

Experiencing a Great 'Read'

Audiobooks Provide a Fresh Way to Absorb Those Page-Turners Without Turning a Page

Since 1995, I have read more than 500 books. Yes, I work fifty or sixty hours per week, go to the gym six days a week, and am home for dinner with my family every day. Yet I can still read an average of more than one book per week—without ever turning a page. And I only read these books in my car and at the gym. My secret: I listen to them.

Before 1995, I was never able to read as many books as I would have liked. Like most attorneys, my reading time was limited by work, family and the need to sleep. That changed when Lynn Carlson, a paralegal in my office, told me about audiobooks. When Lynn first talked about audiobooks, I was skeptical. In some ways, the whole concept seemed hokey. But she persevered, and I relented, borrowing one. I was hooked. Now, not only do I listen to books in the car and at the gym, but they have become a bona fide avocation and, in many ways, a passion. People who learn of my audiobook "life" regularly call asking for book recommendations. I have even created an audiobook lending library in my office. Co-workers borrow them, as do friends, attorneys and even judges—because they have each experienced the entrancing nature of a great book.

Audiobooks are not just people reading a book. When we were children, our parents read to us, and we learned to appreciate a great story. Audiobooks, also called books on tape or recorded audio, improve upon that experience. The difference is dramatic. Consider *Crime and Punishment*, judged by many as the greatest novel ever written, and now the greatest book ever recorded. It runs twenty-five-and-a-half hours, yet the time flies because the reader, George Guidall, performs the novel with such flair that you never want to turn off the cassette player.

Once I started listening regularly, I went to bookstores and purchased some audiobooks. At that time, most mass-market audiobooks were abridged, so my choices were generally fiction by authors such as

John Grisham, Faye Kellerman, Dean Koontz, and Stephen King. Unabridged editions were available then mainly from mail-order companies like Recorded Books and Books on Tape, which were known for their extremely high-quality productions. After discovering these and similar sources, my options expanded into classics such as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Fountainhead*,



Left: Lyons

The Great Gatsby and *East of Eden*. Fortunately, over the years, more books have become available in unabridged form.

The world of audiobooks extends beyond bestsellers and classics. Companies now produce fiction and non-fiction books and other titles for audiobook enthusiasts, encompassing every genre of the written word. For example, there is a series of audiotapes of historical and political documents, such as *The Federalist Papers*, *Common Sense* and *Das Kapital*. These titles are only one or two hours (compared with books that run from three hours to as many as thirty hours), and they interest me now far more than when they were required reading in high school and college. I heard recordings of actual Supreme Court oral arguments and was fascinated again.

Over time, I grew to appreciate the para-

mount importance of the audiobook reader. While a great reader cannot make a bad book good, a great reader can make a good book great. A bad reader, on the other hand, can make any book worse or, at times, unlistenable. I discovered that George Guidall, Barbara Rosenblat and Frank Muller were the superstars of the spoken word, and I appreciated their ability to transform books into masterpieces that left me sitting in my car well after reaching my destination. (Unfortunately, Frank Muller's career was tragically cut short by a bad motorcycle accident that has left him severely limited in speech and motor function.)

A few years ago, I happened upon *Audiofile* magazine, the only magazine devoted exclusively to books on tape. I subscribed, broadening my knowledge again. Eventually, I contacted Robin Whitten, *Audiofile's* editor, to offer my services as a reviewer; Robin accepted. With the ability to review audiobooks came the opportunity to delve into different subjects. I have now reviewed about 100 books for *Audiofile*, spanning current events, literary classics, contemporary fiction, sports, children's books, Judaica, and a whole host of other subjects I had never considered.

Writing for *Audiofile* is itself an interesting activity. Unlike other forums, *Audiofile* publishes short reviews, generally fewer than 140 words each, focusing on presentation more than textual content. It's not easy to be substantive and pithy in one or two paragraphs, but *Audiofile* reviewers do it, and their reviews are very well written.

Two events demonstrate just how much audiobooks and *Audiofile* have become a part of my life. Over the past few years, I became acquainted with Rochelle Krich, an author of murder mysteries involving Jewish characters. I contacted Rochelle to ask why her many novels had never appeared in audio form. The answer was simple: she had never been offered a contract for an audiobook. In 2002, she wrote *Blues in the Night*, and she let me know that she had signed a contract for an audiobook edition. I advised her that it was critically important to discuss how the reader would pronounce the many Yiddish and Hebrew words in her book. All too often, I had experienced the problems caused by readers whose mispronunciations destroy an otherwise excellent book.

Rochelle's agent arranged for her to provide the reader with a list of the "unusual" words, and the result was superb. Coincidentally, *Audiofile* assigned the book review to me, and I wrote:

"*Blues in the Night* is a book of firsts: Rochelle Krich's first novel recorded on audio; the debut of true-crime writer Molly Blume, Krich's new protagonist; and Deanna Hurst's first audiobook recording. Each first is a success. Krich's novels frequently weave murder with stories involving Orthodox Jewish characters. Some liken Krich to Faye Kellerman, but her style is softer and warmer. In Molly Blume, Krich creates her best central character, crafting a story with plot twists and an ending that ties everything together convincingly. Hurst also shines. Her soft, almost sultry, voice fits Blume and gives her the right mix of warmth, intensity and vulnerability. She also excels at imbuing each character with a distinct personality, supplying just the right inflections and accents. Krich's fans, who have long awaited her audio debut, have been rewarded."

Audiofile also assigned me to review *Arab and Jew*, David Shipler's Pulitzer Prize-winning opus about the Middle East. The book is a classic, but the performance was atrocious. It seemed as though the reader mispronounced every Hebrew and Arabic word, while missing a few English ones as well. My review noted that the performance marred the book.

Rather than publish my review, Robin forwarded it to the audiobook publisher, Blackstone Audio, which normally produces some of the finest work in the country. They contacted me, requesting specific examples about the production's many deficiencies. Blackstone then hired me to re-edit the book, which required my reading the book while listening to it, noting every reader error. After a few hours, it became clear that there were so many errors that the recording could not be "fixed" with some minor editing. Blackstone withdrew the entire production and hired a new reader, whose performance I also reviewed:

"David Shipler has updated *Arab and Jew*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning history of the Middle East, to include the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unlike other authors, Shipler focuses on people and events, not just politics. Because it contains many Hebrew and Arabic names and ethnic terms, *Arab and Jew* could be difficult to read. The language does not deter Robert Blumenfeld, whose performance demonstrates his fluency with the languages and the inflections critical to them. Blumenfeld's tone is also ideal, mixing just the right amount of emotion and intensity and giving credibility to people and events, regardless of ethnicity. *Arab and Jew* remains one of the most comprehensive treatments of the Middle East, and this performance is a 'must' for anyone who wants to know more detail than is typically found in the media.

Without obvious biases, the book is both marvelous and infuriating, particularly to people who do not agree with all of Shipler's conclusions."

What a difference a good reader makes.

Audiobooks are an easily acquired taste that, among my friends, has also become a passion. My lending library is constantly in use. Because everyone's tastes are different, the many "borrowers" and I have learned a great deal about each other, far more than we would ordinarily.

It's easy to find audiobooks that "fit" my interests. Yet I'm always pleasantly surprised to discover a book outside my usual interests. A perfect example is *The Secret Life of Bees*, the story of a young white girl coming of age emotionally and physically in the racist South in the 1960s. I only listened to it after the audiobook's positive review in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. This turned out to be one of the best performances I had ever heard, and I have now loaned the book to nearly a dozen people, including a few who had never listened to an audiobook before. Once they experienced *The Secret Life of Bees* they were hooked and—like me—can't wait to discover the next great listen. ■

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Audiobooks:

May It Please the Court: 23 Live Recordings of Landmark Cases As Argued Before the Supreme Court, Including the Actual Voices of the Attorneys and Judges, by Stephanie Guitton (editor), Peter Irons (editor). The first in a series of audiobooks (and accompanying text) containing recordings of oral arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Crime and Punishment, by Fyodor Dostoevsky, read by George Guidall.

Considered by many the greatest book ever recorded. George Guidall's reading is flawless; even the Russian names flow from his mouth with such ease that the reader is completely entranced.

On A Pale Horse, by Piers Anthony, read by George Guidall. One of the finest books ever recorded, and it's certainly one of the most intriguing.

The Nazi Officer's Wife: How One Jewish Woman Survived the Holocaust, by Edith Hahn Beer, Susan Dworkin (contributor), read by Barbara Rosenblat. This is the fascinating story of how one woman survived the Holocaust by using fake credentials and, eventually, marrying a man who became a Nazi officer.

The Secret Life of Bees, by Sue Monk Kidd, read by Jenna Lamia. This is one of the best performances ever on audio, and the book is equally superb.

The Green Mile, by Stephen King, read by Frank Muller. A Stephen King classic, this book is Frank Muller at his best, and demonstrates why King requested that Muller read his books.

Great Readers:

George Guidall – Everything he reads is worth hearing; he could read you the phone

book and you'd never want to stop listening.

Edward Herrmann – An accomplished actor, Herrmann is an equally adept audiobook reader. His readings of Ayn Rand's books are especially good.

Barbara Rosenblat – A true audiobook superstar. Like Guidall, she can make any book interesting, and her ability to give every character a distinct "voice" is like listening to a one-person repertory theater.

Scott Brick – Not as well known as some of the other readers, Brick's performances are consistently excellent.

Frank Muller – A superstar, like Guidall and Rosenblat; it is sad that Muller's motorcycle accident means he may never record again.

Online Resources:

www.audiofilemagazine.com

www.recordedbooks.com

www.booksontape.com

www.blackstoneaudio.com