

Hear ye, hear ye: That's the job of an Audies judge

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Everyone hears plenty about the award programs for movies, television, theater and music: Oscars, Emmys, Tonys and Grammys. The Audies recognize a less common entertainment medium: audiobooks.

The Audio Publishers Association, a nonprofit trade organization based in McLean, Va., will announce the best audiobooks in 28 categories, along with the Audiobook of the Year, at a gala affair May 19 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

As an Audie award judge, I'm invited.

Co-worker and fellow judge Marty Crisp recommended me for this gig some years ago, and I'm grateful she did. Judging has really stretched my "reading" range. And driving any distance without an audiobook now seems like a waste of time to me, even if we're going to Disney World.

So I've clamped on the headphones and spent the weeks from November to February listening to such categories as "Fiction, Abridged"; "Classic"; "Humor"; and, this year, "Non-Fiction, Unabridged." Like the majority of listeners, I prefer my audiobooks unabridged.

First-round judging is really time-consuming; there are enough entries to produce a serious earache, I learned in the early years. But thanks to some brave souls (with cauliflower ears, no doubt), final judging is a breeze. They come up with the five best audiobooks for slackers like me to listen to and rank. Of course, different judges consider the preliminary and final rounds in each category. I'm always gratified when my picks are winners. I never know who



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the other judges are in my category, so there's no collusion.

"We have a pool of about 150 judges we drawn from each year," said judge chair Traci Cothran in an e-mail. "The group is comprised of journalists and book/audio reviewers, retailers, librarians, distributors, academics and industry professionals who are not actively employed by a publisher."

"This year's competition has been fierce," she added. "We had over 700 entries, which is about 150 more than usual. I haven't tallied up the exact number of 'extra' hours we listened, but it was easily 1,000 and probably closer to 2,000!"

My five semifinalists totaled around 76 hours this year. The shortest was Douglas Brinkley's "The Boys of Pointe du Hoc" (revisiting a World War II battle) at six hours, and the longest was Kurt Eichenwald's "Conspiracy of Fools" (laying out the Enron scandal) at 30.5 hours.

That's one big reason I wear headphones on nearly all my walks around the neighborhood. They're connected to my son's disc player, shoved deep inside my pocket.

Even on short trips, books blast from my car stereo; anyone who wanted to ride with me recently had to listen to

a chapter or two of Al Franken's "The Truth (With Jokes)," regardless of personal politics.

I have a CD player on the kitchen counter so I can listen to British-accented author Simon Winchester read "A Crack in the Edge of the World" (on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake) while I boil pasta and iron pillow cases.

And not only am I taking in Thomas L. Friedman's theory on why "The World Is Flat," I'm considering its suitability for audio presentation, the appropriateness of the narrator's vocal characteristics to the topic, the pace of the recording, the quality of the sound engineering — and a dozen other fine points of audio production.

My reward? The audiobooks themselves, which end up as donations to local public and school libraries. But there's also that sense of self-importance I suspect all judges must feel.

Best of all, though, is the sound of silence after I've cast my ballot.

To check out all the finalists for The Audies 2006 Competition, visit www.audiopub.org. Excerpts from new audiobooks and reviews of them are at www.audiopolis.com/audiopolis/.