

Office Hours | By Michael Stephens

Gifts of This Hour

What do I listen to now? More than a few folks shared this sentiment online in the days following the release of “S-Town,” a podcast hosted by Brian Reed and created by the producers of “Serial” and “This American Life.” It topped ten million-plus downloads within four days of release. I binged all seven episodes over spring break and found the series to be a moving, insightful, and well-conceived piece of audio journalism. Podcasting has experienced a renaissance of content, production values, and quality in the past few years.

“S-Town” shares the deeply human story of John B. McLemore, a resident of Woodstock, AL, and an “antiquarian horologist” (repairer of old clocks) who is unimpressed with his rural environment but unwilling to leave. It’s that and so much more—no spoilers! *The Atlantic* described the podcast as a “monument to empathy” and reviews noted it feels like a nonfiction literary novel. Librarians should consider adding this new generation of audio content to library offerings by curating podcasts, educating users, and programming. Readers’ advisory now includes listeners’ advisory!

A ROSE FOR EMILY

Reed told *The New Yorker*, “I hope that people enjoy it the way they might enjoy a book.” “S-Town” is steeped in references to literature, including Faulkner, Poe, de Maupassant, and others. The Birmingham Public Library, AL, jumped on this with a tweet in

early April: “Binged on S-Town and looking for more? Check out a few of the #books and #stories recommended by John B.” An attached image highlighted titles from the show.

I’ve recently heard that podcasts encourage listeners to get their friends and family to “try a pod” because most people still don’t know what they are. This is a prime opportunity for libraries. The Sterling Municipal Library in Baytown, TX, will be launching Story Bar in the next month, curating media collections of podcast clips, TED Talks, articles, suggested readings, and more on iPads to highlight specific topics. Think of it as an information experience built around a popular theme. Sterling’s director Jamie Eustace told me, “Clearly I was heavily influenced by years of listening to “This American Life.” Using podcasts in combination with videos, articles, and books is just one more way we hope to inspire new ideas.”

Days after the release of “S-Town” in late March, the Third Coast International Audio Festival in Chicago announced “S-Town Hall” for those who wanted to come together and discuss the story. For libraries to do this, staff would need to be tapped into pop culture and current events and be able to plan and act quickly. Book clubs could be enhanced with pod clubs.

SPYIN’ IN THE PEEPHOLE

The information science side of me found the post-release explosion of the “S-Town” online discussion and sharing fascinating. I followed Twitter hashtags, a thriving Reddit community,

Facebook groups, and Instagram posts to see images of the people and places included in the story.

Web sleuthing, I have come to learn from a recent student project, is a thing, a thriving community of folks who use the tools of the web to find out more about crimes or mysteries. Netizens uncovered Google satellite images of important Woodstock locations, Facebook posts from town residents featured in the story, and many of McLemore’s online profiles. Curiosity pulled me in, but I also felt concern about where we draw the line with regard to privacy and sharing. It felt so personal, yet that’s what the story of “S-Town” is. Reed told an interviewer that the producers share information about adjusting social media privacy settings with people who appear on programs such as this as they prep a show. Wouldn’t this be an interesting angle for future programming?

WITNESS MARKS

Toward the end of the podcast, Reed explains the essence of “S-Town” “I think trying to understand another person is a worthwhile thing to do.” The communities we serve are worth understanding, too. And just like in “S-Town,” there’s much to discover. Curating audio and media collections by theme and programming connected to significant cultural touchstones informs people about our big, complicated, diverse, messy, beautiful world, and gives them a way to understand the clues and mysteries of other peoples lives. With understanding comes empathy.

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Minnesota Digital Library (MDL) with over 190 institutional partners. MDL is one of the original—and one of the largest—service hubs for [the Digital Public Library of America].”

UMN’s special collections are recognized and used by a global community and include the Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies, which recently won the American Library Association Newlen-Symons Award for Excellence in Serving the GLBT

Community. And, said Lougee, the library “is engaged in a groundbreaking project to capture digital oral histories from the transgender community.”

There is also UMN’s Archie Givens, Sr. Collection of African American Literature that is now “digitiz[ing] resources dealing with African American history and culture from across our extensive archival collections and [has] created a discovery tool—Umbra Search African American History—that brings together relevant digital content from

more than 1,000 U.S. partner archives, libraries, and museums, spanning 250 years of history.”

Libraries of all sizes have become the glue that holds communities together, especially when other social services become overwhelmed. As TPLS’s Cospier-LeBoeuf noted, “The library is the biggest resource in this parish that is available to everyone whether you read or not read. A community needs a nucleus, and we choose to be that center.”—**Julia Lee Barclay-Morton**