and he towered over Ayik.

**Ayik:** But I didn't take him as just this is going to be a bad person. I thought he was doing his job, and he's probably going to punish us today, and that’s it.

**Ruby:** First, Anyang put him in a hogtie.

**Ayik:** Your elbows are tied to your ankles, and you are just on your chest. And you're in the sun, lying in the sun.

**Ruby:** After a day of almost nonstop beatings, Anyang threw Ayik back in the prison. Ayik begged him for water. By the end of the day, Ayik was so thirsty that he had no choice but to drink his own urine.

**Ayik:** So, what happened was I escaped. I escaped.

**Rob:** Ayik escaped again only to be captured and tortured. A cycle that repeated itself again and again. Escape, capture, torture. I feel like Act 1 of the story ends where Ayik, with the help of his sister, manages to get out of Sudan and was granted permission to resettle in Australia. Act 2 lays out Ayik's life in Australia. There's the impact of seeing Anyang, the man in the church, his torturer. There's also Ayik's PTSD and drug use time in prison, and his decision to confront Anyang on National TV. I'm going to leave out some of the details, but they both ended up on a television show called *Look Me in the Eye*. The conceit of the show is this. Two estranged people sit across from each other for five minutes and don't say a word. They just sit. At the end of the five minutes, they decide whether they want to have a conversation.

**Ayik:** And then, I look up and there he was, Anyang, sitting right in front of me looking to me, looking at me. The first moment when I was looking at him, what I saw was the Anyang in the rebel. The Anyang, the prison guard, the boss. What came back to my mind was just what I saw when I was in Ethiopia, in the training camp. It’s just a blank face just looking at me just about to deliver his orders. He still looked the same as when I was in that dust on the ground looking up at him. That's all I saw in his eyes. I didn't see any sympathy. His eye was just so blank and just staring at me.

**Ruby:** Ayik looks away, but Anyang keeps a steady gaze on him.

**Ayik:** I was hoping to see some changes in his face, but I didn't say it. I was just thinking, "This the same guy. He's the same person." People learn, grow, and change but I haven't seen any change.

**Rob:** So, these two acts are basically what Ruby wrote in the first part of her focus sentence. Here it is, again.

**Ruby:** Ayik moved to Australia from Sudan, because he was a child soldier there and he wanted to escape the war, and in particular, the man who tortured him at the children's army camp. But when he finally arrived in Australia, it turned out that his torturer had moved there too to the same state, same town.

**Rob:** Now keep in mind, as she's building these first two acts of the story, she's chopping out a lot in an effort to make it less plot march-y.

**Ruby:** I was being like, "Nah, nah, nah."

**Rob:** And much of what she cut were the plot march-y, unsurprising details about his PTSD and his drug use and time in prison. But at one point, she felt making these cuts because these struggles weren't surprising just felt wrong.

**Ruby:** Yeah, I don't want to be like, "Oh, well, it's unsurprising that someone who's been a child soldier in Sudan and gets out and has PTSD potentially starts using drugs," stuff like that. It feels gross to be like, "That's not surprising." But it's not surprising.

**Rob:** And if she was to cut out all of this part of his life, it would just oversimplify things.

**Ruby:** It's a huge part of his memoir. I don't know, it's probably 60% or 70% of his memoir, is that particular story of his struggles in Australia.

**Rob:** So, in the end, she and her editors agreed to include some of those details briefly. The section ended up running about two minutes long rather than five or six.

**Ruby:** It actually also allowed me to use a piece of tape from Ayik where it's really one of the only times in the interview that he got quite emotional.

Even though Ayik was living this new life in a new country at peace, these thoughts about Anyang and all the pain he inflicted on him, they kept coming up in flashbacks. It was like this movie rolling in front of his eyes that he just couldn't press pause on.

**Ayik:** Sometime, when I was in the kitchen, because there were three of us in my family that I used to cook for everyone, me and my sister and my cousin. Sometime, when I was in the kitchen, I'll have a look at these trays sitting in front of meat, my mind will start thinking, "Oh, okay, if you cut into the meat, it'll be like you're cutting into your nephew and nieces." All these things, crazy thoughts come into my mind. Sometimes, I'll just stick the knife in this steak and go to the park and then come back. And my sister will say, "How come you didn't do that?" I said, "Because I don't want to." I didn't want to tell her what I was going through. I didn't want to tell her that thing reminded me of the war when I was a soldier.

**Ruby:** Ayik's live in Australia had not gone how he'd planned. He couldn't hold down jobs, he got a taste for drugs and booze, and eventually, became a low-level drug dealer.

**Ayik:** I went through in Australia going to prison, having a fight with a girlfriend, having fight with the police, having fight with people in the pub. I was diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. Sorry, Ruby. [gasps]

**Rob:** So, then there's act three. That act reveals what happens after Ayik and Anyang meet in a TV studio. Camera rolling. That's the little addendum Ruby added to her focus sentence.

**Ruby:** But then, he finds that his childhood tormentor is actually the only person who really understands him.

**Rob:** Now, I'm not going to play any clips from Act 3. You'll have to listen to find out what happened with the two of them on the television show and afterwards. But I found myself saying, "Wait, they did what?" I really think you'd be doing yourself a favor if you went and listen to the whole piece on Snap Judgment.

However, before I wrap things up with Ruby and send you on your way to listen to that piece, there is one more point to make about synthesizing a memoir, or any story really.

You have a lot of power. Here you are. You're taking this man's life story and you're sculpting it to suit your needs for a radio story. And so, I'm wondering how do you feel about that power and how do you not use it for evil?

**Ruby:** Yeah, I really asked myself that a lot through the course of putting this story together. It feels like a power that you can feel very uncomfortable having. And I said this at the beginning where I was like, people often don't know the most interesting parts of their life. But it's like who am I to decide what the most interesting parts of a person's life are. But I guess that's what we do as storytellers. So, yeah, I felt uncomfortable about it the whole way through, and I grappled with a lot. And I think that there were drafts where I was getting notes from editors at times that I didn't totally follow through with, because I was just like, "I'm going to include that, because--" I don't know. I just like-- yeah. There were times where I was just extremely uncomfortable.

**Rob:** I can hear you wrestling with it now.

**Ruby:** Yeah, I have. [laughs] But one of the things though that I tell myself, which I think makes me feel better, a person also has agency. They can choose to tell you their story, and Ayik he is choosing to tell me his story. I think there's also potential paternalism in being like, "Oh, well, do they really know what they're getting into in this?" It's like I should assume as well that the people that I'm talking to understand and that they can make their own choices. So, that's definitely one part of it that allows me to feel more comfortable with it.

But in this case, I was extremely nervous when the story came out, because I felt that I'd spoken to him for so long, taken so much of his time and then cherrypicked the parts of the story. After having seven hours of tape with a person and putting out a 35-minute episode, inevitably, you've cut so much. And yeah, the morning that the story went out, I got a text from him. It just said, "Call me." which is the most terrifying message to get from anyone, let alone the person who you just featured in your story. I was extremely nervous that he was going to say, "You've excluded all the important parts of my story," or, "You've misrepresented me," or whatever. I called him right away and he was like, "I absolutely loved the story. You did such a good job. I'm so excited to send it to all my friends and family. Thank you so much. It means a lot." Yeah, so, that was just the biggest relief. It made me trust myself more.

**Rob:** Ruby Schwartz is a producer for 7am, a daily news podcast in Australia.

[distorted sounds]

**Glynn:** Thank you, Rob. Thank you, Ruby. Thank you both so much for pulling back the curtain. If you want to subscribe to The Sound School Podcast, this is a brand-new name, was once How Sound is now Sound School Podcast. Still from PRX, still from Transom, still Rob at the helm. Just a new name, Sound School Podcast. Speaking of Transom, if you yourself, if you want to do this podcast thing, Transom is the online source for inspiration and tools for audio storytellers. If you want to know what gear to buy, Transom. Want to know how to write for the ear, Transom. Want to know how to use music in a story, *transom.org*.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Now, this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you could pull back the curtain on *The Wizard of Oz* only to discover that he and the good witch are quite a bit closer than you thought. And you would still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*