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Sound Bites: What titles make good audiobooks and what goes into making them good? To find out, we surveyed some of the best in the business.

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**Michele Cobb/[AudioGO](#)
Vice president, sales and marketing
President, Audio Publishers Association**

When we look at what print titles we want to make into audiobooks, the first consideration is story. Whether fiction or nonfiction, intended for children or adults, an engrossing story is paramount. Adding the right voice makes it unforgettable. A good audiobook marries text to performance, transporting you into the book and making you want more. Good audiobooks don't just encourage listening—they encourage reading.

What makes an audiobook good is when a narrator enhances the text without changing its intention. We pride ourselves on carefully matching the voice to the text. Again, this comes from the story itself. It is a narrator's ability to affect the nuances of the author's voice that separates the good from the great.

When choosing narrators for Five by Fitzgerald, our upcoming collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald short stories, we knew that Bronson Pinchot and Stephen R. Thorne were equal to the task of interpreting these classics, as they can simultaneously convey the humor and gravitas of Fitzgerald's work, while making the sometimes anachronistic language sound fresh. Likewise, when taking on the narration of Irene Hunt's *Up the Road Slowly*, Jaselyn Blanchard succeeded in bringing life to this seminal work.

**Tim Ditlow/[Brilliance Audio](#)
Vice president**

I would say the driving force behind a good audiobook is passion for the material and the smooth collaboration of everyone involved in the recording process. While any book can be recorded, not every book will make a good audiobook. Whether in print or audio format, a manuscript needs a strong narrative—an innate rhythm that flows. This will compel a master narrator, matched to the text by fine casting, to bring the text to life. And while some narrators can fly solo, it is the rare recording that is not helped immeasurably by having a top director and engineer in the studio. The author's participation throughout the process is key.

A recent example where not only the author, but also his agent and editors worked closely with our production team was *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness. We incorporated the artwork on a bonus CD. Excellent post-production work and proofing is critical as well, and even little details like the music selected for the intro/outro can help add the final touches to a fantastic production. Working with dedicated professionals, driven by a love of the book, results in a recording of exceptional quality.

**Anthony Goff/[Hachette Audio](#)
Publisher director**

What makes a good audiobook is a listening experience that causes you to jump out of your seat or keeps you absolutely stuck to it. A good audiobook can make you miss your subway stop. It can make your blood curdle or your heart jump out of your chest. It can make you laugh or sigh or create an “aha” moment that makes you feel it was worth every minute of listening!

What makes an audiobook good is a publisher who will nurture the work and take the time to ensure that it is properly produced, marketed, and promoted. An audiobook achieves excellence when you have a fantastic story brought to life by wonderful narration, such as Tim Curry’s reading of *Despicable Me* or the full-cast narration of “The Secret” series by Pseudonymous Bosch. In some instances, appropriate sound design pulls listeners further into the story world, such as in the “Beautiful Creatures” series by Kami Gracia and Margaret Stohl. All these elements make an audiobook “the best.”

**Alfred C. Martino/[Listen & Live Audio](#)
President**

I’ve always viewed audiobooks as “entertainment” products—more movie or play than book—marrying the words and vision of an author with the unique interpretation of a narrator. Nearly all are worthy of being in the marketplace, but a portion of these audiobooks are elevated to a true art form, where the listener can’t imagine anyone else as the narrator.

Our “Bloody Jack” series, written by L. A. Meyer and expertly narrated by Katherine Kellgren, stands out as one of our best-reviewed and best-received titles. In each of these epic audiobooks, set in the 19th century, Katy becomes the heroine Jacky Faber, an orphan teen living on the streets of London who dresses as a boy so she can take to the high seas on the HMS Dolphin. Katy employs hundreds of voices—and often sings in those voices—in a myriad of foreign accents, with flair and ebullience that is captivating beyond what is already wonderful literature. That’s what makes for a truly memorable audiobook!

**Rebecca Waugh/[Listening Library](#)
Executive editor**

I think storytelling is the most important quality. When I read a good story that keeps me engrossed, that pulls me in and occasionally surprises me, then I know it will make a good audiobook. But the language is definitely what makes a really great audiobook. I sometimes “listen” to certain paragraphs when I’m reading, and wonder how an actor might interpret them. I thought about this recently when Jim Dale read *The Emerald Atlas* for us. Hearing him read some of the characters, such as the dwarves with a Scottish accent, made them so much funnier than they sounded in my head. The dramatic energy he brings to his narration makes listening a rich experience. Of course, the manuscript itself has to have a richness of characters.

I usually prefer listening to a professional narrator, but on certain occasions, having an author read brings an added dimension. Judy Blume and Jack Gantos are terrific at reading their own words. It all comes back to great storytelling and an expressive narrator—that's what I think makes an audiobook great. Daniel Kraus's *Rotters*, narrated by Kirby Heyborne, is a perfect example of a terrific book that has been made into a great audiobook.

**Robert Allen/[Macmillan Audio](#)
Editorial director**

While all aspects of the production contribute to the listener's experience, what makes an audio good begins with the writing. That is why we spend so much time reading manuscripts from the hundreds of children's titles published each year both from the Macmillan children's publishers and those we receive from agents. And of all those manuscripts, only a small percentage of them become audiobooks. Why do certain titles get selected while others do not? Certainly such factors as the book's print run and audience play a role. But there are times when you read a manuscript and you know immediately that it will work both as a book and as an audiobook. It will have a magical quality and it will be special.

Cinder by Marissa Meyer, scheduled for spring 2012 publication by Feiwel & Friends, re-imagines Cinderella as a cyborg, and the concept was so fresh and so original that I couldn't put it down. I knew immediately that we wanted to publish an audio edition. In some cases an author may be so closely connected with the work that you want him to read it and you hear his voice as you read the manuscript. When Jack Gantos delivered *Dead End in Norvelt*, the book was so personal and so funny that we knew he had to read.

**Melanie Donovan/[Recorded Books](#)
Children's acquisitions editor**

Every good audio has a good book behind it. But first-person narratives—where an engaging character speaks directly to the reader as do Perry in Joe Schreiber's *Au Revoir, Crazy European Chick* and Chloe in *Imaginary Girls* by Nova Ren Suma—are especially well suited to audio. So are fantasies rooted in the oral tradition of legends and fairy tales, like Cinda Chima Williams's "Seven Realms" novels and *A Tale Dark and Grimm* by Adam Gidwitz.

But a good book can only become a good audiobook when you match it with the right narrator, like Johnny Heller, who becomes a gang of middle-grade crime fighters in Michael Buckley's hilarious "N.E.R.D.S" series, and Sisi Aisha Johnson, who perfectly voices Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern in *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia. Some books are better served by multiple narrators. Tom Angleberger's *The Strange Case of Origami Yoda* and *Darth Paper Strikes Back*, for instance, change narrators for each chapter. *Hold Me Closer, Necromancer* by Lish McBride alternates between first- and third-person narratives, so the best choice is two readers. It all comes back to inspiration and perspiration: talented, hardworking narrators and directors are what really make an audiobook good.

**Rebecca Bullene/[Scholastic Audio](#)
Acquisitions editor**

Good audiobooks come from good characters. While a fast-paced plot can make for a fun beach read, it's the books with well-developed characters that make the best recordings. There's something deeply intimate about listening to a story unfold, even more so than reading

it on the page, and finding books with characters that warrant that kind of intimacy is a big part of my job. The characters have to be well written and complex enough that someone will want to listen for three or six or ten hours through to the end to hear their story.

As to what makes an audiobook good, the key is pairing the right narrator with the right book. The audios that really connect with listeners are the ones that are read by talented authors or voice-over artists who know the characters and deliver a personal and honest read. There is an art to good storytelling and the masterpieces of the audiobook world are all recordings of great books read by great voices. An example of this is Libba Bray's recently released *Beauty Queens*. It's a masterful read that's equal parts funny and poignant. Libba took what was already an exceptionally well-written book and added even more hilarity with her narration to make an audiobook that is just pure fun.

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