



Talking Books

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[Chris Powling](#) [1]

[47](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Chris Powling considers the value of stories on tape.

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For those of us still jittery about the prospect of micro-chips with everything, a book is a reassuringly low-tech object. It requires no power-source, calls for minimal physical dexterity and, best of all, can't go wrong. When did you last hear of a book that failed to switch on at a crucial moment, needed its heads cleaned or - horror of horrors - that chewed up its own text? A book is the ideal audio-visual aid for the terminally non-technological because it never demands audio-visual first aid.

So let's keep it that way, shall we? Why not preserve the status of literature as perfect occupational therapy for Luddites?

Fine, if you're prepared to ignore the fact that times change, bringing with them equipment which almost never lets us down not to mention infants who cope far better than we do if it does. These days cassettes are as handy as paperbacks and often come much more naturally to youngsters. Also they're increasingly available - already they represent thirty percent of sales in American bookshops and a rapidly-growing seventeen million pound industry in Britain. Whatever our objections to stories-on-cassette, they can't be made on practical grounds. Nor, I'd suggest, can there be any objections in principle. What story-tapes offer, for readers of all ages, is an alternative narrative mode that doesn't just support books in a number of important ways, it actually does some things *better*.

Not all things, of course. A tape can't replace a book any more than our ears can make our eyes redundant. It's more a matter of recognising when each has the advantage ... also when both work best together.

So what is the contribution of cassettes to literacy? And by what standards should we judge them? These questions are linked but not identical. For in trying to get tapes taped, we don't just re-visit familiar issues in a new guise, we're reminded about key aspects of narrative of texts and of the reading process that it is all too easy to overlook. Some of the answers we come up with are bound to be as personal as our responses to... well, books.

The Value of Story-Cassettes

First, two obvious points. Cassettes can entertain children with texts that might otherwise be beyond their competence; also they're infinitely patient - on tap encores with guaranteed quality control. Who wouldn't be content, for instance, to hand over to Carol Boyd and Peter Bartlett's spritely reading of Allan Ahlberg's **Happy Families** (Tellastory) or their rendition of **The Tales of Beatrix Potter** (Tellastory)? Yes, they'll keep kids quiet for hours ... but is that enough? You don't have to be an expert to appreciate that (valuable as it is) the developing reader needs a more active and varied engagement with stories than endless repetition, even of particular favourites. There's enough on offer already - from the Rev. Awdry's **Thomas the Tank Engine**, read by Johnny Morris and Willie Rushton (Argo) to **Rat Tales**, read by

Roland himself (Tempo Talking Stories) - to satisfy the most divergent of young appetites, but I'd still prefer them to be whetted first by a real-life grown-up. After all, you can't cuddle a cassette. Or ask it questions. Or glance at it for reassurance in the scary bits. Nor may a child listening alone pause to ponder an element that in most worthwhile books for beginning-readers is at least as important as the words, namely the pictures.

Going-it-alone with a book can be greatly helped by following on cassette a text that is being well read. The BBC's 'Listen and Read' series was demonstrating this years ago. But if the prime role of a cassette is to be a sort of benign drill-sergeant square-bashing kids across the page, then consider me a deserter from the regiment. I'd rather they merely *listened*. For the real value of cassettes lies in the prominence they give to the human voice. They're a healthy reminder that texts are nothing more or less than premeditated speech. Stories, however elaborately worked over, are rooted crucially in the jokes, anecdotes and gossip of everyday life and if cassettes help children to make the connection with their own talk, and better still their own writing, a 'lip' service has been done us for which we should all give hearty thanks.

It's a service which applies to all age-groups, moreover. Take, for instance, the ability to distinguish between a novel's real author and its 'implied' author. If you can't see the difference then you think **Black Beauty** was written by a horse. Luckily, most ten-year-olds are up to it and are therefore in a position to compare Angela Rippon's version (Puffin Cover to Cover) identifying presumably with Anna Sewell, and David Davis's (DEA Storytellers) which is bound to focus on Black Beauty himself. Similarly, older readers might like to compare the way in which David Buck (Cover to Cover) and Anthony Bate (Listen for Pleasure) cope with the switch from Jim Hawkins to Dr Livesey as narrator of **Treasure Island**. Should there have been two readers here? If this seems a bit academic then consider a dimension of narrative sometimes very difficult to lift off the page but greatly eased in its passage by appropriate reading aloud: humour. Well do I remember my first encounter with Jane Austen. I liked her writing a lot but the one aspect I couldn't fathom was why it was supposed to be *funny*. Joanna Lumley's **Northanger Abbey** (Hamlyn) would have been a great help - even more so if I'd encountered the droll and ironic at a younger age through, say, David Healy's low-key interpretation of Jeff Brown's **Flat Stanley** or Derek Griffiths' brilliant narration of Catherine Storr's **Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf** (Puffin Cover to Cover). The most compelling reason for taking stories-on-cassette seriously is the access they give to features of texts that readers, both experienced and inexperienced, might otherwise miss.

The Quality of Reading

Mind you, much depends on how good the reading actually is. The attraction of this sort of work for actors was succinctly put by Martin Jarvis on an edition of **Meridian** (BBC World Service) earlier this year describing his work on **Great Expectations** for Cover to Cover: 'There's a performing joy, of course, in that there are certain roles I shall never get to play ... I might perhaps be able to play Mr Jaggers when I'm a little older, but I don't think I shall ever be giving my Miss Havisham in any media except this one! Here you get to play them all.' In his case, magnificently. Other opportunities superbly grabbed by leading performers include Nicol Williamson's **The Hobbit** (Conifer), Ian Richardson's **The Jungle Book** and Glenda Jackson's **The Secret Garden** (both on Argo). What better solution could there be to the problem of introducing classic writers like Tolkien and Kipling and Burnett to an age much less wordy than their own? Of course, personal preference is certain to loom large. Nothing on earth, or on air rather, will convince me that Martin Jarvis's **Just William** stories, unrecorded so far as I know, but heard by chance on Radio 4, don't do much better justice to Richmal Crompton than the Argo version which seems mainly concerned with doing justice to Kenneth Williams. Sometimes a simple lover of the text conveys far more than virtuoso razzle-dazzle. **The Wind in the Willows**, for example, has also been tackled by Kenneth Williams (Listen for Pleasure), by Patrick Wymark, Richard Goolden and Norman Shelley (Argo) and by Frank Duncan (DEA Storytellers), but my favourite version remains a full-length reading by David Davis (Unicorn-Kanchana) which may lack their polish but is so flawlessly true to the spirit of Kenneth Grahame's original we might almost be listening to the author himself. In the case of **You Can't Catch Me** (Andre Deutsch) and **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory** (Caedmon) we *are* listening to the authors themselves - Michael Rosen and Roald Dahl promoting their own work with a flair few other writers will be able to match, though I'd like to see many more having a try. However well Brian Glover, David King and Una Stubbs collaborate on Terry Jones's **Fairy Tales** (Argo) I can't believe they'd bring writer and reader together as profitably as the actual voice of

Terry Jones at any rate on the evidence of the Puffin Promotion tape I came across in a Lancashire school. More please, tape producers.

If they need any urging, that is. The industry is expanding so rapidly it's hard to keep track of it. Here's my attempt to bring order to the current cornucopia:

(1) Candyfloss Cassettes

Not to be condemned, of course, unless you're the type for whom Little Noddy is an Enemy of the People. **My Little Pony** (Tempo) may well have most adults stampeding in the opposite direction but plenty of kids love it. Oh how they love it. Console yourself with the notion that just as candyfloss only rots the teeth if consumed by the ton, it takes consumption on a similar scale for such tapes to rot the brain. Much of the pre-school material is similarly dire - songs, rhymes and stories alongside which the old **Listen With Mother** has the status of a Dimpleby Lecture. Don't despair, though, just divert attention to the good stuff because there's plenty of this as well. To find it, look up Rachel Redford's **Hear to Read** (Book Trust) or consult Tapeworm (details below), a specialist company which cares about quality in cassettes and knows what it's talking about.

(2) Plain, but relatively wholesome

Equally popular but with longer and wittier texts are **The Mister Men** (BBC) and **Postman Pat** (Tempo and Tellastory). All safe bets not least from being TV tie-ins. So, alas, is Our Enid though on tape her prose comes across more than ever like gum somebody else has chewed. Peter Davison's Listen for Pleasure version is the best of a poor bunch. Maybe even Schofield would sink under a blitz of Blyton.

(3) Teacher Fodder

No, I don't mean dual-language tapes - being pioneered by small companies like Mantra, Side-by-Sided and Harmony. These, and what are called 'Heritage' tapes, are still in regrettably short supply. At their best they belong to the next section. What I'm referring to here is the sort of tape which is designed as a drill exercise - it usually goes 'ping' when you're supposed to turn over the page and that's frequently the most exciting thing that happens. My favourite is an account of David and Goliath, backed by the Pastoral Symphony no less, which runs: 'Then David ran towards the giant, putting one - ping! - of the smooth round stones into his sling as he went . . .' thereby guaranteed to make most of the poor and reluctant readers I know wet themselves with mirth. If you think this kind of support is really necessary, it's surely better to produce your own material, real books chosen by real teachers for real children. And if you detect a certain bias in my comments maybe it's because I'm anxious to move on to

(4) Gourmet Grub

This is the McCoy, the 'real' tape challenge to the 'scheme' tapes just described. The leading company currently must be Helen Nicoll's Cover to Cover now taken over by Puffin. All its productions are complete, unabridged and, so far, superb - you simply pay your money and take your choice. My own best buy for tinies is **Meg At Sea** and **Meg on the Moon**, an astonishing tour-de-force in which Maureen Lipman and a radiophonic workshop combine so brilliantly I felt I could 'see' the equivalent of those marvellous Pienkowski spreads in the original. For older readers, I'd opt for Stephen Thorne's **The Sheep Pig**, straightforward in comparison, but as *rapt a* rendering as even Dick King-Smith could hope for - or so my ten-year-old daughter would have said if I'd dared interrupt her listening. Try your luck with any of these though. It's sure to hold good with this company. Also, to be fair, with a number of others, providing they've come to terms with an issue every tape-producer must face.

The Problem of Abridgement

For Helen Nicoll there's no problem at all: you don't. Her Cover to Cover tapes run for as long as it takes to read the book - thirty minutes for **Flat Stanley**, seven hours thirty minutes for **Treasure Island**, twenty one hours thirty minutes for **Jane Eyre**. Not all producers have her nerve, however. Most tapes are shortened to what's considered to be a

commercially viable length, hence Listen for Pleasure's **Treasure Island** is only a third as long as Cover to Cover's. In itself, this needn't mean malpractice. Both Argo's **Nicholas Nickleby** and Conifer's **David Copperfield**, for example, are based commendably on the excerpts used by Dickens himself for his Public Readings. Nor is anybody likely to be fooled by crass re-tellings such as Pickwick's **The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde** based on a text which has been given the Kiss of Death by Ladybird. Much more worrying is **Gulliver's Travels** from Tellastory. Here the words are undeniably Swift's own ... except there aren't many of them. We get only two of the four travels, much speeded up by the removal of any excess baggage thought to clog the storyline: little items like the disgust and the satire, for instance. The result is a truncated and misleading version of half a book - admittedly consistent with its fate for more than two centuries but it would have been nice to have *some* indication on the cassette of what the producers were about.

Let the buyer beware, then. For safety's sake, I'd recommend the asking of five simple questions when considering a particular tape...

1. Will it help develop the children as readers and the 'reading' relationship I already have with them or am I just after a quiet life?
2. Is it a recording of a *real* book or no more than the Walkman equivalent of Ronald Ridout?
3. Is the text complete and unabridged?

If so, is it suitable (children can be bored by tapes as well as books) and if not, why not-and how well has it been cut?

4. Are there any reasons for *not* choosing it - an intractable race, sex or class bias, for instance?
5. How good is the performance?

...and if these questions seem uncannily reminiscent of the criteria you already operate for choosing *books*, so much the better.

Apart from the last, that is. Performance is the hidden extra, the crock of gold at the end of the headset. 'I see it very much as projecting a kind of movie,' explains Martin Jarvis, 'so that after a bit the listeners, the receivers of the picture at the other end, in a curious way forget they're being read to and see the story going on in their own minds.' Helen Nicoll, who, as co-author of the 'Meg and Mog' books, has impeccable credentials as a producer of books *for looking at*, is still quick to endorse this tribute to the power of the human voice in its age-old storytelling mode. 'No silent reading puts pictures in the mind in quite the same way,' she says.

Who will disagree with that?

Hear to Read

Selected and annotated by Rachel Redford. Book Trust (1986), £1.50 inc. p&p (£1.00 to members). available from Book Trust, 45 East Hill, London SW 18 2QZ.

Tapeworm

32 Kingsway, London SW 14 7HS.

WHO'S PRODUCING WHAT

Academy Sound and Vision

The source of the very popular double cassette of **The Chronicles of Narnia**, read by Michael Hordern. 179 North End Road, London W14. From bookshops.

Argo

The spoken word division of Decca which has been producing quality recordings (unabridged Shakespeare for instance) for over 30 years - at first on disc but now on cassette. Good for poetry - Eliot, Betjeman reading their own work; **Under Milk Wood**

with Richard Burton. Children's material includes **The Iron Man**, the Rev. Awdry stories and A A Milne. Available through major booksellers and some record shops.

Catalogue (200 items) from Argo Spoken Word, P O Box 2JH, 52-54 Maddox Street, London W1 (tel: 01-491 4600, ext. 337).

Audio Learning International

Storytapes Classics are 65-minute readings plus incidental music of abridged and adapted stories like **The Wizard of Oz**, **The Railway Children**. Each cassette is accompanied by a 64-page book which allows the listener to follow word for word (and colour in the pictures!). £2.99 for cassette and book. Available through some chainstores or direct.

Phone or write for catalogue to

740 Holloway Road, London N19 3JF (tel: 01-281 2393/5).

Chivers Audio Books

About 18 months ago Chivers started to add children's stories to their 300-strong adult list of titles (all unabridged).

Authors include Judy Blume, Dick King-Smith, Margaret Mahy. Betsy Byars' **Cracker Jackson** is among the new titles this autumn. (£8.65 for two cassettes; £11.25 for three.)

Full listing from Chivers Press, Windsor Bridge Road, Bath BA2 3AX (tel: 0225 335336).

Collins-Caedmon

A new, just launched venture between children's publisher Collins and Caedmon, one of the first record companies to enter the spoken word market in the fifties.

Claire Bloom reads **The Secret Garden**, Ian Richardson, **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe** (and the other Narnia books), Michael Bond, his own **A Bear Called Paddington**, and Peter Ustinov, Russell Hoban's classic **The Mouse and His Child**. 36 titles in one-tape versions appear in the launch list including Dylan Thomas reading **A Child's Christmas in Wales**, one of the first Caedmon recordings. (40-66 mins., £3.99 each, available in bookshops.)

More promised next year.

Conifer

A specialist distributor of other producers' tapes, Conifer also produces a limited number of own-label cassettes including **The Hobbit** read by Nicol Williamson (three cassettes, £7.49), **The Little Prince** read by Peter Ustinov (two cassettes, £5.35), **Watership Down** read by Roy Dotrice (three cassettes, £7.49), and Jon Pertwee reading Barbara Euphan Todd's original **Worzel Gummidge** stories (six single cassettes, £1.99 each). Available from record/bookshops. Enquiries and list available from: Horton Road, West Drayton, Middlesex UB7 8JL (tel: 0895 447707).

Cover to Cover (also Puffin)

Specialist in unabridged readings of adult and children's titles. The children's list is now being marketed, distributed and developed by Puffin (available in bookshops). First titles, including Maureen Lipman's reading of **Meg and Mog**, were launched in July. Autumn titles include **A Bad Spell for the Worst Witch** read by Miriam Margolyes. (£3.99 single tapes; £6.99 twin packs).

For adult tapes: Dene House, Lockeridge, Marlborough, Wiltshire (tel: 067 286 495).

Eloquent Reels

Four-cassette (six-hour) versions of classics like **Wuthering Heights**, **Great Expectations**, **Far from the Madding Crowd**, **Treasure Island**, **The Three Musketeers** and poetry are in preparation. £12.95 per pack. Available through some booksellers or direct.

Send sae for brochure to Alhampton, Shepton Mallett, Somerset BA4 6PZ (tel: 0749 86593).

Hippo (Scholastic Publications)

Book-plus-cassette packs of **Postman Pat** (£2.99) from bookshops.

Listen for Pleasure

Favourite titles including Dahl and Blyton. Two-cassette packs (£4.99) produced by EMI Records. Available in record

departments.

Listen Productions

Traditional stories (including many less well-known tales) and fairy tales. All single cassettes (20-75 minutes), £2.25-£3.75 each (discounts available on request). Available via other distributors or direct.

For catalogue - 3 Earls Terrace, London W8 6LP (tel: 01-602 9664).

Pickwick International

Tell-a-Tale series and **Well Loved Tales** series in association with Ladybird. Re-tellings, 'new' or heavily abridged versions of such as **Thomas the Tank Engine**, traditional fairy tales, **Treasure Island**, **Tom Sawyer** and Beatrix Potter. Also **Transformers**, **Masters of the Universe** and **Puddle Lane**.

Also the Ditto range - twin cassette packs of longer stories, Barbara Euphan Todd's **Worzel Gummidge**, Nigel Hinton's **Beaver Towers** (£2.49).

From bookshops/chainstores etc.

Price Stern Sloan (PSS)

An American based company, which produces the Roger Hargreaves **Mr Men** and **Little Miss** books, have recently introduced the **Wee Sing** range - book/ activity/tape packs of songs, rhymes and games (£3.99).

Information from: The Avenue, Cliftonville, Northampton NN1 5BT (tel: 0604 230344).

Rainbow Communications

Some sources suggest Rainbow has 40% of the current cassette market. Book and cassette packs (£2.49) include Walt Disney titles, **The Care Bears**, **The Muppet Babies**. (Tapes usually 15-20 minutes.) Also dramatised versions of Dahl and Blyton in the **Theatre for Children** series; **Teen Eastenders** coming this autumn. A new departure is Activity Packs (£2.99) of stickers, felt pens, tape of read-along story, songs and instructions.

Available in supermarkets, chainstores, etc.

Sound Beam

Set up as a distributor earlier this year (over 800 titles in its current catalogue), Sound Beam are launching adult own-label titles this autumn - **The Greengage Summer**, **The Riddle of the Sands** among others of interest to secondary librarians. (Two cassettes, approx. three hours, £5.99.) Children's titles are planned for 1988. From bookshops, chainstores, etc.

Write for current listing to 10 Barley Mow Passage, Chiswick, London W4 4PH (tel: 01-994 6477).

The Talking Tape Company

Unabridged short stories (approx. one hour) by Graham Greene, Thomas Hardy, Somerset Maugham, P G Wodehouse and others. BBC radio plays, poetry and **The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole** (slightly abridged, two cassettes) also in the catalogue. Prices range from £3.49 to £5.99 per cassette. Available through some distributors or direct.

Telephone or send sae for catalogue to 186 Fulham Road, London SW 10 9PN (tel: 01-352 7620).

Tellastory

50 titles in this range from Bartlett Bliss Productions. Mostly an hour long, the series includes **Orlando the Marmalade Cat** and **Milly-Molly-Mandy** (the two first tapes and still popular), Frank Muir reading his **What-a-Mess** stories, **Postman Pat**, Allan Ahlberg's **Tales from Ten in a Bed**, and Beatrix Potter (the original!). New this autumn Astrid Lindgren's **Pippi Longstocking** and for older listeners

H G Wells' **The Magic Shop** and **The Red Room**, £3.50 inc. VAT for one cassette. Available from book, record and toy shops.

Send sae for list to 39 Warwick Gardens, London W14 8PH (tel: 01-603 2451 or 01-385 3614).

Tempo

Another mass market company whose products are available in a wide range of outlets. **Talking Stories** (book and cassette) take in **Postman Pat**, **Rupert**, **Little Grey Rabbit** and **Paddington** (£2.49). **Story Tapes** (cassette only)

include **My Little Pony, Spot, Dahl** (£2.25). **Twin Cassettes** range from **The Wind in the Willows** to **SuperTed** (£1.99). **Story Time** series includes **The Snowman** and **Brambly Hedge** (£2.99).

Catalogue from Multiple Sound Holdings (MSD), Sales Dept, 3 Standard Road, Park Royal Industrial Estate, London NW 10 6EY (tel: 01-961 5646).

Whigmaleerie

Stories and songs from Scotland, produced by a small (but growing) Scottish company set up in 1985. **Highland Fairy Tales**, told by Mollie Hunter, Greyfriars Bobby, and Mairi Hedderwick's **Tales of Katie Morag** are just some of an interesting list. Prices range from £2.99 to £3.99. Available through some bookshops or direct.

For catalogue/price list, send sae to 7 Main Street, Belerno, Edinburgh EH14 7EQ (tel: 031-449 5893).

OUP and Macdonald produce tapes of rhymes and songs for the youngest.

For details of dual-language material, see the **Books for Keeps Guide to Children's Books for a Multi-cultural Society 0-7**, available from BfK, 1 Effingham Road, Lee, London SE12 8NZ, price £2.50 inc. p&p.

Weston Woods, 14 Friday Street, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire RG9 1AH (tel: 0491 577033), offers tape slide/film strip packages based on books.

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Photographs by **Richard Mewton**, taken with the kind co-operation of the staff, parents and children of May Park School, Bristol.

Page Number:

9

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[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/chris-powling>

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