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“... the wonder, the excitement, the value of letting children of all ages and abilities listen to books.”

Horizons

Audiobooks in the Classroom

by Ted Hipple

It's 9:50 in the morning in a senior English class at a suburban high school, and the students are completing what one of them calls “Jane Austen month.” The students have read *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*; they've also seen the British television series of the former novel and the award-winning movie adaptation of the latter. In many English classes these activities would have ended the instructional focus, but this one has gone beyond them to include audiobooks. All the students have heard the first cassette of each novel, and there's a reservation list for them to finish Nadia May's narration of *Pride and Prejudice* (Blackstone Audio Books) and Flo Gibson's reading of *Sense and Sensibility* (Audio Book Contractors). Most students will listen to both novels in their entirety and be able to discuss three different renditions—print, film and audiobook.

Down the hall a U.S. history class is deep into the Lincoln presidency. These students, too, are augmenting their textbook material and library research with audiobooks. Four groups are seated in the corners of the room, each listening to a different book about Lincoln: William Safire's *Freedom* (Blackstone Audio Books, read by Jeff Rigenbach), Carl Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln* (Books on Tape, read by Dick Estell), David Herbert Donald's *Lincoln* (Simon and Schuster Audio, read by James Naughton), and a collection of Lincoln's letters (Commuters Library, read by George Vail). Their later comparisons will add much to their understanding of this complex president.

Across town at a suburban middle school a teacher is with a group of seventh graders who either can't read or won't read. Though she

includes considerable attention to basic skills—word-attack strategies, central meanings—her primary goal is to help her students understand that reading can be a pleasurable activity. To enable her to achieve this objective, students put on their Sonys and insert a tape for part of each period. Mostly she uses novels for young adults, like Anne Digby's *First Term at Trebizon* (Chivers Audio Books, read by Brigit Forsyth) and S.E. Hinton's *Taming the Star Runner* (Recorded Books, read by Margo Skinner). She knows from experience that many of her students will finish the audiotape of their book, that they will enjoy this activity and that this enjoyment will spur them on to try to improve their reading of print literature.

What goes on in these settings—students using audiobooks to enlarge and enrich their learning—can, does and should go on in lots and lots of schools. To see teenagers or preteens with headphones or a blaring car radio is not unusual, but commonly they're listening to music. I believe that once exposed to audiobooks, many of them will choose to listen to books. Teachers can help to effect this exposure.

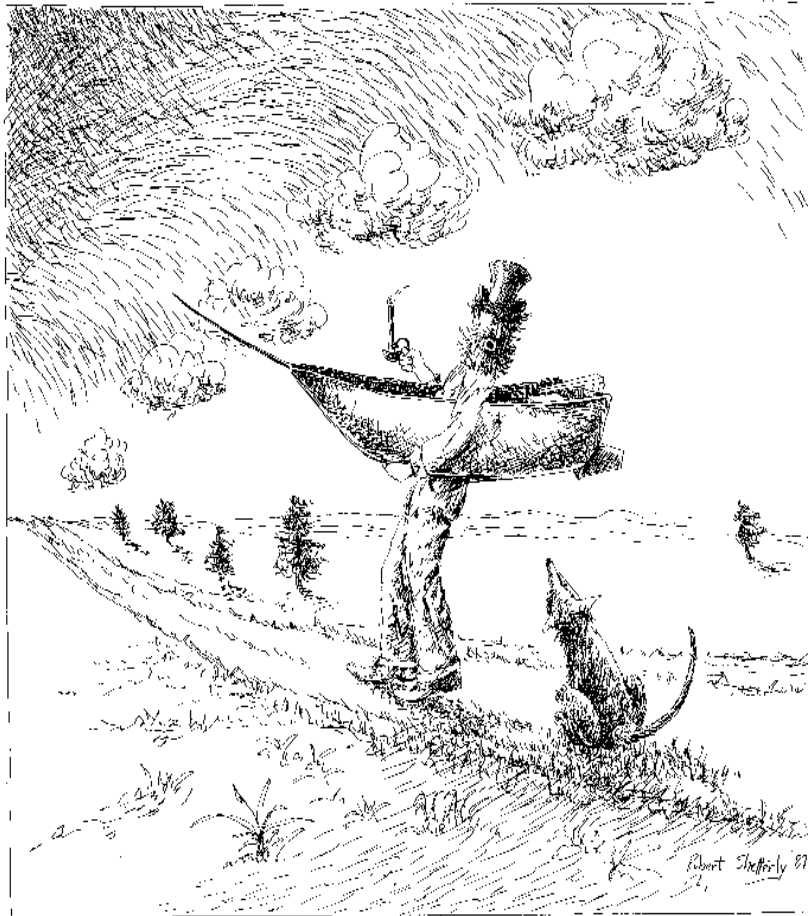
Everyone likes to be told stories, the latest gossip, a current joke, someone's analysis of a political event. And that's, of course, what audiobooks do really well: they tell us stories. Many students, however, though as eager as anyone else to hear stories, simply don't know that audiobooks exist. And that's where their teachers come in. Teachers know (or can learn) about audiobooks, can get hooked themselves, and can make their availability and desirability known to their students.

Not yet in audiobook form, *Better Than Life*, a wonderful, little book by French author Daniel Pennac, makes a compelling case for reading aloud to students. Pennac begins by recalling that magical preschool threesome—the child, Mom (or Grampa) and Dr. Seuss, all of them worrying about those green eggs and ham. But then the child goes to school where, very soon, he must READ and, worse, according to Pennac, must UNDERSTAND. What had been a joyful experience becomes a frightening one. What had been fun becomes work. Pennac's thrust is to remind teachers and parents of the wonder, the excitement, the value of letting children of all ages and abilities listen to books.

Yet listening to books has not yet caught the imagination of enough teachers to make it the commonplace it should be in classrooms across the land. To be sure, a few teachers resist the idea. Recently, a stern English teacher told me that reading aloud to students “is an unconscionable waste of classroom time.” Ugh! More typically, teachers are unaware of just how many fine books exist on tape, how well they're read and how effectively they can enhance student learning.

Classroom uses of audiobooks are many. The best is simply to let students listen. They can comment on the quality of the narration: How does the reader vary the speech among different characters? Is there too much drama? Too little? How do students like being read to? Total classes or small groups can share in the listening experience and follow-up discussion.

Audiobooks can be outstanding motivators. The sheer volume of many books can make them so daunting that reluctant readers have trouble getting



Come, my friend. 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

started. Hardy's several hundred pages about Tess Durbeyfield, for example, seem a bigger challenge than many may want to tackle. But let them listen to just the first tape of Davina Porter's narration of *Tess of the Durbervilles* (Recorded Books), and many of them will finish either the audiobook or the print version. After all, that tape covers the first two chapters—"Maiden" and "Maiden No More"—and very quickly Tess becomes a modern heroine.

Audiobooks can be literacy's handmaiden. Teachers can focus on student response to literature with questions and activities designed to assist students in becoming involved with books. Instructors can pause at the end of a tape and ask students to write their feelings at that moment about what they just listened to. This quest for shared interpretations can make for lively sessions. Imagine a group of tenth-graders who have heard Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* (Books on Tape, read by Wolfram Kandinsky) and are now discussing its philosophical significance.

Many teachers believe strongly in bibliotherapy, using stories to ease the

pain of adolescence. It surely can be a comfort to a student faced with uncertainty about her own worth to read or listen to Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (Recorded Books, read by George Guidall); with its protagonist, Jerry Renault, she can share T. S. Eliot's important question: "Do I dare disturb the universe?"

Drama really comes alive in audiobook format. It was written, after all, more to be seen and heard than to be read. Full-cast or individually read plays are available from a variety of companies and feature performers who, in Longfellow's felicitous phrase, "lend to the rhyme of the poet the music of their voice." Shakespeare, in particular, is difficult for many students, and hearing actors like Paul Scofield or John Gielgud interpret the bard can increase their understanding and enjoyment.

Lest it be thought that audiobooks are primarily the province of the English class, mention needs to be made of its value in social studies classrooms, particularly history. Students sometimes have trouble reading history, thinking it dry and

boring. Let them listen to it, and they'll change their views. As suggested by the classroom example at the beginning of this piece, histories and biographies in audiobook form provide an extra dimension to instruction. Simon and Schuster Audio, for instance, has actor Edward Herrmann (who has played FDR on stage and screen) reading Doris Kearns Goodwin's *No Ordinary Time*, about Franklin and Eleanor in the 1940's. Student listeners will come away with an increased understanding of our difficult role in WW II, a historical period that some of them think came just after the fall of the Roman Empire.

And on and on, audiobooks in science class, like Carl Sagan's *The Demon-Haunted World* (Brilliance Audio, read by Michael Page); in foreign language, like Gary Paulsen's *Sisters/Hermanas*, an audiobook half in English, half in Spanish (Recorded Books, read by Alyssa Bresnahan and Graciela Lecube); in sports, like H. G. Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* (Books on Tape, read by John MacDonald).

In short, what I'm advocating is the widespread use of audiobooks in schools. Students, teachers, literature (broadly defined), and learning will all be the better.

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