

# Listening to Literature: An Author Talks About Audiobooks

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Posted 9:00 AM 12/19/10



Audiobooks are flourishing. The [Audio Publishers Association](#) reports that in 2009, consumers and libraries spent close to \$1 billion on audiobooks. According to the association, "Audiobook listeners are affluent, well-educated, and avid" book readers. For that matter, they are also more voracious than nonlisteners: "Frequent listeners of audiobooks. . .read a median of 15 books in the past year, compared to six books read by people who don't listen to audiobooks," reports a 2010 APA [consumer survey](#).

I asked several bestselling thriller authors how their audio sales compare to print. Answers ranged from, "I'm not quite sure," to "I would guess it's fairly small," to "I don't have a clue. I suppose somewhere there is a royalty statement with that information, but it's deep in one of the piles of boxes from the big move this summer."

One of the few authors willing to venture a guess was [Glenn Cooper](#), a thriller author with whom I share an audiobooks narrator: "I'd say that audio revenues are a de minimus portion of my publishing revenues, certainly less than 1%."

## The Value of Audiobooks

If the percentage of audiobook sales in relation to print is so low, what's the advantage to an author of having his or her books in audio? "For me, audiobooks serve as teasers, or introductions to the series," explains [Lee Child](#), #1 *New York Times* bestselling thriller author of the Jack Reacher series. "Many of my readers tell me they started with audio."

Personally, I "started" in audio a year after my debut novel came out in print. *Freezing Point* sold to [Audible.com](#) as part of their "Breakout Thrillers" program – a partnership with the International Thriller Writers in which bestselling authors recommend newer ones. My agency was able to broker the deal because we kept audio rights at the time of the initial print sale.

"Since publishers aren't yet certain what role audio will play in digital books," says Molly Jaffa, the audio rights agent at Folio Literary Management, "they're looking to buy and

handle those rights themselves, as part of the initial book contract. But when we retain audio for our clients, the advances typically range from \$1,000-\$15,000. They can go even higher if the audio rights are sold at auction."

### **Inside the Booth: Collaborating with a Narrator**

The quality of an audiobook truly hinges on its narrator. The best narrators use their voice talents and training to deliver the feeling behind the author's intent. "I always like to have a conversation with the author if at all possible before I go in to record," says my audiobook narrator, Mark Boyett. "Often there are pronunciations to confirm, but I also like to give the author a chance to talk about his or her novel and express anything they'd like me to communicate as I narrate their book. After all, people are downloading the book to experience the author's work first and foremost, so my work needs to serve that end."

Still, an audiobook reading really is a performance, like a one-man play, and many audiobook narrators gain a loyal following. Listeners frequently make purchases not because they're a fan of the author, but because they love the narrator's work.

Boyett notes that he works to translate the excitement and flow of a story: "As I prepare the book, I'll make margin notes, sometimes about the mood of a scene, or the subtext of a character. Or I'll score sections with little notations that only make sense to me to remind myself to link up these words, or drive through this part, or make this paragraph start as a fresh new thought rather than a continuation of the previous one, and so on."

### **Charting a Course Through the Characters**

Boyett has also developed techniques that make it easier for him to make the book come alive: "Colored markers are also important. In scenes where there are multiple characters, I assign each character a color and then dot each line they speak, so I can read right through, changing the voices as needed, without having to stop and figure out who's talking when. Luckily, in the event that a narrator needs a reminder about the voice he's using for a particular character, the engineer can go back and replay earlier clips as a refresher."

With that level of professionalism and attention to detail, is it any wonder I was delighted with the result? The emotion my narrator conveys through his voice adds a whole new dimension to my written words.

It's been nine months since *Freezing Point* published in audio, and unlike the bestsellers quoted at the beginning of this piece, I do have the percentage of my audiobook sales to print at hand: 5.5%. During that time, I received not just one, but two royalty checks, and Audible purchased the rights to my next environmental thriller.

On Dec. 28, the print and audio versions of *Boiling Point* will publish simultaneously. Because *Boiling Point* brings back two characters from *Freezing Point*, Mark Boyett will also narrate the new audiobook. I can't wait to get my hands on a copy – figuratively speaking – and enjoy what will undoubtedly be another outstanding "recorded listening

experience."



*[Karen Dionne](#) is the internationally published author the environmental thrillers [Freezing Point](#) and [Boiling Point](#). Karen is also the cofounder of Backspace, and serves on the board of directors of the International Thriller Writers. Visit [Red Room](#) to find out more about her books and to read her blog.*

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