



AudioBooks: The New Sound of Comics

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Given the trend to franchise intellectual property in different media—from movies and TV to the Internet and books—it is no wonder that the superhero genre is turning up in the form of audiobooks. Indeed the Bethesda, Md., Audiobook producer Graphic Audio released an audiobook production of DC Comics' crossover series Infinite Crisis in June and has just released an audiobook version of 52: The Audiobook, Part 1, DC's groundbreaking weekly comics series from 2006.

Anji Cornette, marketing and sales director at Graphic Audio, www.graphicaudio.net/default.aspx, declined to give exact sales figures, but said that the audiobook version of DC's Infinite Crisis series has been "very well received." Cornette also told PWCW that while the company produces all of its audiobook titles in-house, "DC Comics has final say on production."

Audio dramatizations of the Superman saga aren't new. DC Comics has never hesitated to explore all avenues of storytelling with Superman. Within the first few years of his first appearance in 1938, Superman had appeared in comic books, comic strips, a book, a series of cartoon shorts and a radio show. More recently in the 1990s, the BBC produced *The Death and Life of Superman*, which was released in the United States through Time Warner Audiobooks (now Hachette Audio). Despite a first-rate production—replete with full-cast dramatizations, sound effects and musical scores—the title received scant attention in the audiobook industry, never mind among comic book readers and retailers. *Batman: Knightfall* and *Kingdom Come* also followed with little notice.

However, by the early 2000s comics-related titles dominated the movie box office, and comic book novelizations had gained popularity as well. Audiobook sales were also rising quickly. The Audio Publishers Association reported more than \$800 million in audiobook sales in 2004, and by 2006, the industry reached over \$920 million in sales.

Some comics-related audiobook titles of the past few years have had a somewhat tenuous connection to their comic book counterparts, which has likely hurt sales. *V for Vendetta* audiobook was based on the novelization of the movie, which in turn was based on the comic book. But both *V for Vendetta* (narrated by the award-winning veteran reader Simon Vance) and the audiobook novelization of *Superman Returns* (narrated by Scott Brick) were fortunate enough to be simultaneously released along with the book and the movie, cashing in nicely on the media attention.

Independent audiobook producers have taken the lead in licensing and producing works for the superhero market. "The choice to do a graphic novel really depends on the quality of writing," explained Haila Williams, acquisitions editor for Blackstone Audio www.blackstoneaudio.com, the independent audiobook producer that released *V for Vendetta* and *Superman Returns*. Williams's comment also meant that Blackstone expects the book to appeal to adults, the company's primary demographic. In 2006 Blackstone Audio released an audiobook version of *It's Superman*:

A Novel by Tom De Haven (also narrated by Brick), which recounts the early life of Superman and his move to Metropolis in the 1930s.

Williams emphasized the importance of tie-ins with major movie and prose book releases, emphasizing that this has proven to be critical to sales of Blackstone's audiobook titles. Blackstone Audio reported initial orders of more than 11,000 units from large retail vendors for both titles. Despite a significant number of returns, Williams reports steady sales in the form of digital audiobooks purchased and downloaded through Audible.com.

Tantor Media www.tantor.com, an audiobook producer in Connecticut, is also looking to exploit comics-related titles, releasing *The Last Days of Krypton* by Kevin J. Anderson this month, which features another award-winning audiobook narrator, William Dufris. The book reveals the political and personal events surrounding the destruction of Superman's home planet. Laura Colebank, a partner at Tantor Media, said its decision to release the title is tied to Anderson's overall popularity as an author, the general appeal of Superman to the action and adventure crowds and the earlier success of Blackstone's two Superman titles.

SimplyAudiobooks.com, an online audiobook retailer and mailing rental service, reports that more than 60% of its comics-related title rentals have occurred in the past 10 months. While the meaning of this pattern is unclear, it shouldn't surprise anyone that classic superhero sagas have an enthusiastic and devoted following across a variety of media and formats.

From the first Superman radio-dramas, fans have understood that hearing these superheroes can be just as exciting as watching them or reading about them. As independent audiobook publishers like Blackstone, Graphic Audio and Tantor Media test the audiobook market for superhero storytelling, it's very likely that the large trade book houses like Random House and Penguin will soon follow in hot pursuit.