'The Grief Manual': Fact, Fiction, and Narrative Podcasts

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In 2014, millions of Americans were captivated by the debut of the smash hit podcast *Serial*. Hosted by journalist Sarah Koenig, *Serial*'s first season (which I will hereafter refer to simply as *Serial*) was released in twelve weekly episodes from October through December of 2014. The podcast follows Koenig's quest to reinvestigate the 1999 murder of 18-year-old Hae Min Lee in Baltimore, Maryland. Lee's ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed, was found guilty of her murder by strangulation, and sentenced to life in prison in 2000. Under the assumption that the identity of Lee's murderer was not settled by Syed's conviction, Koenig embarks on both a journalistic and a personal quest to find the truth, revisiting crime scenes, retracing Lee's steps, talking to witnesses, and, most importantly, extensively interviewing Syed himself. *Serial* quickly broke download records and, as many have attested, turned the still somewhat niche medium of the podcast into a full-fledged mainstream phenomenon. The success of *Serial* ushered in a wave of narrative podcasts, an intriguingly hybrid form that now takes a prominent place in the US media landscape. By *narrative podcast* I mean a single story told across multiple episodes, produced either for web-simultaneous or exclusive web release (as opposed to the more one-off structure of interview-based or comedy podcasts). Not quite radio dramas and not quite hypertexts, narrative podcasts have mainly flown under the radar of narrative theorists. Marie-Laure Ryan's and Jan-Noël Thon's 2014 collection of essays moving "toward a media-conscious narratology" features fascinating theorizations of "storyworlds across media," including a chapter on "multimodal novels" by Wolfgang Hallet, but the collection does not mention podcasts as a narrative medium.[1] Ellen McCracken has only very recently initiated narratological exploration of the podcast form in her 2017 edited collection *The Serial Podcast and Storytelling in the Digital Age* and her contribution to the 2018 *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories*.[2] Now that podcasts like *Serial* and its spinoff *S-Town* (2017) have been downloaded hundreds of millions of times, we

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[1] Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, ed., *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

[2] McCracken's contributions to the narratological study of digital podcasts are based on understanding the multi-directional flow of the textuality and storyworld of the medium, including a collage-like association with paratextual materials. I am less concerned with flow and paratext and more concerned with how the podcast's primary aural mode constructs fictionality and factuality. See Ellen McCracken, "The *Serial* Commodity: Rhetoric, Recombination, and Indeterminacy in the Digital Age," in *The Serial Podcast*

must accord them a place in our consideration of narrative, especially since both of these podcasts offer such an intriguing interplay of factual and fictional narration, which can give us new insight into the workings of those narrative elements.

I argue that understanding the sudden popularity and appeal of narrative podcasts—the most prominent of which are ostensibly nonfictional—nevertheless requires that we understand the way they employ fictionality and fictive discourse. Conversely, the narrative podcast form gives us unique insight into the distinctions (or, indeed, the overlaps) between factual and fictional narration. Because the narrative podcast is still somewhat unestablished as an institution, a podcast's play among narrative genres—like murder mystery, biography, and reportage—and media modes—like radio, television, and the novel—renders the distinction between factual and fictional narration less initially discernible, thus providing new opportunities to explore the boundaries of these categories as well as receivers' behavior in response to them. The precedents established by *Serial* also unveil podcast-specific modes of fictionalization and nonfictional authenticity such as the narrator's intonation/accent and a kind of auditory *mise en scène.* These aural modes blend the conventions of audio journalism and radio drama and base their structure on a literary ethos that banks on sympathy, suspense, and even the marriage plot. Ultimately, the formal, ethical, and political ramifications of these podcasts' experimentation shed a new and perhaps troubling light on the way an ascendant popular media mode treats fact and fiction.

1. Fictionality and Fictive Discourse in the Narrative Podcast

Though *Serial* is an ostensibly nonfiction podcast, many critics point to its strong engagement with elements of fiction, particularly the speculation and simulation necessitated by the unsolved crime at the center of the story, which is, in turn, facilitated by its serial release (an aspect deemed so important to *Serial*'s structure and appeal that it doubled as its title).[3] Erica Haugtvedt and others argue that the abundance of the conventions of fiction in *Serial* results in an audience "primed to expect a story with *characters* and a *plot*," only "Sarah Koenig doesn't chronicle *characters*; she chronicles *people*—and the tension between these two categories produces one of the ethical dilemmas at the heart of *Seri-*

and Storytelling in the Digital Age, edited by Ellen McCracken, (London: Routledge, 2017), 54-71 and Ellen McCracken, "*Serial* as Digital Constellation: Fluid Textuality and Semiotic Otherness in the Podcast Narrative," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories*, edited by Zara Dinnen and Robyn Warhol (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 187-201.

3   For more on simulation, see Patrick Colm Hogan, "Jesus's parables: Simulation, Stories, and Narrative Idiolect," *Narrative* 24.2 (May 2016), 113-133.

al."[4] This critique is based on Peter Lamarque's and Stein Hugom Olsen's institutional model of fiction articulated in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature.* They argue that "the [fiction-]specific attitude of audiences is triggered because they recognize the intentions of the producers that the audience should adopt a fiction-specific attitude[…]."[5] Yet, as H. Porter Abbott has said, in a revision of John R. Searle's original argument, "there is no textual property, syntactic or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of *non*fiction […] This is because fiction, with its freedom, can imitate every single device one can find in nonfiction and still remain fiction."[6] The ability to distinguish, then, between fiction, nonfiction, and deceit often comes down to the recognition of certain conventions usually associated with one mode or another.

Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh have similarly argued that, beyond the realm of literature, all successful rhetorical communication relies on a "shared understanding of the distinction between fictionality and nonfictionality, or […] fictive and nonfictive discourse."[7] Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh offer a distinction between fiction "as a set of conventional genres" like the novel or short story and "fictionality as a quality or fictive discourse as a mode."[8] Haugtvedt explains:

> Fictionality is invoked when a person invents a hypothetical scenario in order to illuminate or comment upon the real world without explicitly referring to that world in the sense of claiming literal truth […] Moments of fictional discourse can occur in acts of communication that otherwise have a globally non-fictive intent."[9]

Since narrative podcasts combine the written constructedness of literature with the reportage of radio documentary and the vocal performance of oral storytelling, it is necessary to combine these literary-institutional and rhetorical approaches. It is not enough to call narrative podcasts like *Serial* and *S-Town* the inheritors of true-crime television shows or radio murder mysteries and all of *their* concomitant fictionalizing elements (like reenactments and sound effects),

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[4] Erica Haugtvedt, "The Ethics of Serialized True Crime: Fictionality in *Serial* Season One," in *The Serial Podcast and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, edited by Ellen McCracken (London: Routledge, 2017), 7-23: 7.

[5] Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 108.

[6] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 149. John Searle's original statement was that "[t]here is no textual property, syntactic or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction" (John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *New Literary History* 6 (1975), 319-333: 325). Abbott offers his revision in response to Dorrit Cohn's cogent counterargument that direct thought cannot be represented in nonfiction (Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 117).

[7] Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh, "Ten Theses about Fictionality," *Narrative* 23.1 (2015), 61-73: 62.

[8] Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "Ten Theses," 62.

[9] Haugtvedt, "The Ethics," 13.

because narrative podcasts also rely on literary conventions that date back to the rise of the novel.

For Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "fictionality is not finally a matter of formal features, reference, or conversational rule-following but rather of a communicator's intent to deploy invention in the service of some ends in relation to particular audiences."[10] I argue that, in the case of narrative podcasts in the style of *Serial* and *S-Town*, intention may be beside the point; regardless of creators' intentions, the invocation of certain generic conventions of fiction in combination with fictive discourse creates a unique hybrid factual/fictional narrative form; this hybridity results from a combination of the creator(s)' intent to provide factual information while (perhaps unintentionally) making use of fictionalizing tropes and/or modes. This combination is deployed "in the service of" a cultural trend initiated by certain fictions that preceded podcasting, specifically the serial murder mystery (in the case of both *Serial* and *S-Town*) and the realist marriage plot (in the case of *S-Town*).

2. *Seriality as a Basis for* Serial*'s Fictionality*

Form and production play no small part in this fictionalizing phenomenon. Many commentators have chalked up *Serial*'s success to the effects of a temporal gap between episodes. Seriality itself has become a hot-button topic in academic and popular discourse, making it seem particularly timely in today's media landscape.[11] Indeed, sellers of contemporary serial fiction through apps like Radish have made the claim that even though seriality is a Victorian invention,

> The Industrial Revolution, which gave rise to serialization the first time around, drastically altered patterns of human behavior just as the Digital Revolution is doing today […] Given the magnitude of changes taking place today, a return to serialization seems to be the perfect way to adapt literature for a fickle modern attention span that thrives on easy availability and instant gratification.[12]

But the convenience factor offered by short, easily consumed parts cannot solely explain the wild success of something like *Serial.* After all, trends in television over the last ten years have moved *away* from seriality toward a model of release

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10 Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "Ten Theses," 102.
11 See, for instance, Sean O'Sullivan, "The Inevitable, the Surprise, and Serial Television," in *Media of Serial Narrative*, edited by Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 204-221; and Felix Brinker, "Transmedia Storytelling in the 'Marvel Cinematic Universe' and the Logics of Convergence-Era Popular Seriality," in *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe*, edited by Matt Yockey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 207-233.
12 Seung Yoon Lee, "Fiction on your phone? That's novel," *Medium*, 26 July 2017, accessed 12 June 2019, https://medium.com/radish-fiction/fiction-on-your-phone-thats-novel-bf40 2e2e84b2.

that 'dumps' all episodes of a season at once online, encouraging viewers to 'binge-watch' them in one or two sittings.

However, as Haugtvedt points out, the temporal gaps created by serial release may strongly impact the way that audiences relate to a narrative, encouraging them to co-construct the narrative by producing their own fictive discourse.[13] This phenomenon finds a direct antecedent in Victorian crime fiction. Haugtvedt explains that "the reporting of sensational murders blurred the line between fact, speculation, and fabrication in ways that reveal the interdependence of journalistic serial narratives and fictional serial narratives."[14] Victorians loved true-crime and would often engage in "murder tourism," visiting sites of notorious crimes and stealing keepsakes.[15] Compare this to the obsessiveness of *Serial* fans who have tracked down the real-life people featured in the podcast, including locating the home of suspect Jay Wilds.[16] The Victorian voraciousness for stories of violence initiated both a genre and an industry of quickly-produced, serialized tales that not only took great liberties with fact but also invited readers to participate in their own speculation. "This interrogation of historical probabilities," Haugtvedt asserts, "powerfully resembles participation in fictional worlds in that both depend upon imaginative invention in relation to a constellation of foregoing evidence."[17] Several critics have noted the numerous ways in which *Serial* host Sarah Koenig's narration and the podcast's various editorial touches facilitate this.[18] For instance, Koenig invites the listener to participate in speculation by sharing her own hypotheses, speaking colloquially, and even sometimes directly imploring the listener by ending her sentences with "Right?" Haugtvedt's research also shows that Koenig's intentional or unintentional fictionalization is only one part of the equation; audience reception, including listeners' online discussion, speculation, and sleuthing, account for a dialectical fictionalization facilitated by seriality.[19]

Seriality, however, is not the cause but rather the vehicle for what listeners have found so appealing about narrative podcasts—that is, the unique pleasures afforded by the fictionalization of real people and real events. *Serial*, as Haugtvedt has shown, takes its structure and tropes from Victorian crime stories, which themselves blur the lines between reporting and inventing. This blend has also ended up appealing strongly to a young, twenty-first-century (primarily Anglo-American) audience, which, like the Victorians, is in the

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[13] Haugtvedt, "The Ethics," 8.
[14] Haugtvedt, "The Ethics," 9.
[15] Haugtvedt, "The Ethics," 10.
[16] Haugtvedt, "The Ethics," 10.
[17] Haugtvedt, "The Ethics," 10.
[18] See, for instance, McCracken, "The *Serial* Commodity," 55; and Leslie Grace McMurtry, "'I'm Not a Real Detective, I Only Play One on Radio': Serial as the Future of Audio Drama," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 49.2 (2016), 306-324: 307.
[19] Haugtvedt, "The Ethics," 8 f.

midst of a pop culture fad that has seen a sharp rise in true-crime narrative media.

3. *Factual and Fictional Effects in* Serial

At first, it may seem that *Serial* simply narrativizes the events of real-life subjects, organizing them into narrative form. Indeed, Koenig, whose background is in court reporting, often signals the supposed factuality of *Serial*'s representation of the Lee murder case through the inclusion of archival audio such as suspect interrogations and court proceedings (not to mention all the paratextual materials housed on the podcast's website, which includes municipal maps and crime scene photos). However, as Jillian DeMair points out, many of Koenig's methods of authentication—or, as Barthes would put it, Koenig's employment of "reality effects"—are to be found in fiction, *including* her "presentation of archival material [, which] mimics the literary convention often called a 'discovered manuscript fiction,' in which a narrator claims to have received information from a credible source, compiled the facts from a historical chronicle, or acquired some artifact that authenticates the claim."[20] Even if, as Barthes has attested, there is no purely nonfictional mode of discourse (which would render all nonfictional narrative, not just *Serial*, fictive to some degree), Koenig pushes beyond the modes of fictive discourse into fictionalization when she invents human subjects' personalities.[21]

In *Serial*'s sixth episode, Adnan Syed voices his objection to this very tendency of Koenig. His obvious disturbance rattles Koenig, who does not seem aware of the fictionalizing effect of her seemingly unintentional invention:

> Sarah Koenig: My interest in it, honestly, has been you, like you're a really nice guy. Like, I like talking to you, you know, so then it's kind of like this question of well, what does that mean? You know.

> Adnan Syed: (Long Pause.) I just, yeah, oh, I mean, you don't even really know me though, uh, Koenig. I'm—you don't. I-I—maybe you do. Maybe, I don't—we only talk on the phone. I don't understand what you mean. I'm not—I mean, it's-it's-it's just weird to hear you say that, because, I don't even really know you—

> Sarah Koenig: But wait, are you saying you don't think that I know you at all?

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[20] Jillian DeMair, "Sounds Authentic: The Acoustic Construction of *Serial*'s Storyworld," in *The Serial Podcast and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, edited by Ellen McCracken (London: Routledge, 2017), 24-36: 25.

[21] See Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900–2000*, edited by Dorothy J. Hale, 229-234 (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

Adnan Syed: I mean, for you to say that I'm a great person, I mean, like a nice person, then, you know what I'm saying? That—I-I don't know—I've only talked to you on the phone a few times.[22]

Frank Zipfel contends that literary depictions of real people, in order to be truly considered fictional, must be "significantly altered versions of real persons."[23] But as Hayden White has famously theorized, all historical writing, including biography, is "essentially a […] fiction-making operation" due to the fact that events and entities do not speak for themselves but rather must be *interpreted* as a part of the process of narrativization.[24] Even though Lubomír Doležel has argued that, unlike fictional gaps, historical gaps *can* be filled in because they possess actual entities and events, unless we have access to information that falsifies a storyteller's account of a person, we have no sense of whether that storyteller's account is fictional or factual.[25] In a narrative podcast focalized through a narrating host, the narrator/producer determines how we receive both the lingual and non-lingual elements of this audio story, including how we see the real people qua 'characters' who populate it.

Thus, *Serial*'s depiction of Syed is different from, for instance, a historical novel depicting Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill. Whereas we have independent historical and archival information about Lincoln and Churchill that can act as our factual reference, our access to Syed comes almost exclusively through Koenig's story unless we seek out the very limited information about Syed in other media avenues (which, in turn, mostly came about because of *Serial*'s amplification of the Lee murder case). To use Marie-Laure Ryan's terms, even though *Serial*'s *reference world* is the real world, we still cannot reliably test the accuracy of Koenig's portrayal of Syed.[26] Perhaps Syed *is* a "great guy," but unless we go ourselves to the Maryland correctional facility housing him, we have no way of comparing *Serial*'s Syed with the flesh-and-blood Syed. By participating in the podcast, as Sandra Kumamoto Stanley puts it, "he [Syed] has essentially become a text that has been analyzed and interpreted and co-opt-

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22 Sarah Koenig, "The Case Against Adnan Syed," *Serial*, podcast audio, 30 Oct. 2014, accessed 12 June 2019, https://serialpodcast.org/season-one/6/the-case-against-adnan-syed.

23 Frank Zipfel, "Fiction across Media: Toward a Transmedial Concept of Fictionality" in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 103-125: 105.

24 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 85.

25 Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 169-184.

26 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media: Turning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology" in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 25-49: 33-35.

ed."[27] This extends to the true-crime genre as a whole—if an audience is unfamiliar with the crime through previous media exposure, there is no reliable reference for whether or not certain elements have been fictionalized in the telling. Furthermore, as Olson and Fludernik have shown, elements of narrative are context dependent, and therefore, as DeMair asserts, audience members' judgments "depend […] on their expectations of the kind of narrative they are reading and their knowledge of certain conventions."[28] For a young 21st-century American listener, for whom radio dramas may be a thing of ancient history, the relative newness and unfamiliarity of the narrative podcast form might render this kind of fictionalization—and the editorial constructedness that enables it—less immediately apparent than it is in other, older narrative media.[29] Even older audiences may be susceptible to treating the subject of podcasts as quasi-fictional entities due to media precedent. *Serial* and *S-Town* producer Julie Snyder herself has pointed out that while there is "a big tradition of fiction serial storytelling in radio" in the US, for the past half-century there has been no such tradition for "nonfiction serialized storytelling" due to logistical constraints.[30] The difficulty of getting an audience to tune in at the exact same time every week for a limited-run nonfiction serial is wiped away by the cheapness and formal freedom of podcasting (in which, for instance, episode length is much more flexible); but because these production constraints existed for so long, audiences are much more accustomed to hearing *fictional* stories in serial form on the radio than to nonfictional ones.[31]

Still, setting aside potential audience naiveté, *Serial*'s fictionalizing tendencies could be accounted for by the pitfalls of all ostensibly biographical storytelling, particularly within the true-crime genre, which in turn shows a tendency to explain even serial killers' violence by organizing perpetrators' lives into causal traumas, thereby rendering them more sympathetic because of the author's or audience's desire for normalization. *Serial*'s spin-off podcast, *S-Town*, however, directly challenges the way we think not only about nonfiction but, strangely enough, the way we think about *the novel*.

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27 Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, "'What We Know': Convicting Narratives in *NPR*'s *Serial*," in *The Serial Podcast and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, edited by Ellen McCracken (London: Routledge, 2017), 72-84: 84.

28 Monika Fludernik and Greta Olson, "Introduction," in *Current Trends in Narratology*, edited by Monika Fludernik and Greta Olson, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 1-33: 3; DeMair, "Sounds Authentic," 36.

29 As McMurtry has noted, broadcast radio serial dramas have been significantly less popular in the US than in Europe: "Twenty-first century Americans do not see themselves as missing out on edgy European audio drama or BBC Classic Serials." (McMurtry, "'I'm Not a Real Detective,'" 307).

30 Lev Grossman et al., "Contemporary Seriality: A Roundtable," in *Narrative* 27.1 (2019), 109-128: 113.

31 Grossman et al., "Contemporary Seriality," 113.

4. S-Town: *The "first true audio novel"?*

Like *Serial*, *S-Town* received massive attention and acclaim in the US, winning its own Peabody Award, which honors excellence in TV, radio, and online storytelling. But unlike the weekly-posted *Serial*, all seven episodes of *S-Town*—pointedly called "chapters"—were posted online at the same time on March 28, 2017. Produced by the creators of *Serial* and hosted by journalist Brian Reed, *S-Town* profiles the colorful John B. McLemore, an incredibly intelligent misanthrope and antique horologist. While the podcast was still in production in 2015, John committed suicide by drinking potassium cyanide. Reed places this occurrence extra-diegetically at the end of the podcast's second chapter, and the remaining five chapters deal with the fallout of John's death as well as a slow uncovering of the secrets of his life. *Serial*'s 175 million downloads dwarf *S-Town*'s total of 77 million (as of March 2018), but two years after its release, *S-Town* "still remains one of the most popular podcasts in the world" as well as the record-holder for most downloads in its first week (16 million) and its first month (40 million).[32] Even though *S-Town* is also labeled a work of nonfiction, featuring a real journalist interacting with real people in a real town, its Peabody Award profile reads, "'S-Town' breaks new ground for the medium by creating the *first true audio novel*, a non-fiction biography constructed in the style and form of a 7-chapter novel" (emphasis added).[33] The Peabody judges use with ease two seemingly contradictory terms for the same work of audio storytelling: *novel* and *non-fiction biography*. Considering the vast catalogue of audio dramas from the twentieth century into the present day, how can we make sense of such an audacious claim?

It could very well be that the Peabody committee, in their declaration that *S-Town* is "the first audio novel," is willfully adopting a conceit of some kind, recognizing Brian Reed's storytelling talent using the same honorific criteria *as though* he were a novelist. But after all, a few years before, *Serial* won a Peabody Award in recognition of its storytelling; why not also honor *S-Town* as yet another, albeit tonally and structurally different, "experiment in long-form, non-fiction audio storytelling"?[34] For the sake of inquiry, I am electing to take the Peabody committee at its word and will explore the idea that what, by the committee's own words, is factually a "biography" also bears significant novelistic traits through the producers' deliberate processes of fictionalization, including what Lamarque and Olsen have called the *institutional practice* of fiction, the de-

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[32] "Serial," *Peabody Awards*, accessed 3 Mar. 2019, http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-p rofile/serial; Drew Taylor, "'S-Town' podcast impact still felt in Woodstock, 1 year later," *AP News*, 26 Mar. 2018, accessed 12 July 2019, https://www.apnews.com/f181f5504ff146e dace036c7b3a7dc5d.

[33] "S-Town," *Peabody Awards*, accessed 3 Mar. 2019, http://www.peabodyawards.com/awar d-profile/s-town.

[34] "Serial," *Peabody Awards*.

ployment of novelistic sympathy, and emplotment. Furthermore, *S-Town* employs what I theorize as podcast-specific modes of fictionalization; for instance, I argue that the focalization of the story through Brian Reed, a member of an East-Coast-based intellectual and liberal media organization, aids in rendering the 'trashy' Southern John B. McLemore into a 'character,' down to his strong Alabama accent.

So, if *S-Town* is a novel, what makes it so? On the surface, numerous literary tropes, especially those to be found in the American Southern Gothic novel, provide an answer, but, as I will show, it is not so much allusion as it is *institutional practice* which makes the presence of these tropes a significant factor in the fictionalization of *S-Town*.[35] There's the omnipresent Gothic symbolism of the clock and the maze, both of which conjure up self-referential images of the novel form, particularly the realist novel that ascended in the mid-nineteenth century. John's hedge maze is made up of concentric circles, mirroring the way the gears of a clock circumnavigate in tightly-controlled temporal movement, reminding one of the way that H.M. Daleski described the structure of Dickens's major novels.[36] *S-Town* is transparently as obsessed with time as John was, with portions of its background music resembling the ticking of a clock.[37] The link between narrative time and human self-knowledge is beautifully voiced by one of John's horologist friends: "The passage of time has something to do with me."[38] The decaying McLemore house and property could not be a more perfect approximation of a Southern Gothic mansion, predating the American Civil War and complete with family graves; John's mother says it's been here "since time."[39] The *sujet* of *S-Town* consists of Brian Reed on a novelistic quest *à la recherche du temps perdu*, in search of John's lost time.

In the very first chapter, John includes William Faulkner's short story *A Rose for Emily* in the bundle of "bedtime reading" he sends to Reed to facilitate the latter's understanding of the situation in Woodstock. The other recommendations are stories by Guy de Maupassant and Shirley Jackson, all of them featuring, in Reed's words "a creeping sense of foreboding—in these places that are allegedly home to polite society, an undercurrent of depravity."[40] The inclusion

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[35] Zipfel, "Fiction across Media," 108.

[36] Using Dickens's own language from *Dombey and Son*, Daleski argues that the "characteristic structure of Dickens's large 'social' novels […] is that of a 'round world of many circles within circles'" moving in tight, supple rotations (H. M. Daleski, *Dickens and the Art of Analogy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 118).

[37] Brian Reed, "Chapter III: Tedious and Brief," *S-Town*, Podcast Audio, 28 Mar. 2017, accessed 17 Jun. 2019, https://stownpodcast.org/chapter/3.

[38] Brian Reed, "Chapter VII: You're beginning to figure it out now, aren't you?" *S-Town*, Podcast Audio, 28 Mar. 2017, accessed 17 Jun. 2019, https://stownpodcast.org/chapter/7.

[39] Brian Reed, "Chapter I: If you keep your mouth shut, you'll be surprised what you can learn," *S-Town*, Podcast Audio, 28 Mar. 2017, accessed 17 Jun. 2019, https://stownpodcast.org/chapter/1.

[40] Reed, "Chapter I."

of this reading list, along with all of these other literary/novelistic tropes, situate *S-Town* itself among these pieces of fiction, casting itself as a literary descendent and signaling its own generic investments with very little subtlety—after all, the song that acts as outro music at the end of each chapter is actually *A Rose for Emily* by The Zombies. We can even recognize John as embodying any number of specific character types, including the unseemly, raunchy, and tragic Sir John Falstaff, complete with a younger ward who chooses family responsibilities over keeping company with his unrespectable mentor. The first two chapters of *S-Town* establish John's character through the imposition of a false murder mystery as an instantiating conflict, with John as the Victorian-born archetype of the misanthropic genius detective Sherlock Holmes.

I am not attempting to conflate literariness with fictionality, a practice to which Paul Dawson objects in his "theses against fictionality."[41] More than generic echoes or allusions, I assert that this excess of literary trappings establishes the *institutional practice* of fiction within the narrative discourse of *S-Town*. The literariness is a *part* of the fictionality. Therefore, even though, like *Serial*, *S-Town* takes the extratextual world as one of its referents, unlike *Serial*, *S-Town* also immediately establishes the world of novels and short stories as an equally important referent. Reed's interpretation of the shared theme of the "bedtime readings" suggests that *S-Town* itself is such a story, comfortably sitting on the shelf between the Faulkner and the Jackson. *S-Town* producer Julie Snyder likens the narrative to a "parable."[42]

Indeed, at times, John seems to cooperate with Reed's establishment of a quasi-fictional storyworld. In addition to providing short stories as background information, when it comes to his sexuality, John also treats fiction as a reference. He finds such resonance with Annie Proulx's short story, *Brokeback Mountain*, that he calls it "The Grief Manual."[43] Collapsing the boundaries between a fictional short story and the quasi-narrative, nonfictional form of a manual, John's alternative title reveals a persistent sense of the inseparability of fiction and real life. His suicide note and manifesto function similarly. The suicide note, meant to be read after death, overlays a story of development, with all its concomitant closure, onto the circumstances of John's life, belying his vocalized nihilism. When Reed asks John why he is suicidal in Chapter IV, John says it is because he is "tired in a way [he] can't put into words."[44] But he already *has* put it into words, and put it into words that organize the moments of his life into a *bildungsroman*. His manifesto, it turns out, is its own factual/fictional sto-

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[41] Paul Dawson, "Ten Theses against Fictionality," in *Narrative* 23.1 (2014), 74-100: 78.

[42] Grossman et al., "Contemporary Seriality," 117.

[43] Brian Reed, "Chapter VI: Since everyone around here thinks I'm a queer anyway," *S-Town*, Podcast Audio, 28 Mar. 2017, accessed 17 Jun. 2019, https://stownpodcast.org/chapter/6.

[44] Brian Reed, "Chapter IV: If anybody could find it, it would be me," *S-Town*, Podcast Audio, 28 Mar. 2017, accessed 17 Jun. 2019, https://stownpodcast.org/chapter/4.

ry, an apocalyptic prediction based on research but ultimately consisting of pre-
diction and speculation. John's manifesto, *Critical Issues for the Future*, is a
dystopian narrative of the consequences of catastrophic climate change. To
quote the manifesto directly, the world will

> enter a new Dark Ages, a sort of new feudalism ruled by theocratic dictators […]
> [E]xpect public mutilations, executions, and torture to make a comeback in this re-
> gion, flogging, boiling, burning, hand-cutting, hanging, evisceration, honor killings,
> gang rape. Due process will perish, and confederates will betray each other for minus-
> cule gains. That gain may be as mundane as a morsel of food or a drink of water.[45]

Skov Nielsen et al. categorize dystopian fictive discourse as one of the prime ex-
amples of their thesis that "fictive communication may invite the reader or lis-
tener to map an engagement with representations of *what is not* onto *what is*,"
thus "[…] substantially affect[ing] his or her sense and understanding of what
is."[46] Reed confesses that his first reaction to John's bleak account was to deny
its likelihood, but then he admits that he thought the same thing about John's
suicide, strongly implying that the eventually-revealed non-fictiveness of John's
avowal to commit suicide has now drastically affected Reed's attitude toward
the debatable fictiveness of John's manifesto.

   In this way, *S-Town* builds its storyworld on a shared literary-cultural reading
experience. As Ryan attests, "The imagination […] will import knowledge from
the real world to fill out incomplete descriptions" in fiction, but as Lamarque
and Olsen make clear, when an audience is presented with fiction-specific con-
ventions, the audience will also use the knowledge of these conventions to fill
out incomplete descriptions.[47] From the beginning, *S-Town* establishes similar
fictive conventions as *Serial* did, particularly when fictionalizing the protago-
nist of the story, but with a significant difference: *S-Town* explicitly invites its
audience to use what it knows of short stories and novels to fill in gaps about
the character of John B. McLemore, the setting of his house and of Woodstock,
and even the plot of the tragedy of John's life, death, and legacy. Stacking on
another layer of referentiality, in order to fully understand *S-Town*, we must
have already listened to *Serial*. *S-Town* presents itself as the inheritor of *Serial*,
with Sarah Koenig beginning each episode by announcing, "Chapter One,"
"Chapter Two," as though it is she, in fact, who is the frame narrator of *S-Town*,
just as Ira Glass is the frame narrator of *Serial*, his audio-storytelling vehicle *This
American Life* an origin-text in this chain of inheritance.

   Koenig's frame narration invites us, from the first second of *S-Town*, to ex-
pect a fictionalized true-crime story, and indeed, the promotion for *S-Town* in-
vited the same. However, it turns out that the speculative nature of the central

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45 Reed, "Chapter IV."
46 Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "Ten Theses," 68.
47 Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media," 35; Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*,
    108.

conflict within *Serial* lends itself much more easily to emplotment than does *S-Town*. (I believe that's why *Serial* has remained so much more popular. *S-Town*'s structure is a bait and switch.) Thus, part of *S-Town*'s fact/fiction interplay involves an interplay of genre—specifically, the true-crime genre and the realist genre. Even though, in the *fabula* of *S-Town*, it becomes quickly apparent to Reed that there was no covered-up murder in Woodstock, in the *sujet* of the podcast the audience is made to believe for at least the first two chapters—and again, sporadically, through the remaining chapters—that there is some mystery or conspiracy to uncover in *S-Town*.

This is also the driving force behind *Serial*, to uncover the truth, and, as De-Mair points out, it's a very Victorian approach to storytelling; Richard Alewyn, in "The Origin of the Detective Novel," has traced how Victorian realist novels are driven by the idea that methodically archiving and ordering facts can uncover reality.[48] Because *Serial* is actually a detective story, the premise (and promise) that there is a truth out there to discover is an easy one for the audience to accept and internalize.[49] But since the murder referenced at the beginning of *S-Town* is a red herring, the trajectory of the fictionalized plot of *S-Town* reroutes midstream with the revelation of John's suicide. We see this attempt to spell out a generic shift in Chapter III, the chapter which details the circumstances of John's suicide. Reed narrates:

> [I]n the aftermath of his [John's] death, a whole other story unfurled in front of me piece by piece. A story I could picture John laying out for me with outrage and humor and sadness, maybe even written by one of his favorite short story writers. I could see John handing it to the next visitor he coaxed down to Bibb County as their bedtime reading, saying, read this, it'll help you understand this place I've lived nearly every one of my days. It'll help you understand me.[50]

If *Serial* takes structural cues from a Victorian serial detective novel, then from Chapter III onward, *S-Town* aspires to the Modernist, character-driven introspection of Proust.

Yet Reed's fictionalization of John turns out more problematic than Koenig's fictionalization of Syed. What so many critics have identified as the key element of *Serial*'s commercial success—its invitation to participate in solving a mystery—would not be present in the story of *S-Town* without the imposition, first, of what turns out to be a false murder accusation and, second, Reed's imposition of a discoverable truth behind John himself. In this way, Reed is a true realist in the Victorian sense, "attempt[ing]," as George Levine would put it, "to use lan-

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48 Richard Alewyn, "The Origin of the Detective Novel" in *The Poetics of Murder*, edited by Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe, translated by Glenn W. Most, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983), 62-78: 68; quoted in DeMair, "Sounds Authentic," 32.

49 McCracken has argued that "*Serial* takes strong positions beneath the veneer of postmodern uncertainty" (McCracken, "*Serial* Commodity," 64).

50 Reed, "Chapter III."

guage to get beyond language, to discover some non-verbal truth out there."[51] And like the Victorians, Reed's deployment of novelistic realism in attempting to represent John B. McLemore's life and death at times betrays a deep uneasiness with the arbitrariness of emplotment; willy-nilly, he picks up new tropes from detective fiction as he goes along and fails to resolve them, including an inheritance squabble, a hunt for a buried treasure, and a government conspiracy.[52] There *is* a murder mystery here, Reed seems to insist, but "the body that would expose Shit-town" is John's.[53] Except in the end there's no nefariousness to uncover, no culprit to unmask. The result is a confusion of warring plots which becomes even further confused as the last two chapters drop everything else in favor of emplotting John's sexuality and thwarted romances, cathecting his thwarted romance with his hometown.

In *Serial*, the promise of solving a murder compels a process of fictionalization; the speculation engaged in by Koenig and the listeners feeds the instantiation of conflict, which, as Abbott has argued, incites "desire" in a narrative's audience and can result either in "satisfaction" or "frustration" depending on the narrative's closure or lack thereof (suspense).[54] In *S-Town*, once an unsolved murder is removed as the story's conflict, its producers switch fictionalizing modes from one driven by a murder mystery to one driven by suspense of a different kind: the answer to the question of why John B. McLemore killed himself. All the conventions of fiction established in the early chapters set us up, as listeners, for the question to be satisfied. And it is satisfied—much more neatly than the ending of *Serial* satisfies its propulsive question, *Did Adnan Syed kill Hae Min Lee?* In the last two chapters especially, Reed systematically lays out the dimensions of John's depression, his disappointment in love, and his disillusionment with his home within the context of this question of his suicide's motivation, ending with a passage full of poetic license that could have come straight from Faulkner: Reed paints before our mind's eye the nineteenth-century Bibb County at the mercy of John's gangster grandfather, then focuses on the image of John's mother, sitting on the land and ritually rubbing her pregnant belly, praying to God to make her child a genius. All of these details lead us up to the birth of John B. McLemore, lending his fate an air of inevitability and predetermination.[55] Additionally, by withholding John's suicide note—the document that is supposed to explain his suicide—until the very end of the podcast, Reed makes *S-Town* come to the kind of climactic, orgasmic end that

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[51] George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 6.
[52] Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, 12.
[53] Reed, "Chapter III."
[54] Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 57.
[55] Reed, "Chapter VII."

Judith Roof has classified as necessarily heteronormative.[56] The pleasure of listening to John's story ends not when John commits suicide, which, after all occurs diegetically at the end of Chapter II. Rather, it ends at the conclusion of the podcast's final episode, after the question *Why did he do it?* has come, satisfyingly, to a conclusion.

And the form that this satisfactory closure takes, the fictional mode that Reed uses to resolve the generic confusion of the earlier episodes, is a marriage plot. As Robyn Warhol points out in her exploration of queer relationships and seriality in *Tales of the City*, "one of the definitions of the marriage plot is that the heroine's story can be resolved only by marriage or death; there are no other options [...]."[57] Normalizing John's suicide by placing it in the context of his supposed failure to find a life partner, as Reed does, coheres John's life to the marriage plot and coheres his death to one of the only two options for the protagonist's fate.

Reed's imposition of the marriage plot in these final episodes results in a conspicuous mishandling of John's masochistic behavior. Tellingly saving this revelation for the final chapter as well, Reed recounts a ritual that John gave the mischievous title "Church"; John would have his younger friend Tyler Goodson tattoo over tattoos as well as re-pierce his nipples multiple times. Reed explains John's masochism by likening it to cutting, a self-harm behavior, and juxtaposes the details of "Church" with a lengthy exploration of the possibility that John had experienced mercury poisoning and thus had gone mad as a hatter.[58] Commentators have found the disclosure of these details controversial and have castigated Reed not only for potentially outing a queer man without his consent but also voyeuristically broadcasting his erotic practices. As cultural critic Daniel Schroeder points out, Reed "tries to translate McLemore into a framework he understands," but his perspective as a heterosexual man lacks the "queer knowledge" needed to comprehend and respect John's behavior.[59]

Indeed, the marriage plot—both in content and in structure—does not allow for a BDSM practice that defies heteronormative closure. As critics have long recognized, masochism is not necessarily the experience of feeling pain as pleasure, but, rather, feeling pleasure in a state of *suspense*.[60] John's masochism ex-

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56   Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 6.
57   Robyn Warhol, "Making 'Gay' and 'Lesbian' into Household Words: How Serial Form Works in Armistead Maupain's *Tales of the City*," *Contemporary Literature* 40.3 (1999), 378-402: 399.
58   Reed, "Chapter VII."
59   Daniel Schroeder, "S-Town Was Great: Until It Forced a Messy Queer Experience Into a Tidy Straight Frame," *Slate*, 11 Apr. 2017, accessed 12 June 2019, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2017/04/11/s_town_podcast_s_treatment_of_queer_experience_hobbled_by_straight_biases.html.
60   See, for instance, the definitive Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, translated by Jean McNeil (New York: George Braziller, 1971).

ceeds Reed's ability to explain it through the marriage plot, *because masochism itself is anti-closure*. Reed's explanation of "Church" locates the inciting conflict in John's thwarted quest for a monogamous life-partner, and thereby attempts to satisfy our desire, as listeners, to learn why John would harm himself and eventually commit suicide. But Reed's explanation necessarily misses the fact that masochism (as it appears in *S-Town*) cannot be explained through this heteronormative framework, perhaps cannot even be narrativized at all in the way we are accustomed to understanding narrative (as is Roof's contention).[61]

So far, I have focused more on the fictionalization at work in *S-Town* and less on the idea of the podcast's specifically novelistic components. This is because I think that when the Peabody Awards committee and other commentators say that they find the podcast to be a "novel," they actually mean that it is highly fictionalized as well as highly dependent on fictional tropes, including master plots.[62] However, there remains one more supposedly novelistic trait that bears investigation: If you skim through the dozens of published reviews of *S-Town*, you will see the words "empathy" or "empathetic" repeated many times.[63] Popular discourse on the novel form takes for granted that *empathy* is one of its necessary requisites, and indeed the inculcation of empathy, especially in young readers, is used as one of the justifications for the novel's continued existence in our own day. Scholars have seen the nineteenth century as a time in which the novel form became established as a vehicle for *sympathy*, a term, as Suzanne Keen desponds, that has been hopelessly conflated with *empathy*.[64] Studies of the novel's rise favor the term sympathy, which refers to the phenomenon that occurs when reading fiction and, as Catherine Gallagher puts it, "someone else's emotion becomes our own. It is the conversion of the idea of someone else's passion into a lively impression of that passion, which is indistinguishable from actually feeling the passion oneself."[65] In addition to this "feeling *with*" a character, sympathy can also mean "feeling *for*" a character (that is, experiencing a kind of compassion for that character's fictive emotions), and indeed, these two processes can be seen as indistinguishable.

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[61] Roof, *Come as You Are*, xxxi f.

[62] "S-Town," *Peabody Awards*.

[63] See, for instance, Spencer Kornhaber, "S-Town Is a Well-Crafted Monument to Empathy," *The Atlantic*, 30 Mar. 2017, accessed 12 July 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/ente rtainment/archive/2017/03/s-town-podcast-review-empathy-cultural-divides/521325/; and Siobhan McHugh, "Why S-Town invites empathy, not voyeurism," *The Conversation*, 26 Apr. 2017, accessed 12 July 2019, https://theconversation.com/why-s-town-invites-empat hy-not-voyeurism-76510.

[64] Suzanne Keen, "Intersectional Narratology in the Study of Narrative Empathy," in *Narrative Theory Unbound*, edited by Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 123-146: 133.

[65] Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1920* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 169.

Since the Victorian era, one of the assumed functions of the realist novel has been to initiate sympathy in the reader through the fictive portrayal of suffering.[66] The theory goes that portraying a suffering fictional subject allows readers to inhabit another person's (i.e. a character's) existence by perceiving (so to speak) that separate person's plight; since, as Gallagher has explained, this existence is actually "nobody's," a reader can in fact fully apprehend that character's dimensions, which would be impossible with a real person.[67] The novel, therefore, supposedly instructs readers to self-improve or to go out and alleviate real suffering. Whether or not reading novels actually inspires altruism is very much up for debate.[68] But what is clear is that the *sympathetic portrayal of suffering* has been so irrevocably assumed to be an integral part of the novel that an *autobiographical podcast*, if it portrays sympathetic suffering, can be said to be novelistic. Even further, this theory of the novel implies that if pain and suffering are portrayed sympathetically, the aforementioned autobiography *is* a novel, as though this convention allows fiction to overpower nonfiction. This has fascinating and perhaps startling implications, especially when it comes to the unnarrated story of slavery in the United States, which lies beneath the surface of *S-Town*.

John's largest tattoo, we learn in Chapter VII, is a bullwhip resting across his shoulders atop a back completely covered in lash marks. To create this tattoo, John apparently "hand-picked" a tree branch from the woods and asked Tyler and his friends to whip him with it and then tattoo lash marks over the wounds.[69] The whipping and the tattoo evoke, Reed says, an image included in John's manifesto: "A photo of a slave named Gordon who was believed to have escaped from a plantation in Louisiana, and whose back was photographed and distributed by abolitionists as visual proof of the terrors of slavery."[70] John's imagistic, phenomenological conjuration of white cruelty and black suffering makes a significant change from his usual mode of highly verbal expression— and the difference is appropriate. Biman Basu points out that in the Foucauldian tradition, inscription of the body is seen as a metaphorical act, the symbolic branding of the body. However, rather than "a writerly or academic indulgence in metaphor," for "African American and postcolonial discourses," "whipping as scripting" *literalizes* "the palimpsestic relation between the historical text and the body."[71] No longer in the realm of metaphor, of fictionality,

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[66] See, for instance, Rachel Ablow's excellent work on this subject in Rachel Ablow, *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
[67] Gallagher, *Nobody's Story*, xv.
[68] Keen, "Intersectional Narratology," 134; 139-141.
[69] Reed, "Chapter VII."
[70] Reed, "Chapter VII."
[71] Biman Basu, *The Commerce of Peoples: Sadomasochism and African American Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 8.

John's self-flagellation in part makes readable—and, indeed, inescapable, unde-
niable—the unnarrated horror of slavery which Reed, the narrator, seems reluc-
tant to approach.

   Just as seriality, in Warhol's words, "resists the settled, cathartic closure of
tragedy and the redemptive telos of sentimentalism," the suffering depicted in
S-Town resists closure.[72] It resists closure because of its queerness, which "defies
the heteronormative closure of the marriage plot."[73] It resists closure because
masochism itself is suspenseful and thus anti-closure. And, finally, it resists clo-
sure because one of its significant inscriptions—the whip and lash marks—liter-
alizes the still-open and unending pain of slavery. In this way, the form of *S-
Town* bears more in common with its parent *Serial* than might be immediately
obvious. Though *S-Town* was not serialized, as McCracken points out, "[e]ven
when listening in the binge mode, there are inevitable delays in consuming the
podcast straight through without interruption."[74] Both *Serial* and *S-Town* are
multi-part stories that fictionalize their subjects through a dubiously sympathet-
ic exhibition of their pain. Rather than a nineteenth-century plot of crime and
punishment, *S-Town* in the end scaffolds a marriage plot onto autobiographical
events. I do not mean to suggest that fictional precedents established in nine-
teenth-century novels perfectly cohere to twenty-first-century digital storytelling.
I am not attempting to erase historical or modal differences. Rather, it is my
contention that what we see playing out in *Serial* and *S-Town* amounts to more
than the transformations of fictional and novelistic conventions across time.
Realism, sympathy, the detective novel, and the marriage plot have all been
with us in some way, shape, or form since their inception in the Victorian age.
But contemporary narrative phenomena like *Serial* and *S-Town* rely on these
specific conventions, and understanding them requires understanding the his-
tory of the novel.

5. *Toward a Theory of Fictionality in Narrative Podcasts*

While it is certainly true that *S-Town* appropriates the fictional tropes of specific
novel genres, one of the elements that make podcasts modally distinct from the
novel or the short story is the inclusion of the literal *voices* of narrators and
characters. At first glance, the direct representation of the subjects' voices in *Se-
rial* and *S-Town* can seem to be a counter-fictional element of the narrative pod-
cast form, allowing the people who appear within them to tell their own story
in their own words. However, as DeMair points out, the aurality of the podcast
form can further obscure the role of editing in the shaping of stories like *Serial*

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[72] Warhol, "Making 'Gay' and 'Lesbian'," 399.
[73] Warhol, "Making 'Gay' and 'Lesbian'," 399.
[74] McCracken, "The *Serial* Commodity," 60.

and *S-Town*; whereas in a television interview, where edits to an interviewee's responses must be masked with awkward cuts away from the speaker, in a podcast there is no such telltale visual sign, and so recognition of audio editing can take much more expertise.[75] Indeed, the auditory format can give an almost archival (and thus *factual*) slant to a podcast's contents, including what Elke Huwiler and Götz Schmedes have identified as the "paraverbal" aspects of radio drama such as intonation, background noise, etc.[76] In other words, the crunching of the gravel underneath the feet of Reed and McLemore as they walk through the hedge maze can produce a kind of auditory *mise en scène* that serves to make the moment seem more real, as though Reed had merely lived this audio rather than composed it.[77] This, in turn, gives an impression of the direct representation of reality rather than showing itself for what it is—a highly edited, mediated product.

I would argue that subjects' *accents* even lend themselves to this fictionalizing process, given the context of the podcast's production. John B. McLemore's audacious Alabama accent, combined with his sing-song cadence, provide a captivating audio experience one simply could not find in a textual novel. Yet, to the millions of listeners of this podcast, most of whom are far alienated from the geographical and social originations denoted by this accent, the accent itself could contribute to John's fictionalization. Records pertaining to the regional cultures of listeners of *S-Town* are not available, but listeners of National Public Radio-affiliated shows definitively skew urban, US Northern, and liberal.[78] The voices of John, Tyler Goodson, and others, with their Alabama accents, may serve to render them more caricature-like to listeners. For instance, audio from

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[75] DeMair, "Sounds Authentic," 36.

[76] Huwiler and Schmedes are cited in DeMair, "Sounds Authentic," 27; Elke Huwiler, *Erzähl-Ströme im Hörspiel: Zur Narratologie der elektroakustischen Kunst* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2005); Götz Schmedes, *Medientext Hörspiel: Ansätze einer Hörspielsemiotik am Beispiel der Radioarbeiten von Alfred Behrens* (Münster: Waxmann, 2002).

[77] McMurtry notes that this "found sound" tactic bolsters "an illusion of the real in audio fiction." (McMurtry, "'I'm Not a Real Detective,'" 308).

[78] A 2012 Pew Research Center poll found that NPR listeners tend to be more highly educated and possess higher incomes than the average American public. In addition, 43% of NPR listeners identify as Democrats, 37% identify as Independents, and only 17% identify as Republicans. ("In Changing News Landscape, Even Television is Vulnerable," Pew Research Center, 27 Sept. 2012, http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/27/section-4-demographics-and-political-views-of-news-audiences/.) NPR's own audience demographic data from 2017 shows that adults from the East South-Central US states (Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee) are 51% less likely than the general US adult population to be NPR station listeners (Antonio Miller and Susan Leland, "Profile 2017: Insights into the Public Radio Audience," National Public Radio, 2017, 15, accessed 22 Nov. 2019, https://dev-support.whro.org/images/pdf/NPR_Profile_2017.pdf). "Compared to the average U.S. adult, however, they [NPR listeners] are more likely to live in New England and Pacific states." (Miller and Leland, "Profile 2017," 7) US adults from smaller counties (i.e. rural areas) are also 25-50% less likely to be NPR listeners than the average US adult. (Miller and Leland, "Profile 2017," 16).

an interview of Tyler Goodson that Reed conducted includes very Southern-inflected background affirmations from Tyler's "Uncle Jimmy." Since Uncle Jimmy is not in any sense a participant in the diegesis of *S-Town*, his exclamations like "yessuh" are unquestionably included for comedic effect, or, at the very least, to provide local color. When bookended within Brian Reed's prototypically Midwestern accent—the accent adopted by most mainstream, national news commentators in the US for its perceived/supposed neutrality—John's voice is othered. Northern, urban listeners may therefore draw on their prior conceptions of rural Southerners, informed in many cases by stereotypes in narrative media like cartoons and films. Sarah Koenig's accent is near-identical to Reed's in its so-called neutrality, but Koenig's vocal performance is more inflected than Reed's.[79] It's not exactly 'up-talk', a term which describes the way that many young American women have been noted to elevate their tone at the end of a sentence as though asking a question even if making a declaration. But Koenig's intonation *does* have the effect of making her narration sound more spontaneous instead of scripted, which, in turn, creates an air of intimacy with the listener, as though Koenig were ingenuously thinking out loud rather than reading from a script. Reed's intonation, on the other hand, is more monotonous, which has its own air of apparent neutrality. Though Koenig's and Reed's vocal styles differ, their *accents* both denote authority and credibility. Their subjects, like John with his Alabama drawl and Adnan Syed with his Black Vernacular-adjacent accent, are inversely subordinated; in a US cultural context, the accents reaffirm that Koenig and Reed are the controlling narrators, whereas Syed and McLemore are the constructed characters.

The combination of verbal and paraverbal institutions of fiction and fact are not new. When considering the precedent of radio drama, I am reminded of Orson Welles's 1938 dramatization of *The War of the Worlds*, which appropriated the form of the radio news broadcast (including coverage of the Hindenburg disaster) to lend an electrifying air of authenticity to a fictional story about alien invasion. However, as I have made clear, the rise of the narrative podcast is more than a simple reprise of radio; it is not a retro trend. It is, instead, a fascinating site of resistance to a media landscape saturated with the visual, a repudiation of visual culture within the mainstream. Building from Marshall McLuhan's argument in *Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley points out that, just as the invention of the Gutenberg press shifted storytelling culture from oral to print, "privileging the eye over the voice, the visual over the acoustic," the electronic age has also enacted another

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[79] McCracken addresses Koenig's vocal performance, but focuses more on her diction and rhetoric than on intonation, and does not address her accent (McCracken, "*Serial* as Digital Constellation," 194).

paradigm shift in the "human imagination."[80] In a time when narrative consumption has never been more customizable and our daily lives have never been more saturated with multimodal media, it is highly significant that the narrative podcast—a form that in and of itself makes use of a single, pre-digital (aural) mode—has garnered hundreds of millions of devotees.[81] Why? Could it be that the act of "listening bridges *both* the sensory, embodied experience *and* the political realm of debate and deliberation," thus perhaps satisfying a thirst for embodied experience in this cerebral, postmodern existence, as Kate Lacey posits?[82] If that alone explained it, non-narrative podcasts would be just as popular as narrative ones.

I hypothesize that the answer lies in the way that listeners are engaging with the real people depicted in these podcasts at least partially as though they were fictional characters. Lev Grossman, discussing contemporary serial films and TV shows, has observed that the way we consume these stories renders them "book-like": "The hallmark of reading, especially reading in a codex format, is the massive amount of control you have over it. You take it everywhere; if you want to go back through, you can review a chapter, you can jump back and forth, you read at your own pace, you can control the speed."[83] Prior to the dawn of the podcast form, serial audio storytelling had no precedent for this degree of receiver control over consumption. It may well be the case that, when receivers encounter a narrative in this form, they fall back on preset modes of interpretation that align with the closest experienced corollary—literature. Now, certainly, this degree of receiver control could apply to a nonfiction book as easily as it could to a novel, but when combined with the institutions of fiction and fictive discourse I have laid out above, a production/publication format which receivers have heretofore associated with fiction has demonstrably resulted in those receivers responding to the narrative as though it were fiction. As Abbott attests, "too much art and narrative drive" in a nonfiction narrative can, in receivers' minds, violate the boundaries of fact.[84]

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[80] Marshall McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); Stanley, "'What We Know'", 74.

[81] McCracken has argued that "oral storytelling in the digital age almost immediately overcomes the transitory nature of traditional oral communication" in part because of online engagement via social media and online discussion forums (McCracken, "*Serial* as Digital Constellation," 187). I contend, however, that paratextual engagement is by no means a guaranteed receiver behavior. Many millions more *simply listen* to podcast episodes and never engage with the fan community online. While listener engagement may determine what creators do in serialized podcasts, I maintain that online co-participation with a podcast is extra to the receiving experience, not integral.

[82] Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 5. Emphasis added.

[83] Grossman et al., "Contemporary Seriality," 119.

[84] Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction*, 145.

6. Conclusion

Since its record-breaking first season, *Serial* has produced two more seasons, each progressively moving further and further away from the narrative formula that made the first season such a hit. Season 3, the last episode of which was posted online on November 15, 2018, decenters Koenig by incorporating multiple narrators and, instead of taking on one single story with one human subject, takes as its subject the various entities operating within a courthouse in Cleveland, Ohio. The tagline for the podcast changed from "One story, told week by week" to the somewhat nonsensical "One courthouse, told week by week."[85] Consequently, almost every element of fictionalization has been removed from the podcast's structure, resulting in a much more straightforwardly journalistic product. This change seems to have been prompted by some of the criticism Koenig and her team faced in response to the first season—or, perhaps, from the creators' own disturbance at their seemingly unintentional invocation of fictional elements. Julie Snyder, a producer for both *Serial* and *S-Town*, voiced this discomfort: "We're doing journalism. So we're trying to report a story; it was about sticking to the truth […]. It just feels like we got hit a bit by an onslaught of fandom that you see in fiction realms […]. It just felt like —'This isn't what we intended, this isn't what we wanted. This feels gross to us.'"[86] Intention, we can see from Snyder's words (and we can infer from the subsequent changes made to later seasons of *Serial*), does not always determine the *effect* of a narrative's perceived factuality or fictionality. It may well be said, then, that nonfictional narrative podcast producers can tell the *truth* while still producing *fiction*.

Faced not only with criticism but also with the troubling "fandom"-like response to *Serial*'s first season, Koenig and her team have now apparently attempted to disown the structure that gained them wild success. The direction of *Serial*'s third season, combined with the fact that no additional spinoffs have been made in the vein of *S-Town*, signals an attempt to get away from the fictionalization that accompanied the earlier podcasts' serialization of a single story, usually a true-crime mystery, because of the ethical fallout. But imitators have already produced numerous serial podcasts following this lucrative formula in which a single investigator stirs up a cold case with the promise of solving it. Unfortunately, many of these imitators are not as scrupulous as Koenig's team when it comes to appropriating elements of fiction in order to tell the truth. In this post-truth, fake news era, there are serious ethical and political consequences to this mode, of which *Serial* and *S-Town* are precedents. Reckoning with those consequences means allowing the boundary-crossings of these

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[85] Sarah Koenig, *Serial*, season 3, podcast audio, 25 Sept.–15 Nov. 2018, accessed 17 June 2019, https://serialpodcast.org/.

[86] Grossman et al., "Contemporary Seriality," 121.

narrative podcasts to reframe how we think of the intersections of factual and fictional narration.

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