

Red-state noir, blue-state noir

In both *S-Town* and *Big Little Lies*, there's human depravity everywhere.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue



Madeline (Reese Witherspoon, left), Jane (Shailene Woodley, center), and Celeste (Nicole Kidman) in the show *Big Little Lies*. Photo by Hilary Bronwyn. © 2017 HBO. All rights reserved.

Every spring I reread the works of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. As the sun starts breaking through the interminable gray northeastern skies, my mind turns to gimlets and the bleakness of human nature.

Masters of early detective noir, Chandler and Hammett knew that the only real mystery was the inscrutable human will. Murder, embezzlement, pornography rings, and adultery lead us into the much wilder terrain of human intention.

Noir has always appealed to me because it is so unsentimental about human nature. Both writers suggest that even the most respectable societies are built on a substratum of corruption. In their fiction, this is personified by mob families, gin runners, corrupt police, and sex rackets. Nothing and no one is immune to the corrupting influences of money and power, and nearly everyone succumbs.

This fascination is why, perhaps, I have become so enamored of two recent pop culture juggernauts, *S-Town*, a podcast from the producers of *Serial* and *This American Life*, and HBO's limited-run drama *Big Little Lies*, both of which use murder to develop rich explorations of human characters. They borrow the unsentimentality of noir but offer something more hopeful than total despair.

John B. McLemore, the central character of *S-Town*, could give any noir detective a run for his money. He sees greed, dishonesty, jealousy, and violence in almost every person and institution of his hometown, Woodstock, Alabama. Convinced that a murder is being covered up by the sheriff's office in his rural county, McLemore contacts *This American Life* reporter Brian Reed and asks him to investigate.

The story that McLemore tells about his hometown, and that Reed tries to corroborate, is fringed by salacious possibilities: buried treasure, conniving relatives, medieval alchemy, sadomasochist rituals, white supremacist violence, unsolvable mazes, and family history that resurges with tragic fatality. It's noir meets Faulkner meets Internet conspiracy theory.

The intricate hooks and leads that *S-Town* traces are a bit hard to follow. But it soon becomes apparent that the details don't really matter. The plots of noir novels rarely add up anyway. The point is to follow the guide. And our guide—and the mystery at the heart of the podcast—is McLemore himself.

McLemore's conflicted feelings about his hometown give the listener the first puzzle. In his ambivalence—if not outright scorn—toward Woodstock, we are given permission to recoil. But in his unwillingness to leave the town, and his abundantly displayed commitment to the very people and places he disdains, we can't help seeing the town and its inhabitants as lovable because loved. This tension is something like the hedge maze McLemore has built on his 126-acre family property:

if set just so, it is unsolvable; it becomes a trap, not a puzzle.

Despite his mazes, what McLemore seems to want most of all is to be understood. Reed eventually espouses this as the ethic of the show: truly trying to understand another person is worth doing in and of itself.

Set in glistening blue Monterey, California, *Big Little Lies* seems as far politically and geographically as possible from the deep red of rural Alabama. But like *S-Town*, it opens on a murder scene. The setup is pure noir: nothing screams “all is not well in paradise” like murder at an upscale elementary school fund-raiser. And as in many noir novels, the murder itself recedes in order to explore the characters involved.

The story settles on a small group of dysfunctional women: Madeline Mackenzie (Reese Witherspoon), a helicopter parent who hovers fiercely over the school pickup line; Celeste Wright (Nicole Kidman), former power attorney turned stay-at-home mom; Jane Chapman (Shailene Woodley), a young single mom who is punching above her class category; Renata Klein (Laura Dern), the only full-time working mom in the group; and Bonnie Carlson (Zoë Kravitz), a yoga teacher and the new wife of Madeline’s first husband.

Watching the suffocating politics of wealthy people policing each other through parenting is not my idea of a good way to spend seven hours. But the care and generosity shown to the characters, and the skilled acting that renders them in full flesh, pulled me in. All the big lies about rape, murder, adultery, domestic violence—and the little ones about jealousy, gossip, narcissism—draw the viewer to see the real humans struggling to know themselves and each other.

At a turning point, Renata and Jane face off over accusations of bullying between their children. Almost imperceptibly, Jane lets down her guard, and instead of attacking, as is Renata’s habit when she senses weakness, Renata leans forward, and they both seem to see each other for the first time. Everything that follows—in intimate lives and dramatic crescendos—blossoms from that tiny moment of empathy. It suggests that this show shares with *S-Town* an ethic of human understanding.

We hear a lot these days about the difficulty of getting outside the bubbles of our own class, race, or geographic location. Red states and blue states can seem as far apart as different planets.

In a way, early noir helped invent this very juxtaposition. It is not an accident that all Chandler and Hammett stories take place in Los Angeles and New York City, and often feature innocent midwestern victims lured to their moral, if not physical, demise in the corrupt hotbeds of coastal cities. Maybe it is a sign of progress that *S-Town* and *Big Little Lies* suggest that things are just as screwed up in Alabama as in Monterey. We might call it the Calvinist principle: true equality in total depravity. Instead of noting the nobility and worth of all, I recognize that I am just as screwed up as everyone else.

But even though both series play with noir conventions, neither accepts depravity as a given. Where Chandler and Hammett were content to pull back the curtain on corruption, *S-Town* and *Big Little Lies* invite us to walk inside, make ourselves a gimlet, find the nearest character, and start a conversation.

A version of this article appears in the May 24 print edition under the title "Total (and equal) depravity."