



## Downloadable Audiobooks: At a Library Near You?

by Sheldon Kaye

>> The introduction of audiobooks in libraries, first on cassette, then on CD, was a logical extension of the public library's purpose. Growing numbers of people who had initially fallen in love with the medium by renting or buying their titles were delighted to find they could borrow audiobooks. In similar fashion, library patrons who have had to pay for downloading audiobooks from the Internet are pleased to find that this powerful way of delivering audiobook content is now available as a library service that they access from their own computers.

One of the users of library downloading is Julie Fralich, a researcher with the Muskie School at the University of Southern Maine, in Portland. Her introduction to audiobooks was through the cassettes and CDs she borrowed from the Portland Public Library. However, as a full-time professional and mother of two, it was not always easy for Julie to make it to the library to pick up and return her audiobooks. More than four years ago, she became an enthusiastic subscriber to Audible.com because she could conveniently download titles at home from a selection that was always available. Today she also goes online to use her library's downloadable audiobooks service, introduced in March 2005.

*This powerful way of delivering audiobook content is now available as a library service.*

Librarian Lisa Joyce of the Portland Public Library helps patrons who have health or mobility problems access the library's collections. As an enthusiast of downloadable audio herself, Lisa was quick to see how it could benefit patrons, including senior citizens who may find it difficult to visit the library and are also becoming more avid computer users.

Anisio Correia, Vice President of

Program Services for Maine's Iris Network, represents a third type of user of downloadable audiobooks. His agency helps individuals cope with the loss of vision, and he himself is partially blind. Anisio first came to appreciate audiobooks by using Talking Books from the Library of Congress. He welcomes the availability of downloadable audio through the Portland Public Library, both for himself and for the people he serves.

Washington State's King County Library System was among the first libraries to offer downloadable audiobooks in 2001, earning local and national recognition for circulating MP3 devices preloaded with audiobook content from Audible.com. In 2003, explains Bruce Schauer, Associate Director, Collection Management Services, the library broached the subject of offering direct downloading to patrons with Overdrive, the company that was already supplying the library with e-books. That and other conversations Overdrive was having with libraries led the company to become one of two major suppliers of downloadable audiobooks to the library market.

Steve Potash, president of Overdrive, says the company's new direction was a natural outgrowth of his company's 15-year experience with software development and digital print content. He is proud of his company's close collaboration with libraries in creating Overdrive's downloadable service, which includes software to access the content the company licenses from nearly 50 publishers.

Overdrive shares the growing library market for downloadable audiobooks with Recorded Books, which has earned a loyal base for its extensive, carefully produced, unabridged programs featuring some of the best known narrators in the industry. Brian Downing, president of Recorded Books, explains that they chose to team up with NetLibrary, an early provider of e-text that is now part of the highly respected Online

Computer Library Center (OCLC). NetLibrary can use its expertise in electronic distribution to the library market, while Recorded Books can concentrate on providing content.

King County Library System saw the circulation of MP3 players preloaded with content from Audible decline sharply when they introduced downloadable audiobooks from Overdrive and Recorded Books. With approximately 1,000 titles each, Bruce Schauer reported in October 2005 an impressive combined use of about 3,000 downloads.

*Not all libraries are finding their patrons quick to adopt the new downloadable service.*

Not all libraries are finding their patrons quick to adopt the new downloadable service. Nancy Saff, who is in charge of audiobooks for the Allen County Public Library, Indiana, which offers downloadable titles from Recorded Books, reported just a little more than 3,000 downloads total in nine months since the service began in March 2005. Suzanne Sullivan, Electronic Materials Librarian for the Portland Public Library in Maine, which also offers downloadable books only from Recorded Books, says their monthly downloads have averaged a disappointing 150. One obstacle to more widespread use of the service, says Sullivan, is that downloadable books from Recorded Books and Overdrive can only be played on MP3 players using the Windows Media Platform, thereby cutting out the many people who own market-dominant iPods. Another factor affecting usage, she says, is that the titles Recorded Books offers for library download are weighted toward the backlist, not current titles in demand.

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If compatibility with the iPod and limited availability of high-demand titles are two difficulties, what contributes to success? Julie Pringle, Collections & Acquisition Manager of the Fairfax County, Virginia, Public Library attributes her library's success with downloadable titles from Overdrive and Recorded Books to the fact that 91 percent of the largely suburban, affluent population they serve have computers with access to the Internet. Also, the busy lives of their patrons and the congested roads add another incentive for downloading books from home.

Everyone in the library community agrees that compatibility with all player platforms would make downloadable audiobooks from libraries more popular and convenient to use. As with any new service, there are problems to be solved and a need for sufficient quantities of high-demand content. However, the chord this service is striking in a growing number of users suggests it has a strong future.

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### Sheldon Kaye

Sheldon Kaye (“Tech Notes,” page 12) has been a librarian for more than 30 years, having most recently served as Director of the Portland Public Library in Portland, Maine, for nearly 19 years. He has been writing about and reviewing audiobooks for 20 years, and for the past 2 years he has been a judge for the Audio Publishers Association’s Audie Awards.

### Judith Black

Judith Black (“AudiOpinion,” page 10) creates and tells stories. Retelling our national history from new perspectives, exploring ER pediatric nursing, and tickling familial dysfunction are all fodder for her tales. Featured on stages from the Montreal Comedy Festival to the Smithsonian Institution, she’s the winner of the Oracle Award, storytelling’s most coveted laurel.



### Martie Ramm Engle

Martie Engle (“Talking With Alan Alda,” page 31) has been a reviewer for *AudioFile* since 1993. She’s also a musical theater performer, director, and choreographer, and has appeared on Broadway, in national tours, and on London’s famed West End. Martie is currently on the theater arts faculty at Fullerton College, Golden West College, and Riverside Community College in Southern California.

### Howard Kaplan

Photographing people has been a passion of Howard Kaplan’s (“Listening With,” page 64) since he was a teenager. He watched his youngest sister grow up through his camera lens and continues to capture precious moments as a photographer in the Metro-Detroit area. “Capturing someone in their environment or in their own space is a great challenge that makes me want to get up in the morning and make new images.”



### JD King

JD King (“The Journey From Print to Audiobook,” page 22) has been a freelance illustrator for nearly 20 years. His clients include *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Bicycling*, and *The Washington Post*. He lives near Adirondack National Park and pursues his avocation, experimental music, with JD King & The Coachmen. His work can be seen online at [www.theispot.com](http://www.theispot.com).