

Audio Books, an Annotated Bibliography
By Neal Grigsby

Ames, Katrine. "The New Oral Tradition." *Newsweek*. 9 Dec 1991: pg. 79.

Not much better than a free advertisement for the audio book industry, the title of the article reflects how it buys into the industry rhetoric that audio books are actually carrying on an important tradition of oral narrative. Also notable in its evaluation of authors as narrators. Gives props to John le Carre, Eudora Welty, and Salman Rushdie, but calls Normal Mailer "gravelly, bumbling, stilted."

Aron, Helen. "Bookworms Become Tapeworms: A Profile of Listeners to Books on Audiotape." *Journal of Reading*. 36.3 (1992): 208-12.

Cited by Kozloff in her analysis of the demographics of audio book listeners. Supports the theory that audio book listeners are not at all lazy, but tend to be well read, highly educated folk who supplement reading with listening to feed their appetites for fiction.

"Audio Publishers Association (APA) Fact Sheet." 18 Oct 2005. *Audio Publishers Association*. 1 Dec 2005.

<<http://www.audiopub.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID=3550>>

The kind of promotional rhetoric one would expect from an industry association fact sheet, and notable for providing the industry version of the "unique and fascinating" audio book history. Stresses a conception of audio books as preserving the "oral tradition of storytelling," and cites anthropologist J.P. Harrington's recording of Native American oral histories as a direct precursor to the form. This seems specious at best. As several others have noted, it is problematic to equate a mass-produced, mechanically-recorded audio text with the interactive, liminal, temporally-bound performances of traditional storytellers, though both forms may provide some similar pleasures. Also notable: the industry's selective sales figures report increasing growth, but if the overall numbers are accurate (total sales of \$800 million), the growth of the industry since the early 90s is actually flat (Ames, Paige).

Birkerts, Sven. "Close Listening: The Metaphysics of Reading an Audio Book." *Harper's Magazine*. Jan 1993: pg. 86, 6 pgs.

Describes the particular pleasures and frustrations of audio book reading, from an admittedly "Luddite disposition." Although attributing much value and novelty to the form—specifically giving them credit for reminding listeners "of the sound of literature"—his baseline for description is a comparison with quiet reading of a book. Particularly inaccurate, in my opinion, is his evaluation of verbal narration as "an act of vocal tyranny." Why is hearing something not in your own mental voice an act of tyranny? If anything, you are the tyrant of your own mind. You could say hearing books in a variety of voices is the more democratic model.

Blumenfeld, Robert. *Acting with the Voice: The Art of Recording Books*. New York : Limelight Editions, 2004.

Cited by Horwitz to support the theory that audio book narration should be a transparent window to the text itself.

"Caedmon: Recreating the Moment of Inspiration." 5 Dec 2002 *NPR Morning Edition*. 2 Dec 2005.

<<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=866406>>

Radio broadcast available in streaming audio includes an interview with the Barbara Holdridge and Marianne Mantell, who co-founded Caedmon in 1952. Includes samples of recordings by Dylan Thomas, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner. Attempts to explicitly position these two as the inventors of the modern audio book. Also notable is the language they use to describe what they were going for in those recordings, a recreation of each author's "moment of inspiration." Reinforces the artifactual nature of many of those recordings, which, I would argue, actively works against their claims of parentage.

Camlot, Jason. "Early Talking Books: Spoken Recordings and Recitation Anthologies." *Book History*. 6 (2003): 147-73.

Traces the history of audio books back to the invention of the phonograph, and Thomsas Edison's speculation that audio literature would revolutionize society, or at least give the blind better access to literature. He also identifies the rhetoric, still recognizable in writings on the form today (Horwitz), that casts sound recording as "a transparent medium," and the Edison phonograph as a device that "speaks for itself," removing reader and narrator to create a pure experience of the text. Also notes how this idea shows a shift away from the mannered elocution style of early Victorian recitation towards a "natural" style adept at mimicry. So the art of speaking, in the phonographic age, is not in reading well, but in the development of vocal character, especially the ability to create multiple voices, as we can see in those early Edison recordings featuring performers approximating ethnic accents. Echoes in recent writing attribute Jim Dale's excellence as a narrator to his virtuosity with voices (Donahue, Machpherson). Most importantly, however, is his insight that audio books make us reflect on the materiality of the medium, whether sound recording or printed text. "Reading a books is never a simple or quiet activity, but always a technologically informed and culturally rehearsed practice."

Cheever, Benjamin. "Hear Hear." *Publishers Weekly*. 16 May 2005: pg. 70.

This one calls audio books an \$8 billion a year industry. Also refutes the myth that reading is "courageous" and listening is "shameful." But this passage *is* shameful: "Yes, yes, children are read to and, yes, the audio books industry was started for the blind and infirm. But origins shouldn't be held against us." I would argue that we have a lot to learn from the blind; that the success of audio books has a lot to do with modern consumer culture coming up to speed with the cyborg consciousness embraced by disabled communities decades previous.

———. "Audio's Original Voices." *Publishers Weekly*. 24 Oct 2005: pg. 22, 2pgs.

Profiles Caedmon's Marianne Mantell and Books on Tape's Duvall Hecht. This seems to me a particularly telling opposition. One pioneered the recording of the author's voice as artifact, the other the recording of audio books as complete alternatives to the written text, both approaches still in tension today.

Cooper, Rand Richards. "Can We Really Read with Our Ears? The 'Wuthering' Truth About Novels on Tape." *New York Times Book Review*. June 6, 1993: pg. 49.

Claims that the act of quiet reading is the "main event of literature itself," and "fundamentally a spatial and textural phenomenon." Bemoans the multitasking associated with listening to audio books as likely to while literature "away into the background." Finds audio literature a trend towards making reading "safe and easy," as if quiet reading in itself is an act of revolution. Thoroughly and ingeniously refuted by Camlot and Varley.

Donahue, Deirdre. "When Jim Dale Speaks, People Listen to 'Potter.'" *USA Today*. 15 July 2005: pg. 5.

Primarily notable for its insight into why Dale was chosen to narrate in the US: "his English accent has been tempered by living in the States since 1980. American children sometimes find very strong English accents difficult."

Fallows, James. "Reading by Ear." *The Atlantic Monthly*. Jan 2001: pg. 16, 2 pgs.

A favorable comparison of the audio book to the written text, Fallows insists that vocal performances inhere to the memory much stronger than the written word. His reasoning for this is curious, however, as he attributes it to the slower pace at which one listens to audio books. This is helpful as an ethnography of an individual listener, but, in my own experience, listening to audio books propels me through the text at a rate much faster than reading, in which I will often reread sections multiple times if my attention fails. One important aspect of the audio book for me, then, is in its discreteness; I know exactly how long a book is going to take me to read. It enforces a kind of discipline in comprehension that reading lacks. Varley also notes this distinction.

Hardyment, Christina. "The Brave New World of Talking Books." *The New Republic*. Oct. 13, 1997: pg. 45.

Describes abridgment as "an art meriting comparison with screenplay writing and radio dramatization." Clearly adheres to a take on audio books as a potentially separate medium from written literature, and cites Tom Wolfe's audio-only "Ambush at Fort Bragg" as proof that the form will mature into its own thing.

Horwitz, Simi. "Narrating Books: The Art, The Obstacles." *Adweek*. 24 June 2004

Repeats the fallacy identified by Camlot's essay, that somehow technology can provide texts that dissolve the authorial act, that "speak for themselves." Quotes Blumenfeld as believing "the key to narrating books is letting the text speak for itself." Quotes Claudia Howard, an audio book producer, as advising, "you have to be able to make the page disappear when you read," and comparing narration to monologue rather than radio drama. Although Camlot's troubling of these concepts is important, I can't help but think there's a kernel of truth to the metaphor.

Kozloff, Sarah. "Audio Books in a Visual Culture." *Journal of American Culture*. 18.4 (Winter 1995): 83-99.

With Camlot's piece, the two most thoughtful and relevant academic sources discussing the phenomenon of audio books. Kozloff traces the history of the form to three progenitors: the tradition of reading books aloud, the radio drama, and the talking books for the blind programs. Also cites Caedmon and the Walt Disney Storyteller series as key ancestors, but attributes the start of the contemporary boom to the advent of the cassette, the Walkman, and the proliferation of tape decks in cars. Also points to the increase in commute times and the rise of repetitious exercise regimes as the cultural changes that made audio books desirable. Finally, theorizes that "films have accustomed us to the use of novels as source material," so that the use of audio books is really a result of our visual culture. This last argument seems forced. Radio dramas also used novels as source material, but the boom in audio books took place long after radio dramas faded from the popular airwaves. My own take on the cultural changes that precipitated the popularity of audio books would be the rise of technoculture and the proliferation of the personal computer. The computer as a universal tool which changes function depending on the software loaded into it echoes a consideration of our own senses as tools that can be repurposed, a requirement for one to entertain the possibility that one can "read" a sound recording. In our adoption of this technological consciousness, mainstream consumers have caught up with disabled communities that have always depended on a synaesthetic capacity to participate in written culture, whether through talking books or Braille.

Lindsey, Jennifer. "Talking Books." *LIS 519: Selection, Acquisition, and Management of Non-Book Materials*. University of Buffalo. December 1, 2005. <<http://informatics.buffalo.edu/faculty/ellison/Syllabi/519Complete/formats/talkingbooks/talkbks.html>>

A short history of audio books from a library science perspective.

Machpherson, Karen. "Audio Books Can Be a Great Learning Tool." *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*. 14 Nov. 2005: pg 1.

An apologetics for the audio book form which adheres to the philosophy that new media is only of value if it gets kids to read more. "While some people still believe that listening to books is no substitution for reading them, reading experts believe that listening to books is a great tool to help students develop their reading skills."

Maughan, Shannon. "Audio's Best of the Best." *Publishers Weekly*. 6 June 2005: pg. 21, 2 pgs.

An attempt to determine which audio books are the bestsellers of all time. The clear winner? *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* followed by *Men Are From Mars: Women Are From Venus*, which exemplifies the dark secret of the audio book industry: a large percentage of spoken word sales come from self-help titles (though this is true of book publishing, as well). *The DaVinci Code*, and the 5 Harry Potter

titles available at the time of this article are all tied for 3rd.

———. **"Star Turns on Audio."** *Publishers Weekly*. 4 April 2005: pg. 19, 2 pgs.

Describes the trend in audio publishing of having celebrities narrate their own life stories.

Mulrine, Anna. "The Tale of the Tapes." *U.S. News and World Report*. 13 July 1998: pg. 61, 2 pgs.

Describes the popularity of celebrities as narrators for audio books, and the rise of an "audio-book culture of sorts" that recognizes successful narrators as celebrities, such as Frank Muller.

"National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped: History." January 11, 2005. *The Library of Congress*. December 2, 2005.

<http://www.loc.gov/nls/about_history.html>

Straight-forward history of the program, with details on the technology used to deliver talking books to the blind over the years. Though no audio samples are available, the article identifies the first talking books thusly: "Among the titles chosen for the first orders of talking books were the Declaration of Independence; the Constitution of the United States; Washington's Farewell Address; Lincoln's Gettysburg Address; Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Hamlet*; Kipling's *Brushwood Boy*; and Wodehouse's *Very Good Jeeves*."

Paige, Earl. "A Special Billboard Spotlight on the Billion-Buck Biz That's Got Everybody Talking." *Billboard*. 15 Aug 1992: pg. 45.

Attempts to account for the rise of audio book profits from \$800 million in 1988 to \$1 billion in 1992. Describes the Blockbuster rental experiment that later failed. Concludes with quotes from various authors about the form. Particularly notable is Garrison Keillor's assertion that "the great practical advantage of a book is that you can skim it and skip the boring parts," which directly contradicts the romanticization of the printed word found in the Birkets and Cooper articles. Also, Joseph Wambaugh describes the trend towards more complete audio books: "Back in the early days of audio books, it wasn't serious business—they were all abridgments, and the publishers treated them like a chance for publicity for the 'real' books." This adds evidence to my theory that, if there is any historical teleology to be found in the form, it is away from sonic experimentation and towards greater fidelity to the literary source.

Scarborough, Kim. "The Mercury Theatre on the Air." 5 Nov 2005. 4 Dec 2005.

<<http://www.mercurytheatre.info/>>

Wonderful site provides complete downloads of all of the radio dramas produced by Orson Welles's Mercury Theatre in the 30s.

Sutton, Roger. "Do You Hear What I Hear?" *The Horn Book Magazine*. May/June 2002: pg. 245, 2 pgs.

Characteristic passage: "do we select and promote audiobooks because they are books,

are like books, or promote books; or do we welcome them on their own terms?" Points to the issue of whether this is a medium of its own, or dependent on the literary source.

"Talking Book' Special Programme." *In Touch*. 15 Nov 2005. BBC Radio 4. 4 Dec 2005. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/factual/intouch_factsheet_20051115.shtml>

Radio show discusses the history of the United Kingdom's version of the Talking Books for the Blind program, with clips from books read by the likes of Michael Palin. It would be instructive to look at the US and UK audio book industries comparatively. The UK program for the blind seems much better integrated with the consumer industry, the same readings are available to both segments of the population (at least in the few examples I checked out). It does seem strange that, in the US, the charitable program has to duplicate work already done by the commercial industry.

Varley, Pamela. "As Good as Reading? Kids and the Audiobook Revolution." *The Horn Book Magazine*. May/June 2002: pg. 251, 12 pgs.

Article actually subverts the aesthetic hierarchy implicit in the title in its examination of the popularity of audio books among children, especially the Harry Potter series. Varley refreshingly attributes a great deal of interpretive agency to audio book listeners to interrogate the readings given them by the form ("the good news in this is that *we are not sheep*"), or to get completely caught up in the narrative. Also asks whether audio books may mean the same to children as to adults. For adults, the audio book may be a begrudging alternative to the written work, pursued for a lack of leisure time, but, for kids, audio books may already be just another way of consuming literature. Varley also challenges the notion that all reading is equal, that we may often "read a work of literature with the same ruthlessness we might apply to a website or newspaper, searching for the juicy and exciting tidbits and leaving the rest." Probably the most positive and constructive evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the audio book in this bibliography.

West, Billy R. "The Art and Science of Audio Book Production." Sep 1995. *National Library Service*. 10 Dec 2005.

<<http://www.loc.gov/nls/other/audioart/index.html>>

A guide to the audio book production process, with advice on narrating, audio engineering, and producing. Note the bulleted list of the "most important" elements in evaluation a narration, including "The narration is free of strained, unclear, inconsistent or overplayed accents, dialects, or character interpretations" and "The narration is accomplished in a conversational manner free of stilted, mechanical, monotonous, or repetitive patterns of delivery that are not called for in the text." So, again, the advice is to recite naturally and let the text "speak for itself."

Woronov, Namoi. "Now Hear This: On the Sensuous Delights of Tales on Tape—the Spies, the Sleuths, the Classics." *New York*. 15 Jan. 1990: 43-45.

Cited by Kozloff as a valuable poetics of the form, but very hard to find due to the imprint.