

Why S-Town invites empathy not voyeurism

Written by Siobhan McHugh, Senior Lecturer, Journalism, University of Wollongong



Brian Reed, host of S-Town, somewhere in the woods of Bibb County, Alabama. Andrea Morales

Warning: this article contains spoilers.

With [In Cold Blood](#), Truman Capote invented the non-fiction novel and turbocharged the genre of literary journalism. [S-Town](#), a podcast by the team at Serial and This American Life that appeared on March 28th as seven bingeable “chapters”, has unleashed aural literary journalism that is as masterly in its evocation of place and character as exemplars by Didion, Wolfe and Capote.

S-Town had 10 million downloads in the first four days, far surpassing even Serial. It has been rapturously reviewed by [The Atlantic](#), [The New York Times](#) and respected podcasting critic Nicholas Quah in [Vulture](#). It has also been described as “[morally indefensible](#)” by The Guardian for its intrusion into the life of a mentally ill man and panned by other critics for [breaching privacy](#), glossing over [racism](#) and [misrepresenting](#) aspects of gay sexuality.

In order to assess all this, it is vital to consider not just the “what” of S-Town, i.e. the journalistic content, but also the “how”: the art form of choreographed audio storytelling, which S-Town exemplifies.

At the centre of the podcast is the mordant, self-destructive genius John B. McLemore, a forty-something fixer of antiquarian clocks who is both shaped and shackled by his small Shit Town (S-Town), actually Woodstock, Alabama. Literary journalists can only write about

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delicious details they unearth but S-Town gives us the real deal: we *hear* first-hand the magnificent rants about climate change, chicanery and ignorance that McLemore delivers with rococo Southern musicality and a stand-up's timing.

[Listen here](#) to how producers Brian Reed and Julie Snyder craft one rant around an operatic aria, delivering a kind of acoustic alchemy that both counterpoints and elevates John B's vitriol.

We ain't nothin' but a nation of goddamn, chicken-shit, horse-shit, tattle-tale, pissy-assed, whiney, fat, flabby, out-of-shape, Facebook-lookin', damn twerk-fest, peekin' out the windows and snoopin' around, listenin' on the cellphones and spyin' in the peephole and peepin' in the crack of the goddamn door, listenin' in the fuckin' Sheetrock: Mr Putin puh-lease, show some fuckin' mercy, I mean drop the fuckin' bomb, won't you?"

Opera swells in the background to climactic end, then he emits a heavy sigh.

I gotta have me some tea.

To add opera to a landscape of trailer trash, tattoos and "titty-rings" might seem incongruous, but then as Miss Irene Hicks tells Reed in a Blanche DuBois voice when he inquires after her grandson, Tyler, John B.'s hired hand:

I have my medicine and I have my [Andrea] Bocelli.

In S-Town, journalism meets art. The episodes unfold via evocative scenes, intensive interviewing (perhaps a [hundred hours](#), Reed thinks) carefully placed encounters, and Reed's metaphorical musings, but all is driven by sound, voice and the unalloyed intimacy of listening, in real time.

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We meet Tyler via the “click, click, click” of a chainsaw he’s sharpening, tooth by tooth. Tyler doubles as a tattoo artist whose pop up parlour has a secret Whites Only bar out back. Reed records its misfit denizens’ casual racism and bravado. “Tell ‘em,” one implores.

I’m so fuckin’ fat I don’t care no more. I’m a six-foot, 350 lbs bearded man in a John Deere hat with FEED ME on my belly.

Bypassing our bigotry

We listen in appalled fascination; audio can bypass our bigotry and suck us in to places where we normally wouldn’t go. As S-Town producer, Julie Snyder, recently [told](#) me:

In audio, it’s much easier to connect with the people in the story. You’re hearing their natural way of talking. You hear emotion, it’s not a polished thing. In film... you judge, the way they look, the way they’re dressed, the setting they’re in.



Julie Snyder and Brian Reed of Serial productions’ S-Town. Elise Bergerson

In this medium, language achieves added force, the poetry of the South laced with the [affective power](#)

of sound. Tyler’s Uncle Jimmy, speech-damaged after a bullet lodged in his brain, echoes his nephew with strangely beautiful ejaculations reminiscent of Gospel affirmations.

“Beacoups and beacoups of stuff,” he sings out, after the murder Reed is investigating at John B’s request gives way to another, more tragic, death - that of John B. himself.

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In the mother of all jaw-droppers, we learn that John B. has killed himself by drinking potassium cyanide. Reed's shock and grief at this news are real. [Like many literary journalists](#), he has become part of the story. He knows John B. is his subject, not his friend, but says he cared about him. Reed's immersion grows after John B.'s suicide, taking him to S-Town "nine or ten" times more.

Critics of S-Town point out that John B. had initially approached Reed asking him to cover the story of a murder there – not to have his own suicide and life become the focus of it. As Gay Alcorn [wrote this week](#) in The Guardian, the story became, "McLemore's own painful journey, even though the eccentric clock restorer had never consented for his life to be investigated in this way".

But it's clear even before Reed meets John B. that the "murder" is less important to him than having the ear of a national radio reporter. "We'd end up on the phone for hours," Reed says, "with him going on and on, not just about the murder, but about his life, and his town."

Socially, intellectually and sexually isolated, John B. yearns for meaningful, non-judgemental contact. He is candid about his depression: he keeps a suicide note on his computer and has emailed the town clerk a list of people to be contacted in the event of his death. His mental illness, it will be suggested by Reed, probably derives from mercury poisoning; he has been ingesting mercury vapour for decades due to alchemical operations he practises when mending clocks.

The value of being listened to

In my experience as an oral historian, people greatly value being attentively listened to. When mortality looms, the impulse to place something on the record for posterity, to avoid being erased, can deepen. John B. talked openly about his suicide ideation and probably knew he did not have long to live.

I believe he reeled Reed into his life because Reed was the ideal person to bear witness: intelligent enough to engage with a swirling canvas, undeterred by John B.'s "virtuosic negativity", an outsider with no prior relationship with S-Town. As Reed says:

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It felt as if by sheer force of will, John was opening this portal between us.

Once he stepped through that portal, Reed felt compelled to carry on: not to needlessly invade a life, but to honour the splendid, scabrous, sprawling complexity of the man who chose him as his chronicler. In so doing, he [validates, rather than violates](#), the fierce, flawed life of John B. McLemore.

Still, in its treatment of John B's sexuality, S-Town does tread on dangerous ground. John B. described himself as a "semi-homosexual"; he has had few and mostly unfulfilling relationships. And the listener wonders is Tyler (who at 25 has four kids by four women) John B.'s surrogate son or the object of thwarted desire?

Off the record, John B. tells Reed about a relationship he has had with a married man. Reed later interviews the man, though he does not play the tape. Still, he justifies including these and other details in the podcast because two others had confirmed them on the record and because John B. is by now "wormdirt".

But by mentioning that the man once worked for John B., Reed does risk making listeners participate "in the unwitting outing of one queer man over the dead body of another", as an insightful [Vox](#) article has suggested.

The final chapter of S-Town provides disturbing detail on what John B. called his "church" ritual with Tyler. According to John B. it involves getting "drunk as hell in the back room" and talking about everything from life and death to black holes and quarks. Tyler reveals, somewhat uncomfortably, that "church" also involved increasingly [painful tattooing](#) that gave John B. "an endorphin high". Some [critics](#) argue that including this element crosses an ethical line.

It is shocking, certainly. But the way it unfolds, the listener can only empathise with John B. and appreciate how anguished he must have been to crave this momentary expunging of mental pain. It is a vital part of seeking to understand the man. And that was Reed's simple, profound purpose.

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The ability to [evoke empathy](#) is a cornerstone of audio and its deployment in S-Town is both timely and provocative. As Snyder [told](#) a Sydney audience last year:

Things that make them [people] human, you relate to that ... There is nuance, there isn't a monolithic way that certain people think, the Republicans think this way and Democrats think that way.

As Uncle Jimmy would say, Amen to that.

Anyone seeking support and information about suicide can contact Lifeline on 131 114 or beyondblue 1300 22 46 36.

Siobhan McHugh receives funding from the Australian Research Council for a project that involves converting oral histories into crafted audio storytelling. She is Founding Editor of RadioDoc Review, a journal that critiques podcasts, radio documentaries and audio features.

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