



# Why Listen at All?

► **TERI S. LESESNE**

*[Editors' Note: We warmly thank Audiobooks It Is! columnist Pam Spencer Holley for four years of expert development of VOYA's audiobook critiques. Now we welcome new AudioTalk columnist Teri S. Lesesne, who puts her unique stamp on our coverage of audiobooks and the ways that teens use them.]*

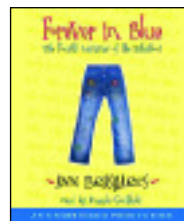
My love affair with audiobooks began about thirteen years ago, when I decided to drive my granddaughters—ages eight, three, and one—from their home in Georgia to my house in Texas for the summer. I had this wonderful vision of bonding time during the nearly three-day drive. About thirty minutes outside of Atlanta, I realized the error of my ways. Fortunately my daughter had packed a first-aid kit that contained several cassettes of stories and nursery rhymes. No more whining, “Are we there yet?” or questions about when we would stop for another meal. Instead we all listened to the magical tape that pulled us out of the car (at least in spirit) and into the stories. That out-of-car experience continues today as I drive solo or with the family across Texas listening to audiobooks to help pass the time.

No more than ever, though, audio is finding its way out of the car and into the classroom and library. Offering much more than entertainment for travelers, audiobooks have utilitarian application in creating lifetime readers. Why should we listen to audiobooks? Why should we ensure that they find their way into our collections? Let's explore three reasons why audiobooks are essential tools for bringing books and readers together.

## Audiobooks offer more time for teens to read.

Contemporary teens are overwhelmed by demands on their time. They go from school to work and on to lessons or practice. Often they spend a great deal of time moving to and from these activities. Listening to books during this transit time can be beneficial. For the past several years, I have placed audiobooks into a local school where some students spend more than an hour as they travel from home to school and back again. Teens have been amazed at how much they can accomplish by simply listening to some of the books that they are required to read for assignments or choose for recreational reading. My own resident teens listen to audiobooks during the week in lieu of watching television. Recently on a long road trip, they intended to watch their DVD in the back of the van. Once they heard the opening lines of **The Book Thief**, however, they were hooked. Their age difference generally means that they have distinct tastes in their choice of reading fare. Audiobooks seem to diminish these differences, interestingly enough. They both enjoyed **Life As We Knew It** and **Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants** in audio format.

Brashares, Ann. **Forever in Blue**. Listening Library, 2007. Narrated by Angela Goethals. Unabridged; 9 hours, 3 minutes. 7 CDs, \$55. 978-0-7393-4845-1. **4Q 5P S**



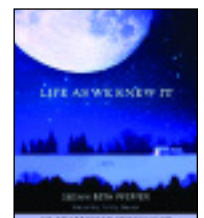
The *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* is back in a fourth installment. *Tibby, Carmen, Lena, and Bea* are all off to various colleges now but still connected by friendship and the magical pair of jeans that have been theirs for four summers now.

*Carmen tries out for a summer stock theater production and finds that she shines in more than her usual behind-the-scenes role. Tibby is spending the summer at film school. Lena is taking some courses in art while Bea is on an archaeological dig. Each girl faces challenges—among them a pregnancy scare, betrayal by supposed friends, and changing relationships. The pants provide a constant in their hectic lives.*

*Although a single voice narrates this audio, listeners will have no trouble recognizing the various exploits of the four girls and their friends and families. Goethals, a young narrator, is able to bring alive all the angst, enthusiasm, and emotion of young women entering into adulthood—albeit a bit reluctantly.*

Pfeffer, Susan Beth. **Life As We Knew It**. Listening Library, 2006. Narrated by Emily Bauer. Unabridged; 9 hours. 7 CDs, \$55. 978-0-7393-3789-9. **5Q 3P M J S**

*Life changes one fateful night as millions of people across the world look on. An asteroid hits the moon and knocks it off orbit. The*



change in the orbit of the moon affects tides immediately. By morning, hundreds of cities near the world's oceans are under water. Millions are dead, but the worst is yet to come for many of the survivors. This post-apocalyptic novel is told in diary entries from the point of view of Miranda, who lives in Pennsylvania. Before the asteroid, Miranda was a typical teen; in the wake of the disaster, she must be more adult than she is at first willing to become.

Narrator Bauer does a commendable job showing Miranda's growth from a rather whiny girl who complains about the spare diet that she must endure to a more mature young woman who knows what she must do to help her family survive. This transition is easy to spot while reading the text. It takes an accomplished reader to do the same in her vocal portrayal of Miranda.

Zusak, Markus. **The Book Thief**. Listening Library, 2006. Narrated by Allan Corduner. Unabridged; 13 hours, 57 minutes. 11 CDs, \$75. 978-0-7393-3800-1. **5Q 4P JS**



This Printz Honor medalist recounts the story of Liesel, a young girl who finds herself in the throes of Germany during the Holocaust. Liesel is in the care of a foster family. Her foster father cares deeply for his young charge; Liesel's foster mother,

however, is gruff and cold at the outset. In the midst of the Nazi insanity, Liesel finds comfort in the pages of books. Reading opens doors that she might never have otherwise found. Although Liesel is the protagonist of the novel, the narrator is Death itself, who is at turns chilling, self-deprecating, charming, and even witty. It is this voice that ties the stories of Liesel and the people whom she comes to know and love into one cohesive narrative.

The audio production of this book is electrifying from the opening track until the last echoes of the story have faded. Allan Corduner has perfect pitch as the single-voice narrator of this complex story. As Death, his voice is detached, almost dispassionate, striking the right balance in a story that is frightening and frightful.

### Audiobooks serve as models of verbal fluency.

Listening to audiobooks can help students hear how a fluent reader sounds. Listening to books, especially for those who are learning English, teaches them about the pacing of oral language, about pronunciation, and even about idiomatic expressions. A teacher of English as a Second Language recently remarked on how much more endurance her students have when listening as opposed to simply reading without the audio playing at the same time. Students listen and track along in the book for an entire 45-minute class instead of groaning and giving up after 10 or 15 minutes. This verbal endurance pays off with increased vocabulary development and better comprehension.

By the way, books with dialects or books set in the past can also be made more accessible with audio accompaniment. The audio version of a book such as **Nightjohn** by Gary Paulsen (Recorded Books, 2001) allows readers to hear the voice of Sarney, a young slave. Finally, no matter how good my British accent sounds in my head, Jim Dale's renditions of books such as **Harry Potter** (Listening Library, 1999 – 2005), Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson's **Peter and the Starcatchers** (Brilliance Audio, 2004/VOYA December 2004), and Jules Verne's **Around the World in Eighty Days** (Listening Library, 2004/VOYA December 2005, June 2006) are more enjoyable and authentic. In the case of the following books, audio can provide readers with an introduction to the classic writing of Mark Twain, make a fantasy such as **Swordbird** more accessible to those who do not normally read this genre, and help readers navigate multiple-narrator perspectives in **Harmless**.

Fan, Nancy Yi. **Swordbird**. HarperChildrensAudio, 2007. Narrated by Colleen Delaney. Unabridged; 4 hours. 4 CDs, \$25.95. 978-0-06-123398-2. **4Q 3P M**

The cardinals and bluejays are at war. Neither side knows at first that this war has been caused by an outsider, a hawk named Slimebeak, who is charged with gathering slavebirds for his master. Once the jays and cardinals discover the deception, they join forces to defeat Turnatt, the leader of the hawks. Calling upon the spirit of Swordbird, the Great Spirit of the Birds, the battle just might be won by the smaller and less powerful jays and cardinals. The adventure is nonstop, appealing to those readers who enjoy the work of Brian Jacques. The fact that the author is herself a teen who wrote this novel when she was ten and eleven, of course, will fascinate readers.



The single-voice narration works well in this audio. Delaney makes the distinction between the many characters effortlessly without becoming overly dramatic. Her quiet approach to the narration matches the nature of the avian main characters. An interview with the author is a bonus feature.

Reinhardt, Dana. **Harmless**. Listening Library, 2007. Narrated by Lynde Houck, Donna Rawlins, and Staci Snell. Unabridged; 5 hours, 57 minutes. 5 CDs, \$45. 978-0-7393-4853-6. **4Q 4P S**

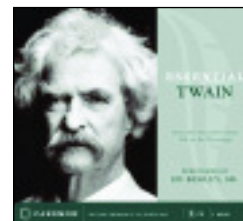


One seemingly harmless lie places the lives of three girls in jeopardy. Anna, Emma, and Mariah tell their parents that they are going to a movie and then having a sleepover. When they are not where they told their parents they would

be, they make up a story about being attacked by a man at the river near their homes. The story spirals out of control, one lie piling on top of another. The three girls each react differently to their sudden notoriety. It is only a matter of time before their house of lies comes crashing down.

In alternating sections from each girl's viewpoint, three narrators provide the voices for Emma, Anna, and Mariah, making it easier for readers to determine who is speaking. The narrators also avoid one of the pitfalls that can occur when adults provide voice for a teen protagonist, by not falling into a more breathy and whiny tone. Instead they imbue the narration with the emotions racing through the lives of the three young women whose careless lie turns harmful. An author interview ends the recording.

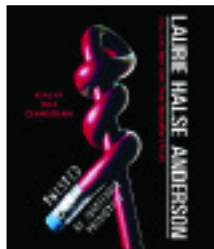
Twain, Mark. **Essential Mark Twain**. Caedmon Audiobooks, 2007. Narrated by Ed Begley, Sr. Abridged; 1 hour. 1 CD, \$12.95. 978-0-06-123218-1. **5Q 2P S**



Part of a series intended to provide an introduction to some classic authors, this single CD offers excerpts from **Life on the Mississippi**, Twain's recounting of his life on a riverboat. The selections allow readers to hear the rich language of Twain in bursts of five-to-ten-minute excerpts. The rhythm of the river parallels the rhythm of Twain's prose; this audiobook facilitates students' ability to hear these distinct rhythms. Unfamiliar words such as "unction" and others will not impede the reading in the audio format. Despite the brevity of these excerpts, Twain's trademark sense of humor shines through. Other authors whose works are included in this series are Tennessee Williams and Anais Nin. English teachers should consider using audiobooks such as these as one way to introduce readers to the work of authors who might be challenging in print form.

## Audiobooks motivate reluctant readers and assist struggling readers.

Despite the efforts of dedicated literacy professionals, some teens simply are below grade level in reading ability. Students who are reading below level can often listen to a book written several years beyond their reading comprehension. So instead of providing babyish books for students who struggle, we can allow them to read the same books as their peers by adding audiobooks as an alternative form of reading. Reluctant readers will appreciate the nonfiction offerings of **Close to Shore** and **The Great Escape**. Having an audio version of **Twisted** means that even struggling readers in high school can access a text that will draw them into a riveting story.



Anderson, Laurie Halse. **Twisted**. Listening Library, 2007. Narrated by Mike Chamberlain. Unabridged; 6 hours. 5 CDs, \$45. 978-0-7393-4884-0. **5Q 5P S**

*Tyler Miller is accustomed to being invisible at school and even at home. Once he gets into trouble for spraying some graffiti on school property, however, Tyler is on everyone's radar. His community service*

*sentence for the graffiti has molded him into a buff, tanned specimen, getting him some attention from Bethany and from her bully brother. Tyler somehow manages to juggle the conflicting feelings that are part of his everyday life. But little by little, they begin to pile up and weigh him down. Is there any way to escape? What should Tyler do to keep from feeling so twisted?*

*Anderson's latest offering for teens is her first with a male protagonist. Chamberlain brings Tyler alive in his narration, carefully drawing readers into this taut drama. His careful pacing enhances the tension already present in the novel.*

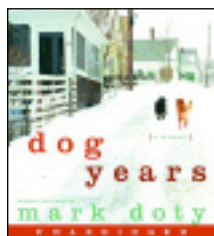
Capuzzo, Michael. **Close To Shore: The Terrifying Shark Attacks of 1916**. Audio Bookshelf, 2007. Narrated by Taylor Mali. Abridged; 3 hours, 30 minutes. 3 CDs, \$39.95. 978-0-9761932-6-5. **4Q 5P M J S**

*Normally I prefer unabridged audiobooks. This work of nonfiction, however, was originally published for adults, and the author has written this abridgement for teen readers. Fans of the Jaws series of movies will be interested in knowing that the shark attacks by what was then thought to be a "rogue" shark served as the basis for Peter Benchley's novel and the movie franchise that followed. In 1916, along the shore of New Jersey, a great white shark attacks swimmers. Some are killed outright; others die from the wounds inflicted by the monstrous fish. In this time before instant communications, word spreads too slowly to prevent more deaths.*

*Narrator Mali maintains an almost reporter tone as he recounts the attacks and their aftermath. This neutral voicing seems to make the attacks even more horrific.*



Doty, Mark. **Dog Years: A Memoir**. HarperAudio, 2007. Narrated by the author. Unabridged; 6 hours. 5 CDs, \$39.95. 978-0-06-123401-9. **5Q 3P S A/YA**.



*In the aftermath of September 11, the author wonders if the death of a beloved family pet even deserves mention. Ultimately though, Doty observes, a single and singular loss can somehow help us deal with the larger tragedies in life. Doty himself narrates his*

*book of reflections about his two beloved pets, Beau and Arden. Along the way, listeners certainly will learn about the dogs. Yet Doty, a poet and professor of writing, provides more than memories of Beau and Arden frolicking at the seashore. Interspersed periodically throughout the narrative are poetic offerings, philosophical musings, political observations, and so much more.*

*Although I am not often a fan of authors reading their own works, Doty is the perfect narrator here. He knows the rhythms of his prose and has lived the experiences with Beau and Arden. Thus he is able to breathe them into life for the listener.*

Fleischman, Sid. **Escape! The Story of the Great Houdini**. Audio Bookshelf, 2007. Narrated by Taylor Mali. Unabridged; 3 hours, 30 minutes. 3 CDs, \$39.95. 978-0-9761932-5-8. **4Q 3P M J**

*Here is one of the interesting observations of an audiophile: Some narrators are chameleon-like in their profession. They can read a variety of*

*works in different genres and somehow manage to adopt each role without flaw. Taylor Mali, narrator of the preceding audio, Close to Shore, is the voice of author Sid Fleischman in Escape! His pitch, tone, and pacing are all quite distinct from his narration work in Close to Shore as he mirrors Fleischman's passion about Houdini and all things magic. Fleischman himself gives voice to the prologue and the afterword, allowing listeners a chance to "meet" the author.*

## A FINAL WORD

Audiobooks have provided me with one way to almost double time for reading. No longer is time lost when spent behind the wheel of the car. I can pop in an audiobook and make the trip seem shorter. I clean house with headphones plugged into an audiobook. It is amazing how time flies as I do spring cleaning. All of us—both adults and teens—can find time to add a bit of audio to our reading lives. ■

## SOURCES

Audio Bookshelf <http://www.audiobookshelf.com>  
Caedmon Audiobooks <http://www.harpercollins.com/imprints/index.aspx?imprintid=518000>  
HarperAudio <http://www.harpercollins.com/imprints/index.aspx?imprintid=517989>  
Listening Library/Random House <http://www.library.booksontape.com>

*Teri S. Lesesne is a professor in the Department of Library Science at Sam Houston State University, where she teaches literature for children and young adults. Currently she is serving on the Odyssey Award Committee, a joint committee of the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) and Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), which will select one title for distinguished audiobook achievement for the first time in 2008. She is the 2007 ALAN Award recipient and author of two professional books about youth and their reading from Stenhouse.*