



Talk Radio

Ham Martin

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A heartwarming novel about the residents of a quaint Maine fishing village, Talk Radio celebrates the joys of human connection.

In Ham Martin's lighthearted novel *Talk Radio*, beauty is found in the ordinary, daily lives of a radio station's devoted listeners.

Organized into on-air and off-air sections, the novel is part narration, part transcripts from the broadcasts of WNWT radio station in Frost Pound, Maine. After one of its stars, Fred, has a stroke, Vivien accepts his now open role. But Fred is not keen to give up his position, despite no longer being fit to host the show. He often calls in and claims that his job was stolen.

Meanwhile, Vivien transforms the caller-focused radio station's working rubric, focusing on the emotional and social news of daily life, rather than on current events and politics. This transition to vulnerable, empathetic coverage comes as a shock to the radio station's devoted fans, but Vivien navigates the uproar with ease, learning about the concerns and stories of her callers—some of whom call in to share their regional poetry and short stories. A feeling of camaraderie and community is fast established.

Vivien's vibrant, nuanced approach invites conversations about morality, too. When she's faced with conservative views, like those of a woman who expresses outdated sentiments about formerly incarcerated people, the role of God in everyday life, and how women should dress and act, Vivien acknowledges how her callers feel while also empowering them to question where their views come from, or if they can be reworked. Even the most banal local stories become engaging through Vivien, whose questions and insights make lobster farming and gardening seem compelling. For example, after two callers share stories of ice fishing, Vivien questions the emotional center of "the silence principle"—where "the frozen lake is not a place for a lot of talk." This challenges one caller to dig deeper, suggesting a spiritual connection between humans and nature.

Embodying a progressive worldview, Vivien's story is one of light humor and compassion. Her excitement for learning about the people around her propels the narrative, rather than the two conflicts that appear in the book's last quarter. The text's asymmetrical format works, though, because it gives each person the right amount of time to cultivate their relationship to Vivien, resulting in a final, emotional payoff.

A heartwarming novel about the residents of a quaint Maine fishing village, *Talk Radio* celebrates the joys of human connection through the people met in the course of a call-in show.

GEORGE HAJJAR (December 1, 2021)

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