mary burkey



A Practical Guide to Sound Literature

audiobooks for youth

A Practical Guide to Sound Literature

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A History of Children's Audiobooks

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was the word. The word was shaped into the sound of story and flowed through time and place, carried by the teller's voice. In daily life, spoken word served as the foundation of culture. Mother soothed her child with story; heroes were immortalized in legend; elders passed along their knowledge of the land through myth and tale. As sound took shape on the page, teachers and students recited lessons together, while religious leaders chanted holy words. The very act of reading was a social activity until the end of the Middle Ages, as the literate processed the meaning of text aloud until Western society instituted the practice of "private reading." Well into the twentieth century, reading remained an aural activity as the newest serialized Sherlock Holmes tale was read aloud in the family parlor and Mark Twain traveled the country reciting his books on stage. Much of the language of literature recognizes this oral tradition; we speak of an author's voice, a work's intended audience, the writer's tone, narrative sequence, and rhetorical mode. The sound of story serves as a constant throughout history, conveyed by bard, safeguarded in script, captured by recording device, and transmitted by digital signal. Audiobooks connect us to literature in its original form, returning the listener to the virtual storyteller's circle.

Thomas Edison envisioned the power of aural literature to educate as well as amuse when he described the practical uses for recorded sound in his 1878 *North American Review* article "The Phonograph and its Future":

Books.—Books may be read by the charitably inclined professional reader, or by such readers especially employed for that purpose, and the record of such book used in the asylums of the blind, hospitals, sick-chamber, or even with great profit and amusement by the lady or gentleman whose eyes and hands may be otherwise employed; or, again, because of the greater enjoyment to be had from a book when read by an elocutionist, than when read by the average reader. The ordinary record sheet, repeating this book from fifty to a hundred times as it will, would command a price that would pay the original reader well for the slightly increased difficulty in reading it aloud in the phonograph.

Educational Purposes.—As an elocutionary teacher, or as a primary teacher for children, it will certainly be invaluable. By it, difficult passages may be correctly rendered for the pupil but once, after which he has only to apply to his phonograph for instructions. The child may thus learn to spell, commit to memory a lesson set for it, etc.²

With a stretch of the imagination, Edison might be credited with recording the first children's audiobook more than a century ago when, as he explains in a sound clip available on Project Gutenberg, Sarah Josepha Hale's poem "Mary Had a Little Lamb" was selected as the first experimental recording on his original tin cylinder phonograph in 1877.³

TALKING BOOKS EVOLVE -

The publishing trade saw the first true combination of book-plus-recording in 1917 when Harper Columbia released *The Bubble Book*, a volume for children. This production was the twenty-sixth recording recognized by the Library of Congress National Recording Registry, established, as stated in the National Recording Preservation Act of 2000, to "maintain and preserve sound recordings and collections of sound recordings that are

culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."4 The National Recording Registry citation reads:

The Bubble Books, published by Harper Columbia between 1917 and 1922, was the first series of books and records published together especially for children. Authors were Ralph Mayhew and Burges Johnson, while Rhoda Chase provided the beautiful, full-color line drawings. Each book contained three 5½-inch discs to accompany the three nursery rhymes printed in the books. The singer is not listed on the discs, but is thought to be Henry Burr. Millions of the books were sold to delighted children in the U.S. and abroad.5

The charming Bubble Book series featured illustrated rhyming text, ranging from Mother Goose to A Child's Garden of Verses, in child-sized books with color-illustrated pages, which were joined within the book to serve as disc sleeves for small records containing the sung and spoken text. A November 1919 advertisement in *The Atlantic Monthly* notes that Bubble Books were available for one dollar at "any bookstore, Columbia Grafonoia store, gift shop, toy shop, music store, or department store" while the 1919 Sears catalog priced the titles at 89 cents. A massive November 1920 promotional effort in book trade journals described Harper Columbia's consumer push of the Bubble Books as "the largest campaign ever devoted to books" and created a rage for the recordings, which were marketed, despite copyright wrangles, into the early 1930s. In an early example of multimedia marketing, the vastly popular productions were endorsed by celebrity child actors, heralded at Bubble Book story times in bookstores, and played on the radio. The Bubble Books form the foundation of children's readalong audiobooks, creating a model of text, image, and words plus music that continues into the twenty-first century.6

As the sales of the Bubble Books succumbed to the Great Depression, the United States government took action on Edison's recommendation to use recorded books for the blind. In 1931, the Pratt-Smoot Act established the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), which charged the Librarian of Congress to establish a system to distribute Braille books through "local or regional centers for the circulation of such books, under such conditions and regulations as he may prescribe." In 1933, the NLS and the American Foundation for the Blind developed

the Talking Book, a "recording on a disc of the voice of a good reader, and its reproduction at will through the instrumentality of a reproducing machine or phonograph." For decades, the NLS served only blind adults but was amended to include blind children in 1952 and expanded in 1966 to include those who have physical limitations, including reading disabilities that prevent the reading of standard print.⁷

The end of the Depression heralded a resurgence of recordings for children, bolstered by new nonbreakable vinyl 78 rpm discs and the development of long-playing LP records in 1948. In that pretelevision age, families gathered around the phonograph listening to releases from major labels which featured top stars and full orchestral accompaniment. Early children's recordings popularized abridged and adapted favorites such as Jean de Brunhoff's Babar Stories (Decca 1936), Dr. Seuss's The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins (RCA Victor 1940), Robert McCloskey's Lentil (Young People's Records 1946), and actor Jimmy Stewart's storybook-and-album of a pre-Disney Winnie-the-Pooh (RCA Victor 1953). Some standout examples of fully produced recordings include A Christmas Carol with Basil Rathbone (Columbia 1942); Orson Welles's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's fairy tale The Happy Prince, narrated by Welles and Bing Crosby, with original music composed by Academy Award-winner Bernard Herrmann (Decca 1946); and Ludwig Bemelmans's Madeline accompanied by Franz Schubert's symphonic music (RCA Victor 1953). Many a baby boomer will fondly recall their bright yellow, 25-cent unbreakable Little Golden Records of The Poky Little Puppy (1948) or The Little Engine That Could (1954).8 In 2009 The National Recording Registry selected the Decca recording of The Churkendoose (1947), a classic representative from this era of children's recordings, for preservation in the Library of Congress, describing the work as "a children's tale of tolerance, compassion and diversity, written by Ben Ross Berenberg for his daughter. The recording features the voice of Ray Bolger, music composed by Alec Wilder, and a supporting cast of farm animals."9

SPOKEN WORD PUBLISHERS

Caedmon, the first publisher dedicated to recording spoken word literature, was founded by Barbara Cohen Holdridge and Marianne Roney in 1952. In a 2002 interview with Renee Montagne for National Public Ra-

dio, the pair recalled the recording session with poet Dylan Thomas that launched the company.

Several missed recording studio appointments later, there stood Dylan Thomas, poems in hand. But not enough, it turned out, to fill a longplaying record. A catastrophe in the making, remembers Barbara Holdridge, since the B side had to have something on it, or they couldn't put out the record. They asked the poet if he had anything else he could record. Holdridge says: "He thought for a minute, and he said, 'Well, I did this story that was published in Harper's Bazaar that was a kind of Christmas story." It was "A Child's Christmas in Wales." They borrowed the only known file copy from the magazine. "That was dusting off something that undoubtedly would have remained buried and that became one of the most loved and popular stories recorded in the 20th century and certainly gave us the start that we needed to become a viable company," Holdridge says. 10

The National Recording Registry noted the lasting importance of this captivating childhood remembrance in a citation for the recording: "It became one of Caedmon's most successful releases and has been credited with launching the audiobook industry in the United States."11 Interestingly, in 1986 Caedmon was acquired by HarperCollins, a company that traces its roots back to the Bubble Books.

The year 1953 marked the launch of Weston Woods, the venerable children's film and audiobook producer that continues to publish award-winning titles more than a half-century after its first release, *Andy and the Lion*. Mort Schindel, the company founder, dedicated his life to translating the best in children's picture book literature into audiovisual media, fulfilling a role described as "teacher to millions." Schindel's meticulous attention to every aspect of filmmaking included the creation of a soundtrack that integrated stellar narration, original music, and sound effects that enhanced a child's understanding of the story. The first incarnations of Weston Woods's audiobooks were vinyl LPs released under the series title Read Me a Story in 1959. The first series consisted of sixteen stories, four to a disc, containing the soundtrack of early Schindel films such as Make Way for Ducklings, Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel, and Millions of Cats. Later, the soundtracks to Weston Woods children's literature filmstrips were also released as audio-only cassette tapes. In 1987, Weston Woods developed entirely new readalong (book-plus-cassette) versions of previously released titles by remastering the original or rerecording a new soundtrack, with the resulting audiobooks—such as *Where the Wild Things Are*—distributed by Scholastic. From that point forward, as each film was produced, the soundtrack elements were reedited and mixed to make the audiobook version its own entity.¹³ (Weston Woods was acquired by Scholastic in 1996.)

In 1955, Anthony Ditlow, a former teacher who was losing his eyesight, founded Listening Library in partnership with his wife, Helen. Ditlow combined his knowledge of Talking Books for the vision impaired with his awareness of the curricular needs of students by developing a list of spoken word titles marketed to schools and libraries, such as perennial young adult favorite Lord of the Flies narrated by author Sir William Golding. From its first production, Around the World in Eighty Days, to its first recording of a children's book in 1962, Pippi Longstocking, Listening Library built its reputation on providing an experience that Anthony Ditlow, on the packaging of his first LP recording in 1955, compared to "a personal friend reading aloud—flawlessly, tirelessly, and with dramatic feeling." The founders' son Tim Ditlow joined the firm in 1979, his expert ear selecting the best in children and young adult literature for unabridged recording, which soon became the firm's sole focus. Listening Library blazed new trails under the guidance of Tim Ditlow, named company president in 1986. Listening Library produced consumer editions of children's audiobooks meticulously faithful to the original text in full-color packaging, which were sold in Waldenbooks stores and released the first full-cast recordings of unabridged novels for children. It also instituted a lifetime replacement policy for library editions and pioneered the inclusion of bonus material such as author interviews and visual images on computer-playable discs. Listening Library's 1998 acquisition of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, combined with Ditlow's casting of Jim Dale as narrator, resulted in a series that shattered all previous audiobook sales records. Part of the Random House Audio Publishing Group since 1999, the company continues its tradition of excellence into the twenty-first century, maintaining the high standards set by its founder. On Listening Library's behalf, Helen Ditlow accepted the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Audio Publishers Association in 2005.14

Lucien Adès broke new ground when he combined pop culture with children's recordings, developing record albums with attached readalong pages, which were based on licensed Walt Disney films. Adès originally developed his product in 1953 as a bookseller in Paris, and later established a marketing partnership of his Adès Editions label with the Walt Disney Productions French office. 15 In 1957, Disney brought the idea to the United States, releasing the first in the Storyteller line of LP albums that combined the songs and story adaptations of such films as Bambi, Dumbo, and Pinocchio. These recordings, with the cover slogan "See the pictures / Hear the record / Read the book," coached a generation of listeners in the how-to technique of readalong audiobooks with this phrase: "You can read along with me in your book. You will know it's time to turn the page when Tinker Bell rings her little bells like this . . . Let's begin now."16

FEDERAL SUPPORT -

Children's audiobooks received support through Eisenhower-era federal programs that recognized the educational benefits of recorded literature envisioned by Edison in the previous century. The National Defense Act of 1958 provided grants for radio, television, film, and audiovisual media, thus contributing to the growth of children's audiobook production. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, in effect through reauthorization for over forty subsequent years, was established to equalize educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, improve libraries, and provide programs for accelerated and struggling learners. These federal funds created an audiovisual boom in school libraries and classrooms, supplying students with new multimedia to enhance learning while transforming school librarians into media specialists. Audiobooks became an established part of literacy learning, whether as part of a readalong package or in the form of a filmstrip-and-cassette production. The strength of the school and library market for audiovisual adaptations of literature was such that in "1973 filmstrips with cassettes were the fastest growing media format in terms of commercial sales."17

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

New technologies revolutionized the way listeners experienced audiobooks and changed the audiobook-publishing playing field. The lull between the introduction of the long-playing record in 1948 and the introduction of the cassette tape by the Philips Corporation in 1963 soon gave way to a tsunami of competing formats. 18 Cassettes hastened the death of the LP and led to the demise of small independent companies that recorded children's literature on records. Gone were companies such as Newbery Award Records and Joseph Berk's one-man company Pathways to Sound, which in 1961 produced Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn reading The Wind in the Willows, Julie Harris narrating Stuart Little in 1965, and E. B. White reading his iconic Charlotte's Web in 197019 (after rejecting Berk's casting actress Hume for the recording, preferring to speak his own words without drama²⁰). The availability of the cassette tape deck and the introduction of the Sony Walkman in 1979 revolutionized the audiobook world, allowing listeners to become mobile. After the brief mid-1960s lifespan of the eight-track tape, both portable and car cassette players became ubiquitous, making the cassette tape the dominant world format after two decades, outselling the vinyl LP by 1983.21

The rise of the cassette provided the technology that gave birth to Recorded Books, a company founded as a way for commuters to experience great books while behind the wheel. The shift from LP to cassettes led to a change in audiovisual hardware in the classroom, and tape players soon outnumbered turntables. Recorded Books recognized a new market and established a K–12 school division in the early 1990s with their first releases public domain children's classics, adding current best sellers and original educational content as the youth division grew. Sony and Phillips jointly developed the compact disc in 1982, and Sony's first portable CD player was launched in 1984. A mere four years later, CD sales surpassed LP records, yet the cassette tape remained a viable audiobook format into the twenty-first century. The new media formats stimulated growth in the audiobook publishing field, with the establishment of Live Oak Media in 1980, Blackstone Audio in 1987, Audio Bookshelf in 1992, Listen & Live Audio in 1997, and Full Cast Audio in 2001.

Digital audio players first appeared in 1997, and Apple's release of the iPod in 2001 marked the beginning of the MP3 era. Audiobooks quickly migrated to the digital format, with Audible.com developing the concept

of download retail sales in 1995, and the first library download service, OverDrive, providing online checkout of audiobooks in 2002. All-in-one units—such as the Playaway, which debuted in 2005—offered the digital audiobook in a preloaded package that eliminated the need for CDs or playback unit. Whatever the container, twenty-first century audiobooks allow listeners to carry literature along in an ever-changing array of formats, transmuting the ageless appeal of storytelling into an outward form that echoes the prediction made in 1650 by the writer Cyrano de Bergerac:

On opening a box, I discovered in it a metal object, not unlike one of our clocks, which was filled with all manner of tiny springs and mysterious machines. It was a book indeed, but a miraculous book, with neither pages nor letters; it was, in short, a book where the eyes were useless for reading and for which only the ears were needed. When someone desires to "read," he winds up this machine with a great quantity of little threads of all kinds, then he turns the needle to the chapter he wishes to hear and at once there issue from it, as from the mouth of a man or from a musical instrument, all the distinct and different sounds which the great lunarians employ for the expression of their language.²⁴

SPOTLIGHT REFLECTION

A Good Story, Well Told BY PAUL GAGNE

LOOKING BACK OVER MY thirty-two-year history of working on children's recordings for Weston Woods Studios, I've observed some pretty significant changes in the audiobook world. I don't know if audiobook was even a standard term when I started as a sound editor in 1978. At the time I was only peripherally aware of some of the other producers doing book recordings—Caedmon, Listening Library, Books on Tape. I became more aware of the audiobook as its own entity when we started producing readalong recordings in the late 1980s, when we needed to go back and rerecord many of the titles in the Weston Woods catalog because the narrations for some of the older film soundtracks weren't always verbatim recordings of the text from the books.

I'd say one of the biggest changes I've noticed is that there is a far greater awareness of the audiobook as a respected art form, not only for me personally, but in the educational and consumer markets overall. And it's still growing, through the efforts of such organizations as the Audio Publishers Association, which formalized a community of audiobook producers and narrators; the Audio Publishers Association's Audie Awards; and the American Library Association's Odyssey Medal, which, in particular, has given the audiobook the kind of formal recognition and respect that motivates producers to strive for quality.

The other major change I've seen is in production technology. When I started in this field, recordings were done using reel-to-reel tape, and editing involved several weeks in a room with razor blades and splicing tape. Digital recording technology and computer applications have revolutionized all of that with easy-to-use, flexible tools that streamlined the editing, mixing, and mastering process from weeks to a matter of days, with no degradation of sound quality, resulting in equally flexible digital master files that can be converted to any of the digital formats currently in use—from an audio CD to downloadable MP3 files—with a few mouse clicks.

As the process of producing audiobooks has become easier and more flexible from a technology standpoint, we as producers have become freer to focus on the fundamentals that have always been at the heart of any good book recording. These are finding strong, well-told stories in the books we choose to adapt and casting readers with the kind of well-honed storytelling skills that can unlock and bring good literature to life for the listener.

Morton Schindel, the founder of Weston Woods, focused his original mission on finding the best literature for children, adapted as faithful reflections of the books themselves and preserving the integrity of the original. This is still very much at the heart of what we do at Weston Woods, and I think that any producer doing quality work in the audiobook field today has their focus on content rather than container. The more things have changed technologically, the more they've remained the same in terms of what lies at the foundation of any successful audiobook recording—a good story, well told.

Paul Gagne is the director of production at Weston Woods/Scholastic Audio.

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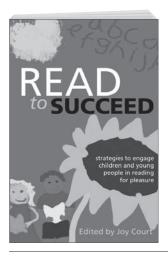
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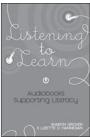


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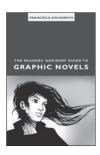
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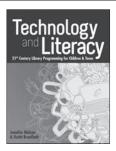
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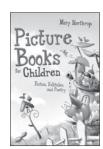
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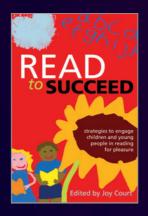
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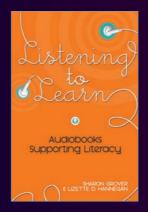
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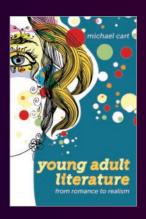
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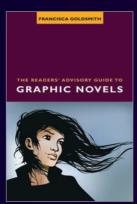
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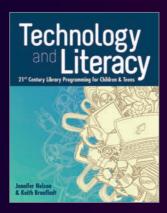
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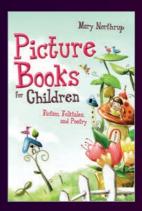












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