

## NON-PRINT YAL CONNECTION

*We Welcome our New Column Editor, Jean Brown*

### Audio Books in the Classroom Bridging between Language Arts and Social Studies

*Jean E. Brown*

The increasing popularity of audio books is a 21<sup>st</sup> Century tribute to the roots of our oral tradition: hearing the stories, legends, and myths passed down from one generation to the next. Traditionally, these accounts provided answers to ancient questions and posed new possibilities through stories and explanations for our ancestors. They became the glue of common experience, the source of answers, and the transmitters of wonder and joy. Audio books are today's expression of that oral tradition, the telling of and listening to stories that reveal the human experience, its triumphs and its pains. Additionally, they can make a valuable contribution to the learning experiences of students both in the classroom and independently.

Just before school began last fall, two members of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school team, a language arts teacher and a social studies teacher, contacted me, seeking advice about new ways to integrate content in their classes. I suggested that we explore the potential benefits of using audio books in their classes. I related the positive experiences that my students had reported about their listening experiences in both my Young Adult Literature classes and my Children's Literature classes. Many of my students revealed that listening to audio books provided them with heightened enjoyment and a different type of literary experience, allowing them to hear the evolution of characters, the nuances of the narrator's voice, and the subtle interaction of characters. Several local teachers had also told me of the successes they had had with using books on tape in their classrooms. While we had reports of their value in literature classes, the social studies teacher expressed concerns about using audio books in her American history classes.

#### Audio Books in the Social Studies Classroom

An effective book on tape captures the elements of characterization, theme, tone, setting, and other significant aspects of the text that may contribute to a lively study in an English language arts class. How, potentially, might audio books contribute to students' understanding of social studies? I thought briefly of some expository texts, but they seemed to fall short of providing a vital connection between the two disciplines. I then thought about some quality works of historical fiction that I have on tape. The use of historical fiction seemed logical because it has effectively established a cross-curricular value between English and history/social studies classes.

In a meeting with the teachers, we discussed the units they were going to be teaching. The social studies class would begin the year studying colonial America. The languages arts teacher was flexible, but he indicated that he wanted to involve his students in literature circles early in the year.

I sought titles of historical fiction that would be appropriate to use in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade class English language arts class to use with literature circles and bridge to a social studies class studying American history. I reviewed a number of audio books from my library and selected seven titles that seemed to meet the needs of both teachers. I had listened to the audio books of each of these books as well as having read them. The teachers reviewed the books and listened to sections of the audio books. They choose five core books to use in both classes. We then discussed ways to use literature in the social studies classroom.

We began with the recognition that literature is used in a social studies classroom to provide a context for actual events, rather than for literary experience. Historical fiction can serve to put a human face on the past and help student to realize that the events happened to people like them. Hopefully, it will also help them to recognize that they are apart of on-going history. While social studies teachers might assign an historical novel as outside reading; they do not devote class time for in-depth discussion of literature. More appropriately, using excerpts from a book will provide social studies teachers with the means for honing in on passages that will present listeners with insights about the times and events. The details in historical fiction reveal an accurate account of period and the people who lived through it. These accounts give the story authenticity. For example, in an American history course, the following audio books might be used: *Witch Child* relates the story of immigration to colonial America in 1659 and the rigid structure of Puritan society; *Sign of the Beaver*, set in 1768 territory of Maine, explores the challenges of settling the wilderness; *My Brother Sam is Dead* chronicles the period of the American Revolution and explores the complexities of the choices between the Loyalists and the patriots; *Fever, 1793* examines the impact of the Yellow fever epidemic in our first capital of Philadelphia during George Washington's second Presidential term; and *The Slave Dancer* depicts life on a slave ship in 1840. Each of these books explores a significant facet of the evolution of our country.

***Witch Child* by Celia Rees**

*Candlewick Press, 2002*

*Read by Jennifer Ehle with Carole Shelly*

*Listening Library, Random House Audio, 2001*

*5 hours, 38 minutes*

Mary Newbury is alone after the death of her grandmother. As the granddaughter of a witch, Mary is unsafe in England so she travels to America with a zealous group of Puritans. The diary format makes it easy to use excerpts. For example, diary entries could be used to show the hardships of 17<sup>th</sup> century ship travel. The tape also captures the hardship the newcomers endured and also the type of hysteria that claims of witchcraft created. The one weakness is that the narrator sounds more mature than 14 years old. The book could be used in conjunction with Ann Rinaldi's *A Break with Charity*, Elizabeth George Spear's *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, or Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

***Sign of the Beaver* by Elizabeth George Speare**

*Dell Yearling, 1983*

*Read by Greg Schaffert*

*Listening Library, Random House Audio, 1998*

*3 hours 9 minutes*

Matt and his father embark on a trip into the wilderness of Maine before the Revolutionary War to establish a homestead. After planting crops and building a house, his father returns to Massachusetts to get the rest of the family, leaving Matt to maintain homestead and mind the crops. One reader effectively relates the story. Excerpts from this tape might be used to capture a sense of the wilderness and the hardships of settling in the wilds, and the grave responsibilities that were placed on Matt at such a young age. Also excerpts that depict the cautious and guarded relationship between Matt and Attean might be discussed as they characterize the relationship between settlers and the Native Americans.

***My Brother Sam is Dead* by Christopher and James Lincoln Collier.**

*Scholastic, 1974*

*Read by John C. Brown*

*Audio Bookshelf, 1996*

*4 1/2 hours*

Perhaps the most effective excerpts of this audio book are those that capture the significant conflict that occurs between Sam and his father as they dramatically represent the division among the colonist, those who wish to remain loyal to England and those who sought the freedom that only independence could bring. Other excerpts that provide a sense of the times are those that describe the hardships that the war caused for the civilian population. Perhaps the most significant element of the book is the irony of both Sam's and his father's deaths. Excerpts of the text could be used in class to have students discuss the circumstances of the deaths of these characters and the implications that the deaths have for understanding the Revolutionary War.

***Fever, 1793* by Laurie Halse Anderson**

*Simon and Schuster, 2000*

*Read by Emily Bergl*

*Random House Audio Books 2000*

*5 hours 45 minutes*

The narration of this tape is particularly effective, because the young woman who reads the book sounds appropriately youthful. As with the diary entries in *Witch Child*, *Fever, 1793*, uses dates for each chapter that provides the reader with a sense of the chronology of the epidemic that wracked Philadelphia in 1793. It also makes identifying and using excerpts easy. The passages that deal with public panic and fear provide a potential springboard for refocusing to recent events in this country. Social studies teachers could also refer the accounts of medical procedures and treatment to science or health classes, in addition to discussing the conditions and procedures in the historical context of the day. Other effective excerpts that could be used include those that describe the deserted city or the return to the city of President Washington.

***The Slave Dancer* by Paula Fox**

*Dell Publishing, 1973*

*Read by Peter MacNicol*

*Bantam Doubleday Dell Audio Publishing, 1996*

*4 hours*

This audio book would be more effective if multiple readers were used to differentiate the voices of various crewmembers. Listeners will gain insights about the legal attempts to eliminate slavery prior to the American Civil War and the risks that ruthless shippers were willing to take for the lucrative trade. Excerpts about the capture of Jessie and his impressment on the ship provide insights about the harshness of child labor. The most compelling excerpts from the book include the accounts of the transport and shipboard treatment of the slaves. These passages will provide today's listeners with a sense of the gravity of the inhumane treatment and cruelty that the slaves were forced to endure or die. The conditions on the ship are reminiscent of Tom Feeling's *Middle Passage*.

Excerpts from each of these books present a facet of the early days of our country. Using excerpts will provide listeners in a social studies classroom with a context for the factual events that they are studying in the class. If these books are also being used in literature circles in the English language arts class, the use of excerpts in the social class will serve to reinforce student recognition of the aspects of the books that are true to the history of the times. These five audio books are representative of available works of historical fiction. Quality YA audio books are increasingly available. This increased availability will provide teachers with appropriate resources to use with their students.

In the next column I will share an evaluation form for audio books and use it to review a number of audio books. I developed the form with my sister, an educational researcher, and I'm currently completing a field test of the form with local teachers.

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