



Brian Reed and Julie Snyder interviewed for the Revisiting *S-Town* Session at Vulture Festival, New York City, May 20, 2018. Image by Rhododendrites, Wikimedia Commons.

The Narrative Podcast as Digital Literary Journalism: Conceptualizing *S-Town*

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Abstract: Surveying the purposeful integration of multimedia technologies into longform online journalism, Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche in 2016 described a new wave of digital literary journalism, marked by flagship works such as the *New York Times*'s 2012 "Snow Fall." Less attention has been paid to the implications for digital literary journalism of longform audio storytelling, which proliferated following the extraordinary success of the narrative podcast, *Serial*, in 2014. This study analyzes how key characteristics of literary journalism can be mapped to the Peabody Award-winning 2017 narrative podcast, *S-Town*, produced by the same organization that created *Serial*. *S-Town* examines the life and death of an eccentric genius, John B. McLemore, and the small Alabama community he has come to loathe. This analysis argues that host and author Brian Reed, in his revelatory seven-hour exploration of McLemore's complex psyche and insular environment, uses literary journalism techniques as identified by Norman Sims, Mark Kramer, and Robert S. Boynton, and conforms to a matrix Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche adapted for their 2016 study of longform digital journalism. *S-Town* was downloaded forty million times within a month of publication, eclipsing by tenfold the response to "Snow Fall" and breaking records for podcast engagement. The narrative podcast form offers a new aural model of digital literary journalism, one that opens innovative possibilities to extend the genre's reach and impact.

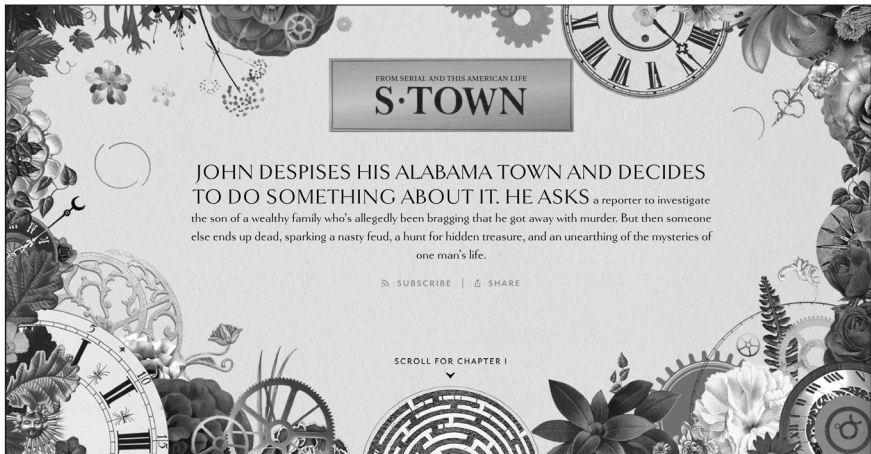
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Since the 1990s, the digital era has heralded new transmedia iterations of literary journalism, a form that has also been described as “longform journalism,” “creative nonfiction,” “narrative journalism,” “narrative nonfiction,” and “literary nonfiction.” Twenty-six years ago, writer and academic Mark Kramer defended the term literary journalism:

As a practitioner, I find the “literary” part self-congratulating and the “journalism” part masking the form’s inventiveness. But “literary journalism” is roughly accurate. The paired words cancel each other’s vices and describe the sort of nonfiction in which arts of style and narrative construction long associated with fiction help pierce to the quick of what’s happening—the essence of journalism.¹

The year Kramer wrote those words, coincidentally, U.S. radio broadcaster Ira Glass quit his job at National Public Radio to launch his own show, *This American Life* (*TAL*), an hour-long format that eschewed radio staples such as authoritative news reportage, entertainment-focused talk, and music. Instead, each episode delivered a true story themed around three acts, with a deceptively casual introduction by Glass. His script was written to sound spontaneous and conversational—“So here’s the thing . . .”—without compromising substance, which at the time was a novel combination. On its website, *TAL* is described this way: “Mostly we do journalism, but an entertaining kind of journalism that’s built around plot. In other words, stories! Our favorite sorts of stories have compelling people at the center of them, funny moments, big feelings, surprising plot twists, and interesting ideas. Like little movies for radio.”²

The *TAL* formula has been a success. The show reaches 2 million listeners each week via 500-plus U.S. public radio stations. The podcast version is downloaded 2.8 million times per episode.³ *TAL*, and the record-breaking narrative podcasts it has spawned, *Serial*, in 2014 and *S-Town*, in 2017,⁴ grew out of Glass’s resistance to what he saw as the straitjacket of news journalism and its inviolable tenets of objectivity and the inverted pyramid.⁵ An earlier, 2013 iteration of the *TAL* website blurb, “the journalism we do tends to use a lot of the techniques of fiction: scenes and characters and narrative threads,”⁶ made explicit Glass’s interest in employing the literary journalistic approach. Though he rejected the term “literary nonfiction” (“It’s pretentious, for one thing, and it’s a bore”),⁷ Glass loved the kind of writing it espoused—so much so that in 2007 he published an anthology, *The New Kings of Nonfiction*, in which he brought together iconic literary journalism figures, such as David Foster Wallace, Malcolm Gladwell, Michael Lewis, and Susan Orlean, alongside emerging writers in the genre. In his introduction, Glass explained what drew him to their work: “They try to get inside their protagonists’ heads

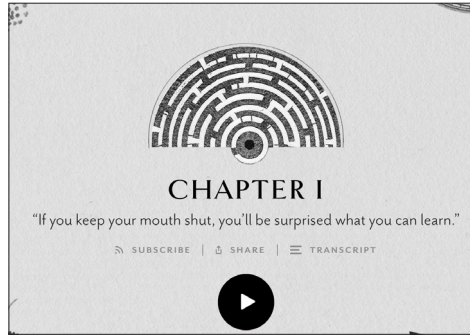


with a degree of empathy that's unusual. Theirs is a ministry of love, in a way we don't usually discuss reporters' feelings toward their subjects. Or at least, they're willing to see what is lovable in the people they're interviewing."⁸ Such empathy is evident in *TAL*'s two spin-off narrative podcasts, as *Serial* host Sarah Koenig demonstrates ambiguous feelings about her main character, convicted murderer Adnan Syed, and host Brian Reed openly shares with the listener his fascination with *S-Town* protagonist John B. McLemore.⁹

Glass further recognized that, for all their diversity, his nonfiction "kings" were using two basic building blocks: the plot and the ideas lurking behind it. "Usually the plot is the easy part," he wrote in his introduction. "You do whatever research you can, you talk to lots of people, and you figure out what happened. It's the ideas that kill you. What's the story mean? What bigger truth about all of us does it point to?"¹⁰ In *TAL*, Glass articulates these subliminal, lurking ideas as connecting themes for his three-act episodes.

A decade before Glass's book was published, other longform storytellers started to marshal new forms to get across their own "bigger truths." Scholars mark the launch of Mark Bowden's story, "Black Hawk Down," as a milestone in multimedia storytelling.¹¹ Published in 1997 on the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* website, in serial form over twenty-eight days, with photos, animated maps, audio and video clips, and graphic drawings threaded throughout, it was an extended narrative account of a battle between U.S. Rangers and armed civilians in Mogadishu, Somalia. Described at the time as "what appears to be the largest newspaper story project ever published on the Internet," it was a "visually lush multimedia format" that broke new ground by providing "an enveloping sensual experience, as well as a fast-paced read."¹²

Innovative collaborations in online narrative journalism reached new heights in 2012 with “Snow Fall,” a *New York Times* production that created a riveting multimedia account of an avalanche, complete with “animation of snow drifting across a mountain and computerized flyovers of the story’s setting.”¹³



The story attracted 3.2 million visitors, won a Pulitzer Prize, and literally entered the lexicon: journalists began to ask, “Can we ‘snowfall’ this?” This question, posed inside newsrooms, signaled an intention to find captivating multimedia treatments for stories.¹⁴ The following year, writer Jon Henley’s “Firestorm,” published in the *Guardian*, combined video, audio, photography, and emergency rescue operations recordings, anchored by a written narrative spine, to tell the extraordinary story of how an Australian family escaped a terrible brushfire.¹⁵ As Fiona Giles and Georgia Hitch have noted, this work integrated multimedia features in the service of a literary journalism approach, deepening its impact.¹⁶ Other notable works followed. In 2014, Ta-Nahesi Coates’s “The Case for Reparations,” a masterful 16,000-word essay published in the *Atlantic*, interweaved archival photographs and video, contemporary audio and video, and interactive infographics as Coates set out his argument for why African-Americans deserve to be compensated for the discriminatory outcomes of slavery.¹⁷ In 2018, the *Oregonian* published Noelle Crombie’s “Ghosts of Highway 20,” a compelling interactive online feature. Its combination of video, photography, maps, and a text that included dialogue and reconstructed scenes told the story of a serial killer and the one woman who survived his predations.¹⁸

These critically acclaimed digital narrative works synergistically harnessed distinct strengths of several media forms. But in 2014, *Serial* demonstrated that technological wizardry was not a necessary part of successful digital longform journalism—its linear audio story alone managed to attract a huge audience. *Serial* was an episodic, twelve-part work of investigative journalism that examined the 1999 Baltimore murder of a schoolgirl named Hae Min Lee, delivered as a narrative podcast. Glass commissioned the story as a way of experimenting with podcast-first content that could sit independently of the *TAL* broadcast slot, which was constrained by limits on duration and explicit content.¹⁹ *Serial* attracted five million downloads in its first month alone and became the world’s most downloaded episodic storytelling podcast.

By 2018 it achieved 420 million downloads over three seasons.²⁰ This massive audience response spurred the *TAL* stable to experiment with another narrative podcast, *S-Town*, which launched in 2017.

This analysis situates *S-Town* within the ecology of narrative podcasts and demonstrates how it meets the criteria for digital literary journalism. “Narrative podcast” here will be understood to mean an episodic, nonfiction, audio storytelling format that interweaves voice, music, and ambient sound recordings to create a layered audio experience with a narrative arc. Textual analysis of the seven-hour, 66,000-word podcast will be used, as will a contextualizing literature review of the origins of narrative podcasts and a discussion of literary journalism characteristics that, in 2016, Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche adapted from Tom Wolfe’s 1973 analysis that leads his and E. W. Johnson’s anthology in *The New Journalism*. The analysis provides additional scaffolding from the work of Norman Sims, Mark Kramer, and Robert S. Boynton to identify how the *S-Town* podcast should be classified as a work of digital literary journalism.²¹ This study draws conceptually from three areas—radio production studies, literary journalism studies, and the emerging field of podcasting studies.

From Radio Documentaries to Narrative Podcasts

In 1933, the Scottish film documentary maker John Grierson famously defined a documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality.”²² It is a definition that maps well to the radio documentary/feature form, which dates back to the 1930s but still has much in common with narrative podcasts today.²³ Historic practice and principles embedded in the radio documentary/feature format in Europe, Australia, the United States, and elsewhere have been thoroughly analyzed by scholars.²⁴ They commonly frame the audio medium as temporal, enveloping, and able to trigger a rich imaginative response. Both radio and podcasting leverage the affective resonance and intimacy of the human voice.²⁵ But sound itself has its own potency: as sensory evocation, “a partnership between memory and imagination,”²⁶ and as a subjective force: “Sounds are embedded with both cultural and personal meanings; sounds do not come at us merely raw,” as Michael Bull and Les Back have pointed out.²⁷ The act of listening also needs to be considered in both radio and podcast contexts; as media studies scholar Kate Lacey has said, it raises “notions of embodiment, intersubjectivity, liveness, and sensory perception.”²⁸

Both exemplary narrative podcasts²⁹ and radio documentaries are built forms, as carefully crafted as a good film, though the process is far less documented. The journal *RadioDoc Review* was founded by the author in 2014 to fill that gap in scholarship; its board, comprising noted podcast and radio in-

dustry professionals along with audio studies scholars, is building a canon of the crafted audio storytelling form by identifying signature works and commissioning in-depth critical analyses by peers in the field.³⁰ Some film studies theory can also be applied to the form. French film theorist Michel Chion divides the audio (soundtrack) used in film into three categories: voice, music, and “bruit,” which literally translates as “noise” but can be taken to mean natural or ambient sound: the buzz of a café, a clap of thunder.³¹ Whether as film soundtrack or pure audio, the relational layering, timing, and placement of all three kinds of sounds—what might be termed the choreography of sound—viscerally shapes the impact a mixed end product can have on listeners.³² When visual distractions are absent, such as in the screen-less mode of podcasting, masterful sculpting of sounds is particularly effective. The alchemic mix can cause what British audio producer Alan Hall has called “creative combustion.”³³

Podcasts came into being in 2001, though the term “podcast” was coined only in 2004.³⁴ Podcasts were defined as any audio file made available as a Really Simple Syndication (RSS) format, which provides a standardized system for the distribution of content from a website to internet users. Early podcast content ranged from time-shifted radio programs and niche blog and chat formats to the odd celebrity show. Popular current formats in the United States range from interviews and panels to sophisticated audio fiction and crafted narrative nonfiction. Podcasts today are easily accessed using platforms such as Apple’s iTunes, Spotify, or Google Podcasts. Listenership is increasing year by year, with more than half of U.S. citizens surveyed having listened to a podcast by 2019.³⁵ Scholars, practitioners, and industry commentators have observed that podcasting has its own distinct characteristics despite its strong links to radio.³⁶ Podcasts are opt-in, meaning consumers deliberately choose to listen, often via headphones, on mobile devices. This immersive, curated listening predisposes a podcast audience to be attentive consumers (a mode that augurs well for longform content) compared to the more serendipitous listening afforded by radio.

Stylistically, podcasts have adapted to this mode of consumption and distribution. Freed of an institutional gatekeeper, the podcast host can adopt a more spontaneous and confiding persona than the detached, carefully objective reporting tone of most public radio.³⁷ For example, in one *Serial* episode, host Sarah Koenig and producer Dana Chivvis are returning from investigating the scene of the crime. As they drive past a seafood store, Dana says, “There’s a shrimp sale at the Crab Crib.” Such a throwaway line would be jarring in print, but in the immediacy of the audio medium, where the reporter is an inherent presence, Koenig makes the most of the incidental

chit-chat. “Sometimes I think Dana isn’t listening to me,” she reflects, adding a touch of humor and relatability to a dark topic.³⁸ Koenig basks in the story, forensically unpicking each new item of information and talking to listeners as though they are companions on the quest to solve Lee’s murder. This aligns with the sort of meta-reportage, subjectivity, and self-reflexivity that literary journalists from Norman Mailer (*Armies of the Night*) to Anna Funder (*Stasiland*) have long claimed and that,

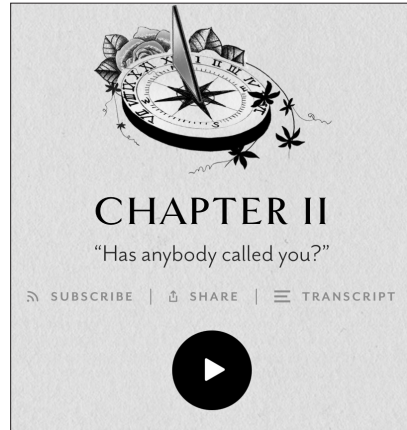
as Mia Lindgren has pointed out, podcasters are harnessing to an increasing degree. “Listeners are invited to care about the journalist, and, by extension, the story,” she explains.³⁹ Glass approvingly notes this quality in the work of his “nonfiction kings”: “a lot of the power of these stories comes from the writers telling you step by step what they’re feeling and thinking, as they do their reporting.”⁴⁰

As David Dowling and Kyle Miller have noted, this willing transparency on the part of the journalist/host has become a lauded trope of narrative podcasts.⁴¹ Underpinned by solid investigative journalism and delivered in an episodic style that mimicked the cliffhanger endings usually associated with streamed web television series,⁴² *Serial* became popular with binge listeners, and the program’s success sparked a rush to emulate its form. Its most influential successor, however, came from within the *TAL* stable itself, in the form of *S-Town*, a story that was consciously conceived as an aural novel, with its episodes even described on the *S-Town* website as “chapters.”⁴³

The next section sets out why *S-Town* should be categorized as a work of literary journalism.

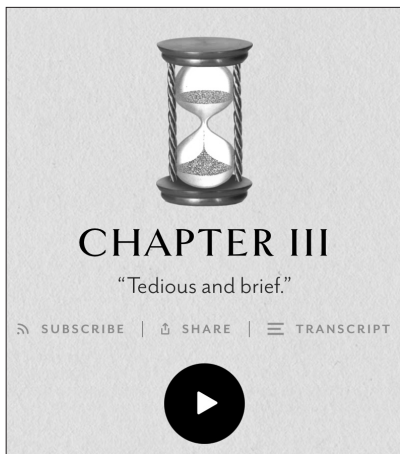
Adapting a Framework of Literary Journalism Theory for Podcasting

There is a dearth of scholarship analyzing longform radio or audio works as a form of literary journalism. Among the most pertinent is Miles Maguire’s 2014 study of David Isay’s radio documentary, *The Sunshine Hotel*.⁴⁴ Maguire compares this story of down-at-the-heel denizens of a flophouse—rendered in audio, newspaper, and book formats—to the work of *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell. Maguire points out that this and Isay’s many other radio documentaries show “a deep concern for getting the facts right coupled with what might be called artistic techniques to heighten the audience’s



experience of those facts.”⁴⁵ He further likens Isay’s practice of spending extensive time with his subjects to what literary journalism scholars call immersion. But unlike the many literary journalists who place themselves squarely in the frame, Isay himself is an absent voice.

Mia Lindgren has traced the recent growth of personal narrative journalism and its particular affinities with the podcast form. She points to audio’s oft-noted capacity to engender intimacy and to develop an empathetic response in listeners. “Voice is the intimate key to audiences’ hearts. By listening to detailed personal experiences of ‘others,’ listeners become connected to the people whose stories they share.”⁴⁶ She argues that “personal audio storytelling is an emerging and popular genre in podcasting” that will evolve as a sort of post-radio format metamorphosed onto digital platforms, with new



production conventions and listener expectations.⁴⁷ Dowling and Miller reinforce that argument, proposing that immersive and subjective longform audio storytelling such as *S-Town* borrows from techniques associated with documentary cinema and the novel, creating a genre that is “adept and multifaceted in providing serious reportage, cultural critique, and probing psychological intrigue.”⁴⁸ In a recent case study, Ella Waldman situates *S-Town* at the crossroads of podcast studies and literary theory, examining the importance of

sound design and close listening to its narrative structure and impact.⁴⁹

Given the relative paucity of podcast-specific analysis of narrative audio journalism, this study instead analyzes *S-Town* through a framework that combines classic literary journalism characteristics as identified by Sims, Kramer, and Boynton, and a matrix modified for digital journalism by Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche, from Wolfe’s original conceptualizing of the genre. Sims, in *The Literary Journalists*, describes the genre’s distinctive approach: “Literary journalism draws on immersion, voice, accuracy, and symbolism as essential forces.”⁵⁰ Sims later observed that literary journalists “triangulate differing stories, sort through participants’ memories, make judgment calls, calculate the structure of the story, adopt a point of view, and decipher the symbolism of details.”⁵¹ Kramer in 1995 offered pertinent concepts in “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists,” on which the analysis will also draw.⁵² A decade later, in 2005, Boynton summarized literary journalism as “rigorously reported,

psychologically astute, sociologically sophisticated, and politically aware.”⁵³

As Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche note,⁵⁴ Wolfe, in his essay that leads *The New Journalism*, explicated the four literary devices used to develop what he characterized as a new way of narrative storytelling: scene-by-scene construction, use of dialogue, point of view, and status life, or “everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture” that reveal a character’s way of being in the world.⁵⁵ Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche mapped Wolfe’s and other scholarly analyses of what constituted literary journalism onto a matrix more suited to digital narrative journalism:

- Scene [SC]
- Dialogue [DI]
- Characterization [CH]
- Dramatic Tension [DT].⁵⁶

The above abbreviations will be appended to examples that arise in the *S-Town* analysis that follows.

S-Town Podcast

On March 28, 2017, *S-Town* dropped online as a complete, seven-episode series. The podcast, which had been three years in the making, almost did not happen. The project began when the central protagonist, John B. McLemore, emailed *This American Life*. The subject line read: “John B. McLemore lives in Shittown, Alabama.” As *TAL* routinely received many attention-seeking emails, staff thought McLemore could be either a narcissist or a nut. Still, in his email he asked host Reed to investigate a murder, and a subsequent email provided a link to a related news story. Eventually, a year on, Reed rang him.

That phone call, relayed in edited form in the first episode, immediately revealed that McLemore was a remarkable character. Although he lived in “a crummy little shittown in Alabama, called Woodstock,” his interests had always been ambitious and wide-ranging: “Even when I was a kid in school, I didn’t want to hang around other kids. Because kids are talking about getting girls, or deer hunting, or football. Whereas I was interested in the astrolabe, sundials, projective geometry, new age music, climate change, and how to solve Rubik’s cube.”⁵⁷ [CH]

In the first chapter Reed says that when McLemore is not obsessively researching climate change, he is looking after his aged mother, caring for numerous stray dogs on his 124-acre property, tending a huge rose garden (displaying extensive botanical knowledge in the process), fixing antiquarian clocks, and building a vast maze. [CH] McLemore’s use of language is arresting. In a deep Southern drawl, he mentions a visit by the “Praetorian class”

(the police) and laments the “proleptic decay and decrepitude” of the area.⁵⁸ [DI] Reed reassures listeners he had to look up the meaning of “proleptic” (using a word or phrase in anticipation of its coming true) but succumbs to McLemore’s powerful personality and agrees to visit him. “It felt as if, by sheer force of will, John was opening this portal between us and calling out through it, calling from his world.”⁵⁹

Listeners embark, with Reed as companion-guide, on a story as tortuous as McLemore’s maze. In its evocation of place and attention to detail, the podcast is not unlike that first, famous “nonfiction novel,” Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*. On page one, Capote describes the denizens of Holcomb, Kansas, where his multiple murder story takes place: “The local accent is barbed with a prairie twang, a ranch-hand nasalness, and the men, many of them, wear narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes.”⁶⁰

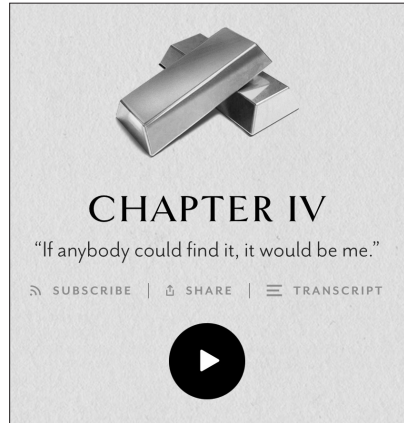
In *S-Town*’s first chapter, Reed introduces McLemore via this scene:

He’s a redhead, with red goatee and glasses, looks a bit younger than his forty-eight years, in ratty jeans and ratty sneakers, and a Sherwin-Williams T-shirt that he probably got for buying a can of paint at the hardware store. . . . He’s naming the plants all around us as we move—goldenrod, Russian sage, a climbing lady banks rose. . . .⁶¹ [SC]

When Reed moves on, he introduces McLemore’s young sidekick, Tyler Goodson, who is in the workshop sharpening a chainsaw “tooth by tooth.” This is another image redolent with symbolism, the potency of which is amplified by the steady click-click sound as Goodson wields the tool.

Still in chapter one, Reed’s overtly novelistic technique emerges—a style he has borrowed from Edward P. Jones’s book on U.S. slavery, *The Known World*.⁶² “If Tyler has his shirt on, you know he must be going to court. At least that’s what his mom will tell me one day.”⁶³ [DT] This simple device of inserting future tense sets up a narrative tension and foreshadows what lies ahead: a shape-shifting tale that leads deep inside a Southern Gothic landscape of tattoos and nipple-rings, bigotry and beauty, love and loss—the world of Shittown, Alabama, abbreviated as *S-Town*. In the vernacular of the podcast blurb:

John despises his Alabama town and decides to do something about it. He



asks a reporter to investigate the son of a wealthy family who's allegedly been bragging that he got away with murder. But then someone else ends up dead, sparking a nasty feud, a hunt for hidden treasure, and an unearthing of the mysteries of one man's life.⁶⁴

Voice and Subjectivity

As Kramer notes, "the personality of the writer, the individual and intimate voice of a whole, candid person . . . someone who has illuminated experience with private reflection, but who has not transcended crankiness, wryness, doubtfulness, and who doesn't blank out emotional realities of sadness, glee, excitement, fury, love" is "the defining mark of literary journalism."⁶⁵ In just this manner, the voice of narrator/host/author Reed anchors *S-Town*, literally and figuratively.⁶⁶ In chapter one, he shares his doubts about McLemore's credibility:

I'd say it's about this point that I ask myself, is John fucking with me? Is he just a bored guy who contacted me on a lark and never expected me to actually follow through? Is this murder not real and he knows it? It's not only the fact that he is right now pouring potassium cyanide into a bucket in front of me that makes me wonder this.⁶⁷ [DT]

In chapter two, Reed's stricken reaction to a phone call leads to the listener's learning the awful news that McLemore has committed suicide—by drinking cyanide. [DT] In chapter three, Reed, by now closely attached to the Goodson family, attends the funeral, where McLemore's mother, Mary Grace, is chief mourner. Reed says: "As Mary Grace speaks, Tyler's mom clutches my arm." Reed, through his sharp eyes and subjective view, continues to unpack the details of McLemore's life. When a cousin, Reta, appears and seems to be taking over McLemore's affairs, leaving Goodson in the lurch, Reed is shocked. "I don't think this was the clockmaker's intention," he says.⁶⁸ Goodson starts taking matters into his own hands, challenging Reta's authority by appropriating items on McLemore's estate that he claims are his own and searching for the gold McLemore is believed to have hidden, taking Reed increasingly into his confidence ("We got to find it, Brian").⁶⁹ But in chapter five, when Goodson gets rough with a man who has stolen a valued family heirloom and intends to "snip off" his finger as punishment, Reed is rattled. This is a response, he says, "which I find unsettling." Likewise, when Reta seeks to acquire some gold nipple rings McLemore had, Reed recoils: "Ugh, I'm just reeling from you saying they should cut his nipples off. Oh, Reta."⁷⁰

Reed steers listeners through shifting sympathies as he reveals further twists to the story, but everything is mediated through his deeply personal

voice. He uses a colloquial tone, an approach that is less available to print journalists, but standard for audio presenters: one that generates intimacy.⁷¹ Listeners learn a new aspect of McLemore's personality—that he had an intense though unconsummated relationship with a gay man named Olin Long. [DT] An email from Long leads Reed to investigate McLemore's sexuality, which is a matter of some ambiguity. In his first email to Reed, McLemore declares: "Me, I am 47, unmarried, sort of, ahem, like ahem—let's just say I might be a fan of David Sedaris, or in other words, I might know who Audre Lorde and Ann Bannon is, if you get the idea. Of course, that could get you killed around here."⁷² [CH]

Reed observes casually: "I took that to mean John was gay, though when we talked about it after, he told me that he'd gone both ways in his life."⁷³ Reed's subsequent, eleven-hour interview with Olin sheds considerable light on McLemore's repressed sexuality. [DI] In chapter six, making what Sims would say is "a judgment call," Reed reveals that McLemore had a sexual relationship with a married man, something McLemore had told him off the record. "It wasn't the fact that he had been with men that he didn't want recorded, but that he had been with this particular guy," Reed explains. Reed justifies including the information on the anonymized man as follows:

First, since John died, two other people who knew him well have told me the same information on the record. Also, John was very clear that he did not believe in God or an afterlife. So John, in his own view, is worm dirt now, unaffected by this. And lastly, what John disclosed, and where it led me after he died, helped me understand him so much more. And I think trying to understand another person is a worthwhile thing to do.⁷⁴ [CH]

Some commentators have wondered whether Reed had the right to make the podcast at all, given that McLemore had died without explicitly consenting to the podcast being about him, not the murder he first wrote to *TAL* about. The question was made more complex because McLemore was known to suffer from depression. Did mental illness affect McLemore's ability to consent? *S-Town's* co-executive producer, Julie Snyder, was adamant that McLemore was aware the focus of the podcast had shifted. "He knew that the story we were interested in was going to be about him and his community and his relationship with that community," she told the *New York Times*.⁷⁵

As for the question of whether journalists should describe only the life experiences to which their subjects have explicitly given consent to make public, the field of biography would be greatly impoverished, indeed reduced to mere public relations, if that edict were followed. Kramer offers insight on the responsibility of the journalist in interpreting a life. "Literary journalism couples cold fact and personal event, in the author's humane company."⁷⁶

While Reed is clearly partisan, warming to the Goodson family and wary of other residents of Bibb County, from the evasive town clerk to the racist denizens of Goodson's Black Sheep Ink tattoo bar, he is never less than humane.

Immersion/Rigorous Reporting

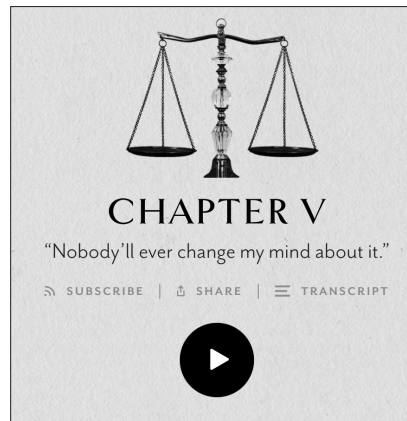
S-Town is rich in details that deepen the storytelling and lead closer to the truth, as Kramer advises.⁷⁷ Chapter four delves into McLemore's career as a horologist, as Reed tracks down the antique clock enthusiasts, clients, and colleagues who were on McLemore's self-penned funeral list. One, his old college professor, tears up as he shows Reed a personalized sun dial McLemore made for him. It had taken McLemore more than twenty years to complete.⁷⁸ [CH]

Among the unsavory people Reed introduces in Goodson's tattoo bar [SC] in chapter two is a six-foot, 350-pound, bearded man, wearing a John Deere hat, "whose name I never do catch, who tells me, quote, 'I'm so fucking fat, I don't care no more,' and lifts up his shirt to show me the giant words he has tattooed on his stomach—'Feed Me.'"⁷⁹ [DI] In showing that these rednecks and racists accepted McLemore, Reed deliberately complicates the view of his subject early on. The ambiguities will only deepen.

In Reed's longitudinal reportage and intensive interviewing, his characters take real shape. One night Reed meets the man named Olin in a motel and records a five-hour interview, followed by a six-hour session the next day. The conversations trace the nearing-sixty-year-old, former Air Force linguist's twelve-year relationship with McLemore and its sublimated sexuality. The edited interview is the spine of chapter six, introducing a little-known

aspect of McLemore's life, crucial to understanding the denouement in chapter seven. [DI, CH] Reed employs in-depth interviewing of the form practiced by many journalists, including Svetlana Alexievich, the first full-time journalist to win the Nobel Prize for literature. As John Hartsock has noted, "Hers is very much an immersion journalism. In her case it is an immersion into other people's emotional lives."⁸⁰ Similarly, Olin describes the unfulfilled yearning of one encounter with McLemore, when McLemore delivers flowers from his nursery to Olin:

I'm sitting there in a truck with John B. McLemore outside a doctor's office picking up my azaleas . . . I wanted to pull his shirt up, expose his belly,



and just kiss all over his belly around that red hair, just to that extent. And I wanted to do it slowly and sensuously It was the hair, the skin, the intelligence, the—he was in a jolly mood that day.⁸¹ [SC]

Hartsock observes of Alexievich, “her subjects slowly open up emotionally as Alexievich earns their trust.”⁸² The same gradual uncovering happens with the characters in *S-Town* over the course of Reed’s numerous visits and phone interviews. Goodson’s portrayal begins to blur from tattoo entrepreneur, dedicated young father, and loyal defender of Mary Grace (his “mama”), to troubled ne’er-do-well who, burdened by the legacy of a violent, predatory father, struggles to accommodate the special place he holds in McLemore’s affections. [CH] McLemore committed suicide the day after Father’s Day, when Goodson and McLemore had gone fishing. It was an idyllic outing:

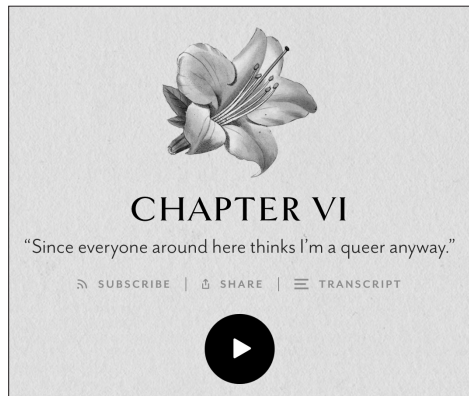
Tyler Goodson: He said, Tyler, you’ve just got to learn to just stop and take some time for yourself, and try to enjoy life And hell, John can’t swim. I mean, hell, we wasn’t in no deeper water than about waist deep, and he wouldn’t go nowhere without me holding his damn hand like a kid. [Reed laughs] We waded up and down the river and stuff, and I was slipping over rocks finding some crawfish and hellgrammites and stuff, showing him. And he never done stuff like that before

Brian Reed: Did it seem like he was saying goodbye?

Tyler Goodson: I don’t know. Hell, we spray-painted our damn names up there on the damn bridge.⁸³ [SC, DI]

But in an example of Sims’s triangulation of stories, the perspective constantly shifts: One minute on Goodson’s side, seeing Cousin Reta as a gold digger; but later, starting to see that

Goodson is crossing a line and that maybe Mary Grace would be better off with Reta. Nowhere is the visceral emotionalism Hartsock identifies from Alexievich’s immersion interviewing⁸⁴ more evident than in Reed’s distillation of McLemore himself. Reed captures McLemore’s ringing self-assessment: “I don’t just look at myself as a forty-nine-year-old, semi-homosexual atheist living in a Shittown full of Baptists in Buttfucksville, Alabama. I look at myself as a citizen of the world.”⁸⁵ [CH]



Reed records McLemore's blistering view of the townsfolk: "A bunch of fussing and fighting, snaggletooth, stolen trucks, meth labs, stabbing, hooping, hollering, and going to jail?"⁸⁶ And he gains McLemore's disarming admission that while on a recorded phone call to Reed, he has "pissed in the sink," as an act of environmental awareness:

Instead of wasting three or four gallons to flush the commode, I just peed here in the kitchen sink and used about one cupful of water to flush the sink. And I got a little short dick, but I got a pretty good aim, so I can usually aim right for the center of that damn thing without splashing everywhere.⁸⁷ [SC]

This descriptive scene acquires additional force, because it is followed immediately by the ringing of a phone. That sound has an inbuilt expectancy, as the listener naturally tries to guess the caller's identity. Tension ratchets upward until, finally, comes tragic news from Goodson's sister-in-law, Skyler. McLemore has taken his own life. The chapter's cliffhanger ending on this point marks an utterly unforeseen narrative twist. [DT] The next chapter opens with a reprise of the call, Skyler's reply this time artfully broken up by Reed's introduction:

Skyler: Has anybody called you?

Brian Reed: No, not that I know. I have a few missed calls, but don't think that they're from anybody down there. Why?

Brian Reed: From *Serial* and *This American Life*, I'm Brian Reed. This is Shittown.

Skyler: Well, we have some bad news to tell you.

Brian Reed: OK.

Skyler: John B. killed his self Monday night.

Brian Reed: Are you kidding me?

Skyler: No.

Brian Reed: Oh my gosh.⁸⁸ [SC, DI]

There is a certain artifice in how Reed has, as the reporter, recorded the sound of his own distress at the news: as an audio journalist, he would understandably have pressed "record" before he made a phone call to the community, but there is still a cool self-awareness in the technique, as he records his faltering voice and expression of sympathy. The effect is to position the listener as almost an eavesdropper on the scene, compelled to imagine what has happened. Here Reed is deploying what Lindgren describes as "sonic elements . . . to create accompanying inner imagery and experiences of intimacy."⁸⁹ The juxtaposition of the joking McLemore peeing in the sink with the terrible reality that follows delivers a savage gut punch.

This raises the matter of structure and a consideration of *S-Town's* aural format.

Structure

Kramer has emphasized that “structure counts,”⁹⁰ and *S-Town* executive producer Julie Snyder concurs: “we map out pretty detailed structures for every episode . . . *when* do you want to know something? . . . *where* are the places that you are going to have a feeling or a realization?”⁹¹ *S-Town*’s seven chapters have an individually delineated theme and a title that comes from inter-

view quotes. But Kramer also advises literary journalists to mix “primary narrative with tales and digressions to amplify and reframe events.”⁹² This, too, is abundantly clear in *S-Town*. In chapter five, for instance, Reed rings Goodson’s mother but instead finds Goodson’s grandmother, Miss Irene Hicks, on the end of the phone. This leads into an entirely new perspective on Goodson’s situation, as Miss Hicks details the nine felony charges against Goodson, then describes her troubled extended family’s situation. Besides supporting Goodson, she looks after a son named Jimmy who was brain-damaged after being shot. She also supports Goodson’s mother, who finds it hard to hold a job because of health problems. There are extended family members living with her and a dog about to have a litter of puppies, while Goodson and his children and pregnant girlfriend are living in their half-finished house. [CH] Reed wonders how she copes. “I just take my medicine and take my Bocelli,” she replies. [DI] That is Andrea Bocelli, the opera singer, soon to become a player in the story.

As John McPhee has observed, “Structure . . . is the juxtaposition of parts, the way in which two parts of a piece of writing, merely by lying side-by-side, can comment on each other without a word spoken. The way in which the thing is assembled, you can get much said.”⁹³ By harnessing the nature of the audio medium, this juxtaposition is amplified in *S-Town*. Reed layers voice with sound—in this case, music—to create a heightened meaning. In audio storytelling, sound itself is used as punctuation, or to set mood. A crow’s mournful call, a child’s laughter, a door slamming, these audio prompts can evoke affective responses in the listener.⁹⁴ Music can be even more potent. In chapter five, for instance, Miss Hicks muses again on Goodson’s behavior: “I can’t make up my mind whether to scold him or love him or something.”



Underlining her observation, the swelling opening bars of “La donna è mobile” immediately follow: the Verdi aria sung by, of course, Bocelli. With careful phrasing, the music lowers and Reed’s narration comes over it, reflecting on the conundrum of Goodson’s character, before Bocelli returns in full throttle and Miss Hicks “responds” to him with delight: “Oh, that man’s got a voice like an angel.”

This clever placement of music adds texture and pace, embellishing Miss Hicks’s torn feelings for Goodson. But it becomes masterful when Reed returns to the piece later in the chapter. This time, Goodson has been self-doubting his own moral character and concludes: “I wish I had a little better guidance,” an allusion to his father’s being a convicted sex offender. This segues back to the same Verdi aria where, over the opening phrase, Reed observes that Goodson’s erratic behavior has inspired some of McLemore’s most virtuosic rants. [CH] The music level dips and the soulful opera counterpoints McLemore’s baleful brilliance:

We ain’t nothing but a nation of goddamn, chicken-shit, horse-shit, tattle-tale, pissy-ass, whiny, fat, flabby, out of shape Facebook-looking damn twerp-fest, peaking out the windows and slipping around, listening in on the cell phones and spying in the peephole and peeping in the crack of the goddamned door, and listening in the fucking sheet rock. You know, Mr. Putin, please, show some fucking mercy! I mean, come on, drop a fucking bomb, won’t you?⁹⁵ [SC, DI]

With exquisite choreography, the music ends in a crashing coda that adds dramatic resolution. There is an audible sigh from McLemore, exhausted by his own tirade. Then, in a starkly contrasting tone, he mutters: “I gotta have me some tea.”⁹⁶

Substituting “listener” for reader leads to numerous resonances in this section of chapter five, between audio’s renowned ability to create pictures in the mind, with the listener as co-creator,⁹⁷ and Kramer’s vision of what the literary journalist sets out to achieve. “The writer paints sensory scenes, confides on a level of intimacy that stirs readers’ own experiences and sensations, and sets up alchemical interplay between constructed text and readers’ psyches. The readers’ realizations are what the author and readers have made together.”⁹⁸

Other structural aspects emerge spontaneously. Goodson’s Uncle Jimmy, brain damaged from a bullet lodged in his skull, is present at some gatherings. He expresses, in the form of verbal affirmations, his understanding of what is said. Those expressions provide sometimes sharp commentary on the unfolding events, as when Goodson is describing how McLemore promised he would leave him some gold. “Beaucoup and beaucoup of stuff,” intones

Uncle Jimmy.⁹⁹ These add a degree of aural symbolism to the deep symbology of the podcast series, discussed next.

Symbolism

Reed and his cast of characters are forever trying to decipher what Sims calls “the symbolism of details.” In chapter one, Reed and McLemore are briefly lost in McLemore’s maze—a telling start. “It actually has sixty-four possible solutions, depending on how you swap the gates around,” he tells Reed, foreshadowing the labyrinthine possibilities of this story.¹⁰⁰ McLemore also describes the “witness marks” on the old clocks he fixes: the imperfections put there by the horologists who have repaired the antique timepieces through the ages. It is a beautiful metaphor for the flaws that will be uncovered in the people of *S-Town* and the ways in which those flaws provide insight into the messy reality of human beings.

The clocks and their long histories also invoke McLemore’s troubled past. For all his brilliance, his life has been full of missteps—dropping out of university, closeted sexuality, ambiguous social attitudes, and a sense of doom about impending climate change. In the opening moments of the podcast, Reed cleverly intertwines both symbols: “I’m told fixing an old clock can be maddening. You’re constantly wondering if you’ve just spent hours going down a path that will likely take you nowhere.”¹⁰¹ The clocks and sundials—to which McLemore devoted so much of his time and skill—bear plangent mottos that further build the symbolic meaning. One, “tedious and brief,”¹⁰² provides McLemore’s epitaph. The potassium cyanide that will kill McLemore at the end of chapter two is introduced in chapter one as McLemore drunkenly foments a chemical reaction on a dime Reed supplies, from which the coin emerges as a gold-plated souvenir, a powerful allusion to transformation.

Tattoos take on increasing symbology through the series. Chapter two opens in Goodson’s tattoo bar with its pun-like name, Black Sheep Ink. [SC] He considers this place his “church.” One patron, Bubba, thinks of Goodson’s tattooing service as providing a form of therapeutic expression for *S-Town*’s white trailer trash. By the final chapter, though, the story is in much darker territory. McLemore has descended into a terrible depression, and the pain of extreme tattooing has become something between a BDSM ritual and an expression of his thwarted, perhaps fatherly, feelings for Goodson. [SC] With heavy irony, McLemore now calls his compulsive, masochistic tattooing sessions with Goodson “church.” He declaims the links: “Wild Turkey is the holy water. The little filthy-ass room is the sanctuary . . . the tattoo needles are the reliquaries.”¹⁰³ [DI]

The marks McLemore acquires are also symbolic. He has taken a switch

from the woods, had others beat him with it and then tattoo over the welts. The shocking, flayed imagery of his back is supposed to resemble the floggings found on a freed slave. Given Alabama's ardent pro-slavery history, the image is particularly loaded, reinforcing the many references to racial bigotry throughout the podcast, such as the name of the local lumber mill, KyKen-Kee, supposedly based on the proprietor's family initials and invoking the contraction KKK.

Above this landscape, hovering none too subtly, is the ghost of William Faulkner, denizen of this Southern Gothic landscape. His short story, "A Rose for Emily"¹⁰⁴ features a psychologically damaged woman who holes up in a decaying mansion with her parent and struggles against an oppressive society. On Reed's first visit, McLemore presents him with a copy as "bedtime reading," making an obvious connection to his own situation. The podcast takes this link further, resurrecting a 1968 musical adaptation of the story by the British rock group, the Zombies, as its theme song,¹⁰⁵ to close each episode in haunting harmony.

Sociological Awareness and Psychological Astuteness

S-Town displays a keen awareness of where McLemore's life and activities fit within the prism of Alabama and broader U.S. life. Goodson's tattoo bar doubles as a drinking club for "a collection of misfits, of self-proclaimed criminals and runaways and hillbillies."¹⁰⁶ Bibb County is ninety-five percent white, "and that is no accident," Reed reports.¹⁰⁷ It was the last place in the state to allow desegregation of schools, in 1967. Reed marvels at the openness of the bigotry, proclaimed right into his microphone. Bubba complains, "If you got a taxpaying job, you got to take care of some nigger's wife that's in jail because she's drawing a child support check."¹⁰⁸ [DI] Reclaiming a subjective voice, Reed says he is glad now that he took his wife's advice and made his Facebook page private before he visited *S-Town*. It has pictures of their recent wedding and, unlike Reed, she is Black. [DT]

The more Reed investigates and explores, the more nuanced his depictions of the people he meets become. [CH] In keeping with what Kramer says is the whole point of literary journalism's long immersions, Reed starts "to comprehend subjects at a level Henry James termed 'felt life' It leaves quirks and self-deceptions, hypocrisies and graces intact and exposed; in fact, it uses them to deepen understanding."¹⁰⁹ By the final chapter, Reed is clear-eyed about McLemore: "So much of the stuff John said he hated about Shittown—Harleys, tattoos, misogyny, and homophobia, racism, he said he despised it. But that stuff was part of him, too."¹¹⁰ [CH]

When Reta's husband dismisses Goodson as a criminal, Reed observes:

“That’s what Tyler’s been reduced to in their eyes. But this is what conflicts like this do to the participants—reduce them.” Goodson has his own crisis of conscience. Reed has been pressing him on his plan to mutilate the man who stole his grandfather’s gun. “I kept questioning Tyler, trying to understand why he thought this was okay, but nothing he said did quite make me understand. And I realized it was probably going to stay that way.”¹¹¹

As he is about to hang up, Goodson suddenly asks Reed, “Do you see me being a bad person?” Reed replies, “No, man, I see you as a complicated, normal person. You know, I disagree with some of your decisions. But you also—you’ve had a very different life experience than I’ve had.”¹¹² [DI]

Rather than offer simplistic truths, *S-Town* honors the unknowability of real life. Because of McLemore’s horological practice of fire gilding, he may have suffered from mercury poisoning, which would have affected his mental acuity. Perhaps his repressed sexuality added to the pressure he felt. And it is possible that he needed more of an outlet for his amazing intellect than could be found in the dedicated fellow horologists and friends who had held him dear over many years, before he withdrew from them.

McLemore’s suicide note, which with typical outrageousness he emailed to the town clerk, provides a deeply moving finale to the podcast. Reed, McLemore’s interlocutor-turned-friend, reads the note:

I have not lived a spectacular life. But within my four dozen plus years, I’ve had many more hours to pursue that which I chose, instead of moiling over that which I detested. I have coaxed many infirm clocks back to mellifluous life, studied projective geometry and built astrolabes, sundials, taught myself nineteenth century electroplating, bronzing, patination, micro machining, horology, learned piano . . .

But the best times of my life, I realize, were the times I spent in the forest and field . . . I have audited the discourse of the hickories, oaks, and pines, even when no wind was present.¹¹³ [SC]

This epic depiction of one man ends with Reed describing how McLemore’s great-grandfather, a notorious gangster, obtained the family estate by extortion and murder. His mother, Mary Grace, took to sitting on the land while pregnant with McLemore, rubbing her stomach and begging God to make her child a genius.¹¹⁴ As listeners now know, she got her wish. And in delivering the story of this mordant, self-destructive prodigy, Reed has elevated the art of audio storytelling to new heights. As the 2017 Peabody Award judges’ citation noted: “If ‘Serial’ launched the podcast as mass entertainment through a police procedural, its sibling successor, ‘S-Town,’ breaks new ground for the medium by creating the first true audio novel, a nonfiction biography constructed in the style and form of a 7-chapter novel.”¹¹⁵

Conclusion

The narrative podcast form, if executed to the highest standards, offers a new mode in which digital literary journalism can flourish—one exemplified by *S-Town*. Crafted audio storytelling has its own narrative principles, which apply the grammar and aesthetics of the audio medium to storytelling technique, paying particular attention to tone, texture, and temporality.¹¹⁶ These qualities can marry well with the characteristics of literary journalism, framed in the opt-in, on-demand ecology of digital journalism. *S-Town* displays abundantly the four characteristics of digital literary journalism devised by Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche. Further, the materiality of audio allows for the actual *recording* of evocative scenes and dialogue, while characterization is forcefully achieved by a mixture of authorial observation and carefully edited interview excerpts. Dramatic tension is heightened by using structural conventions of crafted audio storytelling, including use of music and sound to amplify narrative arcs. The result is a powerful, affective work that deepens understanding and allows the listener “to behold others’ lives, often set within far clearer contexts than we can bring to our own.”¹¹⁷

Ultimately, *S-Town* delivers what Kramer describes as the epitome of what literary journalism can offer: “the process moves readers, and writers, toward realization, compassion, and in the best of cases, wisdom.”¹¹⁸

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Notes

- ¹ Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists," 21.
- ² "About This American Life," para. 1.
- ³ "About," para. 2.
- ⁴ Koenig et al., *Serial*, was launched in 2014; Reed and Snyder, *S-Town*, in 2017.
- ⁵ Hilmes, "The New Materiality of Radio: Sound on Screens," 53–54.
- ⁶ The descriptor has been removed from the current TAL website but can still be found on podcast platforms such as Podcast Planet. See <http://www.podcast-planet.com/storytelling/the-american-life/>.
- ⁷ Glass, introduction to *The New Kings of Nonfiction*, 12.
- ⁸ Glass, 10.
- ⁹ Koenig et al., *Serial*; Reed and Snyder, *S-Town*.
- ¹⁰ Glass, introduction to *The New Kings of Nonfiction*, 8.
- ¹¹ Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche, "The Digital Animation of Literary Journalism," 530.
- ¹² Levins, "Largest Newspaper Web Series Ever?" 22.
- ¹³ Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche, "The Digital Animation of Literary Journalism," 528. See also Branch, "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek."
- ¹⁴ Dowling and Vogan, "Can We 'Snowfall' This?" 209, 221.
- ¹⁵ Henley, "Firestorm."
- ¹⁶ Giles and Hitch, "Multimedia Features as 'Narra-descriptive' Texts," 81–83.
- ¹⁷ Coates, "The Case for Reparations."
- ¹⁸ Crombie, Nakamura, and Killen, "Ghosts of Highway 20."
- ¹⁹ Biewen and Dilworth, "One Story, Week by Week," 77–89.
- ²⁰ Quah, "*Serial* Season 3 Is the Podcast's Biggest Ever," para. 2.
- ²¹ Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche, "The Digital Animation of Literary Journalism," 527–46; Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 3–52; Sims, *The Literary Journalists*; Sims, *True Stories*; Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists," 21–34; Boynton, *The New New Journalism*.
- ²² Grierson, "The Documentary Producer," 8.
- ²³ Radio documentary and radio feature have different cultural and regional interpretations, but both refer to crafted audio storytelling formats. See McHugh, "How Podcasting Is Changing the Audio Storytelling Genre," 5–9.
- ²⁴ See for example, Madsen, "Radio and the Documentary Imagination," 189–98; Crisell, *Understanding Radio*.
- ²⁵ McHugh, "The Affective Power of Sound," 187–206.
- ²⁶ Street, "Poetry, Texas: Review 1," 6.
- ²⁷ Bull and Back, "Introduction: Into Sound," 9.
- ²⁸ Lacey, "Listening in the Digital Age," 13.
- ²⁹ Listing the awards is beyond the scope of this study. For examples, see the winners, in the storytelling/investigative category, of national podcast awards such as the British Podcast Awards, <https://www.britishpodcastawards.com/>; and the Australian Podcast Awards, <https://australianpodcastawards.com/>. See also the

winners of Peabody Awards for podcast, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/results/podcast/1/null/null/title/asc>; the podcast categories in the New York Festivals (Radio), <https://radio.newyorkfestivals.com/winners/List/0ba71550-d2a9-40b0-9885-f3912b179fa3>; and the newly created, in 2020, audio reporting category for the Pulitzer Prize, <https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/631>.

³⁰ *RadioDoc Review*, 2014–present.

³¹ Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 208, 252.

³² British producer Alan Hall discusses these concepts poetically throughout the chapter, “Cigarettes and Dance Steps,” 126–37.

³³ Hall, 131.

³⁴ British journalist Ben Hammersley coined the term for an article in the *Guardian*. The first podcast artifact was a form of audio blogging, developed in 2001 by two U.S. innovators, Adam Curry, a video journalist at MTV, and David Winer, a tech innovator who invented the RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed by which podcasts are distributed online. See Hammersley, “Audible Revolution”; Nuzum, “The Story of the First Podcast Feed.”

³⁵ Webster, “The State of Podcast Listening for 2021,” para 5.

³⁶ Llinares, Fox, and Berry, *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*, 4–5; Spinelli and Dann, *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution*, 2.

³⁷ For example, transgender reporter Lewis Wallace was fired from the American Public Media show “Marketplace” in 2017 for rejecting an objective tone. See <https://medium.com/@lewispants/i-was-fired-from-my-journalism-job-ten-days-into-trump-c3bc014ce51d>. Wallace later wrote a book and created a podcast, *The View from Somewhere*, to examine the concept of objectivity. Robert Boynton reviewed the podcast for *RadioDoc Review*. See Boynton, “The View from Somewhere: A Review.”

³⁸ Koenig et al. *Serial*, Season One, Episode 5. <https://serialpodcast.org/season-one>.

³⁹ Lindgren, “Intimacy and Emotions in Podcast Journalism,” 11.

⁴⁰ Glass, introduction to *The New Kings of Nonfiction*, 7.

⁴¹ Dowling and Miller, “Immersive Audio Storytelling,” 170.

⁴² Biewen and Dilworth, “One Story, Week by Week,” 77.

⁴³ Lau, “Brian Reed on How One Novel Inspired *S-Town*’s Style,” para. 4, 5, 6, 7.

⁴⁴ Maguire, “Literary Journalism on the Air,” 47–64.

⁴⁵ Maguire, 51.

⁴⁶ Lindgren, “Personal Narrative Journalism,” 27.

⁴⁷ Lindgren, 37.

⁴⁸ Dowling and Miller, “Immersive Audio Storytelling,” 178.

⁴⁹ Waldmann, “From Storytelling to Storylistening,” 7–12.

⁵⁰ Sims, “The Literary Journalists,” 4.

⁵¹ Sims, *True Stories*, 16.

⁵² Kramer, “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists,” 21–34.

⁵³ Boynton, “About the Book,” para. 1. See also, Boynton, introduction to *The New New Journalism*, xi.

⁵⁴ Jacobsen, Marino, and Gutsche, "Digital Animation," 536–38.

⁵⁵ Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 31–32.

⁵⁶ Jacobsen, Marino, and Gutsche, "Digital Animation," 532. Coding for the present study is based on these authors' framework.

⁵⁷ *S-Town*, chapter 1, <https://stowndownpodcast.org/>. See also Reed and Snyder, *S-Town*, <https://stowndownpodcast.org/>.

⁵⁸ *S-Town*, chapter 1.

⁵⁹ *S-Town*, chapter 1.

⁶⁰ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, 3.

⁶¹ *S-Town*, chapter 1.

⁶² Jones, *The Known World*.

⁶³ *S-Town*, chapter 1.

⁶⁴ *S-Town*, chapter 1.

⁶⁵ Kramer, "Breakable Rules," 29.

⁶⁶ Brian Reed is credited here as *S-Town*'s author, as he reported the story, gathered the interviews, and wrote the script he narrates. But it should be noted that crafted audio storytelling is usually a team effort, where producers in particular play a key role in designing and structuring the form. Julie Snyder, as executive producer, played a pivotal part in determining the creative shape of *S-Town*, as is acknowledged on the podcast's credits. See Reed and Snyder, *S-Town*.

⁶⁷ *S-Town*, chapter 1.

⁶⁸ *S-Town*, chapter 3.

⁶⁹ *S-Town*, chapter 3.

⁷⁰ *S-Town*, chapter 5.

⁷¹ See McAdam, "The Journey from Print to Radio Storytelling."

⁷² *S-Town*, chapter 3.

⁷³ *S-Town*, chapter 3.

⁷⁴ *S-Town*, chapter 6.

⁷⁵ Stevens, "S-Town's Treatment of Its Main Character Was Riveting. But Was It Unlawful?" para. 33.

⁷⁶ Kramer, "Breakable Rules," 34.

⁷⁷ Kramer, 34.

⁷⁸ *S-Town*, chapter 4.

⁷⁹ *S-Town*, chapter 2.

⁸⁰ Hartsock, "Svetlana Alexievich and the Nobel Prize for Literatures," 26.

⁸¹ *S-Town*, chapter 6.

⁸² Hartsock, "Svetlana Alexievich," 26.

⁸³ *S-Town*, chapter 3.

⁸⁴ Hartsock, "Svetlana Alexievich," 26.

⁸⁵ *S-Town*, chapter 7.

⁸⁶ *S-Town*, chapter 2.

⁸⁷ *S-Town*, chapter 2.

⁸⁸ *S-Town*, chapter 3.

⁸⁹ Lindgren, "Intimacy and Emotions," 13.

- ⁹⁰ Kramer, “Breakable Rules,” 32–33.
- ⁹¹ Snyder, “Speaking with *Serial*’s Julie Snyder,” 9.08.
- ⁹² Kramer, “Breakable Rules,” 32.
- ⁹³ Sims, quoting McPhee’s description from interview published in “The Literary Journalists,” 13.
- ⁹⁴ Hall, “Cigarettes and Dance Steps,” 127–29.
- ⁹⁵ *S-Town*, chapter 5.
- ⁹⁶ *S-Town*, chapter 5.
- ⁹⁷ See Biewen and Dilworth, *Reality Radio*, p. 2, para. 3, L16–17; p. 5, para. 2; p. 8, para. 2; p. 12, para. 4, L2–4; p. 230, para. 3; McHugh, “Memoir for Your Ears: The Podcast Life,” 106–10.
- ⁹⁸ Kramer, “Breakable Rules,” 33.
- ⁹⁹ *S-Town*, chapter 3.
- ¹⁰⁰ Indeed, false starts and misconceptions have become something of a trope in narrative podcasts, featuring in Nocera’s *The Shrink Next Door*; Goffard’s *Dirty John*; Barry’s *Jungle Prince*, and, inevitably, Koenig et al.’s *Serial*.
- ¹⁰¹ *S-Town*, chapter 1.
- ¹⁰² *S-Town*, chapter 2.
- ¹⁰³ *S-Town*, chapter 7.
- ¹⁰⁴ Faulkner, “A Rose for Emily.”
- ¹⁰⁵ The Zombies, *Odessey and Oracle*.
- ¹⁰⁶ *S-Town*, chapter 2.
- ¹⁰⁷ *S-Town*, chapter 7.
- ¹⁰⁸ *S-Town*, chapter 2.
- ¹⁰⁹ Kramer, “Breakable Rules,” 23.
- ¹¹⁰ *S-Town*, chapter 7.
- ¹¹¹ *S-Town*, chapter 5.
- ¹¹² *S-Town*, chapter 5.
- ¹¹³ *S-Town*, chapter 7.
- ¹¹⁴ *S-Town*, chapter 7.
- ¹¹⁵ Peabody, “*S-Town* (stownpodcast.org).”
- ¹¹⁶ McHugh, “Memoir,” 106–10.
- ¹¹⁷ Kramer, “Breakable Rules,” 34.
- ¹¹⁸ Kramer, 34.

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