The New Explosion in Audio Books

How They Re-emerged as a Rare Bright Spot in the Publishing Business

By Alexandra Alter

Updated Aug. 1, 2013 7:41 p.m. ET

Cory Wilbur, a 25-year-old software engineer in Boston, never used to read much. He barely cracked a book in college and would read one or two a year on vacation, at most.

But in the past year, he's finished 10 books, including Dan Brown's "Inferno," Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs and George R.R. Martin's fantasy series "A Song of Ice and Fire." He listens to audio books in snippets throughout the day on his [iPhone](http://topics.wsj.com/subject/I/iphone/1663?lc=int_mb_1001) during his morning workout, on his 20-minute commute to work, and while he's cooking dinner or cleaning up. Before he falls asleep, he switches to an e-book of the same story on his Kindle, and starts reading right where the narrator left off.

"I fly through a lot more books than I used to," Mr. Wilbur said.

The digital revolution may have dealt a heavy blow to print, but it is boosting literacy in other unexpected ways by fueling the explosive growth of audio books.

Listen to Some Audio Book Excerpts

Once a static niche for aficionados renting clunky cassettes or CDs for their commutes, audio books have gone mass-market. Sales have jumped by double digits in recent years. Shifts in digital technology have broadened the pool of potential listeners to include anyone with a smartphone.

At the same time, publishers are investing six-figure sums in splashy productions with dozens of narrators. Using the Netflix model, some audio book producers have even started experimenting with original works written exclusively as audio productions, ranging from full-cast dramatizations in the style of old school radio plays, complete with music and sound effects, to young adult novels, thrillers and multipart science fiction epics.

"It's one of the few times in history that technology has reinvigorated an art form rather than crushing it," said Max Brooks, author of the zombie novel "World War Z," which was released in May ahead of the Brad Pitt movie in an elaborate new audio edition with 40 cast members, including Alan Alda, John Turturro, and Martin Scorsese. It sold 60,000 CDs and digital-audio copies. "Now, because there is such demand and the production value is so inexpensive, it opens the door for more creative storytelling." he said.

Digital innovation isn't just changing the way audio books are created, packaged and sold. It's starting to reshape the way readers consume literature, creating a new breed of literary omnivores who see narrated books and text as interchangeable. Last year, the audio book producer and retailer Audible unveiled a long-awaited syncing feature that allows book lovers to switch seamlessly between an e-book and a digital audio book, picking up the story at precisely the same sentence.

So far, Audible, which is owned by Amazon, has paired some 26,000 ebooks with professional narrations. The company is adding more than 1,000 titles a month and aims to eventually bring the number to close to 100,000.

"We're moving toward a media-agnostic consumer who doesn't think of the difference between textual and visual and auditory experience," says Don Katz, Audible's founder and CEO. "It's the story, and it is there for you in the way you want it."

Audio books have ballooned into a $1.2 billion industry, up from $480 million in retail sales in 1997. Unit sales of downloaded audio books grew by nearly 30% in 2011 compared with 2010, according to the Audio Publishers Association. Now they can be downloaded onto smartphones with the tap of a finger, often for the price of an e-book.

Recorded books date back to the 1930s, when the Library of Congress created a "talking books" program for the blind. The proliferation of the cassette deck in autos boosted their popularity in the 1980s. CDs followed, but sales plateaued as audio books failed to keep pace with other forms of digital entertainment.

These narrated books typically cost $50 or more ($100 for Stephen King's lengthy "The Stand"), so devotees borrowed them from the library or rented them from mail-order services like Books on Tape, which still exists as a unit of Random House and emphasizes unabridged titles for libraries and schools.

Prices are much lower now, as production costs have plunged and demand has risen. Audio books can be bundled with an e-book for just a few dollars, downloaded as part of a monthly subscription plan or bought individually for as low as $1.99 (for a short story) or as high as $69.99 (for the Bible). An average downloadable audio book costs close to $20.

"Everybody has an audio book player in their pocket at this point," says Anthony Goff, vice president of Hachette Audio, where sales have jumped by 31% this spring over last. "It makes that much easier for the masses to try it." Downloadable books made up some 60% of total audio unit sales in 2011, dwarfing CDs.

Audio book producers have been dramatically increasing their output. 13,255 titles came out in 2012, up from 4,602 in 2009, according to the Audio Publishers Association.

Audio books are no longer viewed as just an ancillary product to print. Some audio publishers are now attempting to rebrand narrated books as a distinct medium from print, labeling them as "audio entertainment." A handful of such publishers have started dabbling in original audio content, hoping to demonstrate that recorded narratives can hold their own as original works of art.

In the past five years, AudioGo has produced about 25 works exclusively for audio, including "Baseball Forever," a remix of radio broadcasts of some of the top moments in the history of baseball, "Dreadtime Stories," a collection of original horror stories, and a series of apocalyptic zombie stories. The company has also produced 10 full-cast productions that resemble old fashioned radio plays, a nearly extinct art form. They hired actor Val Kilmer to play Zorro in an audio dramatization titled "The Mark of Zorro," and recruited Stacy Keach, Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer on TV, to voice the detective in an original Mike Hammer audio book.

Audible, the country's largest audio book producer and retailer, has been investing in original works as a way to showcase the dramatic potential of the form, and to provide exclusive content as HBO, Showtime and Netflix do in television. Audible has produced nearly 20 original audio books, mainly in fast-growing categories like mystery and science fiction. Audible, which Amazon bought in 2008, runs a subscription service for millions of members, who listen to an average of 18 books a year. Plans range from $14.95 a month, for one book a month, to $229.50 a year, for 24 books a year. The pipeline needs to keep flowing.

"If you run out of mysteries, people quit," Mr. Katz said.

Recent offerings include a novelization of "Macbeth," narrated by Scottish actor Alan Cumming; "META-tropolis," a multipart science fiction epic set in a future America; "Gun Church," a crime novel by Reed Farrel Coleman, and "The Chopin Manuscript," a serial thriller written by 15 mystery writers, including Lee Child, Jeffery Deaver and Lisa Scottoline. All were written specifically for audio, rather than originating in print. Audible commissioned sequels for several of the most popular works.

Earlier this year, Audible recruited science fiction writer Orson Scott Card to write an elaborate, six-hour dramatization of his best-selling 1985 novel "Ender's Game." The story unfolds entirely in dialogue, punctuated by background music and sound effects. The project was recently recorded in Los Angeles by a cast of 28 narrators, including superstar narrator Scott Brick, songwriter Janis Ian and English actress Samantha Eggar. Audible will release "Ender's Game Alive," this October, a month before the premiere of a big-budget Hollywood movie based on the novel, starring Asa Butterfield, Harrison Ford, and Hailee Steinfeld.

Mr. Card says the radio play has the same premise as the novel, but consists of entirely new material. Rather than telling the story through an omniscient narrator, from the perspective of the novel's young protagonist, Ender, the plot emerges though dialogue, from multiple points of view.

"It's not a simple adaptation, it is a new telling of the same story," Mr. Card said.

Some novelists are bypassing print and releasing novels as audio exclusives. This week, British novelist David Hewson released his new mystery, "The Flood" straight to audio with no print edition. His audio publisher, Whole Story Audiobooks, holds exclusive rights to the material for a year. Mr. Hewson says he hasn't shopped the novel to print publishers yet.

"Until a year or two ago, audio had to come out with print, but audio is kind of its own thing now," said Mr. Hewson, who has published 22 novels. "It's become a hot medium."

Mr. Hewson has already developed something of a following among avid listeners. He's co-wrote four other original audio novels, including novelizations of "Macbeth" and "Hamlet," which he co-wrote with A.J. Hartley, a thriller writer and Shakespeare scholar at the UNC Charlotte. The nine-hour and 45-minute novelization of "Macbeth," which paints a much more sympathetic portrait of Shakespeare's power-hungry protagonist, generated more than 1,000 reviews on Audible and drew an average of four stars. Their take on "Hamlet," which Audible will release this fall, features a punchier Ophelia, a less gloomy Hamlet, and swaps in snappy dialogue for Hamlet's famous soliloquies.

Mr. Hewson has discovered that writing for audio requires different techniques from prose writing. Word repetition becomes glaringly obvious. So do unintentional rhymes. Location changes have to be telegraphed at the beginning of the scene, so that listeners aren't confused.

"Complex sentences, long subordinate clauses—they don't work, people get bored and confused by them," he says. "You're looking for the writing to disappear so that all people hear is the story."

The rapid rise of audio books has prompted some hand- wringing about how we consume literature. Print purists doubt that listening to a book while multitasking delivers the same experience as sitting down and silently reading. Scientific studies have repeatedly shown that for competent readers, there is virtually no difference between listening to a story and reading it. The format has little bearing on a reader's ability to understand and remember a text. Some scholars argue that listening to a text might even improve understanding, especially for difficult works like Shakespeare, where a narrator's interpretation of the text can help convey the meaning.

Less is known about how well people absorb stories when they are also driving or lifting weights or chopping vegetables. Commuters still account for half of audio book buyers, according to a report from the research firm Bowker, which tracks the book business. Daniel Willingham, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia who has studied reading and listening comprehension, said that multitasking compromises a listener's attention, unless the task is truly automatic. Jogging on a treadmill would probably be fine, but running on a trail might be too distracting to fully absorb the text, he said.

Some writers worry that the practice of silent reading could be threatened, as impatient and busy readers no longer take time to concentrate on a text.

"If we come to think reading is this secondary activity we do while doing other stuff, then we lose that deepest and most important kind of reading," said Nicholas Carr, author of 'The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains.' "The broader danger is that technology will give us the illusion that everything can be done while multitasking, including reading."

Audible is now funding cognitive research at Rutgers University to study the brain activity of test subjects while they are reading a text, listening to it, reading and listening simultaneously, and switching between the two modes. The research is continuing and has yet to be published, but early results suggest that listening to a narrator may be more emotionally engaging than silent reading, particularly for men, says Guy Story, Audible's chief scientist.

Certain book lovers can't fathom diluting the immersive experience by switching back and forth. "It's like going to the movies and watching the first half-hour then going home and reading the script," says Robin Whitten, editor of Audiofile magazine, which reviews audio book narrations.

For others, the distinction between print and narrated works has already evaporated. Michele Harvey, 48, a software developer who lives in Centreville, Va., has a collection of more than 470 audio books, and close to 2,000 ebooks, mostly romances and fantasy. She often buys both an audio book and an e-book so that she can stick with the story while she's doing other things. Throughout the day, she listens to books on her Android phone. She listens in the car on her way to and from work, and while she's making dinner, folding laundry and loading the dishwasher. Then, at night, after her 9-year-old son is in bed, she picks up the story on her Kindle, right where the narration left off, and reads for two or three hours. She says she's often able to recall the parts she listened to better than the passages she read, particularly if the book has a talented narrator.

When people ask her about the best or most memorable book she's read, she often mentions Susanna Clarke's fantasy novel "Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell."

"I keep having to remind myself I have never actually read it," she says. "I listened to it."

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