

Twenty Years and Counting: Robin Whitten's take on it all

by Aurelia C. Scott

Throughout the coming year as we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of *AudioFile*, we will be considering the state of the audiobook and exploring the future of the medium we love.

 *AudioFile's* founding editor and publisher says audiobooks are on a roll. "I was on a panel at a literary festival recently, and it turned out that most of the other panelists were absolutely devoted audiobooks fans. I didn't even have to ask! Being a listener has become mainstream." So mainstream that a recent Geico Insurance commercial features an audiobook narrator. Admittedly, Geico's official spokesman is a talking gecko, and the commercial's star is a talking rooster. But still, says Robin, "You know

you've made it when your industry is used as a plot point in an advertisement for something else."

With the increase in listeners has come greater appreciation of audiobooks in education and in the literary world. It used to be that many authors interviewed by *AudioFile* had never actually listened to an audiobook. Now most authors not only have heard of audiobooks but are fans of the narrators who give voice to their work. For example, Sue Grafton, author of the Alphabet mystery series, reports that she can summon the voice of her longtime narrator Judy Kaye as she writes. Several authors have become avid listeners. Alexander McCall Smith of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* fame crams as many audiobooks as he can get onto his iPod before every trip. "Five is good; fifteen is better."

In 2008, the American Library Association recognized the medium by establishing the



annual Odyssey Award for best audiobook produced for children and/or young adults. The prize is on a par with the ALA's Newbery and Caldecott Awards. "This is a very big deal," says Robin, because it signifies acceptance of audio by an establishment that cares deeply about books and literacy. "The recent studies that examine the link between literacy and audiobooks have been hugely important. They mean that we no longer have to convince elementary and middle school teachers that audiobooks are a great educational tool.

Audiobooks are welcome in the classroom, which is a sea change from just a few years ago." Robin admits that high school teachers may still need some persuasion. "But that just gives us work for the future."

All these listeners have a lot more to hear. More than 500 audiobooks are now published each month, up from an average of 200 per month in 2002. Most of these are new titles, yet publishers are also making efforts to record their authors' backlists. For instance, *AudioFile* just reviewed *The Color Purple*, first published in 1982, "because it was a new audiobook and we wanted to bring it to everyone's attention," Robin says. Publishers are also securing rights to works that have never before been released in audio.

"William Faulkner and E.L. Doctorow are two examples of writers whose books are only now becoming available in audio." In addition, there are some whose work never made the transition from cassette. A wonderful



oeuvre of Steinbeck recordings, for example, has just been rereleased in digital format. “This is great for listeners,” Robin adds, “but also a challenge for *AudioFile* because our main goal is to keep listeners abreast of newly written work. So we plan to concentrate on the best of the backlist audios.”

More audiobooks mean more narrators and the increasing importance of audiobook narration as a performance specialty. “We’re finding that actors are choosing to concentrate on this field,” says Robin. “In part, that’s because it is hard work, and to be good, you have to devote time. Actors also like the opportunities that long-form narration gives them.” Narrator Wanda McCaddon, an *AudioFile* Golden Voice, explains, “It lets me play everyone from a little girl to an old man. What other stage would give me that?”

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Not long ago, most audiobooks were recorded in publishers’ studios. Some books, such as memoirs read by the author, are still made that way. However, since the advent of better, less expensive technology, some professional narrators have chosen to record in home-based studios outfitted with the latest soundproof recording booths, condenser microphones, computer- interface tools, and editing software. *AudioFile* Golden Voice narrator Gerard Doyle describes the experience: “When I’m in the studio, I’m not really in the claustrophobic soundproof box in my garage. I’ve gone somewhere else. And I’ve become many other people, other creatures. I’ve been subsumed.” When he reappears, he digitally

Continued on page 14

Audiobook History: A Timeline



1952: Dylan Thomas records *A Child’s Christmas in Wales* for Caedmon Records, a new company founded by Barbara Cohen Holdridge and Marianne Roney Mantell.

1973: California businessman Duvall Hecht hires someone to record books for him to listen to on his commute. Hecht founds Books on Tape in 1977.



1986: Audio Publishers Association (APA) founded by Newman Communications, Warner Audio, Simon & Schuster, Bantam Doubleday Dell, and Random House. Seth Gershel is the first APA President.



1992: *AudioFile* publishes its first issue, a newsletter of 12 pages with 25 reviews.

1994: The term “audiobook” is established as the standard for consistency.

1995: Audible.com is founded by Don Katz. audible.com



1996: First Audie Awards are given by the APA. Alfred Molina wins award for Solo Performance. *The Homecoming*, read by Richard Thomas, wins Fiction Audie Award.

1997: The “Golden Voice” accolade is established by *AudioFile*. First recipients are David Case, Frank Muller, Martin Jarvis, Wanda McCaddon, Barbara Rosenblat, and Jay O. Sanders.



2001: CD format is offered in addition to the cassette.

2002: “June is Audiobook Month” is established by the APA.

2002: King County Library System loans first digital audiobooks.

2008: “The Year in Audiobooks” recognition of voices and titles is established by *AudioFile*.



2010: AudiobookCommunity.com launches and reaches 5,000 members by April 2011.

2010: Sony announces the “death” of the cassette Walkman player.



2011: *AudioFile* passes the milestone of 30,000 audiobook reviews and enters its 20th year.



Continued from page 13

transmits the finished product for final edits by the producer.

While the most experienced narrators can produce high-quality work this way, Robin feels that all actors benefit from some degree of directorial oversight. “Very few self-direct brilliantly.” The desire to be as close to brilliant as possible is why, even when they have home studios, many prominent narrators continue to record at least some of their work in the publisher’s production studio with a director present or virtually connected with a program like Skype. “Keeps us honest,” laughs Golden Voice narrator John Lee. “And it gives you someone to commiserate with when you’re reading an author who doesn’t believe in commas.”

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For all the advances in audiobook publishing and production, says Robin, it is still not as easy as it should be to find out about new works in audio. “Despite having many more productions to choose from, we lack a sufficient number of places to see and hear and discover audiobooks. Most people who buy audiobooks purchase them online, and online browsing may not be as successful an experience as physically browsing in a bookstore or library. Because online search programs tend to recommend narrowly rather than broadly, that makes it difficult to stumble across something you didn’t expect, something which might please you.”

This makes *AudioFile*’s mission to help people discover audiobooks even more important. “Where else are listeners going to learn about a full-cast dramatization or a fabulous

L.A. Theatre Works production of *A Raisin in the Sun*? It’s not likely to be reviewed in a newspaper or featured on Amazon.” In addition to *AudioFile* online and in print, what’s needed now, says Robin, is a discovery tool that will allow those who know what they want to find it, buy it, and begin listening immediately, while enabling other listeners to mimic the browsing experience found in a bookstore or library. Never one to wait for others to solve a problem, Robin says, “We are looking into designing it ourselves.”

Meanwhile, *AudioFile* continues to expand methods for bringing audiobook information to a wide range of audiences. “We may have started as print-on-paper, but we’ve known for years that our audience is online and out in the world and not necessarily sitting down to read a magazine, so we have found a number of ways to deliver our reviews, recommendations, booklists, and narrator interviews online. And since we’re all about audio, shouldn’t more of this news be available in audio form? After all, narrators have followings just like movie stars, and their fans love to hear sound samples from them and conversations with them.”

Robin predicts that in the next 10 years, the medium of audio will be used to promote audiobooks much more than it is today. Already, spoken reviews, audiobook excerpts, and recorded interviews are offered on *AudioFile*’s two podcasts: general-interest Audiopolis and family listening All Ears! And Audiobook Community (ABC), a social media site that *AudioFile* created, serves as a meeting place for everyone from narrators to librarians to avid listeners to discover what they want to hear next, to talk about books they love or earbuds they hate. ABC also hosts an audience development program for young adult listeners called SYNC. Now in its second year, SYNC offers two free downloads each week in July and August, pairing a popular YA title with a classic title that

appears on many summer reading lists. “With the option of audio downloads, teens can consume more of what’s on their list. Eyes or ears, they’re getting more literature,” says Robin.

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Speaking of downloading, remember tape decks? Ten years ago, an advertisement in *AudioFile* touted the availability of a publisher’s audiobooks “on tape and CD!” The exclamation mark in that ad reveals how much our way of listening has changed. “Most kids would barely recognize a tape player unless they’ve spent time in an old car,” Robin laughs. “Cassettes are effectively gone. CDs are still a big part of the market, but their numbers are declining. The use of electronic media is increasing as people download books onto their computers, and now onto their tablets. Kids and adults listen on their iPods or their cell phones. Phones really changed the game.” Robin foresees that the final transition away from CDs will come when most vehicles have a standard digital option that is universally available and easy to use.

She reports that evolving technologies may soon transform some proportion of audiobooks from a pure listening experience into something

more mixed media. Publishers are experimenting with “enhanced audiobooks” that would combine the best aspects of the audiobook with the best features of digital e-books—text synchronized with a fine professional narration, coupled with images available in the paper book. Think of listening to Shelby Foote read his Civil War series while you peruse battlefield maps and Matthew Brady photographs. “It’s fun to consider,” says Robin. “Although I would like to see audiobooks become more affordable, I don’t see how the enhanced version could be cheaper.” But she’s willing to wait and find out, because adding enhancements might entice some nonlisteners to discover audiobooks.

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Twenty years after *AudioFile’s* inaugural issue, Robin Whitten remains an evangelist for the spoken word. In conversation, she might start by enthusing about the Playaway devices that come pre-loaded with an audiobook that have been shipped by hundreds of thousands to our soldiers in Iraq, “giving them something good to hear in the midst of war.” Then she moves on to wishing that Terry Gross, host of NPR’s *Fresh Air*, “would consider having professional narrators read excerpts from the book when she’s interviewing an author,” which might remind Robin of the delight she felt last fall when Little Brown and Hachette used excerpts of the audiobook read by Johnny Depp as a sneak preview to promote Keith Richards’s memoir, *Life*. “How cool is that?” she asks. Totally cool. Future, here we come.

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