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Lend me your ears: Audio books

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Audio books are popular for a variety of reasons. Not only are customers drawn to them for their traditional *raison d'être* — [as an aid for the blind](#) -- but also because they help book lovers stay current on their reading even as they do housework or make the dreaded daily commute to work (not to mention filling the long hours of family road trips this summer).

Audio books “help maximize my reading time,” explains Jen Forbus at [Devourer of Books](#), which hosted an Audio Book Week in June. She sums up a widespread viewpoint: “Before, time spent driving, knitting, washing dishes, folding clothes ... was all wasted reading time.... [Now] I can consume more books as I’m doing a whole variety of activities that don’t allow me to hold a book in front of my face.”

[Sunday's book coverage](#) scratched the surface on this topic, and Publishers Weekly [has surveyed an enormous number of new and forthcoming audio titles](#) catering to every reader's taste and preference, and that means *every* taste. Not only are there familiar favorites like new Michael Connelly or Jonathan Franzen novels, but also timely (and unexpected) ones. Example: A new audio title "Spirituality and the Oil Spill" comes from Marianne Williamson: The spirituality author takes her New Age insights and shows people affected by the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster how to use the 12-step recovery to heal.

PW's coverage also points out something else: Though audio books are extremely popular, that market has been affected by the economy, just like every other segment of publishing. PW directs readers to [a report from the Audio Publishers Assn.](#), pointing out that, despite APA's optimistic declaration — “Audiobook sales increase in 2009” — profits have been undercut by digital downloads. Downloads, [writes Rachel Deahl](#), “which are historically cheaper than CDs, are rising to create higher unit sales, but less money is coming in.”

It's understandably disappointing news for audio manufacturers, but isn't there still an upside? Audio CDs can get very expensive: If you can't get a retail discount for, say, a box set of Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point," "Blink" and "Outliers," the list price is \$79.98, compared to picking up the three paperbacks for about \$50. So isn't it good that consumers, thanks to downloads, are still getting a cheaper way to read as they do the dishes?

-- Nick Owchar

