

‘Like a Novel’: Literary Aesthetics, Nonfiction Ethics, and the *S-Town* podcast

Kylie Cardell

IN late 2014, when New York based radio journalist Bryan Reed arrives in Woodstock, Alabama, he is expecting to investigate a lurid if somewhat predictable tale of small-town crime and justice gone wrong. For just under a year, Reed has been corresponding with a charismatic local, John B. McLemore. McLemore has lived his whole life in Woodstock, a town he professes to despise. ‘Something’s happened’ he states in a phone call to Reed, ‘something has absolutely happened in this town. There’s just too much little crap for something not to have happened. And I’m about had enough of Shittown and the things that goes on’ (*S-Town* Chapter 1).

It is the kind of human-interest true-crime style content that Reed’s National Public Radio (NPR) colleagues have just made waves with for their breakthrough podcast *Serial*, and for which audiences of audio media are increasingly hungry (Dowling and Miller 168). When Reed agrees to investigate, the journalist and the clockmaker have already exchanged a series of long emails and multiple phone calls. McLemore is a complex, contradictory and fascinating character to whom Reed has felt increasingly drawn: ‘It felt as if by sheer force of will John was opening this portal between us and calling out through it’ (*S-Town* Chapter 1). When Reed visits Woodstock, he quickly discovers that while the town and its characters live up to McLemore’s vivid description, the alleged crime is too insubstantial to carry an investigative story. The resulting podcast explores themes of small town ‘paranoia’ and the consequences of ‘quick belief’, but the kind of deep dive, procedural narrative popularised by *Serial* is reimaged by Reed (Rich). Instead, *S-Town* takes ‘the human mystery’ as its central investigative concern, ‘the mysteries and tragedies surrounding the

life of a brilliant, troubled man in a small Alabama town' (Larson). It is a story that Reed and his producers will time and again refer to as 'literary' in its proportions and crafted 'of necessity' to resemble a novel (Vary). Of course, while the story may feel like a novel, McLemore is not a fictional protagonist. A world-renowned horologist, trained chemist, amateur alchemist, passionate conspiracy theorist, cynical denizen of the rural South, owner of an enormous and well-tended backyard hedge-maze (which may contain his 'unbanked' fortune) and closeted gay man, McLemore is deceased before the recording is finished, but his life-story, in intimate detail, will be narrated, crafted, and broadcast to the world by Reed in a podcast styled as a novel.

This article explores *S-Town* as a significant example of popular nonfiction podcasting that shows both the ongoing importance of personal storytelling modes and the continuing complexity of nonfiction representation and ethics. Reed uses 'novel', or sometimes 'book', to convey his sense of innovation in podcast media, to describe the format and structure of the podcast, and to establish an aesthetic for *S-Town* as a 'literary' work (Reed in Van Luling). While the podcast has been praised for its innovation in form, 'novelistic' scope and narrative style, audiences have also remained attentive to ethical questions – for example, representation of queer identity and experience, complicity with racism and exploitative 'poverty tourism' – that also surround this story and that Reed has been less enthusiastic in discussing. While critics have raised issues on several fronts, ethical concerns in relation to privacy and consent have been foregrounded. Aja Romano, for instance, argues that despite the useful 'complexity and range' of issues explored in *S-Town*, the podcast still 'ultimately amounts to a deep dive into one man's mental health – a journey I don't believe he ever explicitly invited us to take'. As an exciting 'experiment', *S-Town* shows the potential of the podcast medium for innovative nonfiction storytelling, but various ethical questions remain extant (Romano). Others, like Gay Alcorn, have framed these issues as a moral problem and a failure of Reed's personal ethics as a professional journalist.

The questions that critics and commentators have raised in relation to the *S-Town* podcast highlight complex issues of representation and ethics that have been of interest to professional journalists for a number of years and that are of central significance to scholarly discussions of ethics in relation to life narrative. *S-Town* is the story of McLemore and it is narrated and crafted by Reed; it is a biographical project in which the narrator's autobiographical voice and perspective is also present and this fact has troubled commentators: it is 'the reporter's story being told, not the story of his or her subjects. And that complicates everything' (Alcorn). Siobhan McHugh observes, in 'Memoir for Your Ears: The Podcast Life', that one of the most significant recent trends is

for podcast journalism that functions as aural memoir (106). The affordances of podcast technology are important here and have an ethical dimension. For example, McHugh discusses the significance of audio as a ‘temporal medium’, a text in which it is harder to ‘skim a passage and jump ahead’ and so in which intimacy between speaker and listener, as well as experiences of subjectivity, can be uniquely enhanced (‘Memoir’ 107). Reed, however, tends to discuss his podcast innovation in terms of its resemblance to the literary form of the novel. In this discussion, I consider how, through using techniques that he associates with the novel, such as metaphor, Reed is negotiating with the ethics of representing this story. Whether this particular story ought *not* to have been told, as Romano or Alcorn argue, it is evident that audiences and makers continue to seek out experimental storytelling in nonfiction genres and digital formats and that life narrative is predominant in this endeavour. This article considers issues that are continuing to evolve in relation to the podcast medium and explores some of the ways in which innovation in nonfiction podcasting is intersecting with ongoing debates in relation to life writing and representation in the twenty-first century.

‘Like a Novel’: Nonfiction, prestige and form

In *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, life writing scholar, Julie Rak, observes that because certain genres of storytelling have retained an association with forms of low or ‘mass’ culture they have struggled to achieve value in the eyes of consumers and scholars (19). Rak discusses memoir as a genre of nonfiction that has shifted in and out of prestige arenas in relation to markets and literary discourse, but she is mostly interested in how genre matters to readers. Because reader expectations are shaped by paratext and other material, genre is one of the ways in which a reader knows *how* to read a text being presented. Particularly for autobiographical narrative, ‘it matters’, says Rak, ‘how this book has been manufactured and more specifically what *kind* of book it is’ (25). It matters not only for readers, but for publishers too.

Memoir’s popularity is linked to a ‘boom’ in autobiographical production of all kinds and to the current predominance of personal storytelling across multiple modes of media. The podcast is one such medium, emerging at a moment of peak intersection between subjective – or what Rosalind Coward has called ‘confessional’ – forms of journalism, and the efflorescence of life narrative as a vast and influential literary genre of the twenty-first century. Although distinct from the twentieth-century movement of New Journalism, ‘the first-time journalists self-consciously included themselves in the picture’, subjective and confessional journalism remains energised by a broader social and cultural push for more ‘personal reporting’ and by an amplified popularity for the kind

of author-led subjective responses and individual perspectives that the era of New Journalism commenced (Coward 52). For contemporary journalists, the pressure to take a more personal point of view is part of a broader shift in media more generally and Coward discusses her own experience of subjective reporting: for two years she wrote a column for a major British newspaper on caring for her ageing mother who was declining from Alzheimer's. For Coward, this was 'journalism on par with more conventional campaigning and investigative journalism, but raising issues in more personal and empathetic ways' (5). While her readers were broadly supportive, she was occasionally criticised for perceived breaches of her mother's privacy. 'Speaking personally', says Coward, 'is now a dominant element of journalism and core to the practices of journalism on the Internet', yet she is troubled to find very little in the way of academic or professional reflection on ethical practice: 'personal writing is barely acknowledged as journalism in many quarters. Its ethical dilemmas are not regarded as journalism's most pressing issues' (7). Coward's study details the immense popularity of subjective modes of journalism and reveals some of the urgent, ongoing ethical stakes for journalists, editors and indeed the subjects of these stories.

The *S-Town* podcast can be usefully contextualised in relation to the kinds of debates that Rak and Coward identify. The public appetite for autobiographical and personal storytelling is affecting various conventions in relation to nonfiction narration and debates about ethics, responsibility and value, as well as the role of audiences, remain central. Significantly, the podcast is a medium of audio in which generic conventions are still being established but the terms of reference have tended to draw from various recognisable forms. James Tierney suggests that, in general, 'literary' descriptors are being invoked to describe the kinds of experiences that podcast audiences desire and enjoy, that is, as the kind of 'enrapturement typically associated with the experience of reading a novel'. Certainly, the *S-Town* podcast has been hailed in literary terms, as 'aural literature' (Waldman); as the twenty-first century successor to the 'nonfiction novel', as murder mystery, rural tourism and 'timely, humanistic biography' (Kornhaber). In 2017, conferring their annual awards for innovative broadcast storytelling, the Peabody committee commended the NPR produced podcast and Reed's team for breaking 'new ground' in the medium, describing *S-Town* as 'the first true audio novel, a nonfiction biography constructed in the style and form of a 7-chapter novel' (*The Peabody Award*).

The Peabody description in particular captures some of the conjoined excitement and complexity that has surrounded *S-Town* and that has been amplified (or exacerbated) by Reed's own go-to description of the podcast as 'like a novel' (Van Luling). In *Immersive Longform Storytelling: Media, Technology, Audi-*

ence, a scholarly discussion of the increasing popularity of immersive online media, David Dowling identifies *S-Town* as a pivotal product in the shift towards the kind of sophisticated, longform nonfiction narrative that is now becoming a feature of podcast content. Despite stereotypes of the ‘the manic Twitter-driven news cycle and its attendant online reading practices associate with scanning, skimming, and short attention spans’, Dowling argues that both research and the market are proving the appeal of longform and immersive digital media (9). Significantly, unlike much of the radio journalism that historically precedes it, ‘digital longform is not known for the staid presentation of emotionally neutral material’ (Dowling 9). Alongside the sophistication enabled in longform audio, an increased self-reflexivity and a commitment to making the means of production transparent is positioning journalists in relation to their material in new and creative ways.

For Dowling, *S-Town* is a preeminent example of this kind of contemporary journalism because it ‘breach[es] the category of news altogether’, drawing instead on literary antecedents and fictional techniques, ‘on modernist fictional narrative as the keynote for its self-reflexive postmodern narrative’, adopting a narrative voice and style more usually associated with ‘documentary cinema and the novel’ (125). Here issues of aesthetics and artfulness are drawn into view: the immersive, longform podcast nonfiction that Dowling admires is seen to have more in common with literary culture than its usually cited antecedent, broadcast radio, and he argues that this has been important in establishing both the innovation and value of the podcast medium. And it is not surprising that crime or mystery podcasts seem to be some of the most successful and popular genres in this medium. The ongoing tension of a plot of detection and mystery, of sleuthing and solving, is an obvious fit for the structural narrative tension of the weekly podcast format and this fit is hardly a new invention. As Erika Haugtvedt says, serialisation ‘unleashes the considerable power of a desiring, anxious, and invested audience in stories that continually defer closure. This combination is particularly volatile when united with the serial narration of true crime, as the nineteenth century taught us’ (9). In relation to the podcast, however, seriality is a hallmark that has also, as Dowling explains, been associated with various stereotypes of digital culture as deficient, sustained successively instead of deeply through attention grabs, shallow reading and a lack of capacity for sustained concentration (1).

Contemporary podcasts are being conceptualised by makers in ways that seek to transcend previous conceptions of the podcast form and to overcome a stigma relating to digital content and its consumption. In *S-Town*, this intention is explicitly signalled by host and producer Reed through his articulated references to the podcast’s ‘novelistic’ style and in discussions about choices in

relation to format. For example, while *S-Town* replicates much of the narrative and dramatic arc of its NPR stablemate and famous predecessor *Serial*, it deviates from that model in various key aspects and one of these is the eschewing of a serial, episode-by-episode broadcast: unlike *Serial* host Sarah Koenig's weekly musings, presented as a real-time view on a still-unfolding investigation, Reed's podcast was delivered to audiences as a completed story. Dowling suggests that this choice was partly market-driven, a response to a 'user demand for autonomy' and a shift in 'consumption practices – from episodic to binge-listening – based on the Netflix model of publishing full seasons at once' (123). In discussion, however, Reed tends to focus on the decision as a commitment to crafting for style and affect. For example, the podcast is divided and labelled into 'chapters' rather than episodes and this was a very deliberate choice. *S-Town* producer Julie Synder comments: 'We don't even consider the episodes as episodes. They're chapters. It just feels like a book' (Locke). Elsewhere, Reed explains, 'I guess I wanted to signal to the listeners that this is the kind of story this is. It's going to feel a little literary and a little more like a novel than a TV show, maybe' (qtd. in Van Luling).

What does it mean for a podcast to 'feel' like a book? Anna Poletti has discussed the significance of the monograph as a 'trusted and privileged medium' within the context of autobiography and life writing studies, where the book is not only a format but a critical metaphor and benchmark in relation to ideals of representation of self and experience (461). Poletti argues: the book is 'the privileged medium for making knowledge consequential' yet it has too often been 'invisible' to theorists and critics, a legacy that Poletti crucially interrupts (460). In seeing that, Reed and the *S-Town* team have made decisions in relation to both the format of the podcast, its book-like 'feel', and to the use of a 'novelistic' technique, it is clear that this is about establishing literary dimensions and correspondent value for the podcast product. So, the much-remarked on decision to eschew 'serial' delivery for *S-Town* can be understood not only as a canny market-based response, but also as a desire to establish a kind of prestige that Reed sees as inherent in the monograph object, an attendant association of the form with complex narrative and sophisticated engagement. This is an association with the novel as a preeminent literary mode and, as Wayne Booth establishes in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the novel as a 'certain kind of literature, or literature as a certain kind of art' (31).

An alignment with the novel as a *literary* form is further contextualised here as an aspiration in connection to prestige and the market, even as it can also be seen as part of a self-conscious effort to work with and present the kind of complex and sophisticated narrative of which the literary novel is a canonical symbol:

Some podcasts feel a little more structured after serialized TV; this is more like a book you might sit down to read over the course of a week or two . . . where you listen before you go to bed or while you're commuting or whatever like that – it kind of embeds itself in your brain a little bit. You're just doing your normal day stuff and you've got this little window in to your little world, like, in your brain like you would with a good novel. (Reed qtd. in Van Luling)

However, Reed's literary intentions and crafting for *S-Town* also raise issues that he has been less willing to address. These have centred not on the literariness of the *S-Town* podcast, and most critics have agreed that the story is exceptionally well told, but on its ethical stakes. As a combination of journalism and personal story, the *S-Town* podcast can be situated within a recent tradition of creative nonfiction (a mantra for the movement is 'true stories well told') and in an older tradition of literary journalism, as well as an example of life writing, a broad, nonfiction genre that has been highly influential in the twenty-first century and in new media in particular. In these genres, the vulnerability of truth and verifiability in deference to the author's claimed subjective authority has driven both interest and criticism. Reed's ethical choices in *S-Town* have been a focus for comment and scrutiny. And critics have tended to conclude, as Alcorn does, that while *S-Town* is undeniably a 'good story' it is also 'morally indefensible'; Romano calls the podcast 'stunning' and 'painfully beautiful', but also remains 'not convinced it should have been made'.

Reed's description of his nonfiction podcast as a novel indicates an innovative aesthetic and receptive frame for this work, but there are ongoing pressures for makers in nonfiction podcast formats to make visible certain ethical choices and decision-making that audiences increasingly expect and seek to understand. Coward has argued that forms of journalism that step away from 'impersonal voice' and 'fallacies of objectivity' have an important role and that risks incurred are worth taking (29). Dowling claims that digital longform has become 'increasingly self-reflexive by calling attention to the process of its own production' and that this has an ethical dimension (2). The podcast medium interfaces with ideas of the literary and particularly in relation to 'personal' storytelling; narratives in which the podcast host is also a key interlocutor and character. What kind of ethical tensions surface in the podcast as life narrative, and how are makers negotiating with the demands of genre and story in this medium?

'Witness Marks': *S-Town* and Narrative Ethics

S-Town was produced by a team that included Sarah Koenig (host and producer of the ground-breaking *Serial* podcast) as well as Reed and Koenig's *This American Life* colleague and NPR radio celebrity, Ira Glass. Reed's podcast

was cross promoted by Koenig and initially appeared to be a continuation of *Serial*'s award-winning formula. But although *S-Town* sets out like a classic serialised crime procedural, it quickly shifts gears into a different kind of investigation altogether. Once McLemore's suicide is revealed in Chapter 2, it takes on a eulogistic mode in which Reed, in what is framed as an act of personal grief or mourning, is presented as attempting to reconstruct the life of a friend he knew only towards the end of a very complicated life. Reed turns his investigative skills to McLemore's past and to reconciling what he perceives as the contradictions of his public persona and aspects of his life that McLemore himself kept guarded while he was alive.

The choices Reed makes here, sometimes self-consciously discussed within the podcast, form challenging ethical territory, and these have been the catalyst for some of the more vocal criticisms of the podcast, many of which revolve around the canonical biographical question of consent: once Reed's informant is no longer able to corroborate facts or ask for privacy in relation to them, his vulnerability is exposed. As the podcast arc evolves from classic reporter-detective story and treasure hunt to personal quest and biography, the focus shifts to an attempt to trace the cultural context in which McLemore lived and to parse the inner-workings of his character and the history of his experience; the plot is no longer about a mysterious crime but an investigation into McLemore himself. As Reed learns more about his dead friend, he shares his discoveries with the podcast audience. It is a narrative tension built on serial suspense and revelation but that also involves the presentation of ever more private or hidden detail from McLemore's life. Reed also makes personal disclosures during *S-Town*, for example, he reveals that he is married to a black Alabaman woman but he confesses that he has not disclosed this fact to people he meets in Woodstock, many of whom he records expressing strongly racist views. Reed's reluctance to share details of his own biography with subjects he meets in Woodstock reveal currents of prejudice and discrimination negotiated in order to get the story, and they also reveal degrees of complicity.

We learn about Reed from what he chooses to reveal, as well as from what he does not, but most discussions of the podcast have tended to have focus on disclosures Reed makes on behalf of his subject. Late in Chapter 6, for example, Reed presents a long anonymous interview with one of John's friends that draws sharply into view the restrictions and social obstacles McLemore faced as a closeted gay man. In the same chapter, Reed explains why he has chosen to disclose details of McLemore's affair with an unnamed married man in his town, an affair that was a secret while McLemore was alive. Prompted to consider what 'good' these revelations might do, and by implication what harm, Reed articulates and reflects on his motives in the voiceover and concludes that

what he has been trying to do in the podcast is ‘understand another person’ and that this ‘is a worthwhile thing to do’ (*S-Town* Chapter 6).

The podcast uses both narrative and aural effects to tell the *S-Town* story and to navigate and make visible the ethical context and consequences of this narration. Reed’s referencing of ‘novel’ in this context signals an intention in relation to crafting and sophistication, and this innovative longform audio in nonfiction genres has increasingly become an interest for contemporary audiences. Dowling links the emergence of highly complex nonfiction narrative in audio to various other developments in digital culture, for example, on social media or in practises of online reading: ‘deep reading associated with the literary mind has now found its counterpart in immersive nonfictional media’ (22). John Biewen too observes that the popularity of complex nonfiction narratives in audio is a relatively new phenomenon, and that it is only recently that using ‘sound to tell *true* stories *artfully*’ has been an acceptable premise for audio content producers (5, emphasis in original). The podcast is a distinctive medium for nonfiction narration and one that innovatively deploys and works with recognisable conventions in this genre. For example, writing on *S-Town* for *The Conversation*, McHugh differentiates between the ‘delicious detail’ a literary journalist can only write about but which on a podcast, ‘we hear first-hand’ (‘Why *S-Town* Invites’). For Mia Lindgren, the affective mode of listening elevates and amplifies the potential of the podcast medium within personal narrative genres such that the affordances of the podcast mean personal storytelling in this form ‘creates a uniquely personal relationship between the listener and the content. Voice is the intimate key to audiences’ hearts. By listening to detailed personal experience of “others”, listeners become connected to the people whose stories they share’ (27).

For McHugh, the presentation of subjects with strong regional accents is an effect of the aural medium that conveys place and authenticity and ‘invites’ empathy: ‘we listen in appalled fascination; audio can bypass our bigotry and suck us in to places where we normally wouldn’t go’ (27). Perhaps alluded to here are widespread criticisms of *S-Town* as a kind of poverty tourism that enables its listeners, by implication, from elsewhere, to eavesdrop on the ‘backwards South’ and its rural queer (Bibler). For McHugh and Lindgren, however, the audio presentation of voice in this context is part of an ethical contract that the podcast medium makes with its listeners, an effect that McHugh argues establishes empathy over the charge of voyeurism in the case of *S-Town*. Michael Bibler, in a critique of *S-Town*, agrees that the aural medium has ethical force: ‘because this is a podcast delivered through sound, and not a written narrative, the power and originality of McLemore’s voice constantly break through Reed’s efforts to shape what we hear’. However, though McLemore’s audible

voice is one of the most compelling and important elements of the podcast, the narrative arc itself is also crucial: '*S-Town* squanders this opportunity by editing McLemore's voice to fit a more shopworn "southern" script. Like Jeeter Lester soaking his feet in the drainage ditch in Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932), it doesn't take long before *S-Town* sinks into a stream of southern gothic clichés' (Bibler).

Both McHugh and Lindgren ask for a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of how the podcast medium works and for this to be part of a calculation of its aesthetic effect and its ethics. Hearing a subject's 'actual voice' as well as other non-verbal sound is a significant quality of the podcast medium, one that may heighten empathy or feeling (McHugh, 'Memoir for your Ears' 108). But audibility is not alone an ethical fix. Reed's referencing of literary genres and the novel becomes important here. Bibler, for example, has argued that the arc of narration and its attendant structure is a problematic element of the *S-Town* story because it centres Reed as the interpreter and arbiter of meaning in relation to McLemore's life and acts as a consoling plot. It 'invites listeners to identify with Reed's narrative voice, eventually sharing his feelings of transcendent mobility and sophistication in opposition to the pain and paranoia that we hear in McLemore'. Similarly, literary scholar Nathanael T. Booth argues that alongside important and ongoing debates about ethics and facts in relation to *S-Town*, it is the 'novelistic' features of the podcast that he sees as able to 'provide an important interpretative path for understanding' (275).

A reading that also situates *S-Town* alongside literary antecedents can do important work. Reed's 'invocation of literature' and his claims to the podcast as 'novelistic' prompt Booth to use literary genre analysis of small-town fiction and the trope of 'Revolt from the Village', in a reading that seeks to unpack the representation of queer identity in *S-Town*. Though Booth finds Reed's 'highly artificial approach to reportage' to also be 'refreshingly open and honest', he queries the presence of retrograde tropes that reduce McLemore's sexual identity to stock characterisation and his lived queer experience to a series of plot twists (275). Ultimately, Booth argues that 'in spite of their actual existence', both McLemore and his town are reduced to stereotypes in Reed's telling of this story, perpetuating dated imagery of both rural life and queer experience (275). While critical of the podcast's representative ethics, the fact that this is *Reed's* story is central to Booth's analysis and to how he reads the representations of others in this frame. While Booth uses fictional antecedents in order to understand Reed's narrative choices, the kind of analysis here might also be understood as a methodology of life narrative scholarship, where a close attention to acts of self-representation is foundational.

As noted above, critical responses to the *S-Town* podcast have largely focused on privacy and ethics in relation to Reed's handling of McLemore's story, and it is clear that genre matters for nonfiction authors and readers in ways that continue to evolve. For authors working in life narrative modes, for example in journalism that is also intended to be literary art, such issues can become urgent. In *Memoir: An Introduction*, G. Thomas Couser argues that memoir has a strong relationship to genres of fiction but that in terms of scholarly and theoretical engagement, the novel has taken precedence. Yet, as Couser observes, 'too often overlooked has been the fact that most novels (at least until about 1900) took the *form* of life writing genres' (55, emphasis in original). Couser calls memoir and the novel 'sibling genres' and he argues that a better understanding of each can be enhanced by knowledge of either and that in most cases '*they are often indistinguishable in form*' (55, emphasis in original). Where a distinction is made, however, is in relation to ethics. Importantly, 'the two genres make different kinds of truth claims: it is possible for memoirs to lie in ways that make no sense for novels' (Couser 55).

The novel as a literary form is highly influential in how Reed has designed, delivered and conceptualised *S-Town* and the podcast also uses a highly self-reflexive autobiographical narrative voice, allowing for moments of confession and personal disclosure on behalf of the host as well as a degree of transparency in how the podcast has been made. Reed aligns his podcast with a prestigious product (the literary novel) while speaking to a mass online audience primed for Coward's 'confessional journalism', or who are versed in everyday personal storytelling modes. Attending not only to the novelistic affects or frame of *S-Town* but also to the way the podcast negotiates and makes visible the basis of truth claims and use of evidentiary details is thus equally important. This is not to elide the ethical implications of claims to genre, which have important consequences for a text's circulation and impact in the world. Instead, it is to dig deeper into why association with the novel is such an important claim for Reed and what he sees this as allowing in relation to the kind of story he has to tell. My reading of the podcast thus resists the need to instate what Couser elsewhere calls 'excessively fastidious' standards in relation to whether or not a memoir satisfies cultural ethical standards (*Vulnerable Subjects* 55).

That is, the ethics of Reed's decision-making and claims to genre demand scrutiny, but a reading of this podcast that attends to its literary aesthetics, to tropes or plot (such as Bibler's and Booth's approaches), can also be brought to bear in other ways. One of the issues that Reed explores in his podcast is the difficulty of representing and narrating a life story and this is important. For example, an extended voiceover on McLemore's profession as an antique clock-restorer that opens Chapter 1 uses literary metaphor to reflect on and

explore the idea of ‘restoration’:

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, and all you’ve got are these vague witness marks, which might not even mean what you think they mean. So at every moment along the way, you have to decide if you’re wasting your time or not. (*S-Town* Chapter 1)

Piecing and reconstructing a life, much like restoring a clock, is contingent and to some extent impossibly slippery or leaky work. It is a description that Reed applies to McLemore, but could equally describe his own work as a journalist. For example, one of the catalysts for Reed’s sense of his podcast as a novel is in the unexpected shape of the story that emerged during recording. Snyder says: ‘I felt so bad for Brian. When he called me to tell me it was like his friend died, we weren’t talking about it like a story. This is where [executive producer] Ira Glass is very helpful, because Ira has a tendency to move on a little more quickly than the rest of us. He was the one who pointed out that this made it a story’ (Locker). The method of reporting was also important. Reed and Snyder discuss the structural challenges of narrating an audio story that lacked classic radio-style ‘forward-motion’ and that positioned Reed in an unfamiliar narrative role, needing to deploy ‘omniscience’ and ‘foreshadowing’, and to manage the narrative over a space of years (Vary).

For Reed, the kind of story that he ended up with in *S-Town* allowed him to create an innovative podcast product, but it also presented methodological and ethical challenges. As Coward reminds us, journalists who navigate subjective reporting often do so with little professional guidance or respect (137). But that Reed is to some degree thinking about the construction of his podcast and its narrative ethics, about the responsibility that this entails, is part of the narrative: for the journalist, as the clockmaker, the ‘restoring’ creates its own traces, the ‘witness marks’ that reveal the maker in relation to the made. Rak, in her discussion of memoir and the market, observes that this kind of self-conscious representation in which a narrator reveals or reflects on their own mediation in relation to a nonfiction work is a risky yet inevitable claim of life writing, and Couser too addresses this. Coward observes that the risks of personal journalism involve getting it wrong, but that ‘self-revelation and scrutiny of other’s intimacies are about witnessing others create themselves and respond to ethical dilemmas’, and that journalists also have a crucial role here (89).

Ultimately, nonfiction is also a literary form. Both readers and critics can

attend to the ways in which life writers and others use and deploy symbolic and figurative language, for example, alongside and as part of fulfilling expectations and assumptions of truth and verifiability in relation to genre. Booth's reading, an analysis of *S-Town* in relation to tropes of small-town fiction, is instructive as a corollary: 'McLemore is presented as the protagonist of *S-Town*, but his fulfilment of generic roles suggests that the real moral arc is that of the listener' (282-3). I suggest that one of the ways in which the *S-Town* podcast thus actively negotiates with ethics and life writing is in asking the audience to think more actively about how nonfiction and documentary stories might be crafted to 'feel' like novels and to consider what this might mean, making visible the burden and benefits of telling someone's life story, and the vulnerability and responsibility that emerges. Reading *S-Town* in this frame draws attention to the ways in which nonfiction forms use devices not always or simply associated with verifiability and 'truth' in order to make transparent, or audible, the challenges of this narrative mode. In this kind of reading, the voiceovers and reflective monologues that Reed conducts can be seen as the 'witness marks'. These 'marks' allow him to reconstruct McLemore's life and self-consciously signal this project as relative and incomplete. They are a metaphor for the difficult, fraught and ultimately inadequate capacity to fully represent a life in narrative, and of the impossible burden on the 'restorer' to get it right in relation to the original experience. Restoring a clock to its original working order is represented as a mysterious process: the restorer inevitably mediates the original but can also leave marks that show and reveal these efforts. This is a principle of horology and it is increasingly a feature of life narrative and contemporary biography.

Reed's podcast is a complex and influential example of the podcast medium, one that reveals the persistence and power of subjective and personal storytelling for contemporary audiences. In a generous analysis, a description by Reed and his team of the podcast as 'like a novel' can also be seen as part of an effort to acknowledge the potential for complex representation in relation to ethics and narration. Similarly, there is no doubt that Reed's description of his podcast as a literary product is also an aspirational claim connected to market forces as much as it accurately describes self-conscious choices made in relation to journalistic craft and to podcast affordances. As I have been arguing, whether or not the podcast fulfills its actual ethical obligations, Reed's insistent references to the novel to describe his aesthetic choices for *S-Town* are important to consider when contextualised, for example, in relation to Rak's work on how genres of nonfiction have sometimes been disparaged in popular markets and contexts and where audiences are clearly being sought. Reed is negotiating with similar perceptions in his context; the tensions that Rak sees

in the nonfiction literary marketplace are also relevant to online and digital content, but so too are the ethical consequences and responsibility, and journalists and podcasters are not exempt from these demands.

What might Reed's claims about his approach to the podcast as 'novel' tell us about how journalists view the medium's potential for personal storytelling? While his critics tend to argue that Reed is perhaps, most simply, aligning himself to a tradition of journalism that feels retro at least and wilfully nostalgic at worst, that is, as a kind of Truman Capote-esque New Journalist claim to the 'nonfiction novel', the potential of the podcast medium to allow for complex and crafted literary retellings – like the novel – is one that can be taken seriously. *S-Town* marks a lyrical, 'novelistic' engagement with documentary storytelling, a trajectory that has also been traced in life writing over the last few decades and it draws valuable attention to the rise of nonfiction storytelling in the podcast medium, as well as to the ongoing significance of personal, subjective narration in contemporary journalism. As Rak reminds us, genre is far from simply an aesthetic claim. Genres identify markets and are crucial for selling cultural products. Reed needs to differentiate his podcast from similar products, but he also wants to account for the story that he tells.

Of course, for all the ways in which *S-Town* has been crafted with 'novelistic' metaphors and structure, the narrative itself details the life story of a queer man whose co-agency in relation to the presentation and crafting of the story has been foregone by his death. To what degree are Reed's claims to genre also an ethical bargaining with the kind of story he eventually tells here? Reed's literary journalistic account of his subject comes up against various ethical and aesthetic limits, and he might have made different choices; Larson is another commentator who ponders whether he might have decided 'not to tell' more often. The ethics of life writing, though, make ongoing demands on writers and readers and there is little doubt, as Eakin has observed, that authors will continue to be criticised 'not only for *not* telling the truth – historical or personal – but also for telling too much truth' (3). In the twenty-first century, nonfiction forms have assumed an unprecedented popularity, and the ethics of 'personal storytelling' remain a key domain of debate. Moreover, as Coward has observed, while 'confessional' first-person narrative of all kinds has proliferated in online and digital media, journalists have come under particular pressure in this context. By foregrounding the subjective presence and decision-making processes of the journalist in relation to the story, Reed asks the listener to engage with sophisticated ethical questions about whose story is being told, and how. Though this does not diminish the ethical responsibility that Reed incurs in telling this story, and indeed, he may ultimately fail various ethical obligations that the podcast negotiates, the *S-Town* podcast is also a

self-conscious literary representation; the nature of autobiographical truth and the significance of subjectivity and ethics are part of the story.

The popularity of the nonfiction podcast is further evidence of the ways in which subjective points of view continue to be both influential and attractive to audiences. The podcast represents an exceptionally powerful new medium at the interface of literary and personal storytelling that, as Lindgren observes, produces the potential for both new affective registers and a mode of listening and witnessing that may demand audiences develop new critical skills and capacity for following ‘presenters moving seamlessly’ from ‘wild speculations and opinions to facts’ (37). While *S-Town* must be contextualised in relation to the urgent ethical issues drawn into view by commentators and critics, the podcast also offers a case study of nonfiction literature finding a place in the podcast medium, and it is a performance of challenges and opportunities that creators seeking to innovate in this format will continue to encounter.

Works cited

- Alcorn, Gay. ‘*S-Town* Never Justifies its Voyeurism, and That Makes it Morally Indefensible.’ *The Guardian*, 22 Apr. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/22/s-town-never-justifies-its-vo>
- Bibler, Michael. ‘The Podcast and the Police: *S-Town* and the Narrative Form of Southern Queerness.’ *Southern Spaces*, 24 Mar. 2020, <https://southernspaces.org/2020/podcast-and-police-s-town-and-narrative-form-s>
- Biewen, John. ‘Introduction.’ *Reality Radio: Telling True Stories in Sound*, edited by John Biewen and Alexa Dilworth, The U of North Carolina P, 2010, pp. 1–14.
- Booth, Nathanael T. ‘*S-Town*, Small-Town Literature, and the Uses of Queerness.’ *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2019, pp. 273–96, doi: [10.1353/mss.2019.0013](https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2019.0013).
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed., The U of Chicago P, 1983.
- Couser, G. Thomas. *Memoir: An Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2012.
- . *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*. Cornell UP, 2004.
- Coward, Rosalind. *Speaking Personally: The Rise of Subjective and Confessional Journalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Dowling, David. *Immersive Longform Storytelling: Media, Technology, Audience*. Routledge, 2019.
- . and Kyle J. Miller. ‘Immersive Audio Storytelling: Podcasting and Serial Documentary in the Digital Publishing Industry.’ *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2019, pp. 167–84, doi: [10.1080/19376529.2018.1509218](https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2018.1509218).
- Eakin, Paul John, ed. *The Ethics of Life Writing*. Cornell UP, 2004.

Haugtvedt, Erica. ‘The Ethics of Serialized True Crime: Fictionality in *Serial* Season One.’ *The Serial Podcast and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, edited by Ellen McCracken, Routledge, 2017, pp. 7–23.

Kornhaber, Spencer. ‘*S-Town* Is a Well-Crafted Monument to Empathy.’ *The Atlantic*, 31 Mar. 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/03/s-town-podcast-review-empathy-cultural-divides/521325/>.

Larson, Sarah. ‘*S-Town* Investigates the Human Mystery.’ *The New Yorker*, 31 Mar. 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/sarah-larson/s-town-investigates-the-human-mystery>.

Lindgren, Mia. ‘Personal Narrative Journalism and Podcasting.’ *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2016, pp. 23–41, doi: [10.1386/rjao.14.1.23_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/rjao.14.1.23_1).

Locke, Charley. ‘The Creators of *Serial* are Back with a Binge-Ready New Podcast.’ *Wired*, 28 Mar. 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/03/s-town-podcast/>.

Locker, Melissa. ‘Bittersweet home Alabama: *S-Town*, the Next Podcast from the Makers of *Serial*.’ *The Guardian*, 28 Mar. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/mar/28/s-town-podcast-makers-serial>.

McHugh, Siobhán. ‘Why *S-Town* Invites Empathy Not Voyeurism.’ *The Conversation*, 27 Apr. 2017, <https://theconversation.com/why-s-town-invites-empathy-not-voyeurism-76510>.

—. ‘Memoir for Your Ears: The Podcast Life.’ *Mediating Memory: Tracing the Limits of Memoir*, edited by Buntly Avieson, et al., Routledge, 2017, pp. 104–22.

Poletti, Anna. ‘Putting Lives on the Record: The Book as Material and Symbol in Life Writing.’ *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2017, pp. 460–84, doi: [10.1353/bio.2017.0033](https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2017.0033).

Rak, Julie. *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013.

Reed, Brian, host and executive producer. *S-Town*. Serial Productions, 2017, <https://stownpodcast.org/>.

Rich, Katey. ‘How *S-Town*, From the People Who Brought You *Serial*, Is Changing Podcasts All Over Again.’ *Vanity Fair*, 30 Mar. 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/s-town-podcast-serial>.

Romano, Aja. ‘*S-Town*, the Controversial Hit Podcast, is Being Sued for Exploitation.’ *Vox*, 17 Jul. 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/7/17/17581928/s-town-podcast-lawsuit-john-b-mclemore>.

‘*S-Town* (stownpodcast.org).’ *The Peabody Awards*, 2017, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/s-town>.

Tierney, James. ‘Literary Listening: The rise of the podcast as literary form.’ *Kill Your Darlings*, 21 Jan. 2015, <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/2015/01/literary-listening/>.

Vary, Adam B. ‘How The Best Podcast Of The Year Was Made.’ *Buzzfeed*, 15 Apr. 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/adambvary/beaucoups-and-beaucoups-of-stuff>.

Van Luling, Todd. ‘New *Serial* and *This American Life* Podcast *S-Town* Just Debuted All Its Episodes at Once.’ *The Huffington Post*, 28 Mar. 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/serial-s-town-podcast_n_58d40857e4b0f838c6307f44.

Waldman, Katy. ‘The Gorgeous New True Crime Podcast *S-Town* is Like *Serial* but Satisfying.’ *Slate*,

30 Mar. 2017, <https://slate.com/culture/2017/03/s-town-the-new-true-crime-podcast-by-the-makers-of-serial-rev.html>.