



# Listening to Learn



Audiobooks  
Supporting Literacy

SHARON GROVER  
& LIZETTE D. HANNEGAN  
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Sharon Grover  
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**Sharon Grover** is a longtime audiobook listener and reviewer. She has served on and chaired Selected Audiobooks for Young Adults (now called Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults), served on the inaugural Odyssey Award Committee, and chaired the 2010 Odyssey Award Committee. Currently, she is head of the Youth Services Department at the Hedberg Public Library in Janesville, Wisconsin, where she shares favorite audiobook titles with her young patrons. Fifteen years at the Arlington (Virginia) Public Library allowed her the good fortune to work with her friend and colleague Liz Hannegan, as well as a host of amazing middle school readers and listeners. Sharon has written articles and columns and presented workshops—many of them with Liz Hannegan—on using audiobooks to promote literacy. She is proud of turning Liz into an audiobook devotee and is happy to have become a curriculum junkie in return.

**Lizette (Liz) Hannegan** is now retired from the Arlington (Virginia) Public Schools, after working twenty-two years as an elementary and middle school librarian and as the district library media supervisor. Advocating for audiobooks has resulted in conference presentations, grants for the use of audiobooks in instructional settings, and journal and review articles. She has been an Audies judge, a 2010 Odyssey Award Committee member, and the 2012 Odyssey Award chair. Growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, she feels that the Enoch Pratt Free Library was a source for her love and support for libraries. She has used her bachelor's degree in English literature and master's degree in library science to demonstrate that libraries are the place where all young people begin their journey of listening and learning. For Liz, the best part of completing this book has been working with a kindred spirit, friend and colleague Sharon Grover.

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# 1



## *How It All Begins*

Those of us who work with children and teens in school and public library settings appreciate the thrill of reading a great book. Curling up with a favorite author or genre brings enormous satisfaction to book people.

But for many of the students we serve, that love of reading and the satisfaction of a well-told story just doesn't happen. Because we want students to participate in rich literature experiences, and because we know how critical reading is to future success, we are always looking for ways to engage them with the written word. Current audiobook productions—with their high production values, stellar narrators, and wide variety of formats—can be one avenue to reach these reluctant or struggling readers, as well as their proficient peers who are looking for more time to include reading in their busy schedules.

The Search Institute has created the 40 Developmental Assets list, which pulls together “elements in human experience that have long-term, positive consequences for young people.”<sup>1</sup> These assets are thought to predict success and encourage students to engage in fewer risky behaviors, particularly as they move into middle and high school. Among the forty assets are the external asset of positive support from nonfamily-member adults and the internal asset of reading for pleasure. A caring teacher or librarian armed with a list of exciting audiobooks can provide both of these things to students who don't read or to those who are reading, but rarely just for pleasure. Those of us who enjoy

reading for pleasure, either with our eyes or with our ears, understand the importance of the diversion this experience provides.

Working with these students and their families also offers another opportunity for collaboration between schools and public libraries. Because public library materials budgets do not need to support textbooks and learning software, they are often able to include more audiobooks in their collections. Teachers and school librarians can form effective partnerships with their public library colleagues to make these materials available to students. Public librarians will be happy to see that collection circulate outside of vacation times and may even be willing to help booktalk titles in the classroom.

Katherine Kellgren, one of today's foremost narrators of audiobooks for children and teens, has recorded more than 125 audiobooks, including several Odyssey Honor titles. In 2009 Kellgren won the Audie Award for Best Solo Narration (Female), and in 2010 she was named one of *AudioFile* magazine's "Golden Voices." She eloquently described to us her experience of listening as a young person herself:

I grew up listening to audiobooks, and they were vitally important to my development as a child as they made me curious to read for myself, in fact they really helped me to fall in love with literature. The first time I came into contact with a lot of my favorite authors, it was through the audio versions of their work. Listening opened up so many worlds to me in a way that was very intimate and seemed to speak directly to me. It made the work of great authors both in children's and adult literature seem less intimidating, and excited my curiosity to pick up books in print form. I sometimes hear the argument that if children listen to audiobooks it's somehow "cheating," that it's too easy and discourages them from reading for themselves. All I can say is that from my personal experience it has the exact opposite effect! That is one of the many reasons I feel so proud and so fortunate to be able to narrate books for children and young adults. It's my great hope that I can help contribute something to the lifelong adventure that begins when a child first [says,] "Read me a story."

The following chapters introduce some of the research linking audiobook listening and literacy development and equip readers with many titles, standards, and instructional activities to facilitate the use of audiobooks in classrooms, libraries, and homes. But first we'll take a look at how the audiobook business started and what we need to listen for to become critical listeners, selecting the very best for the young people in our lives.

The early days of audiobooks relied on LP recordings of available print material, with early rental programs to schools and public libraries.<sup>2</sup> In 1955, Anthony Ditlow, who was suffering from macular degeneration, founded Listening Library. Ditlow was familiar with audiobook productions for the blind and visually handicapped available from the Library of Congress, as well as the work of companies like Caedmon Audio and Spoken Arts.<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs were pouring money into schools and public libraries, and Ditlow was positioned to move into children's books, taking advantage of the booming school market.<sup>4</sup> By focusing on the classic works that were staples of library and classroom collections, Ditlow "was pushing the educational value of audiobooks before the term *literacy* was used as it is today," according to his son, Tim Ditlow, vice president of Brilliance Audio.<sup>5</sup>

Early recordings were generally read by one person, with little or no embellishments—no character creations, no musical accompaniment, and no sound effects. Today's audiobooks are a far cry from those early days, with narrators now creating the voices of many characters or even with full-cast productions.

The most important aspect of selecting an audiobook is knowing whether the original text is something that will translate well to an aural medium. How does one choose among all those books out there the titles that will most engage listeners? Tim Ditlow, who grew up in the audiobook business at the company his parents, Anthony and Helen Ditlow, founded, had this to say to us:

One of the most frequently asked questions of anyone involved in our business is, "How do you know which books to select for an audiobook production out of the thousands of titles published annually?"

While many people wish a magic formula existed for predicting best-sellers, the fact remains that a publisher must be willing to take a gamble on what their intuition tells them is an outstanding novel.

I believe chance favors the well-read publisher. By that I mean, if you really love a certain category, whether they be books for young adults, science fiction or romance novels, and if you read deeply in your field, over time you will get better at picking top sellers.

For example, did I know a manuscript about a boy wizard would end up becoming the bestselling audiobook series in the history of the industry? No. Did I know it was a thoroughly engaging fantasy novel? Yes, but only because I had produced recordings by Lloyd Alexander, Susan Cooper, Madeleine L'Engle and Philip Pullman for the previous twenty years.



Speaking of producing, it helps if your editorial acumen is sharpened by having spent time in the studio. This way you can develop the “inner listening” wisdom to know which books will make great recordings.

Well, maybe there is a magic formula after all—read, read more and listen to your instincts!

Let’s move on to what, exactly, we might be listening to in terms of the narration of an audiobook. Here is a sampling of different vocal interpretations (be sure to look at Mary Burkey’s Audiobook Lexicon in appendix A for a more complete breakdown of what you’re hearing on an audiobook).

First and foremost, we expect clarity and consistency in audio productions. The narrator should not sound as if he or she were reading from the bottom of a well. There should be no silent gaps between thoughts or chapters, and the sound quality or volume should not vary (in other words, the listener should not be able to tell when breaks were taken in the narrating process).

Pacing is a very important element in a narrator’s tool kit. Too fast, and you can’t understand what’s being said. Too slow, and your attention wanders. Pacing should also be appropriate to the tenor of the story; it should move more quickly when there is exciting action and slow down for more contemplative scenes.

For audiobooks with one reader, here are a few ways the narration might be developed:

- A fully voiced narration, in which the narrator develops a distinct voice for each character
- A partially voiced narration, in which the reader develops a distinct voice for some characters but distinguishes others through pacing and inflection
- An unvoiced narration, in which pacing and inflection differentiate all the characters

Perhaps there is more than one reader. For example, there might be a male and a female narrator to differentiate genders, or there might be a full cast, with each member taking on an individual role in the book. In the case of full-cast recordings, attributives (e.g., “he said,” “she said”) are often removed from the text to produce a better narrative flow.

What about pronunciation? It should be clear, consistent, and correct. Proper names and place-names are particularly important. How many children knew how to pronounce the name of Harry Potter’s

friend Hermione before listening to the inimitable Jim Dale's excellent recordings of that iconic series?

In their article "Authentic Listening Experiences," Junko Yokota and Miriam Martinez state: "The audiobook narrator plays a role similar to that of a translator of a book from one language to another. A good translator can make a big difference in the reading experience through word choice and passage interpretation; likewise, the audiobook narrator helps mediate the story for the listener by selecting what tone to take, what types of voices to give to characters, what to emphasize, and how to engage the listener."<sup>6</sup>

With the increase in the publishing of multicultural books for children and teens, there has been a corresponding expansion of cultural diversity in audiobook production. Just as one always looks for cultural authenticity in the printed word, it is equally important to expect culturally accurate narration in an audiobook. This is true not only for cultures outside of the United States but also for cultures and localities within our borders. Just as the window to the wider world and the mirror to our children's own part of the world is important to us when purchasing and recommending print materials to our students, so is it vitally important when purchasing and recommending audiobooks. A narrator voicing a child from South Africa should employ the speech patterns, phrasing, and accents from that region. It is equally essential that a narrator voicing individuals from Wisconsin or West Virginia or South Boston be able to emulate the speech patterns, phrasing, and accents from those regions as well.

Now, more than ever, the careful listener must also consider music and sound effects when determining the effectiveness of an audiobook. Do these elements enhance the listening experience or detract from it? As Jo Carr so succinctly put it in her 1994 article on audiobook production, excellence is created by "respect for the original book, careful editing, technically superior recording, and inspired narration."<sup>7</sup>

Becoming a critical evaluator of audiobooks means listening and more listening—and still more listening. When new members are appointed each year to the Odyssey Award Committee, they are enjoined to carefully consider the award criteria before they begin their listening and as they continue listening throughout their year of service.<sup>8</sup> Reading reviews of audiobooks will also help in selecting the best for school, pleasure, and family listening; in chapter 10 you will find suggestions of journals in which you can find constructive reviews. Here, Sue-Ellen Beauregard, the media editor of *Booklist* magazine and consultant to the

Odyssey Award Committee, gave us some advice on what an audiobook review really is:

Audiobook reviews are *not* book reviews and while that may sound like a simple concept, it means that audiobook reviews concentrate on the overall production values of the recording. I tell reviewers that the easy part of the process is listening to the audio and taking notes. The difficulty comes with writing a cogent critique of the audio, paying particular attention to the reader's (or readers') performance style, including voice quality, diction, timing, pacing, inflection, accents, tone, and method of distinguishing characters. In addition to critiquing the reader, reviewers must judge the overall technical qualities of the recording (sound, pauses, background music, sound effects). *Booklist* audio reviews provide librarians with credible interpretations of the audio recording and are never a review of the book. And although audio production has evolved over the past years with titles now including more author interviews and other special features, including PDF files and DVDs, the overall criteria for evaluating audios has remained much the same.

An Audio Publisher's Association survey conducted in the summer of 2010 discovered that there is "significant sharing" of audiobooks among friends and family.<sup>9</sup> Friends were, in fact, the major source of most audiobook suggestions among 27 percent of respondents, with websites coming in second, at 22 percent.<sup>10</sup> What you may find surprising is that a close third (21 percent) used librarians as their "leading source of recommendations."<sup>11</sup>

We take that as a sign to start listening and to find out what this audiobook and literacy revolution is all about!

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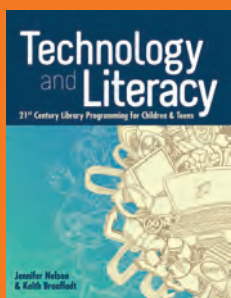
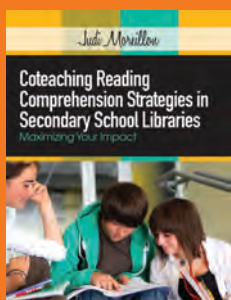
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