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Tennessee Woman Spends \$50,000 on Audiobooks

Marion Bryant shelled out \$50,000 dollars last year on audio books. She spends between 20 minutes and an hour-and-a-half a day listening to them in her car, or doing chores around her home in Tennessee. She favors fantasy books, The Teaching Company lecture courses, but her favorite listen last year was The Bible Experience narrated by Samuel L. Jackson, Angela Bassett, Cuba Gooding, Jr. and Blair Underwood. Marion Bryant is also a valuable resource during the recession.

She is the director of the Blue Grass Regional Library in Columbia, Tennessee, which has an annual budget to buy audio books for a consortium of 200 non-metropolitan libraries around the state. She's not just stocking their shelves. Most of the titles she buys will be downloaded from branch websites to computers and MP3 players, provided listeners have a library card and a computer at home. Computers cost, the library card and the audiobooks are free.

All across the country, libraries are consumers' first choice for audiobooks, accounting for 43 percent of the listening audience, according to a survey from the Audio Publishers Association, the industry's trade organization. Meanwhile, Barnes & Noble, Borders, and all retail sales, amount to 27 percent of the market, while downloads from sites such as Audible.com or Amazon account for only 9 percent of sales.

Like everyone else, audio publishers are feeling the results of today's nasty economy. But there was comfort in the industry, until recently, when the audiobook sales figures numbered slightly over 1 billion. Nice.

As sales figures have risen in this ear end of publishing, so have audio production values. In the early 1980s, production was often basic narration by non-professionals from independent publishers in off-the-beaten-path studios. Now, production is skillful and done in New York and Los Angeles for name-brand publishers like Macmillan, Random House, HarperCollins, and Simon & Shuster. Independent production has also blossomed in non-coastal places like Ashland, Ore., where Blackstone Audio is based, Grand Haven, Mich., home to Brilliance Audio and Old Saybrook, Conn., where you'll find Tantor.

A lot of well known actors do book narrations but the majority of voice talent heard today are working actors who've become listener brand-names like Grover Gardner, Lorelei King, Barbara Rosenblat and Frederick Davidson. The reader is what often makes audiobooks more appealing than their ink-and-paper brothers. "Narration is a unique

experience. It's more than just getting the words," says veteran Los Angeles audio producer, Linda Korn. "Readers can make a huge difference. A good narrator can make a mediocre book better, a good book excellent, and bad narrator can ruin a good book." With fiction, skilled actors inhabit multiple characters and have the ability to make listeners forget there's only one person doing all the male and female voices, plus narration.

Listeners say they have an easier time accessing dense, non-fiction books through their ears, rather than through their eyes. Lorin Henner, a fifty-something Los Angeles writer makes use of his endless freeway time by absorbing The Teaching Company courses he gets free from the Los Angeles Central Library.

Whether in Los Angeles or Tennessee, library audiobooks, and their downloads, are an increasingly popular source for entertainment and learning during these very tough times.

The Los Angeles Central Library, with 71 branches serving 500 square miles, has more than 107,000 copies in their audiobook collection. Of the 4,000 available for download, listeners piped-in a whopping 3,842 of them in January alone, and the number is growing every month, according the library's Giovanna Mannino, of Information Technologies & Collections.

Tennessee's Blue Grass Consortium has 7,400 books available to the 91 non-metropolitan counties they serve. An astounding 10,610 per month are now being downloaded. And that does not include the big cities of Memphis, Chattanooga, Nashville, or Knoxville, each of whom has their own audiobook collections. Awesome.

Audiobooks seem to satisfy several functions - mostly all while moving: a stress reliever in daily traffic; boredom fighter on long solo drives; educational while riding public transportation; diverting while walking the dog; communal entertainment for family car trips; distraction from routine household chores; and a world of mysteries, thrillers, romance, science fiction, literature, best-sellers, histories, biographies, spiritual and self help books - all for nothing through the local library. With the cost of everything rising and the value of everything falling, it's gratifying to have Marion Bryant, her librarian counterparts across the country - and a library card.