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Review 3

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Listening to S-Town, I was struck by the juxtaposition of obviously scripted narrative and “unscripted” phone calls. I found it hilarious at the right moments and poignant at others. This does raise the question though: What counts as scripted? Obviously this is a carefully constructed narrative that was pieced together through many years. Can we even call those phone calls with John B. and various other S-Town members “authentic?”

Brian Reed obviously had a pretty clear idea of what he thought would make a good podcast, what would keep listeners interested and make for a compelling story. In a speech to attendants at The Conference in 2014, he lays out the basic elements that make a story compelling. I highly recommend watching this video, it will give you a bit of insight into the creative process that goes on when creating a podcast: <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/extras/brian-reed-on-how-to-construct-a-compelling-story> This video was shot in 2014, 3 years before he released S-Town and probably around the same time that Brian got the first email from John B. claiming he lived in Shit-Town Alabama. Brian Reed previously worked for NPR as an investigative reporter before joining *This American Life* in 2010. S-Town is considered his most ground-breaking podcast, catapulting him into widespread fame.

With this amount of experience, Brian Reed knows what makes for a good story. Another question I have: where does bias fit into this story? To make a story compelling, there has to be some sense of intrigue, suspense. Reed does this by comparing Tyler Goodson’s view of Reta with Reta’s own admissions. When we first hear about Reta, it’s from Tyler’s perspective and he paints her as a conniving gold-digger who is only out to get John’s money. To be honest, I was pretty drawn into this conclusion and decided that Reta was no good from the beginning. A few episodes later, Brian reveals that he interviewed Reta and shares her responses with the listeners. As I was listening, I noticed that Brian’s view of Reta is not exactly stellar. He is still pretty suspicious of her and voices his views to the listener. As a journalist, isn’t he supposed to present the facts without his opinion? In reality, I know that that never happens, but in this case I thought there could have been more of a separation, especially since this is a real case that is affecting real people.

And how does libel fit into all of this? Could Reed possibly be sued for defaming Reta? Does a published podcast count as “written content”? I ended up with a lot of questions about the ethics of this podcast and not a whole lot of answers. In some ways, that’s what makes it so interesting. The listener is on the edge of their seat the whole time, wondering if Reed will get in trouble or if the townspeople will actually find John B.’s treasure. If I were to rate this podcast, I’d give it an 8 out of 10, simply because I felt a little bit unsatisfied with the ending. Brian left a lot of avenues unexplored. I did love the extended metaphor of clock-making that wove throughout the entire podcast. Overall, I really enjoyed this (as much as I just complained about it in this review) and I’ve already recommended it to my friends and family!