

## “S-Town” Investigates the Human Mystery.”

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[www.newyorker.com/culture/sarah-larson/s-town-investigates-the-human-mystery](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/sarah-larson/s-town-investigates-the-human-mystery).

"S-Town," the mesmerizing new podcast from the team behind "Serial" and "This American Life," was released in its entirety on Tuesday—seven hour-long "chapters" about the mysteries and tragedies surrounding the life of a brilliant, troubled man in a small Alabama town. From the beginning, when its co-executive producer and host, Brian Reed, begins talking about the workings of antique clocks, the podcast is novelistic in its aesthetic. "I'm told fixing an old clock can be maddening," Reed says in the opening narration. "You're constantly wondering if you've just spent hours going down a path that will likely take you nowhere, and all you've got are these vague witness marks"—impressions, outlines, and discolorations inside the clock, hinting at what was there before—"which might not even mean what you think they mean." He's telling us this because John B. McLemore, a florid, fantastic talker and a renowned horologist, sent Reed an e-mail in 2012 with the subject line "John B. McLemore lives in Shittown, Alabama." There had been a murder in McLemore's terrible little town that had been covered up, McLemore said, and he wanted the "This American Life" producers to come investigate it. The two men began corresponding by e-mail and then talking on the phone. "It felt as if by sheer force of will, John was opening this portal between us and calling out through it," Reed tells us. "So eventually I decided to come check it out."

When Reed ventures to McLemore's sprawling ancestral property and its environs, in Woodstock, Alabama, the murder mystery proves stubborn and elusive. At one point, Reed finds himself standing with McLemore inside a hedge maze that he's designed and had built on his land, and they're both wondering how to get out. Such framing about clocks and mazes is palpably deliberate—

right from the beginning, “S-Town” wants to reassure you that meanderings and muddles are part of the design.

When “Serial” came out, in 2014, it retrained our brains in two ways: one, by showing us that we have an appetite for long, detailed, complex audio stories about real-life mysteries; and two, at the end of that journey, by denying us easy answers amid those complexities, or even answers at all. More details can give us more insights, but what does it all mean? At the beginning of “S-Town,” we know that the team has been working on the story for three years and that the entire series is complete. So we know that, unlike the first season of “Serial,” the producers have crafted a whole show out of a finite amount of material, and that the ending likely won’t be as elliptical. Yet the central question that “S-Town” pursues is much murkier from the start. It’s not a whodunit—it’s a What happened? or a *Did* something happen? or a What are we doing here? The more we learn about the possible murder, the more cryptic it gets.

Meanwhile, we get to know the fascinating characters and the town. “If ‘Serial’ is more like a TV show, this is more like a novel,” Reed told me, in a phone call last week. “I hope that people enjoy it the way they might enjoy a book.” There’s McLemore; his elderly mother with dementia; their old house and its underground tunnels and possible hidden treasure (seriously); McLemore’s close friend, employee, and son figure, Tyler Goodson, an earnest twenty-one-year-old with three daughters and a baby on the way; Tyler’s brother and sister-in-law; the wealthy Burt family, of which McLemore is leery, and which owns a logging concern suspiciously called K3 Lumber; and McLemore’s old school, which reminds him of Auschwitz. The possible murder, possibly perpetrated by Kabram Burt, and possible coverup are far from the only things that make McLemore think that Woodstock is a shit town: it’s one of the child-molester capitals of the state, he tells us; it has incredible police corruption and terrible education; its residents are

“rednecks,” backward and ignorant and misguided religious. “Jee-bus is coming!” McLemore says, disgustedly. (For a Northern, liberal NPR listener, hearing such things levelled against mostly conservative Southern whites, in a mellifluous spiel by a liberal Southern white man with a thick accent, is a mind-bender in itself—you feel implicated somehow, and voyeuristic.)



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREA MORALES

The producer Julie Snyder, in a phone call, also talked about novels and short stories, pointing out that early in the podcast, McLemore, fiercely wanting Reed and his audience to understand this world, gives Reed a copy of Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” He also gives him de Maupassant’s “The Necklace” and a horrifying Shirley Jackson story about vengeful townsfolk. All along,

McLemore himself is making his world seem like literature. But he also wants to get out and wishes he had years ago. At one point, he compares himself to someone dreaming of escaping Fallujah or Beirut. He also sees, around Shittown, a kind of shit world—a planet on the verge of collapse from climate change and other follies of man.

McLemore talks about his own depression with a startling casualness; he can sound almost chipper about it. In the first episode, listening to him go on, I found him a likable, compelling character who doesn't seem to be entirely O.K. He's like a bright and unstable relative who keeps you on the phone too long, someone you'd love, worry about, and not know how to help. It isn't just that the story he guides us into is a maze you could get stuck in—it's that he is, too. His speech is colorful and musical, his accent delicious. He says things like "That's when the Kabram boy just got out there and spilled the durn beans," and also talks of "proleptic decay and decrepitude."

Early on, I wondered if it was right to be holding a microphone up to McLemore and broadcasting him to the world. Listening to him made me think of a scene in the movie "Spotlight" in which the Boston *Globe* journalists discuss an agitated abuse survivor, who's been contacting them about predator priests for years. Some had ignored him, writing him off as a nut; others pointed out that sometimes such people are agitated for a reason, and that their stories are important. A key part of the value of having a dedicated investigative team like Spotlight is that it affords journalists the time and resources to pursue leads that might prove fruitless—which is a key part of finding the stories that prove fruitful, that uncover injustices and vital hidden truths. At the beginning of "S-Town," you feel what it's like to be a journalist who's in the exploratory phase, not knowing where your investigation will lead. Where it leads is not where anyone imagined: it becomes a kind of documentary literature.

“He’s kind of like a whistle-blower on this rural town,” Reed told me. When Reed was getting to know McLemore from afar, while working on stories about things like the F.B.I. and the Federal Reserve and the police, McLemore kept writing and calling to give him updates. “He was like, ‘Guess what I heard in the parking lot of the gas station today? I heard someone talking about this terrible, like, you know, depraved sexual act that is going on.’ It just felt like, ‘O.K., so I’ve got, like, the woman leaking secret recordings from the Fed, and then I’ve got John, who’s calling me from rural Alabama.’ And it seemed like, ‘O.K., I’ll see what he has to say.’ This is why I like my job.”

At the end of the second episode, there’s a shocking death. It’s unnerving for a few reasons. When I got to that point in the series, I wondered if they should have made this podcast at all, no matter how tempting its details, no matter how sensitively it was handled. “[Serial](#),” “[Making a Murderer](#),” and “[Missing Richard Simmons](#)”—three very different fine-grained works that examined real-life mysteries, with very different strengths and flaws—got millions of people obsessed with real, living people as if they were characters on “Breaking Bad” or “Big Little Lies.” I felt uneasy for the people of Woodstock, Alabama, and uneasy for myself. This wasn’t just interviewing the unruly gang at the local tattoo parlor; this was probing the aftermath of a tragedy. Now what we were getting into, in addition to some lingering practical mysteries, was the human mystery: depression, loneliness, isolation, grief, intolerance, bodily pain, emotional pain, greed, laws, lies, truth, justice.

Reed, who records the call in which he learns of the death, goes to the funeral for personal reasons, not sure what to do about the story he’s been working on. He goes as a concerned friend, but he also records the funeral on his phone. From here on, the producers walk a careful line. They play parts of the funeral on the show—but not the most painful parts. Reed talks to the survivors, gently and caringly asking them questions. He’s respectful,

appropriate, careful not to interfere; he warns interviewees of the possible implications of telling him sensitive information, of which there is plenty. Reed told me that as the months went on, he stayed interested in the story, and its subjects stayed connected to him. By that point, he had become part of their lives. “People were still contacting me and saying there was stuff happening,” he told me. “So I kept going.” He overreported, he said, knowing that there were several threads that could make a story.

You can’t tear yourself away from the results—especially from the fate of Tyler Goodson, an especially open-hearted and forthcoming subject, who you come to care about deeply. In the final episode, a detail is revealed that rivals de Maupassant in its painful thematic irony. “S-Town” is expertly constructed, by some of the most talented people in the podcast realm. The incidental music is an intriguing combination of strings and handclaps, urging you along, suggesting wistfulness and contemplation; episodes conclude with a lovely Zombies song, “A Rose for Emily.” In the end, we empathize with almost every character, and find commonalities between them and ourselves. “S-Town” helps advance the art of audio storytelling, daringly, thoughtfully, and with a journalist’s love of good details and fascinating material—but it also edges us closer to a discomfiting realm of well-intentioned voyeurism on a scale we haven’t quite experienced before. In the past four days, “S-Town” has exceeded ten million downloads. Whether the Internet and an audience of millions will share the show’s sensitivity toward its subjects remains to be seen.

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