



Listening to a good book

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Article Category:

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Angela Macpherson on the contribution of audio books.

Since the era of productions of **Larry the Lamb** and **Jennings and Darbishire** on BBC Radio Children's Hour with Uncle Mac and David Davies, there have been huge advances in the availability and quality of books on tape or CD. Could audio books now have more to offer than printed ones? **Angela Macpherson** explores.<!--break-->

In the first recording of children's stories that I owned the narrator was Johnny Morris reading **Thomas, The Tank Engine** on a long play vinyl record. His storytelling skills, with the timing perfected to emphasise the nuances of the text, put other more ordinary storytellings in the shade. My children wore the record out in their enthusiasm and I became convinced of the importance of audio story as a medium.

Virtuosos leading the way

The most recent bunch of winners at the Spoken Word Publishing Association Awards (SWPA) highlights the huge advances in the quality of production of stories on cassette or CD that have occurred during the past few years. This year's overall winner of the Spoken Word Audio of the Year, which also won the children's section and a prize for production, was **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time** by Mark Haddon. This remarkable piece of writing has already received much acclaim as a book. The reader, Ben Tibber (aged 12), manages brilliantly, by reading the story in a monotone, to reflect Christopher's autistic mind and inability to express emotion. Meanwhile a cast of actors cleverly interject with conversation, thereby lightening the story and conveying the nature of the relationship between Christopher and the outside world. Normally a story reading delivered in a monotone would be considered lacking but monotonous this is not. The whole production takes the book to a level beyond that which could be reached by reading alone.

Reviews rarely mention the talented people behind these audio productions. Mike Carrington Wood, producer of **The Curious Incident**, tells me that he has been working in children's spoken word since its conception in the early 70s. At that time EMI had excellent recordings on the Listen for Pleasure label. These and other good productions by Argo were sold largely through record shops. Later this market was swamped by cheap productions and EMI decided to withdraw. The public's perception of stories on cassette was being lowered to the level that doing it yourself would be just as good!

Helen Nicoll was a pioneer of quality spoken word productions. She started Cover to Cover Cassettes which was briefly taken over by Puffin and then by the BBC where it is flourishing. It is Cover to Cover that has made such a brilliant success of Stephen Fry's readings of the **Harry Potter** stories. They are proof that price does not necessarily deter people from buying long spoken word recordings. **Harry Potter** customers return again and again for another 9-12 hours of entertainment at £20-£30 a shot. Stephen Fry's talent is that he can provide a separate voice for every character in the **Harry Potter** stories, and maintain them throughout. This is evidence that the audio book has become more than a reading and is now a performance with some real virtuosos leading the way.

Book publishers who contract out audio production to specialists now dominate the market, and sales are mainly through bookshops. Often the style of production, the choice of reader and so on are left entirely to the producer. Some publishers like to take a closer interest in the process. The producers I talked to for this article all have titles on this year's SWPA prize winners list and they have produced some of the best children's spoken word recordings over a period of many years. Peter Rinne, a freelance producer, and Nicholas Jones of Strathmore Publishing who specialise in spoken word production, both feel that the huge changes in technology have contributed to improvements in both production style and quality. Complicated editing, music production and sound effects can be done with relatively inexpensive equipment and a computer. Production costs have become more viable in terms of sales and the SWPA Awards (originally called The Talkies) have raised the profile of audio books. For Nicholas Jones, 'the best recordings are those where you become unaware of being read to'. The voice recording however is still dependent on the skill of the actor to make the story sound fresh and 'performed' rather than simply 'read'.

A cast of actors

The use of a cast of actors can be very successful. A recent excellent example is Philip Pullman's **Lyra's Oxford**, a short bridging novel between 'His Dark Materials' and a longer forthcoming novel. The printed book is delightful on its own with its wonderful engravings by John Lawrence. On the CD Philip Pullman himself narrates the story with a cast of actors to dramatise the spoken parts. Brilliantly conceived and well cast, the recording adds a further dimension to both the text and illustrations.

A talented actor who can play different parts may produce an even better effect than a cast of many as he/she can control the pace. An example is Anton Lesser performing **The Ruby in the Smoke** by Philip Pullman. Lesser's characterisations are superb and include an awesome range of voices, both male and female. Unfortunately there are too few actors who can do this.

Younger children's audio

A ground breaking title in younger children's audio is **The Gruffalo** book and tape pack. This brilliant picture book about a mouse scaring a monster is given an extra dimension by Imelda Staunton's inspired reading and the excellent sound effects. Macmillan followed this production with other recordings using a similar format and Julia Donaldson's **Room on the Broom** and **Monkey Puzzle** both won SWPA prizes this year in the under 7s category.

Other notable recent award winners are the recordings of **Horrid Henry** stories by Francesca Simon which have to be heard to be believed! Sound effects and jangling music portray the central character in more than just words. Listening, you feel that you are in Henry's house witnessing events. Henry is particularly horrid and Perfect Peter makes you squirm through Miranda Richardson's perceptive narration. **Horrid Henry and the Stinkbomb** won gold in the 2003 SWPA awards for children of 6 and under.

Poetry has always provided good recording material. **The Curse of the Vampire's Socks** is a collection of poems by Terry Jones. Some moralising, others just silly, Terry's performance of his own work sparkles with specially composed musical interludes. As well as winning an SWPA award in the poetry section, this recording is great fun and entertainment for anyone aged 7-70. More great listens for younger children are the **Seriously Silly Stories** by Laurence Anholt. Neil Morrissey is perfectly cast for telling **The Emperor's Underwear** and sound effects and music bring the scenes to life. Set in a country where no one wears clothes, this is a parody of the traditional fairy tale that turns the story on its head and will have listeners giggling.

The most recent of the recordings of Kevin Crossley-Holland's **Arthur** trilogy is **Arthur, King of the Middle March**. It has been carefully abridged by Kati Nicholl and very thoughtfully produced by Peter Rinne and Nicholas Jones. Evocative music takes the listener straight to the heart of the location where Samuel West brilliantly interprets the text.

Audio in the classroom

It is a pity that the use of spoken word recordings in the classroom has been largely pushed out by the demands of the literacy hour in the junior school. However, there is still considerable demand for good recordings in the early years, where children often use headsets to sit and listen in peace with or without the book alongside. Now that the DfES is realising that listening skills are important, perhaps audio books will become more popular in school. Their use for learning to read or to encourage new readers is an important use of the product. However the quality of production that is now possible should also give audio books the right to exist on their own merits.

Books on radio

Oneword Radio is a digital radio station dedicated exclusively to books, plays, comedy and discussion. There is an increasing number of people who can access it. (If you've got digital TV you can tune in.) It provides another outlet for the spoken word devoting 23 hours a week to children's programmes. Jo Forshaw runs these programmes and selects the best book recordings from the publishers who are leading the field. For example, the early part of 2004 will see serialisations of the 'Alex Rider' series (**Skeleton Key** etc by Anthony Horowitz), Laurence Anholt's **Seriously Silly Stories** and **The Secret Life of Sally Tomato** by Jean Ure.

Lots of good recordings are now available on the market. The difficulty for the buyer is having to select purely on the basis of the cover. Reviews like those in **Books for Keeps** can help but overall coverage is thin.

With advances in technology we are likely to see even more innovation in production and perhaps a move into non-fiction, an area that has been largely neglected to date. The BBC has had some success with recording **The Horrible Histories**. Whilst they are well recorded, they do not work as well as the books, which are so easy to dip into.

Absorption in story

Many parents whose children have benefited from listening to good spoken word recordings have nothing but praise for the medium. Some comment that audio books have helped their children change from being uninterested in books to being voracious readers. Audio books can be a lifeline for dyslexic children who can gain an excellent vocabulary and understanding of narrative without the trials of reading. And lots of drivers already know that good recordings can take the tedium out of long car journeys and maybe even cool road rage!

Every teacher wants their learner readers, whether they are listening or reading, to become absorbed in story. And for many children, listening to a story is a lot easier than reading. With all the distractions of deciphering text, holding the book, turning pages etc taken away, the child is left with the sound of the words and the pictures in their mind. Understanding the text and improving vocabulary become effortless. Sadly, children are often expected to read to themselves as soon as they are able. Family storytelling can be abandoned and some children can find reading a book alone too much to cope with. But listening can be an experience that surpasses reading and it is, after all, where all story originates.

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Audio books discussed

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Mark Haddon, read by Ben Tibber and cast, Random House, 1 85686 788 9, £16.99 six CDs

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, J K Rowling, read by Stephen Fry, BBC Cover to Cover, 1 85549 394 2, £21.99 six cassettes, 1 85549 670 4, £37.99 seven CDs

Lyra's Oxford, Philip Pullman, read by the author and cast, Random House, 1 85686 850 8, £9.99 CD

The Ruby in the Smoke, Philip Pullman, read by Anton Lesser, BBC Cover to Cover, 1 85549 139 7, £13.99 four cassettes, 1 85549 047 1, £29.99 six CDs

The Gruffalo, Julia Donaldson, read by Imelda Staunton, Macmillan, 0 333 90722 1, £7.99 book and tape

Room on the Broom, Julia Donaldson, read by Josie Lawrence, Macmillan, 1 405 00042 2, £5.99 song book and tape

Monkey Puzzle, Julia Donaldson, read by Imelda Staunton, Macmillan, 1 405 00602 1, £7.99 book and tape

Horrid Henry and the Stinkbomb, Francesca Simon, read by Miranda Richardson, Orion, 0 75285 619 7, £4.99 cassette, 0 75285 671 5, £7.99 book and tape

The Curse of the Vampire's Socks, Terry Jones, read by the author, Orion, 0 75285 366 X, £6.99 cassette

The Emperor's Underwear (Seriously Silly Stories), Laurence Anholt, read by Neil Morrissey, Orchard, 1 84362 053 7, £4.99 cassette

Arthur, King of the Middle March, Kevin Crossley-Holland, read by Samuel West, Orion, 0 75286 028 3, £9.99 two cassettes

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