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Book Clubs Lend an Ear to Audio Books

By EDWARD M. EVELD

When Teresa Steinert and friends gathered recently for their book club meeting, only one member had actually read the selection, “The Abstinence Teacher” by Tom Perrotta.

That sounds unenthused, but they weren’t being summertime slouches. As planned, rather than reading the book, the women had listened to the audio version of the novel. It was an experiment that revised their view of book club reading: If members want to listen instead, that’s OK.

“I wouldn’t say they were ‘cheating’ anymore,” said Steinert of Kansas City.

The audio book prompted a different kind of book club discussion, they found. And while listening had its plusses — a time-saver, in some cases — it also had its minuses.

Steinert’s club, which has met for 10 years and has a dozen members across the area, was participating in a Macmillan Audio program that provided CDs of various titles to 45 books clubs in 30 states.

Stephanie Hargadon, who organized the project for Macmillan, said reading groups were more open to trying audio books than she had expected. For a majority of the participating book club members, it was their first experience with audio books, she said. And none of the clubs had ever planned a discussion based on the audio version of a book.

“These are devoted readers, serious book club members,” Hargadon said. “They all seemed open to the experience.”

No doubt the appetite for audio books is strong. **Audio Publishers Association**, an industry group, reported recently that sales for audio book “units” — CDs and digital downloads — increased 4.7 percent in 2009. But the effects of the recession plus discounted prices reduced overall revenue. Still, consumers and libraries spent nearly \$1 billion on audio books last year. It’s estimated recorded books account for 5 to 6 percent of the total book market.

Steinert said everyone in the group liked the audio idea, although one member started listening to the recording and disliked the experience so much she decided instead to read the book on her iPad.

Steinert found out about the audio opportunity through Reading Group Choices, a website and newsletter.

Most of the women had had some experience with audio books. Several with children had listened to the award-winning Harry Potter recordings.

The discussion went on longer than usual, Steinert said, and it started with an assessment of the reader, Campbell Scott. Nobody liked him. He lacked expression overall, they thought, and his character voices weren't distinctive.

"When he did the female voices, it was kind of awkward," Steinert said.

Members were less than enthralled with the two main characters in "The Abstinence Teacher." They tried to assess whether their dissatisfaction with the narration colored their views of the characters and the story.

One upside of the audio book, which ran 10 1/2 hours, was that the women could listen while accomplishing other tasks, including house cleaning and walking. Several downloaded the audio recording onto their music players.

A downside for busy people: It wasn't easy to pick up and put down — like a book — for short periods.

"Nobody felt you could do that with the audio," Steinert said. "You needed a stretch of time."

Steinert's sister, Laurie Smith of Lee's Summit, was taking a vacation trip to France just before the meeting. She bought an inexpensive music player and, being "on the tail end of technology," she said, had her 12-year-old daughter download the recording. Smith listened to most of it on the return flight.

"It reminded me that this is a good option," she said. "I could see listening to an audio book that the kids and I would like, sitting out on the porch. I think they would find that relaxing at the end of the night."

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