

Bragg, Melvyn, host; Simon Tillotson, producer.

In Our Time.

London: BBC Radio 4, (1998) 2004–. Accessed 10 April 2023.

bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qykl.

The trouble with reviewing a podcast like *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4's discussion panel, is its scope. Its 1,002 episodes (as of this writing) airing weekly over 25 seasons address a vast range of subjects in intellectual, scientific, and cultural history. Since 1998, its format has held steady. The host, Melvyn Bragg, plunges straight into a brief synopsis of the subject before he introduces his three guests, typically "only scholars who [are] also teaching academics [...] asked to pour the accumulation of decades of scholarship into a half pint, at most a pint glass."¹ Bragg directs his guests through a brisk 45-minute conversation—posing questions, commending their masterful summaries, and interrupting them when they veer off course, as academics are wont to do. The novelist Will Self compares Bragg's method to "that of a man throwing a stick for a dog: he chucks his questions ahead, and if the chosen academic fails to bring it right back, he chides them."² By the close of each episode, you feel mentally exercised yourself: well informed about subjects outside your area and reacquainted with those you thought you knew.

I have been listening to the *In Our Time* podcast for more than 15 years, paying special attention to early modern topics but also indulging a magpie-like wish to mitigate my utter ignorance of subjects from antimatter to the invention of zero. (Some of my favourite episodes are on geological time: "Ageing the Earth" and "The KT Boundary.") This is the problem with curiosity: the program "flatters its listeners with the implicit message that it is better to be very broadly shallow than deeply bored into any given specialism."³ I cannot resist the temptation to hear intelligent people clarify interesting subjects. And *In Our Time* convenes some of Britain's best minds: novelists A. S. Byatt and Ian McEwan; philosophers A. C. Grayling and Susan Greenfield; cosmologists Carolin Crawford and Martin Rees; and critics Christopher Hitchens and Susan Sontag (two rare American guests). I pay closer attention to episodes

1. Bragg, *Companion*, ix–x.

2. Self, "On the Common."

3. Self, "On the Common."