

# A Sound History

## Audiobooks Are Music to Children's Ears

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**M**r. Gutenberg came along and suddenly we had the book. But long before that, we had the oral traditions, we had storytellers sitting down and weaving a plot and presenting characters," so says adult author Michael Lamb in a National Public Radio interview.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the power of a good story is hard to deny, and the unprecedented growth of audiobooks in recent years, with marked increases among children and young adult titles suggests that this oral tradition is still very much valued by children and adults alike.<sup>2</sup> Given the continued interest in this form of information receiving and a renewed focus on listening within education, it is important for librarians to know the history of audiobooks and recognize components that make audiobooks distinct.<sup>3</sup>

Since the late nineteenth century, the audiobook selection and production processes have progressively become more complex and systematic. Yet only a small fraction of titles published each year are deemed worthy for audiobook production, and even fewer still are recognized as outstanding.

Previous reviews of audiobooks have focused on readers' advisory, the role of audiobooks in supporting literacy development, and the use of audiobooks with children. This article complements and builds upon those reviews by providing an historical overview of audiobooks, detailing the components of audiobook production, and identifying the most notable audiobook awards in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Implications for libraries and library service are then discussed.

### History of audiobook production

Audio recordings of texts have been in existence for nearly a century. As early as 1877, Thomas Edison envisioned the phonograph as an oral book reading device, and his very first recording on the phonograph, a recitation of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" might generously be considered the first children's read-along.<sup>5</sup>

While Edison's first recording was a nursery rhyme, the earliest attempts at audio production of books involved only highly regarded adult literature. Even Mark Twain embraced the idea



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of audio, and he began recording his novel *American Claimant*. However, after about three hours of recording, which filled four dozen cylinders, he abandoned the project. Indeed, it was because of these technological limitations in the early twentieth century that books were often read aloud on the radio rather than recorded. Again, though, this practice involved esteemed adult literature as attested by the fact that Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* was the first serial reading of an entire novel on the air.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the 1931 passage of the Pratt-Smoot Act, which provided federal funding for recorded books for the blind, that audiobook production in the United States intensified.<sup>7</sup>

Yet it took nearly thirty-five years for publishers to recognize the niche of the oral book market. With its premier recording of poet Dylan Thomas reading his own work in 1952, Caedmon Records established itself as the first publisher devoted exclusively to spoken word recordings.<sup>8</sup>

Production of children's books in audio format has a shorter history but still spans nearly a century. Harper Columbia was the first producer of commercially available audiobooks for children with the series *Bubble Books*.<sup>9</sup> *Bubble Books* consisted of print books and corresponding records, and millions of copies were produced and sold commercially in the United States and Great Britain under various labels between 1917 and 1930.<sup>10</sup>

In 1952, Congress extended the National Library Service for the Blind and Handicapped to children.<sup>11</sup> One year later, Mort Schindel founded Weston Woods, a company dedicated to "translating the best in children's picture book literature into audiovisual media."<sup>12</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Anthony and Helen Ditlow launched Listening Library, a publisher committed to creating unabridged recordings of children's and young adult literature for school and library markets.<sup>13</sup>

Since those early days of audiobook recording, a number of other publishers have entered the business. With the growth of the industry have come new organizations and a unique vocabulary to communicate the nuances of audiobook production. In 1987, the Audio Publishers Association (APA) formed to serve the common interests of audiobook producers and related distributors and suppliers, and there are currently more than forty publishers with membership in the APA.<sup>14</sup> The term audiobook came into use in the 1970s, with the advent of the audiocassette, and became the industry standard in 1994 after adoption by the APA.<sup>15</sup>

## Production process

Publishers take extra precautions when selecting titles for audiobook production. Only a small percentage of traditional print books are produced as audiobooks. Of the nearly ten thousand annual submissions, Recorded Books, one of the larger audiobook producers, records only about seven hundred

titles per year; approximately 120 of those are for children or young adults.<sup>16</sup>

When selecting books for audiobook format, the publisher considers numerous factors: the popularity and past success of the author; the qualities of the text, including the distinction of the character's voice that would make it successful in audiobook format; and the element of flexibility within the text that would allow for a reader to enhance the experience aurally.<sup>17</sup>

Books that are exciting and suspenseful in written form tend to transfer well to the audiobook format.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, weaknesses in a print book become more obvious when transferred to audiobook format.<sup>19</sup> Particularly difficult issues for producers include handling transitions between time and/or place and translating extraneous materials and text such as maps, illustrations, and footnotes in a manner that enables a smooth listening experience while also accurately conveying intended purposes.<sup>20</sup> Because nonfiction for children and young adults is often dependent on visual features such as charts, figures, and maps, it sometimes does not translate well to audiobook format.<sup>21</sup>

Although audiobooks could theoretically serve as the sole format of a text, in almost all cases they are an alternate presentation of a book available in a text-based format, both paper and electronic.<sup>22</sup> Once the decision has been made to produce a book in audio format, the publisher will typically try to release audiobook and print editions simultaneously.<sup>23</sup> Increasingly, publishers are bundling e-book and digital audiobook formats of titles and offering syncing technology which allows readers to pick the text up in one medium in the exact location where the reading ended in the other medium.<sup>24</sup> Though it is plausible that audiobooks could differ from their print counterparts in terms of popularity, they tend not to do so—popular sellers in print tend to be popular in audio; books not well received in print tend not to be well received in audio.<sup>25</sup> Typically, sales of audiobooks are about 10 percent of their print counterparts.<sup>26</sup>

## Narration

Throughout the professional literature on audiobooks, the terms "narrator" and "reader" are used interchangeably. Audiobook narration is a specialized craft that differs from both acting and standard reading, but it does integrate the two activities. A good narrator ensures congruence of voice with the traits of the characters and manipulates the voice to bring a text to life and to draw in listeners.<sup>27</sup>

When selecting readers for audiobook narration, producers look for certain qualities. Special attention is paid to ensure that the voice of the narrator does not interfere with the meaning of the story or information and that the reader uses proper pronunciation given the context of the book.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the audiobook reader's voice should match closely with the character's age, making selection of the readers of children's audiobooks significantly more difficult than that of adult books

and sometimes resulting in producers hiring children or teen readers.<sup>29</sup>

In an interview with Mary Burkey, audiobook producer and director David Rapkin said, “In audiobooks for young people, it’s important to imbue the production with a sense of innocent excitement, without an adult sensibility, in the way the actor approaches reading the book and the characters. It’s a very delicate kind of energy that is easily extinguished if ham-handed adulthood is permitted to enter the process. It has to do with the lightness of voice. It has to do with a kind of enthusiasm. It has to do with keeping emotions close to the surface. In an adult book many things can be implied but in a young person’s audiobook the subtlety can be relaxed so that the feelings can emerge.”<sup>30</sup>

A narrator’s decisions about tone, voice, and emphasis can be the determining factor in a listener becoming engrossed in or disengaged from the listening experience. Just as meaning is conveyed through voice, so too is it communicated through pace.<sup>31</sup> The narrator’s pauses convey meaning just as the words do.<sup>32</sup> The narration must flow with the pacing of the action in the text; suspenseful and action-packed dialogue and scenes must be read with appropriate speed while those portions of the text meant to be savored or that evoke strong feelings need be read more slowly.<sup>33</sup>

Audiobook producers tend to use professional actors who are members of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists as narrators.<sup>34</sup> Clarity, strength, and stamina are the necessary voice components for quality narration.<sup>35</sup> According to voice coach Johnny Hellerer, “Vocal acting requires a deeper rapport with the text than is needed for stage or screen acting. Casual readers can gloss over punctuation, but voice actors don’t have that luxury.”<sup>36</sup>

The Deyan Institute recently opened in Northridge, California, as a training facility for audiobook narrators and voice actors because its founders, Bob and Debra Deyan, wanted to ensure that newcomers to the expanding audiobook industry maintain quality production.<sup>37</sup>

Audiobooks are also frequently narrated by authors. When asked if it made a difference if a work were read by an actor or author, Barbara Holdridge, co-founder of Caedmon Records, replied, “The author is actually recapturing the emotions experienced when first the book or poem was written. It doesn’t matter whether he or she reads as an actor would. The actor is interpreting the author’s intent. The author is interpreting his or her own intent—not someone else’s work, but his or her own, in the authentic intonation, emotion, and accent.”<sup>38</sup>

Sherman Alexie’s agent demanded that Alexie be the narrator of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and though his voice is not one that would typically be selected for audiobook narration, it works for that text because it is his story.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, autobiographies and memoirs are often read by the subjects

themselves. For instance, Barack Obama served as the reader for his title *The Audacity of Hope*, and reviews praised his delivery. However, memoirs don’t necessarily have to be read by the writer and can be top quality audiobooks even when narrated by another reader. In fact, Keith Richards’ *Life* was awarded the 2011 Audiobook of the Year by the Audio Publishers Association, and Richards himself only read the first and last chapters.<sup>40</sup>

For many titles, the author is not necessarily always the best choice as narrator. Though authors understand the intended mood and theme of the text, they may not understand the nuances of audiobook narration, such as pacing and verbal interpretation of each of the characters.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, with a vested interest in the text an author may overact parts that are special significance.<sup>42</sup> In discussing his role as the narrator of the memoir *My Life in Dog Years*, Gary Paulsen confessed, “I approached the recording sessions with a sense of dread . . . each night I walked away totally exhausted. I’ve run sled dogs for miles and not been that wiped out. I felt like I was back in the army marching in the desert with packs of rocks on my back—it was that hard.”<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, the role of the narrator is not an easy one, and it requires both preparation and practice. A poor reading of a text can negatively impact a listener’s opinion of a book.<sup>44</sup> Though narrators usually only receive a book or galley about one week in advance of recording, they are expected to conduct their own research before production commences.<sup>45</sup> To prepare for the Jacky Faber series, Katherine Kellgren worked with a singing coach to ensure that songs and sea shanties were accurate and sounded appropriate sung in both male and female character voices. Kellgren also acknowledges that as part of her preparation for audiobook narration, she conducts searches for images of objects described in a text that she herself has never seen.<sup>46</sup>

Tom Opdyke, who narrated a serial podcast, explained,

Narration requires character insights and emotional nuances to carry off voices and paint scenes. When I prepare to read a narrative, I make the same kind of scene-blocking notes I would use if I were reading a script for a stage play. To carry off a scene with credibility, I need to know where the characters are on this imagined set at all times: Am I a character yelling across a parking lot to another character or am I the narrator standing to the side, describing a mother at the bedside of her critically ill son?<sup>47</sup>

Proper portrayal of characters with accents or dialects can be particularly tricky for audiobook narrators. When portraying a regional accent, a narrator must consider both the geography and the historical period.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, identifying correct accents for characters of specific countries or ethnic groups is essential, and the narrator must interpret each of the characters appropriately and consistently.<sup>49</sup> To ensure that character voices are consistent throughout a book or series, some audiobook readers will make digital samples of the voice used for each character that can then be referenced when needed.<sup>50</sup>

Good narration can come with big rewards. Jim Dale, narrator of the *Harry Potter* series, holds the Guinness World Record for Most Character Voices in Audiobook, and in 2003, Queen Elizabeth II awarded him Member of the Order of the British Empire for his narration of the first five *Harry Potter* books.<sup>51</sup>

Some critics claim audiobooks diminish a reader's ability to bring a book to life. These critics contend it is a narrator, not the listener who interprets the story, but other scholars recognize the value of audiobooks and their advantage over the print format in certain instances. As Matthew Rubery explains, "Words susceptible to skimming on the printed page cannot be hurried past when read aloud. There is no 'speed listening' equivalent to 'speed reading.' Spoken narrative restores the rhythm and cadence of prose in ways reminiscent of early storytelling."<sup>52</sup> Though voracious readers tend to rush through books, audiobooks force the process to be drawn out, thereby making the experience different from that of reading. A proficient reader might gain a different perspective by listening than by reading.<sup>53</sup> Award-winning novelist Neil Gaiman concurs:

I don't think the experience of reading a book and the experience of hearing a book are the same. I tend to think the experience of hearing a book is often much more intimate, much more personal: you're down there in the words, unable to skip a dull-looking wodge of prose, unable to speed up or slow down (unless you have an iPod and like hearing people sound like chipmunks), less able to go back. It's you and the story, the way the author meant it.<sup>54</sup>

Joyce Saricks, a veteran audiobook reviewer, furthers the value of the format with the argument, "Books filled with dialect are almost always easier to understand heard than read. (In fact, listeners may not even realize that the written word might not be familiar, because when heard, the words are instantly understandable)."<sup>55</sup> It is precisely for this reason that scholars find multicultural audiobooks so valuable in classroom contexts where the teacher might otherwise feel uncomfortable reading aloud unfamiliar dialects, vernaculars, or words from foreign languages.<sup>56</sup>

## Narration styles

According to audiobook reviewer Kristi Beavin, the narration style of an audiobook can take one of four forms: fully voiced, partially voiced, unvoiced, or multivoiced. A fully voiced reading employs a different delivery for each of the characters and is the most common style used. Fully voiced narration is especially suitable for books containing characters with very distinct personalities or traits. In partially voiced narration, one character's (or a small number of characters') voicing is unique and emphasized while the other characters' words are read in a somewhat less discernable manner. Multivoiced readings employ a cast of narrators to represent the characters. Finally, an unvoiced reading is one in which the narrator delivers the text in a single voice without noticeable variation of characters.<sup>57</sup>

## Sound elements

In addition to narration of the text, many audiobooks contain music and other sound elements. Background music in audiobooks is intended to enhance the feelings and pace associated with the story or information conveyed.<sup>58</sup> Music can amplify the mood or level of intensity associated with a particular scene or event, underscore the pacing of the narration and action, or support the cultural significance of a text. Music is also used to guide the listener through transitions such as chapter beginnings and endings and shifts in place and time or events in the storyline.

Recognizing the important role of music in the listening experience, producers sometimes hire musicians to research and either select or compose music congruent with the culture and historical period of the books.<sup>59</sup> For example, Daniel Kraus's Odyssey-Award-winning book *Rotters* included music that was created by the real band Vorvolakas, which was the name of a fictional band in the book.<sup>60</sup>

## Final production steps

Once all of the elements of an audiobook are selected and recorded, final production begins. Sound editing of an audiobook is a four step process that begins with properly ordering all of the segments of the text which had previously been recorded at various times and stored as individual files. Next, an editor adjusts the pacing, ensuring that there are no long pauses between segments or extraneous noises in the foreground or background. Once the production nears the final stages, a team of editors confirm that the spoken and written texts of audio and print books match perfectly. Finally, music and sound effects are added and the full text is broken into tracks.<sup>61</sup> On average, one hour of an audiobook takes approximately five and a half hours to produce.<sup>62</sup>

## Audiobook awards

Awards recognizing outstanding audiobooks, having first commenced for titles produced for children and/or young adults, are a relatively recent phenomenon compared to similar recognitions for their print counterparts. Similarly, while both the commercial and the professional sectors select the best-of-the-best audiobooks for adults, young adults, and children, the number of recognitions conferred are relatively few in comparison to those for print titles.

With the exception of the Grammy Awards, audiobook awards are relatively new in both the commercial industry and in the professional sector. The Recording Academy first established the Best Performance, Documentary or Spoken Word category in 1958, and nominees and winners have included comedy albums, storytelling performances, poetry readings, documentaries, drama recordings, and non-musical recordings.<sup>63</sup>

The category name has changed several times since the award's inception, most recently to Best Spoken Word. Since 1966 with the conferring of the award to *John F. Kennedy As We Remember Him*, audiobooks have received the award a number of times, but the term "audiobook" was only added to the official category title in 2006. To date, neither a children's nor young adult audiobook has received a Grammy Award.<sup>64</sup>

The APA identifies its award, the Audie, as the "premier awards program in the United States recognizing distinction in audiobooks and spoken word entertainment" and has been issuing awards since 2001.<sup>65</sup> Most Audie awards are presented to adult titles, although there are a few categories for children and young adult literature.<sup>66</sup>

Several divisions of the American Library Association (ALA) bestow recognition to audiobooks deemed exceptional. *Booklist* collaborates with ALA in selecting and recognizing print and audio award and honor books. Since 2008, it has been recognizing one outstanding audiobook reader as the "Voice of Choice" during National Audiobook Month in June.<sup>67</sup> Three divisions of ALA have also established lists recognizing outstanding selections in audiobooks. Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) first began recognizing audiobooks for adult audiences in 2012 with the establishment of the *Listen List*.<sup>68</sup>

The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) releases a list of "notable audio recordings significant to young adults" each year. Originally titled Selected Audiobooks for Young Adults and first released in 1999, the list was renamed Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults in 2009, and since 1996, the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) has released the Notable Children's Recordings list which "includes recordings for children 14 years of age and younger of especially commendable quality."<sup>69</sup>

Together, ALSC and YALSA developed the Odyssey Award, first issued in 2008, to recognize "the producer of the best audiobook produced for children and/or young adults, available in English in the United States."<sup>70</sup> As eloquently stated by Mary Burke, the inaugural award year chair of the Odyssey Award Committee, "a truly touchstone audiobook eliminates the awareness of the format and allows the listener to fall into a direct sensory experience of story. This phenomenon restores the earliest form of literature, the oral tradition, and brings the audiobook listener back into the virtual warmth of the storyteller's circle."<sup>71</sup> Recognition of books produced at this level of quality is the goal of the *Odyssey Award*, and as one producer confessed, the presence of the award has indeed advanced the quality of audiobook production.<sup>72</sup> A recent analysis of Odyssey titles found that the productions vary greatly on a number of factors.<sup>73</sup>

## Promotion of audiobooks for educational use

Educators and literacy proponents advocate the use of audiobooks for literacy development purposes. Early childhood literacy expert Susan Neuman encourages parents to use

audiobooks with preschool children to develop reading and listening skills; children's literature scholar Frank Serafini created a guide for teachers' use of audiobooks in the classroom; and librarians Sharon Grover and Lizette Hannegan wrote a book centered on using audiobooks for literacy development.<sup>74</sup>

Teachers can find further support for incorporating audiobooks in the classroom at the ReadWriteThink Website, a collaborative project of the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English aimed at providing resources directed at producing "the highest quality practices in reading and language arts instruction resources" to educators, parents, and afterschool professionals.<sup>75</sup> In fact, ReadWriteThink has more than sixty lesson plans that include the use of audiobooks.

Articles touting the benefits of audiobook use with children of various ages are found in numerous education publications, and children's and teen librarians have also endorsed the use of audiobooks with children of all ages.<sup>76</sup> Advocates of audiobooks have lauded the format for its role in motivating reading, developing children's language, developing children's vocabularies, and promoting comprehension.<sup>77</sup> Scholars also recognize the significant value of multicultural audiobooks, particularly in the classroom context in which a teacher may not feel comfortable reading aloud a book with unfamiliar dialects or unknown words in a foreign language.<sup>78</sup>

Interestingly, despite the endorsements of audiobooks from librarians, teachers, and scholars, the availability of scholarly research exploring and explaining the benefits of audiobooks is limited.<sup>79</sup> Thus studies further investigating audiobook use would clarify for librarians, classroom teachers, and literacy professionals what the best practices with audiobooks are and the specific skills they promote.

## Implications for libraries

Currently, the audiobook production industry is not only financially viable, but it continues to grow in leaps and bounds. Since 2011, there has been an 83 percent increase in the number of audiobook titles produced each year.<sup>80</sup> Though children's and adolescents' engagement in reading activities has decreased overall in recent years, there have been significant increases in the number of children and young adult audiobooks sold, suggesting an increase in adolescents' and children's engagement with audiobooks.<sup>81</sup>

The audiobook industry has developed considerably over the years in terms of selection, production, accessibility, and award recognition. Audiobook publishers recognize the commercial value in producing audiobooks for children, young adults, and adult audiences, and libraries too can and should capitalize on this interest in audiobooks. According to recent research, about 14 percent of American adults use audiobooks, and almost a quarter of these listeners fall into the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old range.<sup>82</sup> Of those Americans who physically visit a library or library bookmobile, 17 percent do so for the purpose

of accessing audiobooks, and many adult audiobook listeners also report that their children listen to audiobooks.<sup>83</sup>

With the exception of age, the use of audiobooks tends to be similar across demographic groups. The percentages of male and female audiobook user is about equal which contrasts with that of print and e-book use, which are dominated by women. Similarly, percentages of audiobook users are constant across race and ethnicity. Teens, college-aged adults, and senior adults are less likely than other adults to engage with audiobooks.<sup>84</sup>

Of great importance to libraries is the fact that most audiobook listeners prefer to borrow titles from the library rather than purchase them. This contrasts sharply with the preferences of print and e-book readers, the majority of whom prefer to purchase their books.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, it is essential that libraries lend audiobooks for both adults and children as this format might otherwise be financially out of reach for many. Interestingly, teen audiobook users are less likely than their older counterparts to have checked out an audiobook from a public library, perhaps because of access to school libraries.<sup>86</sup> Finally, despite the rise in the number of children and youth with access to mobile devices, gaps still exist between demographic groups; therefore libraries should continue to make audiobooks available in both digital and CD formats.

It is important for librarians to consider whether reviews of audiobooks and readers' advisory of audiobooks are congruent with the needs of audiobook consumers. Audiobook sales tend to mirror those of their print and e-book counterparts suggesting that similar interests drive audiobook and print book use.<sup>87</sup> However, audiobook reviews differ considerably from their print counterparts. While print book reviews tend to focus on the quality of the writing and plot, audiobook reviews focus on the quality of the narration and production elements.<sup>88</sup> Certainly, it is necessary for the quality of a production to be taken into account when advising a listener; however, content of the production seems to trump narration for listeners, perhaps reviewers should consider that as well.

As one audiobook reader testified, "Audiobooks changed my life. I can listen to them anywhere and I can enjoy new stories and new types of books without the trouble of having to carry around a lot of stuff with me or fighting with confusing words or font sizes, and I rarely have to worry about getting to my book when I want because the book is usually available."<sup>89</sup> It is important for librarians and educators to recognize the impact that audiobooks can have on listeners of all ages and to support their needs through continued access to this unique format. ↻

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Presenters show off the 2017 Youth Media Award winners at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in Atlanta. L to R: Sarah Hill, YALSA President; Andrew Medlar, ALSC Immediate Past President; Julie Todaro, ALA President; Selina Gomez-Beloz, REFORMA President; and Dr. Pauletta Brown Bracy, chair, Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee.