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American Ecocide in Bad Faith
The Tragic and Haunting Story of John B. McLemore



Figure 1. John B. McLemore's hedge maze in its early years. Tyler Goodson / Facebook

John B. McLemore plays the central protagonist of the NPR quasi-documentary program called *S-Town*. In what may be the newest iteration of the great American novel (audio-form serial narrative), John B. is a kind of modern-day rogue version of Saint Francis living in the rural wasteland of Bibb County, Alabama. A mystic 'hiding in the woods,' John is a misplaced romantic blindly adrift in his own self-constructed palace of lighted trees.¹ Our story of this rustic sage trapped inside his own labyrinthine garden maze (Fig. 1) begins with these groomed hedges: his pledge to the land is a first window into our story.

In this paper—and with the histories of ecology and ghostliness in mind—I suggest John B. ought to be read as our most recent prophet in the historical tradition of American gothic. Unique, however, within the wider gothic archive, is John B.'s role as astute environmentalist: he was both a polymathic advocate announcing the deleterious stains of climate-change and an solipsistic activist preacher lodged in his own miasma of darkness (his only modern communication the rare email-correspondence). A plant enthusiast, dog-loving stranger in the woods and profoundly mystical

¹ A remarkably inventive line from one of John B.'s many ranting soliloquys, *S-Town* Podcast. NPR. John B. McLemore dialogue. 2014



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introvert, NPR's *S-Town* reveals for listeners the complex bleakness and forlorn character of this tragic figure. Who was John B. (Fig. 2)? How did some otherworldly assemblage of elemental deluge forces come to construct one of the most radically, dynamic literary personhoods one will encounter today? What does his fate tell us about environment, narrative and the often-dystopian contemporary condition (Fig. 3)?

My interventions—along with a variety of inextricably linked intermedial texts—reveal the eco-gothic tradition deep and alive in this American figure of loss. The first of these alternative media are the three narrative prose pieces of fiction John B. suggests for narrator Brian Reed.² The other is a posthumous record of John B.'s ambient drone music entitled *Tor Lundvall Presents: Witness Marks—The Works of John B. McLemore* (Fig. 4). Together, these discordant media show our tragic hero to be a sincere 'citizen of the world,'³ a gothic gentle giant in Charles Brockden Brown's defamiliarized woods.



Figure 2. John B. McLemore's back—tattoos, scars and whip lashings.

² Guy du Maupassant, 'The Necklace'; William Faulkner, 'A Rose for Emily'; Shirley Jackson, 'The Renegade'

³ *S-Town* Podcast. NPR. John B. McLemore dialogue. 2014



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Figure 3. John B. McLemore grave sign.⁴

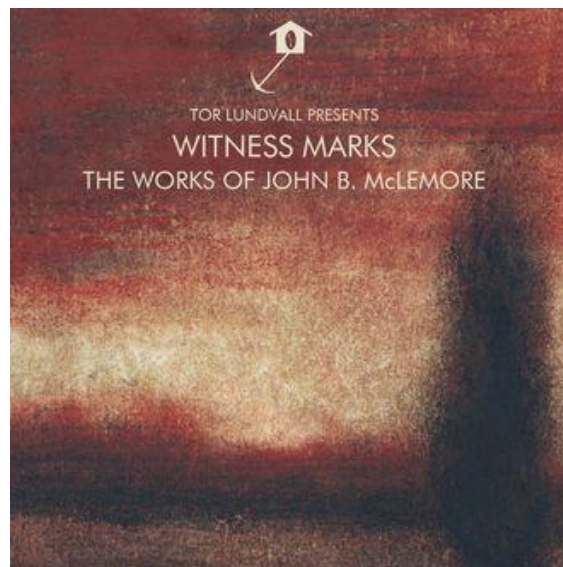


Figure 4. Cover art. Posthumous EP record from John B. and Tor Lundvall.

⁴ Alas, very soon into the program (episode 1, conclusion) we sadly learn of John B's untimely death: suicide by poison.