



Andrew Beck Grace, Chip Brantley. *White Lies*. National Public Radio, 2019. True Crime and Civil Rights Podcast

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NPR's *White Lies* podcast series is a gripping exploration of the 1965 murder of civil rights activist James Reeb. While this is interesting enough as a singular historical incident, this podcast series delves into the related yet distinct processes of historical production and public memory. This synthesis reexamines a traditionally national historical moment in a way that is intimate and particular to Selma and its inhabitants. This high production quality benefits a challenging narrative that dissects questions of race, memory, the judicial process, and even morality. While this podcast was initially released in 2019, it has since taken on a new relevance. In the wake of the George Floyd uprisings and racial justice reckoning in 2020, *White Lies* takes on a further significance by addressing the long historical tails of the civil rights movements and injustices that have still yet to be addressed.

White Lies is an eight-episode, serialized podcast available through NPR's own streaming service and also hosted on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and Spotify. The episodes themselves all run roughly one hour each. Hosts Andrew Beck Grace and Chip Brantley are from Alabama, and their local connection to the politics and social climate of the state hits on the theme of intimacy and the significance of locality in historical narratives. In the first episode, the hosts introduce the

traditional narrative of Reeb's murder and the subsequent trial that acquitted three men of his murder. This series is about complicating a received narrative, however. Brantley tells us in the first episode, "The story we're going to tell you is about what happened on the street [in Selma] that night and what came after, about how a lie took root, working steadily over the years to overshadow the truth." The major themes of race, memory, justice, and the complex interrelation of local events within national histories are all established in this opening episode.

Subsequent episodes spend time dismantling this narrative. This series is not simply a reiteration of existing reporting and scholarship delivered by the hosts. Instead, Grace and Brantley are just as significant figures in this narrative as the many Selma residents they interview. Episodes 2 and 3 discuss the hosts' discovery of materials in myriad local archives and their own original interviews with residents in a blend of methodology that tacks between historical analysis and investigative journalism. The first few episodes are therefore as much a documentary of research processes as they are a presentation of said research. The hosts self-consciously build a base of evidence and process that benefit their later argument against the traditional understanding of the murder of Reeb. As a counterweight to their pro-

fessional research, the hosts then track the emergence of the counternarrative to Reeb's murder, that Reeb had been severely injured but not murdered by the white men who assaulted him. Instead, white Selma residents believed that Reeb had been murdered by the Black doctors who treated him in order to make a martyr for the civil rights movement. While Reeb's murder had always been about race in the context of the civil rights movement, the counternarrative of white Selma residents underscores the centrality of race to the popular memory of Reeb's murder.

The second half of this series is then spent in pursuit of the truth of Reeb's murder. While the documentation of Reeb's unfortunate end in pursuit of racial justice would be captivating enough on its own, a chance interview with a woman who saw the event sends the hosts in another direction, further complicating the established narrative of the assault on Reeb. The next episode then draws a through line with the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson as a means of engaging the broader memory of the civil rights movement within Alabama. The latter episodes delve much more into the legacy within Selma of Reeb's murder, and the way this event has swallowed the lives of many residents. The series then ends with another reflection on public memory. Memory, perhaps the most pertinent theme in this series, and more specifically the way the identity and relationship of the individual to an event changes that memory, is explored in the afterlives of Reeb's death. The hosts conclude by asking both Reeb's descendants and the descendants of one of Reeb's assailants how the definite knowledge of a fourth man changes their understanding of that event. The series thus neatly concludes a muddled history by examining the rippling effect of new information on those most intimately involved with the focus of the series.

One of the key themes in this podcast is the effect of intimacy, locality, and identity on memory. While it may not have been intentional, the choice

to release this series as a podcast engages the listener in its own unique form of intimacy. The whole scope of this podcast is long and complex, and while supplementary graphics or other information may have helped listeners understand the full scope of the series, the simple audio format with minimal sound design creates the atmosphere of a privately held investigative briefing. This intimacy is benefited by the uniquely personal format of a podcast, which isolates the host and the listener. The hosts are measured in their delivery. While the twist addition of a fourth man to the traditional narrative of Reeb's death may locate this podcast within NPR's "True Crime" label, the process of discovery will be familiar to anyone involved in archival research. Throughout the series, the hosts further maintain a calm, professional, but firm delivery of at times complex subjects, such as the intersection of race and memory, further distancing this series from the oftentimes salacious genre of "True Crime."

I would highly recommend this series as an excellent case study in the intersections of public and private memory. Throughout the series, Grace and Brantley are explicit in their locating memory as something that is owned and held within the individual. Recollection is always prefixed by a careful explanation of who the individual is and what their relationship is to the topic. While Grace and Brantley are not exactly explicit in their pronouncement of memory as separate from historical fact, they do take care to identify the unique strains of local remembrance and national narrative. As Grace and Brantley ultimately uncover previously unknown information pertaining to Reeb's death as a result of archival recovery and investigative reporting, this podcast further serves as an excellent study of research methodology. In all, the series is engaging, complex, and very well delivered.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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