

Hail to the Spoken Word

The Pop of King defends the genre, recommends his 10 favorites, and asks to see your top picks

by Stephen King
November 3, 2006
Entertainment Weekly

Some critics — the always tiresome Harold Bloom among them — claim that listening to audiobooks isn't reading. I couldn't disagree more. In some ways, audio perfects reading. One friend of mine likes to tell the story of how she got so involved in Blair Brown's reading of Sue Miller's *Lost in the Forest* that she missed her turnpike exit and ended up in Boston. Another swears he never really "got" Elmore Leonard until he listened to Arliss Howard reading *The Hot Kid* and heard the mixed rhythm of the dialogue and narration.

The book purists argue for the sanctity of the page and the perfect communion of reader and writer, with no intermediary. They say that if there's something you don't understand in a book, you can always go back and read it again (these seem to be people so technologically challenged they've never heard of rewind, or can't find the back button on their CD players). Bloom has said that "Deep reading really demands the inner ear...that part of you which is open to wisdom. You need the text in front of you." Here is a man who has clearly never listened to a campfire story.

There are problems with audiobooks, sure. It's annoying to be on a long road trip when disc 12 of the latest Nelson DeMille has a nervous breakdown (this actually happened to me in North Carolina; somewhere between *Nowhere* and *Nowhere in Particular*, the reader, Scott Brick, developed the world's worst stutter). It's more annoying when a bad reader is paired up with a good book (a fate that has befallen every audio junkie at least once). Most annoying is when you have a certain book in mind and can't find it at a retail outlet, a thing that happens a lot. Once you get past the classics, the latest political bloviators, and Agatha Christie, audio pickings are apt to be mighty slim.

Worst of all? Abridgments. I hate abridgments. Abridgments should be outlawed. No, I take that back. Abridgments should be taken out and hung from the nearest lamppost. Why reputable and otherwise sane writers who labor for years on a book allow them to be snipped up by audio editors to fit a four- or six-CD format mystifies me. It's not as if the audio market generates billions, and the resulting chop-shop jobs go a long way toward justifying the critics' opinions. They're literary Diet Coke.

But man, when these things are good, they are really good. A Charles Dickens novel read by the late David Case is something you can almost bathe in. A suspense novel is more suspenseful — especially in the hands of a good reader — because your eye can't jump ahead and see what happens next. When I heard Kathy Bates reading *The Silence of the Lambs* (an abridgment, alas), I was driving at night and had to shut off the CD player, even though I knew how the story went. It was her voice, so low and intimate and somehow knowing. It was flat creeping me out.

I knew even better how the short story "1408" went, because I not only wrote it, I recorded it. Still, I wasn't prepared for the scream of trumpets the director had added at the very end of the story. My pulse rate spiked and I tore the headphones off my ears. That was a true sting.

There's this, too: Audio is merciless. It exposes every bad sentence, half-baked metaphor, and lousy word choice. (Listen to a Tom Clancy novel on CD, and you will never, ever read another. You'll never be able to look at another one without gibbering.) I can't remember ever reading a piece of work and wondering how it would look up on the silver screen, but I always wonder how it will sound. Because, all apologies to Mr. Bloom, the spoken word is the acid test. They don't call it storytelling for nothing.

One last thought for the audio critics: If ever there was an argument for audio as the perfect medium when it comes to novels and stories, it's Ron Silver's reading of the Pulitzer-winning *American Pastoral*. (That's why it ranks No. 1 on my top 10 all-time list, below. If you're an audio junkie, you may passionately disagree with my picks. If so, please fire away with your own on the message board that follows the list. Your Uncle Stevie's like *Homeland Security*: He's always listening.) This is what happens when a prodigiously talented, fully invested reader really "gets" sublimely written material. Silver delivers "Swede" Levov's story with a passion and a tenderness that only the spoken word can convey.

Listening to something like that, anyone might overshoot their exit.

KING'S TOP 10 AUDIOBOOKS

1. *American Pastoral*
Philip Roth (Read by Ron Silver)
2. *Lonesome Dove*
Larry McMurtry (Read by Wolfram Kandinsky)
3. *The Harry Potter novels*
J.K. Rowling (Read by Jim Dale)
4. *That Old Ace in the Hole*
Annie Proulx (Read by Arliss Howard)
5. *Back When We Were Grownups*
Anne Tyler (Read by Blair Brown)
6. *Enduring Love*
Ian McEwan (Read by Steven Crossley)
7. *Aubrey/Maturin novels*
Patrick O'Brian (Read by Patrick Tull)
8. *Angela's Ashes*
Frank McCourt (Read by Frank McCourt)
9. *Oryx and Crake*
Margaret Atwood (Campbell Scott)
10. *American Gods*
Neil Gaiman (George Guidall)

***Also, check out the reader posts at the bottom of the online feature for more mentions of our titles: http://www.ew.com/ew/article/commentary/0%2C6115%2C1551492_5_0_%2C00.html