

An Art Utterly Changed

The art of narration, then and now

by Aurelia C. Scott

For this installment of *AudioFile* magazine's anniversary celebration, we asked several producers and directors to tell us what they've witnessed and what lies ahead for the sound of audiobooks. Their consensus? Twenty years ago is so yesterday.

▶ "Back in the day, audiobook recordings were more institutional sounding," says Anthony Goff, publisher, director for Hachette Audio. "They were more like classroom lectures." He offers a wry laugh. "Hopefully, good classroom lectures."

"Audiobooks sounded the way they did because they were more derivative of the book," explains producer Paul Ruben, who owns Tribeca Audio, a production and casting company. "They weren't necessarily bad. They were simply viewed as a book read aloud, emphasis on *book*." In other words, it was a practical solution for those who couldn't read in the regular way—such as car-bound drivers and the blind.

"Narrators used to be hired," Grover Gardner's voice drops to its most sonorous, "because of their mature authoritative sound."

Grover Gardner, who started his career with the Library of Congress's Recording for the Blind program, is now Blackstone Audio's studio director. "Years ago in the commercial market, our target audience was the middle-aged white businessman who did a lot of driving," says Gardner. "The detached-sounding read was the goal, in part because it was thought that listeners preferred it. You weren't supposed to get too involved or too dramatic. 'Read the book nicely and

clearly.' Narrators used to be hired," his voice drops to its most sonorous, "because of their mature authoritative sound." He switches to Brooklyn-ese, as he adds, "No accents."

How true, agrees Nicolas Soames, who produces the classics list at Naxos AudioBooks in London, and says that 20 to 30 years ago in England, narrators had to sound traditional. "I might even say 'posh.' Never would you have had today's recordings with their more relaxed sound. We are hearing things now that you never would have heard before." Strong emotions, differentiated voices, narrators with regional accents, female narrators.

Audiobooks are no longer just books read out loud, says Goff. "They have become a separate and legitimate type of entertainment. They are a dramatic art form. I call them 'movies in the ears.'"

Time, evolving tastes, a growing market and improved technology have all contributed to this transformation. During the past 20 years, thanks in part to *AudioFile*, word has gotten out about audiobooks. More than 75,000 titles are now produced annually to meet the demands of an increasing variety of listeners who are women as well as men, teens and children as well as adults, of many races and ethnic groups, who listen avidly whether in the car or not.

"Listeners live all over the place," says Gardner. "They are more likely to know what a Nebraska or a Chicago or a South L.A. accent sounds like. They want authenticity." In addition, he says, we have become used to a less formal way in interacting. "You can see it in advertising. No longer does an authoritative voice-over command, 'Ladies, buy Tide and your wash will be . . .' Instead, a guy in blue jeans says, 'Hey dude, I love my new Dell computer.' It's called peer-to-peer

advertising—people talking to each other. The same style now rules in audiobooks."

Claudia Howard, who has been producing for Recorded Books since the mid-1980s, believes that audiobooks match the times. "If they had been making audiobooks in 1920 when the acting style was much broader, you'd have heard something altogether different! Or think of what we know of John Wilkes Booth doing Shakespeare—versus Kenneth Branagh. Poles apart."

"Audiobooks have become a separate and legitimate type of entertainment," says Anthony Goff. "I call them 'movies in the ears.'"

Changing technology has also affected the way audiobooks are produced. "In the old days of cutting and splicing tape, I would find editors on their hands and knees amid all these bits of tape looking for another *and* or *but*," chuckles Soames. "I know I cut out a *but* a little while ago. Where is it? Now it's all digital and on computer."

As a result, more books can be produced to meet the demand, which also means more work for the increasing number of actors who want to become narrators. "Stage actors, in particular, love this work because, unlike the theater, in an audiobook they get to play every part," Howard says. "We're lucky. There is now a wonderful pool of talent that has had 20 years to grow. The result is a wealth of casting choices for producers."

Yuri Rasovsky, who directs audio drama for Blackstone, believes that the increased competition is "all to the good. Gone are the days when one white male narrator was the best guy



in town. I can get results easily with performers that I used to have to struggle mightily to achieve. The standards have risen for everyone as the audience for audiobooks has increased and the number of actors in the field has grown.”

Well, standards have mostly risen, says Soames. “In the old days, actors were more fluent. Maybe that’s because the editing was so hard that you searched for fluent actors!” Easy editing may require less fluency, but he warns that “until they’ve done several books, few actors know how to prepare for a 10-, 15-, or 30-hour reading job. It is difficult to know how to mark up characters, pace the narrative, and pace themselves for a long sit.”

“Listeners live all over the place,” says Gardner.

“They are more likely to know what a Nebraska or a Chicago or a South L.A. accent sounds like.

They want authenticity.”

This brings us to the knotty issue of how simpler technology, increased demand for unabridged audiobooks, more actors in the field, and a drive to cut costs (to create even more demand) have led to fewer people overseeing each production. “There is a tendency now for actors to work in their own ‘quiet room’ recording studios without benefit of director or engineer,” explains Rasovsky. “Or they may work with a single engineer/director. I have not heard quality go down as a result.”

Others have noticed mispronunciations that an observant producer would once have caught, tired voices

Continued on page 15

GraphicAudio[®]

A MOVIE IN YOUR MIND

CINEMATIC MUSIC • FULL CAST • DIGITAL EFFECTS

BATMAN



NO MAN'S LAND

Book 1 of 2
October 2011

Book 2 of 2
November 2011



BATMAN and all related characters and elements are trademarks of © DC Comics. (s11)

www.GraphicAudio.net or www.GraphicAudioInternational.net

What's Hot?
What's Not?



Subscribe Now,
and get **6 issues** of
AudioFile magazine
plus **Full Access** to
audiofilemagazine.com

Just \$19.95!

AudioFile helps you
make the most
of your listening.

800.506.1212

www.audiofilemagazine.com