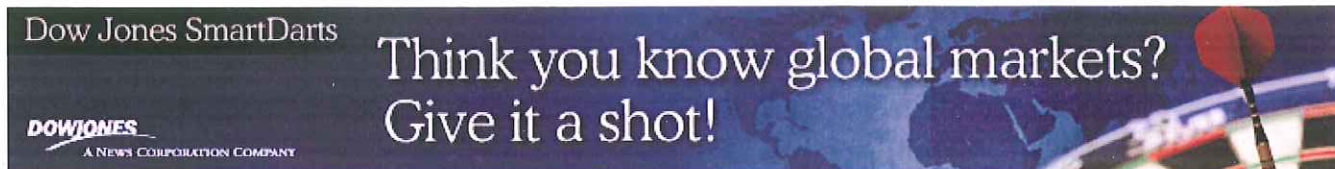


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At the Audies: Judging a Book by Its Narrator

By MARSHALL HEYMAN



Performer Barbara Rosenblat with Edward Hermann.

Astrid Stawiarz for The Wall Street Journal

As BookExpo America was getting under way Tuesday night at the Javits Center, uptown, at the Museum of the City of New York, the Audio Publishers Association, a nonprofit trade organization whose "primary goals are to promote awareness of the audiobook industry," was busy announcing the winners of the Audie awards in 30 categories at a black-tie-optional event.

Hundreds of people gathered on the museum's terrace to eat sweet potato empanadas and lobster ravioli. "Last year people said there wasn't enough food, so that's why we got pasta," explained Janet Benson, president of the APA.



Actress Octavia Spencer.

Astrid Stawiarz for The Wall Street Journal

Nominees wore large medals around their necks; judges wore white ribbons on their lapels. Categories included Romance, Business/Educational and Inspirational/Faith-Based. One of the more heated races was in Spanish Language, which pit "La Audacia de la Esperanza" by Barack Obama against "Por Que Ese Idiota Es Rico Y Yo No?" by Robert Shemin. (The unexpected winner: "La Traversia de Enrique" by Sonia Nazario.)

"I judged children's books," said Susan Fichtelberg, a librarian from New Jersey. "I listened to six or seven. They were shorter, but they're not that short."

"Kids' books aren't short anymore. Harry Potter! Hello!" said Shari Fesko, a librarian from Michigan. "I did the humor category. It was a little out of my comfort zone. There was so much swearing, but that was fun."

"This grew from a small event 15 years ago," explained Craig Black, the handsome but rumpled founder of Blackstone Audio whose Oregon-based company was nominated

for 14 Audies. "I'll be happy if we win two. This is the Oscars of the audiobook industry."

Of course, every Oscars has its Meryl Streep. Tuesday night that was Barbara Rosenblat, nominated for five audiobooks. "If you're ever against Barbara Rosenblat you don't really have a chance," noted one spoken word performer. Her range is astounding: She won for both "Anne Frank Remembered" and "Louise, the Adventures of a Chicken."



Astrid Stawiarz for The Wall Street Journal
Radio personalities Steve Lanford and Gary Dell'Abate.

During the cocktail hour, Ms. Rosenblat snacked on canapés with five nomination medals around her neck. She said she has done "probably 400 titles." "It allows me to stretch as an actor," Ms. Rosenblat explained. "When you do an audiobook, it's like having a child. I have to know the entire audio canvas. I have to know my arc and the engine."

As guests traveled to a basement room for the actual awards presentation, the emcee for the evening, Gary Dell'Abate of Howard Stern fame insisted his presence was not at all incongruous. (Mr. Dell'Abate also goes by "Baba Booeey.") "I was an early adaptor to audiobooks," he explained. "I used to say on-air that I read a book, and they would say, 'No you didn't, you listened to it.'"

Mr. Dell'Abate said that he was a big fan of the audio version of the novel "The Help," which took the evening's big award: Distinguished Achievement in Production. The author, Kathryn Stockett, the actress Octavia Spencer, who will also star in the film version which starts shooting in July, and the actress and writer Jenna Lamia were on hand to accept. (Ms. Lamia did so in her prom dress from 16 years ago. "Tonight was better," she said. "I had mono then.")

When Mr. Dell'Abate encountered Ms. Lamia for the first time, he couldn't help himself. "I'm looking at you and I think, 'I know that voice,'" Mr. Dell'Abate whispered to her. "But you must get that all the time."

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