

Why Listening Is Good for *All* Kids—Especially in the Digital Age

Think you already know? Read on. (Bonus: cited works with online links so you can dig further)

by Liz Noland

▶ I was speaking recently with a well-respected English teacher at my school, and the topic of using audiobooks in the middle school setting came up. She mentioned how wonderful she thought audiobooks could be for young people with physical impairments or learning disabilities but seemed resistant to the idea of incorporating audiobooks in the classroom. The former audiobook and children's book publicist in me began outlining all the reasons why and the ways in which audiobooks can be an important tool for developing reading skills (not to mention reader enthusiasm) in young listeners of all ages and abilities. I know I'm not alone in this task. Even in today's era of greater audiobook prominence, many librarians, booksellers, reading teachers, and other audiobook enthusiasts still struggle with convincing

their audiences why audiobooks for young listeners are a good thing.

The purpose of this article is to pull out highlights and provide a bibliography of resources that can help explain why and how audiobooks are beneficial for children and teens (citations with page numbers make it easy to track down the references).

The importance of reading aloud to children in the development of emerging literacy is widely promoted today by libraries and schools. An oft-cited 1985 report from the Commission on Reading states, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. This is especially so during the preschool years" (Anderson 23). While it is still important for parents to read with children and have the back-and-forth that comes with that

experience, one benefit of audiobooks is that they can supplement the parent read-aloud. As the *AudioFile* article "10 Reasons Kids Learn With Audiobooks" explains, sometimes "parents are simply too busy (or exhausted) to read to their kids. . . . The audio version [can] supplement school reading with much-needed at-home enjoyment."

A 1989 *School Library Journal* article discusses how audiobooks (or back then, "books on tape") can address the problem of young children raised in the era of TV who find it harder to listen without a visual aid. As the article points out, "When a child reads a story or listens to a book on cassette, visualization of the characters and events is left mostly to that child's imagination. This inner picture-making capacity is essential to the child's development" (Moody 29). Developing young children's ability to listen, process, and create mental pictures without the benefit of a visual aid is even more relevant and challenging in the digital age. In a 2007 *AudioFile* article, Susie Wilde and Jeanette Larson reiterate this idea of "stimulating the auditory imagination" while also discussing how audiobooks can "serve as models for oral fluency, building both vocabulary and comprehension" of young listeners (24-25). Both articles point out the benefits for beginning readers of listening to the audio and following along with the print book, making connections between the words they hear and the written words. Since beginning readers do a lot of guessing when they read, this experience gives them more confidence with unfamiliar books (Moody 29; Wilde and Larson 24).

Once children become independent readers, there is much evidence for how their reading development can benefit from audiobooks. Mary Burkey

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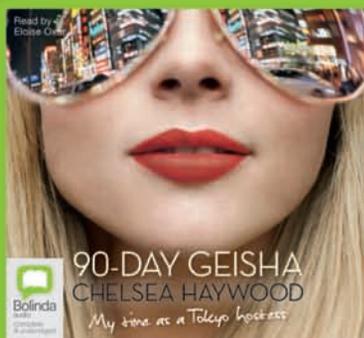
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argues in a 2009 *Book Links* article that audiobooks help with “long-form listening” skills—literacy skills that are valuable in a world where “short-form” texts—such as Wikipedia articles, emails, and text messages—are increasingly common (26). Another developmental benefit of audiobooks for older children is that they model how a fluent reader sounds, explains the 2007 summary of an ALA presentation. Listening to audiobooks “teaches them about the pacing of oral language, pronunciation, and even about idiomatic expressions,” key skills in verbal fluency (Cardillo et al. 46). A 2007 article from the ALSC Research and Development Committee says that young readers’ listening comprehension levels are significantly above their reading levels, so audiobooks can be a bridge for children to enjoy literature that they are ready for intellectually but not yet able to read independently (Clark 49-50).

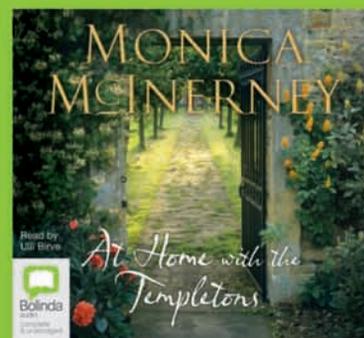
Denise Marchionda points out another benefit when listening levels are above reading levels: vocabulary acquisition. She says, “Children who listen to a book being read while following along with the printed text can both see and hear new words, and the new words are more likely to be remembered. . . . An audiobook presents the correct pronunciation, the book shows the correct spelling, and the context reveals the meaning.” Marchionda also argues that active listening and critical thinking are important aspects of the audiobook experience and that development of these skills helps with overall reading comprehension (19). In a lengthy 2002 *Horn Book* article, Pamela Varley takes this idea further, examining the argument that “reading is not the main event, but the mechanical prelude to engaging the content . . . [and] what matters is what the readers’ minds and imagination do with the content once they arrive.” Varley explores cognitive research while considering whether audiobooks could be alternative routes to engaging with literature.

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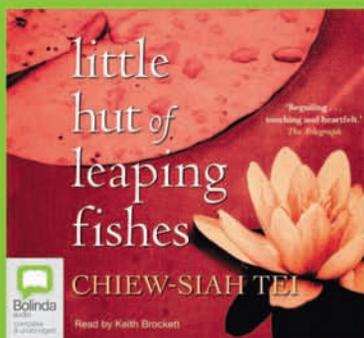
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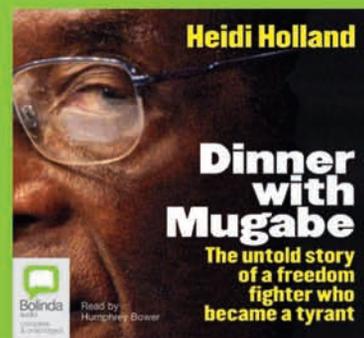
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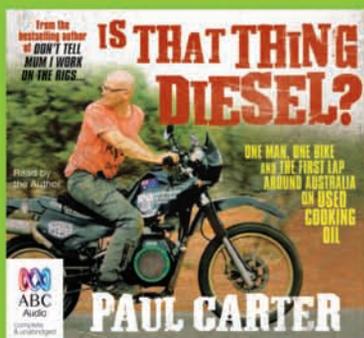
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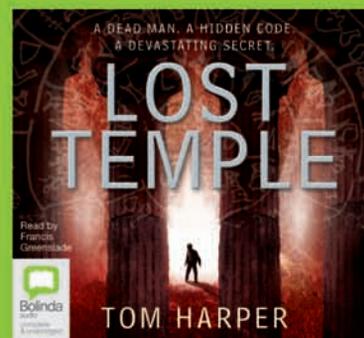
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AudiOpinion, continued

Audiobooks can be especially helpful for struggling or reluctant readers. Gene Wolfson cites a study that found that “students who listened and followed the printed text often were motivated to read ahead and focus more on the actual book” (110). A 1998 article by Kylee Beers includes many anecdotal classroom examples of audiobooks connecting struggling readers to books and giving them more positive attitudes toward reading. Additionally, while many of the reasons outlined above also explain why audiobooks can be beneficial for ESL students or children with learning disabilities, several authors discuss in more detail using audiobooks with these groups, including Baskin and Harris, Francisca Goldsmith, Milani et al., and Molly Wellner.

Once you’ve convinced someone—a teacher, a parent, or even a student—that audiobooks are worth trying, the next step is finding ways to utilize them. An article from *School Library Media Activities Monthly* includes suggestions about the kinds of questions to ask while listening to audiobooks as a group and how to set up a successful listening area (Chen 23-25). Ted Hipple’s article gives concrete examples of teachers using audiobooks to enhance learning and explains how audiobooks can work in a classroom

AUDIOBOOKS HELP KIDS . . .

- listen without a visual aid
- imagine a scene or character
- become aware of language
- engage with content
- increase verbal fluency
- hear how a fluent reader sounds
- build long-form listening skills
- tune in to pacing of oral language
- learn correct pronunciation
- pick up idiomatic expressions
- enjoy literature that they are ready for intellectually
- develop active listening and critical thinking skills
- encourage a positive attitude about reading

setting, through listening paired with discussion, as a motivator to start an intimidating book and to enhance drama in literature, history, and science. One teacher in Deborah Locke’s high school immersed students in their new audiobook collection; Locke describes some of the successful assignments from that audio unit, including listening journals, audiobook reviews, and vocabulary lists (n. pag.). Barbara Wysocki’s article is quite useful, offering strategies for use and recommending audiobooks on different topics and for specific ages. Junko Yokota and Miriam Martinez’s 2004 *Book Links* article offers thoughtful explanations of how audiobook productions of multicultural books can make a book more accessible for students, with a list of recommended multicultural audiobook titles.

Finally, Sharon Grover and Liz Hannegan’s 2008 article in *Teacher Librarian* has helpful tips for building a school library audiobook collection and a list of outstanding audiobooks divided by age group. These former and current chairs of the Odyssey Award Committee are also working on a book scheduled to be published by ALA Editions in late 2011, called *Listening to Learn: Audiobooks Supporting Literacy*. According to Grover, the book will be a “comprehensive overview of audiobooks for children and young adults—the history and development, styles of narration, evaluation, and the ways in which listening to audiobooks enhances literacy skills in children and teens” of all reading levels. Their goal is to take research that links listening to literacy and translate it into “practical recommendations for classroom use,” including lists of high-quality audiobooks that correspond to K-12 curriculum topics and support learning standards. For anyone interested in promoting audiobooks for young listeners, this upcoming book will be an invaluable professional resource.

Liz Noland, Middle School Librarian at St. Anne’s-Belfield School in Charlottesville, Virginia, has just completed a report on the benefits of listening for children for the Audio Publishers Association.

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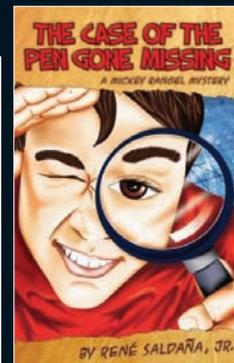
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