

Non-Print Media Column

Evaluation of Audio Books: A Guide for Teachers

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Non-Print Column Editor

I am amazed by how much I enjoy listening to audio books. Whether it is the performance of a book I've recently read or of an introduction to a new book, I find that the stories unfold like blooming flowers. Hearing the words triggers vivid images in my mind's eye, imagining what characters and place look like, and hearing the performer's voice all remind me of the riveting power of storytelling. And they remind me that listening evokes many of the same joys for me that reading does.

I first got hooked on listening to books on tape while driving long distances, sitting around airports, or traveling on airplanes. While traveling with friends, we often listen to tapes and find ourselves discussing the book we heard throughout the trip and beyond; it is a great shared experience. As it is with any addiction, I found other ways to indulge myself beyond a pastime for travel. I listen to audio books while weeding my garden, painting my shed, and even doing some types of housework (and it's a great excuse not to vacuum). Listening to stories makes the time go quickly. As the story unfolds, I am engaged, and the banalities of the task at hand drop away. Additionally, the experience of listening to books while completing necessary but boring jobs provides me with the feeling that I am spending time in a worthwhile way. I have rediscovered short stories I taught to my high school students and have revisited classics that I hadn't read for years. I listen to mysteries, adventure stories, contemporary novels, biographies, and historical accounts. Audio books make even tedious tasks more bearable. Beyond that, I am always frustrated not to have enough time to read all that I want to, so listening while I do other things is very satisfying. Multi-tasking always has its appeal.

While this began as a source of entertainment, when I found YA books on tape, my enjoyment gained a more practical purpose and an effective use of my time by allowing me to review books for my classes. I found an unabridged tape of a favorite book of mine, *Belle Prater's Boy*, by Ruth White, at a local

bookstore. I was delighted to be transported to Coal Station, Virginia, by Gypsy. She relates the sights and occurrences of her world, introduces her cousin Woodrow and leads us to unravel family mysteries. When I mentioned my discovery to Joan Bauer, she immediately sent me audio books of *Squashed*, *Thwunk*, and *Sticks*, her first three novels, and I began developing a library of audio books. I use these and other audio books I've collected with students in my YA literature classes and lend them to teachers I work with out in the schools.

Discovering audio books has an impact on my classes in a number of ways. Listening to audio books provides many of my students with heightened enjoyment, and it enables me to revisit old favorites in new ways and make new discoveries. Audio books in the English classroom provide students with a valuable and different type of literary experience, allowing them to hear the evolving of characters, the nuances of the narrator's voice, and the subtle interaction of characters. *A note of caution:* Not all students share my enthusiasm. For visual or tactile learners, audio books may be frustrating. I have suggested to them that they use the book as they listen, but several of them express frustration because they read so much faster than the tape. I have found that optional listening guides are helpful for these students.

Recognizing that audio books have tremendous implications for instruction, I've talked with several teachers who use audio books, but almost exclusively reserve the practice for small groups or individual students who have reading problems. After we talked about the potential for using books on tape in the classroom for all students, I felt the need to develop a rationale for teachers to recognize the value of audio books in any class.

As we recognize the importance of improving listening skills among students, the role of audio books gains curricular significance. Teachers can use them for whole class work, or for students to work in small groups, or individually.

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Keeping up with media-savvy students is a challenge for middle school and high school teachers everywhere. Some of the concerns I regularly hear are as follows: "How do I find a book on tape that will grab my students?" or "Is there a guide that I can use to find good audio books?"

- Listening to books on tape provides students with outstanding models for reading aloud.
- Audio books are a terrific vehicle for working on active listening skills as well as developing students' critical listening skills.
- An audio book provides teachers with a way to introduce different literature that fits the curriculum.
- Building listening skills along with studying literature seems like a doubly beneficial approach in any English classroom.
- Beyond that, books on tape are a great equalizer for students of varied abilities; all students, regardless of their reading levels, can enjoy them.
- Even the best readers can be challenged by books above their reading level, and all students will benefit from learning vocabulary that is new to them. Teachers have the opportunity to develop vocabulary lessons based upon students hearing new words in context.

Accessibility to audio books has increased as public libraries now regularly add them to their collections. Many libraries include young adult titles in both audio books and CD format. Most school libraries, however, do not have many audio books or CDs because of the prohibitive expense.

Evaluating Audio Books

In her *ALAN Review* column "Non-Print YA Literature Connection, *Bud, Not Buddy*: Common Reading, Uncommon Listening," Marjorie M. Kiser (2000) identifies selection criteria for audio books. The criteria she identifies are as follows: quality of the book, relevance of the themes to maturity of students, quality of the reading on the audio book, and potential of the book to absorb students without a text before them." I discussed these criteria with a number of educators and then began to develop ways to evaluate this medium. I started with two fundamental assumptions. First, audio books are high quality, professionally recorded and produced. Second, because I wanted to deal with entire texts, with rare exceptions, we would focus on unabridged versions. Most of the YA audio books are unabridged, but that is the first criterion I use in selecting one of them. An abridged text might be useful for teachers wishing to play only excerpts of books with the students; however, I would rather use an unabridged version and determine the selection I feel is consistent with my objectives. I can do that only when I have the whole text to choose from. After having purchased and listened to a number of my favorite young adult books on tape, I noticed a variation in content, quality, performance, and technical elements. These variations came up as I recommended audio books to teachers.

Keeping up with media-savvy students is a challenge for middle school and high school teachers everywhere. Some of the concerns I regularly hear are as follows: "How do I find a book on tape that will grab my students?" or "Is there a guide that I can use to find good audio books?" or "I want to have a range of audio books available for my students, but I don't have easy access to review them." or "I've reviewed all the appropriate audio books at the library, and I need to know more." All of the teachers find good audio books?" or "I want to have a range of audio books available for my students, but I don't have easy access to review them." or "I've reviewed all the appropriate audio books at the library, and I need to know more." All of the teachers who have talked with me about this have shared a common need: help in creating a reference resource for evaluating audio books.

As a result of talking with them, I realized we needed an evaluation instrument that would provide teachers and librarians with a guide and recommendations for including audio books in the curriculum. I mentioned this frustration to my sister, a former high school English teacher, who is now an educational researcher and a devotee of audio books. As we talked about the frustration I was hearing from teachers, we began identifying elements we thought should be included in an evaluation form. We shaped and refined the form, and I then distributed it to several of the teachers who had expressed interest in having an instrument that might help them. I asked them to field test the instrument. We incorporated their suggestions and prepared the form for use. In consultation with teachers who had completed the pilot test and some others from area schools, we decided to begin collecting audio book evaluations and have them available upon request. The revised form is as follows:

ASTAL Guide for Evaluating Audio Books

Book _____
 Author _____
 Book Publisher _____ Date _____
 Audio Publisher _____ Date _____
 Reader _____ Length _____

Presentation:

Effectiveness of Reader(s)	5	4	3	2	1
Voice quality	5	4	3	2	1
Ability to capture characterizations	5	4	3	2	1
Provides clues to different characters	5	4	3	2	1

Is the narration appropriate? Why or why not?

Would multiple narrators or an ensemble of readers be more effective? How?

Content:

Overall effectiveness	5	4	3	2	1
True to the text	5	4	3	2	1
Easy to take an excerpt from	5	4	3	2	1

Is there an introduction to the reading? If so, what does it add?

Is there an after word or postscript? If so, what does it add?

Technical:

Technical quality effective	5	4	3	2	1
Sound effects	5	4	3	2	1 NA
Cueing aids	5	4	3	2	1 NA
Music	5	4	3	2	1 NA

Can the tape be played at all volumes without feedback?

Are there echoes or other types of feedback?

Overall rating: (average of all the scores)

Recommendations:

Reviews of Audio Books Using the Evaluation Form:

Book: *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World*
 Author: Jennifer Armstrong
 Book Publisher: Scholastic, Inc. Date: 1998
 Audio Publisher: Audio Bookshelf Date: 1998
 Reader: Taylor Mali Length: 4 hours

Presentation:	Effectiveness of Reader(s)	5
	Voice quality	5
	Ability to capture characterizations	5
	Provides clues to different characters	5
	Effective use of dialects	5

Is the narration appropriate? Why or why not?

Yes, the narration is appropriate because it provides the reader/listener with a real sense of the immediate, life-threatening danger and incredible adversity the crew of the Endurance faced. I listened to this tape in my car. Upon reaching my destination, I would have to wait until the end of a chapter before I could get out, so gripping were the details of this story!

Would multiple narrators or an ensemble of readers be more effective? How?

Not necessary in this case...the narration was superb.

Content:	Effective independent of reading the text	5
	Overall effectiveness	5
	True to the text	5
	Easy to take an excerpt from	5

Is there an introduction to the reading? If so, what does it add?

Yes, there is an introduction which greatly enhances the story because it gives us a context in which to place these men. The introduction speaks of the harshness and treacherousness of the Antarctic — so much so that I actually felt a chill.

Is there an after word or postscript? If so, what does it add?

Yes, the epilogue explains what became of the men of the Endurance, and I felt so connected with them at the end that I couldn't wait to tell anyone who would care to listen to me the final, sometimes ironic fates of these heroes.

Technical:	Technical quality	5
	Sound effects	5
	Cueing aids	NA
	Music	5

Can the tape be played at all volumes without feedback?

Yes.

Are there echoes or other types of feedback?

Not that I'm aware of.

Application:	Appropriate for classroom use	5
	Whole class	5
	Small groups	5
	Individual students	5

Are there special considerations for use in your classroom?

No.

Could the book be used in other disciplines? If so, which one(s)? How might it be used?

This book could certainly be used in a social studies classroom or in a classroom where students are studying geography. In the social studies (or history) classroom, the teacher might use it in connection with other world events during World War I or as an example of triumph over adversity in an era of little or no technology.

Are there recommendations for future use?

As you may have already discerned, I love this book and can't wait to find an opportunity to use it in my own classroom. It speaks of fine leadership and loyalty and cooperation among Shackleton's crew. There is bravery and grace under the cruelest conditions. The men were ever resourceful in their struggle for survival, and survive they did, every last one of them!

Overall rating: 5

Recommendations: I originally bought this book for my nine-year-old daughter through her third grade class Scholastic Book order. It sounded like an interesting story, and because it is a true story, I thought she would benefit from its information. Little did I know that when she brought the book home, I would become so enamored of it. This story of men who survived under the harshest conditions imaginable with little hope for rescue is truly inspiring. With each chapter I read, I became more and more invested in the fates of these brave souls. The audiobook added an even richer dimension to the tale because suddenly the story was alive — it felt like listening to a real-time news commentary. For the entire winter, I never once complained about the cold!

Denise Vincelette

Central Falls High School
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Book: *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban*

Author: J.K. Rowling

Book Publisher: Scholastic Press, Inc. **Date:** 1999

Audio Publisher: Random House **Date:** 2000 (1999)

Reader: Jim Dale **Length:** 12 Hours

Presentation:	Effectiveness of Reader(s)	5
	Voice quality	5
	Ability to capture characterizations	4
	Provides clues to different characters	4
	Effective use of dialects	4

Is the narration appropriate? Why or why not?

Jim Dale's narration of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* catches the essence of the novel and allows it to come alive through your stereo's speakers. As I slid the first tape into the cassette player, I was hesitant because I was unsure of what to expect from the narrator and was fearful that the narration would make the experience of listening to the story difficult. Dale's voice not only effectively captures the English dialect and personality of each character, but also draws in and takes hold of the listener. On the other hand, if the narration were ineffective and inappropriate, it would have been impossible for the audio book to maintain the listener's attention, making it easy to hit the STOP button. It is one thing for a novel to be considered a good read and another for it to be a good listen, and that fact alone describes the importance of an appropriate narration.

Would multiple narrators or an ensemble of readers be more effective? How?

Initially, I felt more than one narrator would have been more effective, but as the narration progressed, my opinion slowly began to change. More than one narrator or an ensemble of narrators would have taken something away from the overall experience of the audio book, and instead of making the narration authentic, it would have been confusing. There are so many different characters in this novel that more than one narrator would have made it extremely difficult to keep the characters and corresponding voices straight. Dale effectively portrays each character while maintaining the continuity of the novel.

Content:	Effective independent of reading the text	5
	Overall effectiveness	5
	True to the text	5
	Easy to take an excerpt from	5

Is there an introduction to the reading? If so, what does it add?

There is not an introduction to *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Is there an after word or postscript? If so, what does it add?

At the conclusion of the novel, there is only a brief statement by Jim Dale concluding the reading and mentioning the publisher of the audio book. There is not an after word or postscript, but it is worth noting that this is the only time during the reading of the novel when you hear any type of instrumental music, although it is only for a few seconds at the final moments of the narration.

Technical:	Technical quality effective	4
	Sound effects	NA
	Cueing aids	NA
	Music	NA

Can the tape be played at all volumes without feedback?

The tape of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* can be played at all volumes without any feedback, although the volume must be set to an unusually high volume in order to hear it clearly.

Are there echoes or other types of feedback?

There are no echoes or other types of feedback in the audio book of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Application:	Appropriate for classroom use	4
	Whole class	4
	Small groups	4
	Individual students	3

Are there special considerations for use in your classroom?

Special considerations for this book would be dependent on the grade you were going to teach the novel to. Younger middle school students may not be familiar with the story of *Harry Potter* (which is hard to believe!) and may be afraid of some of the events that take place. Also, some parents feel the story of Harry Potter is too violent and may "put ideas" into their child's mind. This idea is something that could hold true for students in any grade, not only younger students. Another objection that may arise in the classroom when introducing any *Harry Potter* novel revolves around the subject of religion. Some parents may

feel the concept of magic is against their own personal and religious beliefs. Due to possible situations like the ones described above, it is best receive permission from parents if the novel is not part of the already required curriculum.

Could the book be used in other disciplines? If so, which one(s)? How might it be used?

My first inclination would be to say that it would be difficult to incorporate this novel in other disciplines beside English. The only possibility I can think of is history when the class begins to study American colonial times and the witch trials. I am not exactly sure how you could incorporate this novel effectively with this topic, but you could maybe use an excerpt from the novel as an introduction to the lesson on the witch trials. The excerpt could be used as a lead-in and possibly a point of discussion to gauge what the students may or may not know on the topic of witches and wizards.

Are there recommendations for future use?

I would have no reservations recommending this novel for use in the classroom. *Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* has a universal appeal that is extremely rare for any one novel, never mind a series of novels. This book, along with J.K. Rowling's other novels, could be used for all students but would be most useful in the younger grades (grades 6-8) and would lend itself to a lively class discussion. This audio book would be best used in either small groups or as a class because of the value of discussion, questioning and brainstorming. The audio recording makes it easy for the teacher to pick out excerpts and then discuss that portion of the novel. Instead of asking students to read the novel, allowing them to listen to it introduces literature on another level, one most students do not even consider when they think of the reading experience.

Overall rating: 4.2

Kaylin Curran

I will be including reviews of audio books periodically in this column. I would like to have feedback from any listener/readers after they've used the form.

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