

Heard Any Good Books Lately?: Selecting and Using Audiobooks in the Library Media Center

Feature

About six years ago, I decided it was time to volunteer to be on a YALSA awards selection committee. To my surprise (and at the time, dismay), I found myself named to the Odyssey committee. I would be spending my term, from February to January, listening to lots and lots of audiobooks for children and teens. My experience with audiobooks up to that point had not been positive: I'd undergone eye surgery a few years earlier, had checked some books on CD out from my local library to get me through the weeks of no reading, and had not been impressed. Today, six years later, after three Odyssey, two Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults, and a handful of Audie Awards stints, I am an audiobook convert—and a proselytizer.

I sometimes forget that my car has a radio, or that I own an impressive collection of music CDs; when I get ready for a drive, I make sure I've got my license, my sunglasses—and an audiobook. I am one of the few people who rejoices when I see a traffic jam ahead of me on the highway—because I'll get to listen to a few more chapters before I get to work. I have been known to sit in parking lots with the car running to get to the end of a disc. But audiobooks, like books, are not created equal. This article is about some of the things to consider when choosing a children's or YA book for listening, and some places to find the sorts of recommendations I would have appreciated before my eye surgery!

Not that long ago, audiobooks (those artifacts we still sometimes call “Books on Tape”) were publishing afterthoughts. They were released months after the print book, if at all, and the selection was limited. Today, the audio version is generally released nearly simultaneously with the book, and it is the rare popular title that does not merit an audio edition. The recording process, far from being an afterthought, is a respected creative industry that attracts some impressive talent.

Elementary grade teachers and librarians may see the inclusion of audiobooks in their classroom and library collections as intuitive and obvious. As a child learns to read, listening to a good narrator while following along in the book is a valuable exercise. The narrator's pacing, clarity, and pronunciation are important at this level—as are less tangible elements like expression and emotion. Reading aloud to classes is the thing I miss most about working with younger children; offering books with accompanying CDs should never entirely replace that experience. An audiobook is not the “definitive” reading; you can put your own spin on a book when you read it aloud, showing children that different interpretations are possible. But I suspect I am like many of my colleagues in feeling apprehensive about my pronunciation of words from other cultures; good audiobook productions check that detail. Children fall in love with a certain book and want to listen to (and read) it again and again; audiobooks allow that. They are just one of many valuable tools in a good teacher's toolkit.

Why Audiobooks?

But what is the place of audiobooks in a high school library media center like mine? Don't we want teens to *read* books? Is listening, in some way, cheating? I do agree that listening to a book is a different experience from reading it. The narrator's choices of how to emphasize certain words or scenes may influence your interpretation. Instead of imagining a character's voice in your head, you rely on how the narrator has imagined that voice. But is it “cheating,” or comparable to watching a movie version of a book? Definitely not. In an unabridged audiobook, there are no embellished or omitted scenes as there are in a film; the words are all there. And the listener is free to disagree with the narrator's choices; I certainly have.

The future of standardized tests as we have come to know them is currently up in the air, but it is significant that many of these most recent tests have included a listening portion. Whatever your opinion of these tests, many of our students—about a third of them—*are* auditory learners. They learn best by listening. Audiobooks to supplement more conventional reading can benefit these young learners.

I live and work in an area with a large population of English language learners. They are perhaps the largest audience for my audiobook collection. Research has shown that people learning a language can recognize and understand a spoken word before they are capable of reading that same word in print. ESL students can enjoy the same books as their classmates, through audiobook versions.

Every teacher in my school has a bag of things prepared in the unfortunate event of a lockdown. My bag includes a book on CD. Of course I wouldn't pull it out if the occasion called for silence, but I remember being in a situation some years ago where I was locked in the library with a group of kids for about two hours—no immediate danger, but there was some sort of problem and everyone was under orders to stay where they were. Kids get restless. If that ever happens again, I will slide a CD into a computer and anyone who wants to join me will listen to a good story.

Audio technology has gone through quite a few changes in the past twenty years. Many of us probably still have a few audiobooks on cassette (or even vinyl) in our collections that we just can't bear to part with. Audiobooks are still being produced in CD format. (This is handy for listening in my older-model car). Some are also released as MP3 CDs, or as Playaways—MP3 players preloaded with an audiobook. But more and more listeners are relying on downloads from vendors like

audible.com and library subscription services like Overdrive and Hoopla. All of these providers include a variety of both recent and classic children's, middle grade, and YA, as well as adult, titles. High school and YA librarians will also want to be aware of SYNC (<http://www.audiobooksync.com>), presented by AudioFile; for several years now, they have offered two free YA audiobook downloads per week through the summer months. The 2016 roster of titles will be announced in May. In my school, the adults steer towards the CDs and the students towards the downloads, but I have seen different distributions of format popularity in different libraries. Experiment!

What to Look for (and Where to Find It)

So, you have a limited budget but want to start building an audiobook collection. Where do you begin? A good starting point is to check out Odyssey, Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults, and Notable Children's Recordings lists. Committees made up of YALSA and ALSC members listen to thousands of hours of audiobooks every year, and after much debate choose and annotate their favorites. Another committee representing both ALSC and YALSA goes through the same process with more stringent criteria, and names the Odyssey Award and Honor titles. Committee members weed out the titles that put listeners to sleep (like the ones I chose for my recuperation) and concentrate on those that keep your interest level high throughout. They look for narrators who "do the voices," and do those voices authentically. They pay attention to things that are in the narrator's control, like timing, diction, and pronunciation—and also to things that are in the control of the person in the production booth, like minimizing mouth sounds or external noises. (Try recording yourself reading a paragraph. Then play back and listen, not to what you're saying, but to your breath intakes, your tongue, your lips inadvertently smacking. Now listen to an award-winning audiobook. Notice how few of those natural body noises you hear. There are bands I used to like that I can hardly listen to anymore because Odyssey has sensitized me to the lead singers' breath noises!) Does the text lend itself well to audio? Does the production try something original and innovative and succeed? The bar is set high, and Odyssey honors the highest accomplishments.

You might think that the best audiobooks are narrated by professional actors. Some television, movie, and stage actors are excellent narrators as well. Some aren't. I remember being bored to tears by the wooden delivery of one television star narrating a children's book. Similarly, you might assume that the author is the ideal narrator for his or her own work. Again, this is not always true. Some (I'm thinking of Tim Federle and Libba Bray, both of whom have stage training) are top-notch. Others just don't have the vocal chops for it, and need to let professional narrators work the magic with their material. Notice that the majority of the ALA award-winning narrators do not fall into either the famous actor or author category; they are people who have made a career of narrating audiobooks. Some of the names to look for are Kirby Heyborne, Nick Podehl, Katherine Kellgren, and MacLeod Andrews, among other talented narrators. They don't guarantee a stellar audiobook, any more than an author can guarantee a string of award winners, but they give consistently solid and enjoyable performances.

Also check out the Audie Award winners when doing collection development. The criteria and selection process of the Audio Publishers Association are a bit different from ALA's (and I've been an Audies judge several times, listening to Teen, Adult History, and Adult Nonfiction titles), but winners represent an equally high level of quality. There is often overlap between Teen and Children's Audie winners, and Odyssey titles.

Interested in reading more about ways to incorporate audiobooks into your library? Check out:

- Mary Burkey. *Audiobooks for Youth: A Practical Guide to Sound Literature*. American Library Association, 2012.
- Sharon Grover. *Listening to Learn: Audiobooks Supporting Literacy*. American Library Association, 2012.
- Joyce G. Saricks. *Read On—Audiobooks: Reading Lists for Every Taste*. Libraries Unlimited, 2011.

AWARDS

ALA Youth Media Awards for audiobooks:

- Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults. <http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/amazing-audiobooks-young-adults>
- Notable Children's Recordings <http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/notable-childrens-recordings>
- Odyssey Award <http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/odyssey-award-excellence-audiobook-production>

In addition, ALA's RUSA and CODES divisions honor best adult audiobook titles:

- Listen List <http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/listen-list>
- Winners of the APA's Audie Awards can be found at: <http://www.audiofilemagazine.com/audies/>

Happy listening!

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