

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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Take Long Looks at Anything

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Take Long Looks at Anything

Abstract

Posting about the podcast *S-Town* by Brian Reed from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/take-long-looks-at-anything/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Take Long Looks at Anything

 [inallthings.org/take-long-looks-at-anything/](https://allthings.org/take-long-looks-at-anything/)

Luke Hawley

S-Town is the new [binge-listen podcast](#) dropped last week by the producers of *This American Life* and *Serial*. It's a long and winding and wonderfully wild story about John B McLemore, a madcap horologist who pesters producer Brian Reed with emails about a suspected murder in his hometown—and subject lines like, “John B McLemore lives in Sh**town, Alabama”—until he feels he has no choice but to fly down and meet the man behind the mail. It's billed as a true-crime podcast, but that's like calling Dylan a gospel singer; while a section of the story revolves around the crime that McLemore mentions in the email, it's really only a couple of records in a lifelong catalog. We have Reed to thank for this; perhaps he took a twist of Dylan's advice: *You gotta serve somebody*.

Reed devotes the seven-episode show to John B McLemore. It listens like a Faulkner story—achronological, full of bizarre bit characters and incult idioms, a lid-lifted on the strange South. Or maybe an O'Connor story—both the Bible salesman and the one-legged Hulga Hopewell from “Good Country People” would be right at home in McLemore's S-town. Forgive my fictive comparisons—I'm a writer and an English professor, so I tend to measure the world by what would make a great short story. In fact, I often tell my literature students that I'm not much of a non-fiction guy, though, after listening to S-town and comparing it to the rest of the podcast pantheon, I've realized that's misleading. Most of the podcasts I listen to center on true stories. And I suppose McLemore's story is true too, in that bits and pieces of it happened in real-time, here on earth. But it's as much fiction as anything—a side-eyed glance at what actually happened.

Which, in the end, isn't much, really. Reed weaves a story as confusing as the hedge maze that shows up in the first episode—a maze with 64 different solutions, depending on how McLemore's complicated gate system is set, as well as an impossible-to-get-out null set. You can make the case that S-town is exactly that: a null set. If you're somebody who wants your stories wrapped up in neat bows, I'd suggest you stick to O'Connor. Although I might be wrong about that, too. O'Connor, in her treatise on writing entitled *Mystery and Manners*, says, “Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning because it is an experience, not an abstraction.” S-town is definitely an experience—one that Reed, who seems entirely out of his element for the whole of the narrative, treats with equal parts compassion and confusion, empathy and exasperation, tenderness and utter befuddlement. Which calls to mind another O'Connor quote: “People without hope not only don't write novels ... they don't read them. They don't take long looks at anything because they lack the courage. The way to despair is to refuse to have any kind of experience, and the novel, of course, is a way to have experience.” Reed takes a long look at John B McLemore and comes out on the other end not really knowing one thing or the other. But he has—and by proxy, we have—certainly had an experience.