Listen Up
Best Practices for Audiobooks in Libraries

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This issue's Alert Collector offering on audiobooks is a departure from the usual subject-based column. With the wide availability of downloadable audiobooks, there is a huge opportunity for libraries to serve readers who would rather listen on their mobile devices. Renee Young, a Metadata Librarian III with EBSCO, offers some great advice for any librarian trying to build or improve their audiobook collection. She also suggests ways to promote your collection and help those you serve find great new "reads" in audiobook format. Young is a former reviewer of audiobooks for Booklist, served as member and chair of Listen List Council of the Collection Development and Evaluation Section (CODES) of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), and has presented on listener's advisory at national conferences. Her "listening" skills go back to before becoming a librarian: she served in the US Army as a cryptologic linguist, which involved listening to and translating radio transmissions.—*Editor*

Over recent years, a marvelous change has been occurring: audiobooks have at last fully broken into the mainstream consciousness and have become an accepted way of enjoying a book. No more should anyone fear hearing an accusatory "You didn't actually *read* that book." This change in perception and popularity is likely due to multiple factors, including the remarkable growth of the audiobook publishing industry over the last decade. The Audio Publishers Association (APA) conducts an annual survey tracking sales growth and other figures including formats and, for the past six years, has charted double-digit audiobook sales and production growth.[1] In 2017 alone, over 46,000 titles were produced on audio. Notably, the survey found that 43 percent of all listeners borrowed a title from the library and over half of the respondents said the library played an important part in audiobook discovery.[2] With this increased popularity and a steady stream of new titles to select from, audiobook collections are enjoying a renaissance. Librarians may find the new availability of titles, formats, and audiobook vendors a bit overwhelming, not to mention having to provide audiobook recommendations. Take heart, even if you are not an audiobook listener, you can still navigate your way through the labyrinth and end up with soaring circulation statistics and, above all, happy patrons.

COLLECTION BUILDING

When building an audiobook collection, primary factors to consider are formats and, of course, title selection. Recent years have shown the increasing dominance of the downloadable format. In 2013, downloadable titles made up 70 percent of audiobook sales while just four years later, they accounted for 93 percent with CDs falling to just 6 percent of all sales.[3] Based on this data, you may start contemplating a deaccession of your physical audiobook collection, but before you do, also consider that 46 percent of listeners are above the age of forty-five and around 15 percent are over sixty-five, so there may be some strongly-held preferences for physical audiobooks. Circulation statistics and an awareness of community demographics should be considered when making these decisions and determining how to divide your audio collection budget. Technical competence notwithstanding, how and where library patrons are listening also affects their format selections. Although 73 percent of listeners use smartphones, with smart speakers becoming an increasingly popular device for listening, the APA reported that 65 percent of listeners do so while driving, which means the sound system features of their vehicle may require the use of CDs.[4]

For title selection, the 2016 *Library Journal* survey "Audiobooks and Public Libraries" found that the top factors influencing purchasing decisions include patron requests, popularity of the print book, popularity of an author's previous works, abridgement, award-winning titles, positive audiobook reviews, and narrator familiarity.[5] The 2018 APA survey found the top genres for audiobook purchases are mysteries, thrillers and suspense, science fiction, and romance. Other top genres include humor, history, biography and memoir, classics, and fantasy.[6] In short, popular fiction and narrative nonfiction titles are safe bets when increasing your audiobook collection, and generally, if a title is receiving a lot of buzz, it is a good idea to purchase both a print and audiobook copy (or 5, 10, 20, etc.).

Audiobook purchasing or access models continue to evolve as some major publishers and distributors have introduced an alternative option in addition to the industry standard of one copy/one user.[7] The cost-per-circulation model may have restrictions on the titles available and be limited to backlist works. However, this model supports patron-driven acquisition and helps libraries respond to patron requests with less of a financial output. The cost-per-circulation is a popular model in academic markets according to OverDrive.[8] When looking to purchase titles, libraries have several options, such as purchasing direct from publishers or from a distributor, and unless you can host and manage your downloadable titles, it is usually simplest to work with one of the companies listed below that maintain extensive catalogs of titles and provide them through their proprietary platform. While OverDrive is easily the most recognizable vendor in this digital audiobook arena, there are other options for companies who provide libraries with downloadable audiobooks and e-books:

Baker & Taylor Axis 360 (http://www.baker-taylor.com/axis360.cfm):
Axis 360 is a digital media platform providing discovery and access to digital content. Libraries can also use Baker & Taylor's collection development services to order both print and digital materials at the same time.

Bibliotheca Cloud Library (https://www.bibliotheca.com/cloudlibrary):
Designed for both public and academic libraries, Bibliotheca's Cloud Library offers easy access to e-books and audiobooks as well as marketing, personalization, and collection development assistance.

EBSCO (https://www.ebscohost.com/ebooks):
EBSCO's digital service offers more than a million e-book titles and 100,000 audiobooks from over 1,500 major academic publishers and university presses. EBSCO also provides collection development services through subject sets and featured collections or custom collections with multiple acquisition models offered.

Hoopla (https://www.hoopladigital.com):
Midwest Tape's digital media service for libraries offers an enormous selection of movies, music, audiobooks, e-books, comics, and television shows to stream or download. Their unique borrowing model allows patrons to borrow content with no waiting.

OverDrive (https://www.overdrive.com):
OverDrive is the market leader and found in over 30,000 libraries across forty countries with a catalog of over two million e-books, audiobooks, and videos. The recently updated Libby app provides discovery and access in multiple libraries and across devices.

RB Digital (https://www.rbdigital.com):
Recorded Books' platform for library patrons provides access to over ten types of content, including audiobooks, e-books, magazines, movies, television shows, and more. The content includes over 35,000 Recorded Books–published titles and thousands of titles from other major publishers.

PROMOTING AUDIOBOOKS

With all this information about the current popularity in audiobooks, you may be thinking that they promote themselves. However, as librarians, we know how often large parts of our collections go unnoticed by library patrons, and digital collections are no exception. Although people may think of the library as their first stop to borrow a print book, they may not have the same thought when it comes to borrowing an audiobook, especially since it is likely that most of your audiobook collection does not physically reside

in the library. One way of promoting your collection is talking about it during readers' advisory (RA) interactions with patrons. The *Library Journal* "Audiobooks and Public Libraries" survey received a voluble response when asked about the frequency of listeners' advisory (LA) interactions. Over half of the respondents said they provide LA at least weekly, but less than half have a go-to audio expert on staff.[9] Even for audiobook listeners, providing LA can be challenging. Librarians struggle with the limitations of their own knowledge of narrators and how to recommend audiobook titles given the added element of narrative performance. Four key factors to achieving a successful listeners' advisory conversation are a knowledge of narrators, understanding the patron's appeal factors, making recommendations, and promoting your collection.

NARRATORS

For librarians, it may be best to view narrators as simply another piece of metadata. Some librarians are subject specialists with much deeper knowledge of a specific subject, but all librarians are trained to know *where* to go to find the information they need. Therefore, knowing about available audiobook resources is a good starting point. It is also important to elicit information from your patron. Are they an experienced audiobook listener? Who are some narrators that they enjoyed? Whether they can give you a specific narrator's name or just the title of an audiobook that they enjoyed, an important question to ask is "Why?" Why did they enjoy that narrator over another? Was it the unique character voices? The brisk pacing? Or was the audiobook the latest volume in their favorite series? When you have identified what your patron enjoyed, then you know what to look for. When focusing on narrators it can also be useful to think beyond genres. Listening to a story is a dramatically different experience from reading a book, so it can provide a perfect opportunity for someone to explore a new genre. You can use the resources available to find excerpts of a narrative performance and from that you can get an idea of the narrator's tone, pacing, and the production features. Keep in mind however, that since the excerpt is just a snippet of the work, it can be misleading, either by overpromising or underwhelming, and it may not be reflective of the entirety of the work. Use it instead as an audition to see if the narrator grabs your patron's interest.

APPEAL

Appeal is a way of determining why people enjoy the books they read. Framing conversations in appeal provides a vocabulary for people to use that helps them explain why they enjoyed a title and to identify what they are looking for in their next book. In 2009, NoveList released a vocabulary of print appeal terms and in 2014, expanded this to include narrative appeal terms. By defining a specific set of appeal factors, NoveList standardized the usage and made the application less subjective although the very nature of appeal is in and of itself subjective. It is the same for narrative appeal, but by creating a standardized vocabulary, it can be used consistently, which is the basis for consistently strong recommendations. When you are making recommendations, consider both the story and the narrative performance because even an excellent narrator cannot redeem a poorly written book or even just a plot that holds no interest to the listener. By using appeal, you can focus on what is most important to your patron.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When a library patron asks for an audiobook recommendation, start with a title they have already enjoyed and help them identify their favorite aspects of the audiobook. If they enjoyed the distinctive character voices, then look for titles performed by multiple narrators, vocally adept single narrators, or a full cast. If they say adventure stories or fast pacing, then identify titles within your collection that share those characteristics. The key information to elicit from the person is whether they want a similar listening experience or a similar reading experience (albeit on audio), or both. If you have access to a recommendation database, you can start by looking up the title the patron enjoyed and then see what is recommended either as a read-alike or as a listen-alike depending on what the patron is looking for (e.g., similar listening experience or similar reading experience but on audio, or both). Familiarity with your library's audio collection will help you identify what is available. Look for reviews, sound samples, and narrator information to help you determine what title among your collection is a good recommendation. Lastly, when you present the title or titles to the patron, be sure to explain why you selected it in relation to their original title.

PROMOTING YOUR COLLECTION

I am always surprised by the number of avid (nonlibrarian) listeners who do not make use of their library's collection or worse, did not know their library had an audiobook collection. Below are three suggestions for promoting your collection:

1. Talk about it. Be enthusiastic about the great titles you are offering your patrons. Confidence in your ability to provide listeners' advisory will translate into confidence in your current and future collection.
2. Show it off. You should be literally showing off your collection. Audiobook displays are great, but you have other options. Try interfiling audiobooks and print, especially for school-age titles frequently assigned as

mandatory reading. Food memoirs are another great option for interfiling. The specific auditory experience engages both the ears and the stomach and can inspire listeners to want to cook. If you shy away from interfiling, try "shelf talkers" in both the print and audiobook sections. This makes your patrons aware that the title is available in other formats. Newsletters are a good way to reach library patrons and including reading maps make the newsletters an engaging and fun way of promoting your collection because they begin with a title that resonated with your patron and then provide many options for their next listen.

3. Make it easy. Provide your staff or yourself with strategies and tools that will make promoting your collection easy and effective. The tool may be something like a vendor's marketing tool or it could be staff training. The main goal is to be shameless advocates of your collection and to generate a passionate response in your library patrons.

Lastly, a list of go-to resources for audiobook reviews, recommendations, award-winning titles, and educational tools is included below. These will be good starting places for finding outstanding titles.

AUDIOBOOK RESOURCES

Audiobook Review Sources

AudioFile Magazine (https://www.audiofilemagazine.com)
AudioFile Magazine is a bimonthly publication that recommends and reviews audiobooks, profiles narrators and authors, and awards the best titles and narrators with the Earphones Award.

Booklist (https://www.booklistonline.com)
Booklist is a monthly publication that provides reviews for books, audiobooks, and audiovisual materials for public and school libraries.

Library Journal (https://www.libraryjournal.com) and *School Library Journal* https://www.slj.com)
These monthly publications are targeted to public and school libraries and provide articles, interviews, and both book and audiobook reviews.

The New York Times (https://www.nytimes.com)
The Times publishes a monthly list of the top fifteen best-selling fiction and nonfiction audiobook titles.

Publishers Weekly (https://www.publishersweekly.com)
This weekly publication contains news, reviews, and articles for librarians, booksellers, publishers, and literary agents.

Award Lists

ALA Notable Children's Recordings (http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncr)
This list of titles for children up to age fourteen are of commendable quality and demonstrate respect for young people's intelligence and imagination, exhibit venturesome creativity, and reflect and encourage the interests of children and young adolescents in exemplary ways. The list is announced on the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) website and later through a press release distributed by ALA during the week following the Midwinter conference.

ALA Odyssey Award (http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/odysseyaward)
This annual award, given to the audiobook producer, recognizes the best audiobook produced for children or young adults. It is announced at the ALA Youth Media Awards held during ALA's Midwinter conference each year.

ALA Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults (http://www.ala.org/yalsa/amazing-audiobooks)
This is an annual list of notable audio recordings significant to young adults released in the last two years compiled by YALSA experts. The list is announced in January every year on the YALSA site and the YALSA blog site, The Hub (http://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/)

RUSA's Listen List (https://rusaupdate.org/awards/the-listen-list/)
This Listen List is an annual list of twelve outstanding audiobooks that merit special attention by general adult listeners and the librarians who work with them. The list is announced at the Book and Media Awards reception held the Sunday of each ALA Midwinter conference.

The Audies (https://www.audiopub.org/winners)
Sponsored by the Audio Publishers Association, the Audie Awards recognize distinction in audiobooks and spoken word entertainment in over twenty categories. The awards are presented at an annual gala ceremony held in the spring.

Grammy Awards (https://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards)
The Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word or Nonmusical Album recognizes one adult title each year and is announced at the annual awards ceremony held in the spring.

Professional Resources

NoveList Plus (https://www.ebscohost.com/novelist)
NoveList is an online readers' advisory database containing annotations, reviews, lists, articles, sound samples,

curated lists and title/author/series recommendations for both print and audiobooks.

Sound Learning (https://www.audiopub.org/sound-learning)

Sound Learning is the Audio Publishers Association initiative to create essential and innovative tools to help educators and librarians use audiobooks to benefit literacy.

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