



Listening to Short Takes: Short Stories on Audio

By Beth Farrell - Collection Development, October 1, 2011

What does Eiji Tsuburaya, the special effects creator of Godzilla, have in common with Perry Mason, Sookie Stackhouse, and William Wegman's Weimaraners? They all inhabit outstanding collections of short works tailor-made for the audio format.

It can be argued that suitability for audio is innate for short stories—they have roots in traditional oral storytelling. But short pieces on audio are also a good fit for the busy, workaday, modern world. A short audio piece can provide an excellent distraction from the hustle and bustle of a morning commute or a sweaty half hour on the elliptical machine.

In his October 2008 essay for the New York Times, "The Ambition of the Short Story," Steven Millhauser writes, "The novel buys up the land, cuts down the trees, puts up condos. The short story scampers across a lawn, squeezes under a fence." Along with the nimble short story, this article will discuss original short audio recordings including essays, radio programs, and audio dramatizations.

The 15-year-old Audie Awards, or Audies, an annual competition recognizing excellence in the audiobook and spoken-word formats sponsored by the Audio Publishers Association (APA), give short format works their due. An award for the year's best audiobook in the "Short Stories, Essays and Collections" category has been presented since 2000, while 2003 saw the first nod to the Audio Drama, a category that regularly features short works. In 2010, a short story collection, Nelson Mandela's Favorite African Folktales, was named Audiobook of the Year.

Sourcing the stories

Librarians will have no trouble finding excellent short works on audio from most of the major trade and library audio publishers. Many of the collections offered are available on CD and as digital downloads.

Blackstone Audiobooks has traditionally produced a very strong collection of Westerns, sf/fantasy, and classic short stories. AudioGO (formerly BBC Audiobooks America) has a wide selection of quality contemporary and classic short stories, as well as a great selection of short works with full-cast dramatizations. Naxos Audiobooks features an array of short story sets from many classic authors; all of its excellent productions include classical music. Recorded Books has a great listing of short story collections by classic and modern masters of the genre. It recently launched "RB Shorts," a new imprint and continuous order plan featuring individual short stories packaged separately. While the short stories are of excellent quality and production, many of them were

released in earlier collections, so librarians planning to purchase "RB Shorts" should check their holdings first.

Original radio programs are an essential subset of short works on audio. Selected Shorts, a weekly live radio show produced by Symphony Space and WNYC radio and broadcast on over 130 stations by Public Radio International, features themed episodes in which great actors from the stage, screen, and television read several stories (classic and/or contemporary). Librarians can order collections of these programs through Selected Shorts or from major jobbers. BBC Radio programs (available from AudioGO), Colonial Radio Theatre (available from Brilliance Audio), and Hollywood Theater of the Year (available from Blackstone) are other award-winning audio drama series. L.A. Theatre Works has made a name for itself with multivoiced live audio dramatizations that feature established film and television actors.

HighBridge Audio is an excellent source for award-winning short pieces that originally aired on National Public Radio (NPR). Librarians can purchase collections of episodes from popular programs such as Car Talk, Wait Wait... Don't Tell Me, and Fresh Air with Terry Gross, or themed collections of pieces originating on different radio programs, including NPR American Chronicles (The Civil War; World War II) and Driveway Moments (Baseball, Dog Tales).

Life-changers

In his introduction to Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules, an outstanding short story collection that he edited, David Sedaris describes short stories as potential life-changers: "A good one would take me out of myself and stuff me back in, outsized, now, and uneasy with the fit." Many of the short stories and other short works included here are transformative in the way Sedaris describes, while others are just plain entertaining. Be sure to catch them before they squeeze under that fence!

Audiobooks designated with a star (*) are considered essential library purchases.

Single Author

Andersen, Hans Christian. Fairy Tales. 11 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 13 hrs. Books on Tape. 2005. ISBN 9780307245908. \$75; digital download.

Audie winners Kate Reading and Richard Matthews (aka Simon Vance) take turns reading Andersen's magical fairy tales.

Archer, Jeffrey. And Thereby Hangs a Tale. 6 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 7½ hrs. AudioGO. 2010. ISBN 9780792773108. \$59.95; retail ed. Macmillan Audio; digital download.

Archer's latest short fiction crosses many genres, but all feature his trademark clever plots and engaging characters, brought to life by Audie winner Gerard Doyle.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Canterbury Tales. tr. by Burton Raffel. 18 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 22½ hrs. AudioGO. 2008. ISBN 9780792756507. \$64.95; retail ed. 2 MP3-CDs; digital download.

This unabridged edition features some of the BBC's best narrators giving voice to the outrageous personalities of Chaucer's motley crew of medieval pilgrims. Essential.

("Audiobook Oldies but Goodies")

Cheever, John. The John Cheever Collection. 6 CDs. retail ed. unabridged. 6½ hrs. Harper Audio. 2009. ISBN 9780061965357. \$14.99.

A dozen Cheever shorts are read by Meryl Streep, Peter Gallagher, George Plimpton, and others. A steal at this price.

Christie, Agatha. The Essential Agatha Christie Stories. 12 CDs. retail ed. unabridged. 15 hrs. AudioGO. 2009. ISBN 9781602836631. \$49.95.

Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, and other clever sleuths crack cases in this thoroughly enjoyable collection of Christie's short mysteries, with delightful performances by narrators including David Suchet and Joan Hickson (TV's Poirot and Miss Marple). Volume 2 is due in October 2011.

Conan Doyle, Sir Arthur. The Complete Sherlock Holmes. 60 CDs. retail ed. unabridged. 73 hrs. Naxos Audio. 2009. ISBN 9789626349786. \$250; digital download.

Not only does David Timson offer superlative performances of the 56 short stories and five novels featuring Holmes and Watson, he also has written a booklet that contains comprehensive notes on each story. Smaller packages of Timson's brilliant performances are available.

Fallon, Siobhan. You Know When the Men Are Gone. 5 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 5½ hrs. Tantor Audio. 2011. ISBN 9781452630380. \$71.99; retail ed. 1 MP3-CD; Playaway digital; digital download.

Debut author Fallon, who lived at Fort Hood, TX, while her husband was deployed, offers a gripping collection of loosely interconnected short stories that explore how women cope when their husbands are sent off to war. A solid performance by veteran narrator Cassandra Campbell adds poignancy. (LJ 5/15/11)

Gardner, Erle Stanley. Perry Mason and the Case of the Velvet Claws: A Radio Dramatization. 2 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 2 hrs. Brilliance Audio. 2011. ISBN 9781611064711. \$39.97; retail ed.; digital download.

The Colonial Radio Theatre, based in Boston, here presents these fast-paced titles in the Perry Mason series; fun for mystery fans as well as Golden Age of radio devotees.

Harris, Charlaine. A Touch of Dead: Sookie Stackhouse; The Complete Stories. 3 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 3½ hrs. Recorded Books. 2009. ISBN 9781440776274. \$19.95; retail ed. Recorded Bks.; 1 MP3-CD; Playaway digital; digital download.

Fans of HBO's True Blood will find narrator Johanna Parker pitch perfect as telepathic cocktail waitress Sookie Stackhouse. (Look for a new Sookie adventure in Brilliance Audio's new Home Improvement: Undead Edition).

Hemingway, Ernest. The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories. 4 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 5 hrs. Recorded Books. 2008. ISBN 9781436152136. \$29.75; Playaway digital.

It is simply a delight to hear Stacy Keach read the poignant, beautifully simplistic prose in these ten unforgettable tales from a master craftsman of American short fiction.

Hill, Joe. 20th Century Ghosts. 11 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 12½ hrs. Books on Tape. 2008. ISBN 9781415945971. \$100; retail ed. HarperAudio; digital download.

David Ledoux's straightforward, precise narration builds the perfect atmosphere for

these imaginative tales. Hill's delightfully creepy collection received the 2008 Audie Award for Short Stories/Essays/Collections.

Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. 7 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 8 hrs. Caedmon. 2005. ISBN 9780060789565. \$39.95.

A contender for the finest short story collection ever written, the lyrical beauty of Joyce's writing is enhanced on audio.

King, Stephen. *Full Dark, No Stars*. 12 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 14 hrs. Recorded Bks. 2010. ISBN 9781449819378. \$123.75; 2 MP3-CDs; retail ed. S. & S. Audio; Playaway digital; digital download.

King, a modern master of short fiction, offers four disturbing but unforgettable novellas that explore our capacity for retribution. Narrators Craig Wasson and Jessica Hecht bring these psychological chillers to life. (LJ 3/15/11)

Kipling, Rudyard. *Just So Stories*. 1 CD. retail ed. unabridged. 70 min. Harper Audio. 2005. ISBN 9780060788827. \$13.95.

Kipling's beloved collection of children's stories (adults will enjoy them, too) are read to perfection by Boris Karloff.

L'Amour, Louis. *Big Country*. Vol. 4. 4 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 4 hrs. Blackstone Audio. 2010. ISBN 9781441766120. \$30; retail ed. 1 MP3-CD; digital download.

You don't have to be a hard-core fan of Westerns to enjoy the rousing performances by Mark Bramhall and Tom Weiner in this latest release in Blackstone's L'Amour series.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *Wild Nights! Stories About the Last Days of Poe, Dickinson, Twain, James, and Hemingway*. 6 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 7½ hrs. Books on Tape. 2008. ISBN 9781415954195. \$80.

You can't go wrong with any of Oates's short fiction, but you shouldn't miss this exceptional collection, ably narrated by Mark Deakins, which includes the imaginative, creepy accounts of the final days of five American authors, slyly paying homage to them by emulating their styles.

Parker, Dorothy. *The Dorothy Parker Audio Collection*. 6 CDs. retail ed. unabridged. 5½ hrs. Harper Audio. 2004. ISBN 9780060597894. \$25.60; 1 MP3-CD.

Narrators ranging from Shirley Booth (unbelievably good) to Alfre Woodard tackle a bevy of Parker's top shorts.

Sedaris, David. *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk: A Modest Bestiary*. 3 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 3 hrs. Hachette Audio. 2010. ISBN 9781607889311. \$39.99; retail ed.; Playaway digital; digital download.

David Sedaris is not for everyone, but his many fans will enjoy this hilarious, albeit vulgar, collection of morality stories enacted by animals (think Aesop for grown-ups!) Elaine Stritch, Dylan Baker, and Siân Phillips join Sedaris in reading this quirky, sardonic collection. Don't miss the PDFs of the book's illustrations by Ian Falconer. (LJ 2/1/11)

Shakespeare, William. *Great Historical Shakespeare Recordings and a Miscellany*. 2 CDs. retail ed. selections. 2 hrs. Naxos Audio. 2000. ISBN 9789626342008. \$17.98; digital download.

Naxos offers many excellent recordings of the Bard, but the breathtaking array of

legendary performers—from Sarah Bernhardt to Laurel and Hardy to John Gielgud—makes this title, which includes performances from the beginning of the recording era, very special.

Shepard, Jim. *You Think That's Bad*. 7 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 7¾ hrs. AudioGO. 2011. ISBN 9780792776529. \$59.95; digital download.

Bronson Pinchot deftly performs Shepard's collection of high-concept, exhilarating stories, with its kaleidoscopic cast of characters ranging from a hydraulics engineer to a depraved murderer to the creator of Godzilla. (LJ 6/15/11)

Updike, John. *My Father's Tears and Other Stories*. 8 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 9 hrs. Brilliance Audio. 2009. ISBN 9781423397939. \$92.97; retail ed.

1 MP3-CD; Playaway digital; digital download.

Updike passed away in 2009, and his final collection of short fiction—beautifully and precisely crafted stories of the American experience—is a lovely farewell gift to be enjoyed by his many fans and those new to the iconic writer. (LJ 11/1/09)

Collections

Black Mask Audio Magazine. Vol. 1. 4 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 4¼ hrs. Blackstone Audio. 2008. ISBN 9781433248504. \$40; 1 MP3-CD; digital download.

Performed by the Hollywood Theater for the Ear and featuring a who's who of top narrators—Richard Allen, Richard Ferrone, Grover Gardner, Anthony Heald, and more—these stories originally appeared in the hard-boiled mystery publication Black Mask. Winner of the 2010 Audie Award for Short Stories/Collections.

Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules. Digital download. 3½ hrs. S & S Audio. 2005. ISBN 9780743551663. \$27.50.

Davis Sedaris demonstrates he is an accomplished storyteller, as well as an author, when he reads Charles Baxter's "Gryphon" in this collection featuring five powerful stories from the longer print collection which Sedaris put together to benefit 826NYC, a nonprofit tutoring center in Brooklyn, NY.

Great Classic Science Fiction. 7 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 7¾ hrs. AudioGO. 2010. ISBN 9780792776239. \$64.95; retail ed. AudioGO; digital download.

Star-studded cast including Barbara Rosenblat, Scott Brick, and Simon Vance delivers spot-on performances in this fun selection of stories by award-winning sf authors H.G. Wells, Phillip K. Dick, Andre Norton, and many more.

Nelson Mandela's Favorite African Folktales. 3 CDs. retail ed. unabridged. 3 hrs. Hachette Audio. 2009. ISBN 9781600246661. \$16.98; digital download.

Mandela's beautiful collection of short fables features universally appealing legends from all over the African continent. Winner of the 2010 Audie for Audiobook of the Year, it offers great performances by a cadre of celebrity narrators including Forest Whitaker, Helen Mirren, and Don Cheadle and outstanding music by Johnny Clegg and Vusi Mahlasela. (LJ 9/1/09)

NPR Driveway Moments: Dog Tales. 2 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 2½ hrs. HighBridge Audio. 2011. ISBN 9781611744002. \$50; retail ed. HighBridge Audio; digital download.

All NPR listeners have "driveway moments"—arrived home they are trapped in their cars until the end of the NPR story. Dog lovers will cherish this collection, just one of the great titles in the "Driveway" series. (*LJ* 9/1/11)

Orson Scott Card's InterGalactic Medicine Show. 10 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 12½ hrs. Blackstone. 2008. ISBN 9781433255878. \$105; 1 MP3-CD; digital download.

Cassandra Campbell and Steven Rudnicki are among the quality performers in this solid, diverse collection of stories first appearing in the online magazine launched by the award-winning author Card. Lots of new authors for scifi/fantasy fans to enjoy.

Selected Shorts: American Classics. 3 CDs. retail ed. unabridged. 3 hrs. Symphony Space. 2010. ISBN 9781934033128. \$28. digital download.

Symphony Space offers many affordable titles showcasing the best established and emerging short fiction writers, performed by stars of stage and screen. These gems include Jerry Stiller's side-splitting performance of John's Sayles's *At the Anarchists' Convention* and René Auberjonois's creepy performance of Poe's classic *The Black Cat*. (*LJ* 6/1/10)

Stories. ed. by Neil Gaiman & Al Sarrantonio. 15 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 18¼ hrs. Sound Library. 2010. ISBN 9780792772736. \$115.95; 2 MP3-CD; Playaway digital; digital download.

Winner of the 2011 Audie for Short Stories/Collections, this genre-bending set features 27 imaginative short stories by A-listers such as Jodi Picoult, Jeffery Deaver, Peter Straub, and Joyce Carol Oates. With outstanding performances by Euan Morton, Katherine Kellgren, and others.

This I Believe II: More Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women. 5 CDs. library ed. unabridged. 5 hrs. AudioGO. 2008. ISBN 9780792756606. \$59.95; retail ed. MacMillan Audio; digital download.

This powerful collection, nominated for an Audie Award in 2009, is a compilation of inspiring essays originally aired on NPR. (*LJ* 11/15/08)

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