

# Heard Any Good Books Lately?

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BY SHIRLEY GRACE, MA

A white minivan courses through the dips and curves of the Georgetown Pike during evening rush hour.

On the windshield, rain pelts steadily. Inside the minivan, my three half-grown kids bicker just as steadily: "Will you shut your mouth, please!" "Mom, she told me to shut up!" "I did not, you dork!" "I know you are but what am I?" "Haha, you sound like Peewee, you pervert!" "Mommy, what's a pervert?"

Parenting experts advise us to give children's questions due respect, but I'm not touching that one. Besides, I'm not really listening. Not to them, anyway. Other than the twisting maze that is the Pike (realignment would be anti-historic, I guess), my attention is fixed on my current audiobook as narrator George Guidall spins a tale from Lilian Jackson Braun's *The Cat Who...* mystery series. Volume faded forward, his voice has pulled me down the rabbit hole to the world of KoKo and YumYum, two Siamese cat detectives owned by likeable journalist Jim Qwilleran. A terrible blizzard has them in dire straits.

"QUIET! QUIET!" My shriek cuts through the snipe fest. "Koko and YumYum are lost! They've been in an accident! Thrown from the car!"

Shocked silence. Then my son, a life-long cat lover (but not cat-haver — mom's allergic), asks, voice quavering: "Are they gonna be okay, Mom?"

"Yeah, probably," I say. I point out that there are more books in the series, so how could the author kill off the kitties? Reassured, his worried face relaxes.

as I can, from the back of my shampoo bottle (rinse and repeat) to the great works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and everything in between.

*I could read and drive,  
read and clean, read  
and weed, read and...  
whatever didn't require  
the section of my brain  
I needed for listening.  
Glorious, glorious day.*

My girls — chronological book-ends to my son, poor guy — are less distressed with KoKo and YumYum's predicament, but the bickerspell was nonetheless broken. We all listened to the story for the rest of the car ride, with peace, love, and understandin', man, restored within our family unit — for a few minutes anyway, all thanks to the allure of an audiobook.

## EARS LISTENING TO YA

I'm an unabashed audiobook addict. Really, I'm a reading addict. I mainline as much reading

Until five or six years ago, I thought I was as maxed out as a reader could get and still function in the world; then I discovered the audiobook section in the library — ear reading. I could read and drive, read and clean, read and weed, read and...whatever didn't require the section of my brain I needed for listening. Glorious, glorious day.

To date, I have "read" more than one hundred recorded books, from both the library and direct purchase. I've tried everything:

biographies, psycho-blabs, Pulitzer Prize winners, how-tos, epic tales, and, especially, murder mystery series collections with quirky settings.

I've always yearned for a good story. Born at the tail end of the Dick & Jane era, I can easily thumb through many memories of being read to as a child, courtesy of the local library. When we moved overseas to the Marshall Islands, where the lending selection was slim — and TV non-existent — my mother enrolled us kids in the Weekly Reader Book Club. I loved Harry the Dirty Dog as much as the pet I could never have. And what with moving eight times before age sixteen, often my books were my only friends. This never-

### THE NEXT CHAPTER IN AUDIOBOOKS

In 1995, Jonathan Katz heard the writing on the wall, and launched Audible.com, a subscription-based website where, for only \$21.95 per month, members can download two books every month — a significant cost savings over buying them off the shelf at local or online bookstores, not to mention avoiding library late fees. The company now boasts somewhere around half a million listeners.

Beyond the audio books, the Audible website states that users also have access to all types of spoken word, including "audio editions of newspapers and magazines, business news and analysis, language instruction, educational programming, and all the rest of the fifty-two thousand hours of audio content available at Audible.com." Some of the content is free.

After downloading, users can listen to the books/newspaper/whatever straight from their computers, transfer it to a CD to play in their cars/at the gym/whatever, or — much more cool — store and play it back to an Audible-ready device like an MP3 player, or — even cooler — pop it onto an Apple iPod. For ultimate coolness, they can go out and buy certain new BMW models, which now sport the first integrated adapter for one's iPod.

ending need for stories has persisted into adulthood.

Luckily for me, other people feel this need for stories too. Back in the 1970s, two in particular acted on it. Businessmen Duvall Hecht and Henry Trentman, both frustrated with car commutes and radio offerings, decided to put their time to better use. Independently and almost simultaneously, they founded Books-on-Tape and Recorded Books, Inc. Today, Mary Beth Roche, president of the Audio Publishers Association estimates the annual revenues from audio books at eight-hundred million. That figure is beyond my budget, so apparently I have some kindred listeners.

One is Gary Garcia, network administrator for local high-tech firm CTC, Inc., who uses audiobooks as a boredom buster on the long, long drive back home to visit family in Alabama. A seasoned peacemaker, Garcia usually lets his wife choose, "as long as it isn't a *love* story."

Another is Metro subway system mechanic John Rogel, who spends his off-time teaching both classical voice and martial arts. He listens to audio books because he gets "bored at work, and sick of [classical music station] WGMS." Rogel's job of quick recovery for malfunctioning Red Line trains translates into long stretches of waiting for a train to misbehave, pock-marked by episodes of frenetic problem solving; hence, time to read. He prefers nonfiction, such as *Leonardo, the First Scientist* by Michael White (did you know that da Vinci carried the Mona Lisa around with him wherever he went, for years, like a wallet

photo? Me neither), and Patrick Robinson's *Nimitz Class* book on Pearl Harbor — all 13.5 informative hours of it.

Rogel's choices differ from mine, as I favor the qualities inherent in a series: the comfort of a familiar but slightly morphed setting and plot with each new book, and the extended development of characters over time. Beyond KoKo and YumYum, there's also Dorothy Gilman's once-despondent senior citizen turned CIA operative, Mrs. Pollifax; Janet Evanovich's bumbling, North Jerseyian, laid-off-women's-hosiery-buyer bounty hunter Stephanie Plum; and Lawrence Block's light-fingered but likeable Robin Hood-esque burglar Bernie Rhodenbarr. Bernie and I had become old friends by the end of that series because, despite his love of larceny, I knew he would never steal from a nice girl like me.

As the bulk of my audio reading is done in the car, content complexity and emotional investment also drive my choices. Distracted thoughts — *Huh? What'd he say?* — and repeated rewinding of sections steered me toward simpler fare when driving. I want to provoke thought, not accidents. Also, I just can't retain the loftier stuff while driving, as proved by a high-brow Mozart biography. Rife with information, I really only remember the dirty parts.

My well-hidden but natural sappiness is another concern. So moved by Annie Proulx's lovely, lyrical writing style in *The Shipping News*, I actually had to pull over a few times to collect myself — much to the relief of oncoming traffic, I'm sure. Not a good way to test for attention deficit disorder.

APA president Roche says that based on a "Where Do You Like To Do It?" survey on user listening habits (what were you thinking?), the primary venue for audio book indulgence is indeed in the car, but gardening and marathon training score high too. "We have reports of artists who listen while painting, and postal workers while sorting the mail. Some of them are voracious readers," she says. I myself wasn't asked to respond to this survey, but I can say I've done the gardening thing, even dragging my boom box next to my soaking tub, post-weeding frenzy.

Regardless of genre taste and location, the audio world sings a siren's song that's hard to ignore, once tried. In the car, life can roll by with less frustration at everyone else's bad driving. A *third* run to the grocery store in the same week? Somehow less stultifying if Evanovich's bumbling bounty hunter Stephanie Plum makes you feel better with her tough-girl *oh YEAH?* ineptitude. Next to her I look really together.

And don't disregard the power of children's literature. Despite his affinity for history, Metro mechanic Rogel's wife tattled that he swiped the *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* tapes out of the family car so he could catch the ending on the way to work.

"I did not!"

"Yes, you did! I had them all lined up, ready to listen to with the girls, and boom! Gone!"

### **SPEAKING OF BOOKS**

When my three kids were younger, we were *Ramona the Pest* fans. Now, stumbling through

teenage world, they rarely agree on anything — fashion, friends, or which fast-food joint to hit on the way to lacrosse — but we nevertheless enjoyed the first six of Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series together, until the narrator changed from C.J. Critt to Tanya

voices I developed for Roald Dahl's *The BFG*. Four years of cross-training with classical voice lessons have shored up my oral delivery with proper breath control, phrasing, and diction. The reward? An unexpected revisit to my tweener daughter Roshanne's

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Eby, much to their disgust. "That doesn't even sound like Lula!" they objected when the new narrator delivered the full-figured-African-American-ex-prostitute-turned-assistant-bounty-hunter character's lines in a thinner, higher register than Critt had developed. They flat-out refused to listen to the seventh book, so I indulged on my own between carpooling and carry-out pickup. I can adjust.

I could also adjust to being a narrator myself. My children loved the consistent character

childhood, who, embarrassed but resolute, recently put Toby Speed's Two Cool Cows in my lap, eyes hopeful. You betcha, sweetie. Why not? It gave me an excuse to chant "Over the rickety pickety fence / Down through the buggity bog! / Straight through the wickedly thickety woods / Into the fishety pond!" for possibly the last time until the grandkids arrive.

Convincing audio narration takes real talent. Listen to Diane Mott Davidson's catering murder mystery series, narrated by Barbara Rosenblat, and see if you

can match her talent at mimicking a nasally perky caterer, her stoic cop husband, teenage *hey, dude!* son, and many others, credibly and seamlessly, within one book. Billboard magazine noted that, "Among devoted audiobook fans, Recorded Books reader Barbara Rosenblat is spoken of with the same affection and reverence that the music industry reserves for Frank Sinatra and the Beatles."

### LISTEN UP, CLASS

APA President Roche claims that audiobooks have the added benefit of sneakily educating kids on the art of oration. "Children learn to read with better expression," she says, "and they can listen to an

audiobook that is two reading levels higher than what they're capable of reading traditionally. They can focus better on the message."

But, hmm, is it cheating to read the audio version of *Catcher in the Rye* English class? Lori Gravley-Novello, English teacher at the academically rigorous Sandy Spring Friends School in Maryland thinks not, but with a caveat.

For struggling students, auditory learners, or non-native speakers, she actually encourages a "read-along" approach, using the audiobook narrator's inflection and pauses to reinforce comprehension. "I believe so strongly in having companion readings (book + tape) that I've had the library order the books on tape for texts that I use in my Expository Writing class," she says.

However, Gravley-Novello points out that students who try to skate by with only listening to a book will likely struggle with associated essay writing, as analyzing literature seems to work best when students absorb text from the printed page. "They may remember something a character said or did, but their body doesn't remember where it was on the page."

### WRITE IS RIGHT

Audio books don't work for everyone. "I don't know how you and my husband do that," remarks Susan Jansen, associate editor of *Frederick Magazine*, on listening in the car. "I just can't deal with audiobooks." She prefers the printed page; no surprise, considering her livelihood.

Yoga instructor Linda Miller objects too, she says, "I can't split my mind like that, even at home." A sort of professional focuser and believer in Taoist smell-the-moment philosophies, Miller objects to the fundamental nature of multi-tasking.

"The whole purpose is to focus on one thing in life at a time," she says. "If you're trying to do two things at once, you're not disciplining your mind." Her friend, Carrie Casto, agrees, admitting that she "can barely listen to talk radio" while she's driving. Neither one has tried audiobooks, nor do they intend to.

Sometimes they don't even work for me; or rather, they're not enough. Pick up a favorite book. The woody, gluey, earthy smell of the binding, the smooth glide of the pages slipping past your fingers, the pointed, measured beauty of Garamond typeface, the come-hither crackle of the paper, even the slightly geeky but undeniable sense of belonging to a tradition of reading as old as the Gutenberg Bible — how can an audiobook, trapped in a bland plastic cassette casing or the technological no-nonsense of a shiny CD, compete? Earmarking a passage is annoying with an audiobook, especially with serial-output tapes (CDs score higher on this, as long as you remember to notate the track and minutes — difficult in the car). Marking a memorable spot in a traditional book needs only my favorite turtle bookmark, a Post-it note, gas receipt, or even — *gasp!* — dog-earing the page. To solve this, I have actually gone out and purchased paper copies of favorite audiobooks, so I can relive treasured moments — if I can re-find the spot, that is.

### HEAR DICK RUN

Troubled readers can find real relief from their struggles to decipher the written word. Recorded Books, Inc. offers SmartReader books, whose texts have been simplified and then recorded at slower than normal narration speeds: Level One is recorded forty percent slower, with the writing at a first- to second-grade reading level; level two, seventeen percent slower, presents material written at the third- to fourth-grade level. These are not children's books; rather, the target group is for middle schoolers on up to adults, who are struggling with basic literacy. Titles range from *My Baby: From Birth to Six Months* by Naomi Gross (SmartReader Level Two) to various biographies and thrillers like *Earthquake!* By Susan Vintilla-Friedman (both levels).

A related program, SteadyReader, is aimed at school-age children. Students read a book while hearing a concurrent, slowed-down recording. This double-team approach reinforces comprehension and promotes sustained reading. SteadyReader offers standard classroom titles such as *Old Yeller*, or more challenging ones like Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Using a combination read/listen scenario, with short, twenty-minute tape sides, SteadyReader helps to mainstream students who lag behind their classmates, or are only medium-proficient in English.

**INNER-CHILD STORYTIME**

Listening to a story still has the power to attract and excite us. APA president Roche thinks we've come full circle, saying, "When you think back to the origin of literature, it was shared orally." That's true; one of the earliest stories on record, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, is a compilation of ancient Sumerian stories from about 2,500 BC, and directly attributable to no single author, because the stories were initially shared communally, from the mouth and memory of the teller. More recently, H.G. Well's 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* illustrated the power of oral storytelling: mass hysteria from a thrilling, well-delivered piece of fiction about an alien invasion, causing nation-wide mass hysteria. A bit too thrilling, maybe.

Recorded tales put a modern spin on this age-old practice of storytelling. They have certainly been a boon for the blind or those unable to hold a traditional book. But Roche, also the publisher for Audio Renaissance, sees audiobooks as a way to connect with each other in a world increasingly linked by ephemeral email forwards, aren't-I-handy-with-a-word-processor Christmas update letters, and blogs. "People are more isolated these days. Listening to audio books brings families together. Parents sometimes use them as teach-able moments, where they turn it off and discuss what's happening in the story." Of course, this can happen with traditional books too. But consider today's society:

Daycare and work commutes. Carpools. Soccer games. Flute lessons. Twenty-five percent of Americans eat fast food every single day, and they don't deliver. We are in the car. We might as well take advantage of it.

Year, looks at storytelling as a security blanket that no one makes us throw away. "We need stories. I don't think we ever outgrow them," she says. She celebrates our lives — regardless of age — with her heartening tales of tolerance,

*"We find a place in our hearts where we can trust in that story. Like mashed potatoes and gravy — comfort food."*

- DEL SEAMONDS

And despite the massive load of information accessible to us today, technology has not simplified our lives. Quite the opposite. Life is a hefty, scary enterprise, even for us grownups. Where do we find our place? Aldous Huxley's Peter Quarles says that, "The whole story of the universe is implicit in any part of it," in *Point Counter Point*. Wow. Big thought. Let's leave him to ponder it. Instead, why not curl up in the cosmos's lap occasionally and let a story re-center us?

Leeny Del Seamonds, Master Story Performer and recipient of the 2002 National Storyteller of the

family ties, and peace. Some are folktales from other cultures; others she draws from her own life, using her Cuban heritage as a backdrop.

Be it audio or paper medium, fiction or nonfiction, Del Seamonds agrees that adults need to let themselves be taken away sometimes, that "because we identify with the story character's emotions and challenges, we find a place in our hearts where we can trust in that story. Like mashed potatoes and gravy — comfort food."

Sounds good to me — I'm all ears.