

# The Magic of Audiobooks:

From Inception to Implementation

**M**any of us learned to read while resting on the laps of our parents or sitting on carpet squares in front of our preschool teachers. We listened as someone read to us. Sometimes we followed along with our fingers tracking the words on the pages as they were read aloud, and sometimes the reader tracked the words as he or she read to us. Hearing the sounds of the words and listening as someone read with enthusiasm and excitement made us fall into the story. In many ways, listening to someone read aloud or listening to an audiobook are quite similar. We can still follow along with the printed text, should we wish to do so, or we can close our eyes and enjoy the story as a skilled narrator reads it. As we enter a tale woven by a storyteller, or “read with our ears,” we are centered on story.

Developing strong listening skills is critical; 85% of learning is done through listening, and 45% of an individual’s average day is spent listening (Hoskisson & Tompkins, 1991). Audiobooks have proven to be a valuable tool for improving student learning, and they benefit the literary and listening skills of students. In this article, we offer an inside look into how audiobooks are created, how they offer key benefits, and how they might be used effectively.

Both of us, Jodie and Teri, have background experiences in the creation and implementation of audiobooks. Jodie is a senior marketing manager at Listening Library and has been working in the audiobook industry for more than seven years. She has witnessed every step in the process of creating an audiobook, from helping read manuscript submissions to at-

tending recording sessions. Teri is a professor in the Department of Library Science at Sam Houston State University where she teaches courses in literature for children and young adults. She served on the American Library Association’s inaugural Odyssey Award Committee for Excellence in Audiobook Production and chaired the committee in 2013. She has also written about audiobooks and reviewed audio for VOYA.

## **An Inside Look at Audiobook Creation**

by **Jodie Cohen**

### **Choosing the Best Titles**

Listening Library casts a wide net to create a broad and diverse list of available titles. Many titles are taken from in-house imprints at Penguin Random House, while others are acquired from outside publishers. Each season, the Editorial and Marketing teams attend the in-house launch, where editors describe the coming year’s titles. At this stage of the process, we consider which titles will have strong potential to become great audiobooks. Often, when an editor is excited about a newly discovered author or a text with an engaging backstory, this information helps us consider unique elements we might incorporate into the audiobook. For example, when Phoebe Yeh, Vice President and Publisher of Crown, presented *Breakout* (2015) by Kevin Emerson, she mentioned that he was a musician. When we created this particular audiobook, we asked Kevin to record some original songs; he agreed, and we included them on the recording. In another example, we learned that author Lance Rubin is also an actor and sketch comedy writer. Lance’s

humorous YA novel is written in a witty first-person voice, and because of his training as a comedic actor, we asked him to narrate his text. He brought the right balance of humor, energy, and emotion to *Denton Little's Deathdate* (2015), which received an audio

starred review from *School Library Journal*.

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For out-of-house acquisitions, outside agents and publishers send Listening Library submissions from their lists, often a year in advance of publication. Their pitch provides background about the author and the manuscript. Editorial Director Rebecca Waugh says that one of her favorite parts of the job is

getting an early look at new books, even before reviewers. She says, "It's fun to spread the news about a great, new discovery" (personal communication, August 14, 2015).

When a title has strong commercial potential or is published by a well-established author, Listening Library may participate in an auction for audio rights. This past year, for instance, we learned that Disney was going to publish a series of middle grade novels retelling the Star Wars saga. Rebecca Waugh recognized that because the new Star Wars movie (Abrams, Burk, & Kennedy, 2015) would be released in December, this would be a popular subject. She also knew that three bestselling authors, Alexandra Bracken, Adam Gidwitz, and Tom Angleberger, had the talent and experience to write great books. Since our adult audio imprint, Penguin Random House Audio, is the longtime publisher of the Star Wars franchise, our team was already very familiar with the Star Wars mythology. Because of this, we participated in a heated bidding war and won the audio rights for the series (Angleberger, 2015; Bracken, 2015, Gidwitz, 2015).

Movie tie-ins provide an effective way to draw students' attention to fiction, particularly for reluctant readers, but we also value literary gems. Our philosophy is to publish great titles for all children, and our Marketing team plays an integral part in that process. Last year, we acquired two notable titles, *When I Was the Greatest* (2014) by Jason Reynolds and *Gabi, A*

*Girl in Pieces* (2014) by Isabel Quintero. Both caught our attention through rave reviews, and after reading the texts, we felt each had a wonderful voice and narrative quality that would work particularly well as an audio recording.

We often develop relationships with authors that continue long after the audiobooks are published. For example, Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award Winner Jason Reynolds is very involved in the We Need Diverse Books movement, and he partnered with us on our companion campaign, Hear Diversity. We encourage you to visit [www.heardiversity.com](http://www.heardiversity.com) for powerful videos and interviews about the critical role audiobooks play in our shared commitment to diverse literature.

We also look for titles that will appeal to younger listeners and help support the development of their listening and language skills. We are the longtime publisher of series that have strong educator support, such as *The Magic Tree House*® (2001–2015) by Mary Pope Osborne, *Junie B. Jones* (2003–2007) by Barbara Park, and more recently, the *Three-Ring Rascals* (2015) by Kate Klise and M. Sarah Klise. The latter's illustrated-chapter-book format presented a challenge in its adaptation to the audio form, but we felt that the core story was so engaging and funny that it would resonate with kids—and their parents or guardians. This is a perfect example of a collaborative acquisition; we discussed the challenges with the producer and the authors and decided to implement a full-cast production with light sound effects. You can learn more about this audio on our website, which includes interviews with the producer and authors, at: <http://www.booksontape.com/three-ring-rascals-peek-behind-tent-part-1-meet-ringmaster-producer-julianna-wilson/>.

### **Divvying Up the List**

After our Editorial Team has acquired titles, we have our own launch meeting; this gives the producers and marketing and sales teams an opportunity to become familiar with the texts. The producers then meet and divide up the list based on two main criteria: a strong connection to a particular title and/or a legacy with an author they have previous experience with. Building longstanding relationships with authors is part of our core philosophy. Our staff of ten producers has a combined 125 years of experience producing and directing

audio productions, and some producers have worked with the same authors for over 15 years.

Once the list is divided among the team members, the producers read their assigned manuscripts and collaborate with the authors on casting. As stated previously, some titles present special format challenges when it comes to creating an audiobook. In order to ensure that the listener does not miss out on any part of the experience, the producers work closely with the authors to translate elements, such as the drawings in *The Book Thief* (2013) by Markus Zusak or the puzzles in *Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library* (2013) by Chris Grabenstein. In such cases, the author may write additional text that can be recorded to translate drawings, so a comparable experience is maintained. While producing *Countdown* (2011) and *Revolution* (2014) by Deborah Wiles, both of which include many photographs, Vice President of Content Production Dan Zitt worked closely with Deborah not only to find the right voices but also to assemble a soundscape team who could reimagine the images in the book into audio soundscapes. These soundscapes are similar to background music, but they also contain sounds such as typewriters, crowds, and sirens to transport the listener. Dan says, "This is one of the most complex audiobooks on the market, and without Deb's help, it would have been even more challenging" (personal communication, August 11, 2015).

### **Casting: Finding the Right Voice**

Listening Library's philosophy is that there is one great voice for each and every book. Dan Zitt says, "Each of our producers consults with our authors about their books, whether we are talking about casting, pronunciations, or performance. Casting usually involves the producer discussing the type of voice that they hear while reading the book, and then listening to the author's thoughts on what type of voice might be best" (personal communication, August 11, 2015). The casting process may involve calling talent agents, holding auditions, or suggesting someone who has read before.

For example, when casting Libba Bray's (2012) *The Diviners*, Dan spent two days auditioning over 20 actors. Each actor was given four of the most challenging passages to read. Dan says, "After we listened through the hours of auditions, the director, the author, and I all agreed that January LaVoy was

the best voice for the role" (personal communication, August 11, 2015). Readers can watch a special video about the creation of *The Diviners* audiobook online at <http://www.booksontape.com/the-voice-january-lavoys-divine-diviners-audition/>. Producers also hire directors who help guide the narrator's performance and offer suggestions during the recording in order to match the tone the author intended. Staff producers direct sessions when time allows or when a project needs to be kept confidential.

### **Producing an Audiobook**

#### **ENSURING EVERYTHING IS PRONOUNCED CORRECTLY**

Pronunciations are very important to the integrity of a program. If there are mispronounced locations, words, or names, it will distract listeners. If there are inconsistencies in pronunciations, it creates a confusing experience. Before we enter the studio, our director reviews the text, culls a pronunciation list, and calls the author to verify pronunciations. If the author does not have a definitive answer, we research via the Internet or make phone calls to native speakers or local businesses. The director often starts by contacting the local public library. Sometimes, the narrator is involved; January LaVoy says, "I spend anywhere from a few hours to days doing research on dialects, regionalisms, any diseases or conditions the characters might have and how those can affect speech. It's important to locate what we call 'primary source material' when doing dialect work, finding a recording of or talking to a person who is from somewhere" (personal communication, August 18, 2015).

#### **IN THE STUDIO**

Once the narrator(s) are selected, they are sent the manuscript to read. Two-time Odyssey Award-winning narrator Kirby Heyborne prepares by reading and taking extensive notes to get a sense of tone and characters. While developing characters' voices, Kirby says he "looks for clues from what the author has written. . . . Some characters have different postures and body positioning" (personal communication, August 18, 2015).

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The microphones in studio are some of the most sensitive on the market; we ask our narrators to wear soft clothing, forego jewelry, and eat a light breakfast. The microphone will pick up a gurgling stomach, so narrators must skip their morning coffees. Actors and directors have to be aware of mouth noises like popping p's, dry mouth, lip smacks, and mouth

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clicks. There are lots of tricks to eliminate these kinds of mouth noises. Dan Zitt shares, "If someone's mouth gets a little too wet or a little too dry, we might ask them to take a bite of a green apple to help return a mouth to the proper PH balance, or ask them to gargle with olive oil" (personal communication, August 11, 2015). Actors also need to control their

breathing, maintain a consistent rhythm, and keep the characters consistent. Some actors color-code their scripts according to mood or character. Maintaining continuity for over 200 character voices spanning the seven books in the Harry Potter series (1999–2007) was especially tricky. Senior Executive Producer Orli Moscowitz says, "As Jim Dale prepared, he created unique voices for each character and recorded brief samples to play back in the studio. Those lists and reference CDs were invaluable!" (personal communication, August 3, 2015). It helped tremendously—and Jim Dale achieved a Guinness World Record for having created 134 unique character voices for one audiobook: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Another challenge that narrators face is making sure characters sound different, so listeners can easily distinguish them. January LaVoy says, "That's often where my directors come in—and I use everything in my arsenal by the end of a long book. Nasal quality, register, range, musicality, pace, accent" (personal communication, August 18, 2015).

While recording, an engineer, a director, and sometimes a producer are in the studio to oversee the production. The recording can be influenced by everything from the position of the microphone to the chair the actor is sitting on. While the narrator is reading, the director and engineer follow along, marking up the text for any retakes to fix missed or mispro-

nounced words. Sometimes, the narrator goes back to the beginning of the sentence or paragraph to get the tone and pacing correct. Typically it takes 2–2.5 hours in the studio to get one finished hour of edited audio. A day's session usually results in three edited hours, depending on the reader's efficiency and endurance.

**PUTTING ALL THE PIECES TOGETHER**

The files from the recording session, along with the marked script, are sent to the post-production team. The sound editor listens to the raw audio and cuts out unwanted takes, mistakes, and stray sounds. The editor also paces the recording to make the audio flow naturally. The editor then proofs the entire recording while following along with the script to find and correct any mistakes.

**THE FINAL SAFETY NET: QUALITY CONTROL**

The quality control team identifies anything in the audio that differs from the text and comments on inconsistent pacing, sound levels, or pronunciation. If there are none, the master recording goes to replication. Otherwise, the editor recuts the audio; occasionally, the actor may even be called back into the studio for pickups.

**Getting the Word Out**

At each step of the process, the Marketing and Publicity teams see if there are any opportunities to help promote the titles. For instance, we recently recorded a special message with the narrators of *Illuminae* (2015) by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff for Random House Children's Book's video trailers; readers can watch the finished product at [www.IlluminaeFiles.com](http://www.IlluminaeFiles.com). Sometimes we create videos, as we did with Jon Scieszka who talked about why Audiobooks are Seriously FUN Reading: <http://www.booksontape.com/audiobooks-seriously-fun-reading-jon-scieszka-explains/>.

We also strive to provide useful resources and have created a number of campaigns, including [www.ReadProudListenProud.com](http://www.ReadProudListenProud.com), a website dedicated to sharing powerful LGBTQ stories to encourage understanding. We partnered with Jon Scieszka to create [www.GuysListen.com](http://www.GuysListen.com) to motivate boys to find the right literature for them. And our anti-bullying website, [www.TheBullyConversation.com](http://www.TheBullyConversation.com), features titles that concern the topic of bullying because we hope to open a dialogue that will put an end to it.

## Benefits and Practical Applications of Audiobooks

by Teri S. Lesesne

Colleagues remark from time to time that listening to an audiobook is some sort of shortcut, some way of cheating “real” reading. Reading with our ears is decidedly not a shortcut, nor is it somehow cheating. While the research on audiobooks is still relatively nascent, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the benefits of audiobooks tie directly to the classroom and to achievement. Readers can find research about the benefits of audiobooks at the Audio Publishers Association’s website ([www.audiopub.org](http://www.audiopub.org); direct link to the research in references). Some of the research on the benefits of reading aloud can be applied to listening to audiobooks as well. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it does provide some rationale for using audiobooks in addition to or alongside traditional text.

### Benefits of Audiobooks

Why are audiobooks of value in the classroom? Why offer readers the option of reading “with their ears”? Listening Books and their website, The Sound Learning, (<http://www.soundlearning.org.uk/benefits-of-audiobooks.aspx> and <http://soundlearningapa.org>) gather resources, including research, so that educators can understand the benefit and value of listening:

1. Listening improves visualization. Readers create scenes in their mind as they read. They see places and faces; they watch action unfold as if it were a movie. For many, that movie never begins; the world of the story remains static. Audiobooks, with their pacing, sound effects, voicing, and other aspects, can help those scenes from the book come to life inside the reader’s mind.
2. Listening assists those for whom decoding and vocabulary deficits might be a stumbling block to reading. Whether they are second language learners or students who have comprehension problems, audiobooks can support readers. Correct pronunciation of words can aid in vocabulary development. Moreover, research indicates that listening comprehension can be as high as two years above reading comprehension. Students can gain confidence in comprehension with the addition of audiobooks.
3. Listening aids in the development of fluency and

prosody. Readers who find text challenging need models who read fluently. Anyone who has spent time with beginning readers who attempt to sound out words unfamiliar to them understands issues with fluency. The same is true for some older readers. Audiobooks are good models for how fluent readers sound when reading aloud.

Prosody, the patterns of stress and intonation in reading, is also something we learn with practice. Prosody improves with the use of audiobooks. Readers

hear the inflection of language; they learn how to breathe life into text.

4. Finally, listening to audiobooks can increase the amount of time spent engaged in reading. So many students are overscheduled beyond the confines of the school day. Time spent commuting, riding to and from school on the bus, or traveling to practices and lessons can be filled with audiobooks. Adding audiobooks as a part of reading can actually increase the number of books students can listen to over the course of a year.

### Practical Applications of Audiobooks: Some Tips

1. Provide students with choices for accessing texts: audio, e-books, traditional texts. Sometimes the curriculum does not offer much choice in terms of specific texts. However, the mode in which students access that text can provide choice. Research has already confirmed that choice plays an important role in student success (Allington, 2012), so offering audiobooks as one alternative is important.
2. Create a policy for developing the audiobook collection. Adding audiobooks to the classroom and school libraries should be deliberate. Develop a policy about how funds will be obtained and expended. A discussion of how to shelve audiobooks is also necessary. Are they better shelved within the audiobook collection or side by side with the traditional text? Would a separate audiobook collection be more efficient?
3. An addendum to collection development for audiobooks is necessary to develop familiarity with some of the tools of the trade. *AudioFile*, *Booklist*,

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**Reading with our ears is decidedly not a shortcut, nor is it somehow cheating.**

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*The Horn Book*, *School Library Journal*, and *VOYA* all review audiobooks. Plus, awards and lists that select titles based on the quality of the audiobook recordings are excellent resources for picking high-quality recordings. Some prestigious awards and lists include: the American Library Association's Odyssey Award ([www.ala.org/yalsa/odyssey](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/odyssey)), Young Adult Library Services Association's Amazing Audiobooks ([www.ala.org/yalsa/amazing-audiobooks](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/amazing-audiobooks)), Association of Library Services for Children's (ALSC) "Notable Children's Recordings" ([www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncr](http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncr)), The Audie® Awards from the Audio Publishers of America ([www.audiopub.org/audies-gala.asp](http://www.audiopub.org/audies-gala.asp)), and the Capital Choices Audiobook List ([www.capitolchoices.org/all\\_lists](http://www.capitolchoices.org/all_lists)). Publishers have clips of the audiobooks on their websites, so you can hear a clip of the narrator in advance of making a purchase. Audible and Amazon often offer short clips to preview audiobooks as well.

4. Provide the tools students will need to listen to audiobooks: mp3 players, CD players, headphones, etc. Do not assume that all students will have players and accessories for listening to audiobooks. If the school has 1:1 devices, perhaps audiobooks could be loaded onto those and checked out for home use.
5. Encourage BYOD (Bring Your Own Device). Students with smart phones might be able to download audiobooks for out-of-school listening, and public libraries are often a more-than-willing partner for audio access.
6. Last, model your own listening. It is always important for students to see educators listening to audiobooks and talking about their favorite audios or narrators. Talk about how to develop those listening skills to develop stamina when it comes to listening to longer works (the same stamina needed for reading lengthier texts). If educators listen, students are more likely to read with their ears as well.

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