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[Sunday Book Review](#)

The Mind's Ear

By James Parker - November 25, 2011

Morning commute in America. "I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts. Then I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. . . ." At the wheel of her Subaru, driving east on (perhaps) the Massachusetts Turnpike, a woman is afloat on, adrift in, the Germanic guru-tones of Eckhart Tolle. Raw winter light irradiates the car, fixing every scratch on the windshield in a constellation of worldly damage, and Tolle's voice — deep but somewhat nasal, as if he has a tiny Jedi Master lodged in his sinuses — snuffles spiritually from the speakers. "I could feel myself being sucked into a void. . . . Suddenly there was no more fear."

Audiobooks are on the rise. Purchasable, downloadable, borrowable from the library, they are making ever deeper inroads into what publishers persist in calling (with touching optimism) "the book market": a recent article by Peter Osnos on The Atlantic Web site parsed the sales data in anticipation of a "coming audiobooks boom." There's something lovely about this. At the very moment the poor old book-object dissolves before our eyes, pecked to pieces by the angry birds of Kindle, iPad and the rest, we are renewing our primary contract with the author by offering him our ears. We offer them intimately — in the car, in the kitchen, or in bed, on headphones, the sleeping spouse-form heavily at hand while poetry or fiction or New Age consolation is piped directly into our cranial darkness. The voice of Eckhart Tolle, well known to the millions of hungry souls who have purchased audio versions of "The Power of Now" or "A New Earth," is but a strand of the Voice, that human frequency without which, it seems, we cannot do.

It feels banal to observe that the voice is older than the printed word, and has a senior claim upon our attention. So banal, in fact, that I'm going to leave it to Oscar Wilde. "Since the introduction of printing," he wrote in "The Critic as Artist," "there has been a tendency in literature to appeal more and more to the eye, and less and less to the ear which is really the sense which, from the standpoint of pure art, it should seek to please, and by whose canons of pleasure it should abide always." Wilde's own interface with audio technology is historically shrouded: did he or did he not, at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900, recite part of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" into the recording horn of one of Thomas Edison's phonographs? Biographers are unclear. Half a century would pass before Dylan Thomas, quivering Celtic super-ham, sealed the compact between literature and the microphone with a 1952 session for Caedmon Records. Some poems, some shaken jowls, and the literary celebrity spoken-word recording was born. Three years after that, Caedmon's engineers captured T. S. Eliot reading "Preludes": "The thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted. . . ." Morose, incantatory — how does one begin to describe Eliot's style on the mic? Anglo-Golgothan, maybe.

The "talking book" had already been in existence for a couple of decades, its development powered by the American Foundation for the Blind. The blind, naturally, have a particular interest in the utterance of books. A blind friend of mine makes frequent use in her reading of text-to-speech technology, whereby the words she summons to her computer screen are recited

aloud in an uninflected automated-banking robo-voice. She claims to prefer this voice, for all its flatness and occasional glitchiness, to the conventional huffings and puffings of some great Narrator. "It mispronounces a ton of stuff," she tells me, "but I don't care, because I'm getting the information in a way that's most analogous to reading the printed word. You can learn a lot of things from a narrator's voice, but that interpretation belongs to the narrator. With a synthesized voice there's no interpretation."

On the other hand, my friend is gaga for Rob Inglis's one-man-band 1990 recording of "Lord of the Rings" ("Deep!" she says. "Flawless!") in which Inglis merrily interprets slimy Gollum, booming Tom Bombadil, the whole crew. Certain audiobook interpretations are irresistible: the syrupy cunning of Will Patton, for example, as he pads through the erotic wormholes of Nicholson Baker's "Fermata," or the conversational, unemphatic (and genuinely bardic, perhaps) approach of Seamus Heaney to his own translation of "Beowulf." And then there's my very favorite audiobook: "The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold," read by Michael Cochrane. Evelyn Waugh's 1957 novel, if you haven't read it (and even if you have), is an appallingly funny three-quarters autobiographical account of a mental breakdown suffered on board a cruise ship. The blimpish Mr. Pinfold is besieged and bombarded in his cabin by auditory hallucinations: dogs, jazz, church services, malign engineers from the BBC. His psyche, in effect, is engaged in the production of its own rogue audiobook. Cochrane's delivery is merciless — crisply absurd, squeezed from the upper chest, like Kafka being read by Nigel Bruce. It's a performance, for me, now inseparable from the text. I read Waugh, and I hear Cochrane.

And where do I hear him? Why, in my mind's ear — the invisible tympanum against which every sentence must be tested. There's a kind of species honesty involved in the act of giving voice to the written word. Writers will tell you that nothing lays bare the flaws and falsities of a passage like reading it aloud. And there is liberation, too. Children will tell you that being read to frees them up, licenses their imaginations, unhooks them from the fussy horizontal crawl of the printed page.

I sorrow for "the book market": already the freshest and flashiest hardcovers are giving off wafts of redundancy, like mass-market paperbacks from the '70s. I'll miss the book-object. But then I remember that I have "Ravens," by George Dawes Green, coiled deep in my iPod like a song or a spell, and all is well.

James Parker writes the Entertainment column for The Atlantic.

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