

Storytelling in the Digital Age: Audiobooks Take on the Internet

By Delany Rebernik

In a polarizing age in which the printed book is deemed a relic by sorrowful technophobes, and youtube videos of spoken word performances have revitalized poetry (see Daniel Beaty's powerful performance from Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry), the humble audiobook is upping the ante, trying to find its place in this fast-paced world of ours.

It was, in fact, a series of recorded spoken word poems that helped to catalyze the audiobook industry. It's January 1952. Barbara Cohen and Marianne Roney perch on stools in the Chelsea Hotel bar, armed with bribes of beer, no doubt, and the promise of five hundred dollars, when they coerce reluctant poet Dylan Thomas into a recording session. Cohen and Roney are convinced that records will be transformative for Thomas's work, which is bold, startling, and valuable. Spoken word records are virtually nonexistent at the time, but Thomas's less-than-eager agreement (he flakes on his first scheduled recording session) births Caedmon Records, aptly named for the first poet to pen in Old England's native language.

On February 22, Peter Bartok, son of composer Bela Bartok, sets up recording equipment in Steinway Hall, and the wary Thomas opens his session with "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." In a voice more booming than hesitant, Thomas bids,

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

One can see how these words, so striking in print, goose-pimple the skin when read in Thomas's own voice, the vitality of which is captured by Bartok's symphony-style, grandiose recording. Imagine that "rage," that repeated rage, echoing, the crisp 't' of "light" closing the poem, resounding, harrowing (imagine, or listen here). This powerful poem is juxtaposed with the short story "A Child's Christmas in Wales" comprising the other side of the record. The record establishes "Christmas" as a holiday classic, expanding its popularity through Thomas's powerful recitation and enduring as an eternal vocal supplement to his literary oeuvre.

Since this impromptu start, the audiobook industry has burgeoned into a profitable field. According to a 2011 sales survey conducted by the Audio Publishers Association (APA), unit sales of audiobooks were up nearly ten percent in the previous year, and the total number of audiobooks published had doubled in the past few years, from 3,073 in 2007 to 6,200 in 2010. Audiobook downloads in particular are blossoming, comprising 36% of monetary sales and 52% of unit sales, up from 29% and 48% respectively in 2009. This growth in the download facet of audiobooks is especially evident, as over the past five years, downloading has grown monetary sales by 300%. Despite the flourishing download statistics, the CD format still accounts for the largest dollar income. However, the CD format appears also to be the lone facet to show slight declines, accounting for only 43% of unit sales as opposed to 46% in 2010.

Even taking this blip in audiobook CD sales into account, it is clear the audiobook industry is skyrocketing. But why this sudden uprising? In order to understand this growth, we must first address the intrinsic allure of the audiobook. This innate appeal is evident in that strong-armed 1952 recording—Thomas’s sure, expressive voice giving rise to emotion in his work, his intonation and accentuations as they were intended, elevating the words. Jim Dale, British stage actor made famous through his narration of the Harry Potter series and his subsequent creation of well over a hundred character voices, expands on this notion, asserting that “the reading (narrating) of the book brings the story to life even more because you are hearing what the author wanted you to hear in the way of the voice, in the accent, in the colloquialisms that are used.”

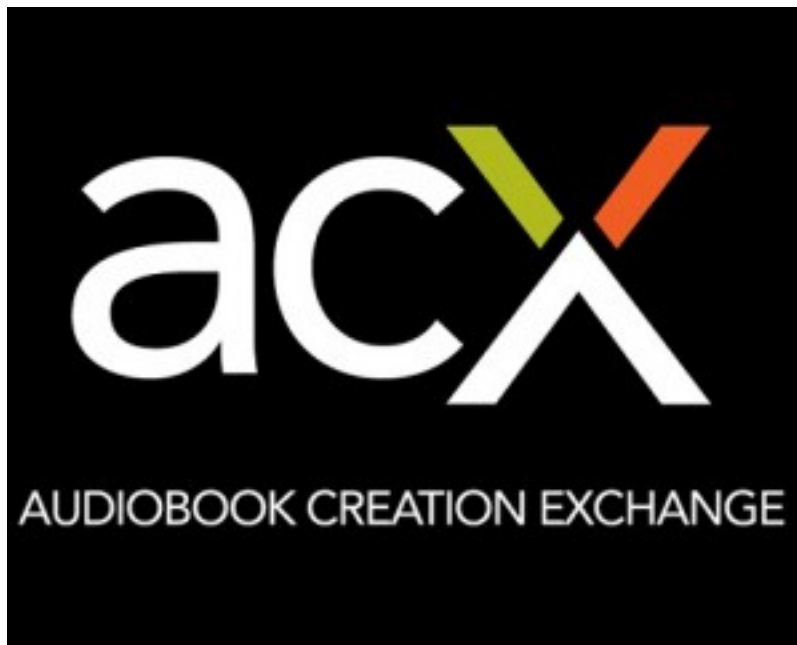
Billy R. West, whose 1995 article, “The Art and Science of Audio Book Production” appears on The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) website, underscores this concept, equating audiobook narration with art. He asserts narration is “an art form related to acting and oral interpretation,” but not wholly represented by either. Instead, West classifies narration as “a niche in the performing arts that blends some elements of both” and that “translat[es] the written word to the spoken word in a way that is as consistent as possible with the intent of the author.” In this way, audiobook narration transcends mere recitation, acting as a means of enhancing words on a page, breathing life through voice and eliminating some of the ambiguity that stems from silent interpretation of a passage.

The source of West’s article is especially interesting, as the NLS has a special program to distribute recorded and braille literature to visually handicapped US residents. When considered in this context, the audiobook constitutes an alternate means of reading, its utility as an art compounded by its practical distributive function, spreading literature to those who can’t read it conventionally.

So the audiobook is appealing for its multi-functionality as an art and as an alternative to traditional reading. This enduring appeal would imply that the popularity of the industry is stable. However, as the APA survey shows, the audiobook industry is thriving and expanding. So what accounts for this continued growth? To what can we attribute this re-realized draw to book narration? I think the sudden revitalization can be explained by the APA statistic marking the slight decline in CD format unit sales and the steady rise in the downloading of audiobooks. We all have to face the music. The literary landscape is changing. According to the Association of American Publishers, e-books like the Kindle and Nook reaped 6.4% of the total trade market revenue in 2010, a huge leap from the 0.6% in 2008, just three years earlier. While apocalyptic literary types bemoan this perceived ending of the printed book at the hands of technology, the publishing industry has taken a more useful stance, harnessing the internet as a tool to redefine literature. In this way, the audiobook industry, already an other, an outsider to traditional literature, has used the internet as a means of reestablishing itself as a literature mainstay and as a way to make audiobooks more accessible. Although audiobook CD sales are declining in tandem with music CDs, the audiobook industry is thriving, luring in the profitable 18 to 34 crowd by infiltrating their homeland: the internet. Now, the internet allows prospective listeners to download audiobooks online and use them as digital files, making locating and listening easier than ever. APA President Michael Cobb, for one, is “heartened to see that nearly one quarter (23%) of listeners are between the ages of 18 and 24,” and expresses his hope that “these younger listeners remain lifelong listeners.” And why wouldn’t they, now that Cobb and

co. have discovered the perpetually-sought link to the hip, ever-consuming youngsters? For the internet has opened its depthless virtual doors to the industry, allowing it to bring more titles to market than ever before.

Exorbitant production costs have long inhibited the audiobook title selection process. According to Voices, self-proclaimed “#1 Voice Over Marketplace for Voice Over Talent” and collaborator with esteemed brands such as NBC, ABC and CBS, just one hour of produced narration can take at least two hours of studio voice time, four hours of recording and eight hours of editing. Furthermore, unknown professional narrators can charge between 200 and 500 dollars per finished hour, while celebrity narrators can do as they damn well please. Thus, when audiobooks were merely tangible disks, only the most popular titles saw the light of a reflective CD. However, the voracious digital audiobook readers have spurred variety and range in the titles available, and as Publishingtrends.com notes, in this age of broadening bandwidths and shortening attention spans, “having a variety of product is important in growing and keeping the interest of younger tech-savvy customers.” A spokesperson from Audible, a leader in the digital audiobook market, declares that “more than 40% of our members have never listened before joining Audible, but once they become Audible members, they download an average of over 17 books a year.” To supply this demand, Audible created the Audiobook Creation Exchange (ACX), a program that links audiobook rights holders, such as authors and publishers, with producers and narrators.



Source: www.digitalbookworld.com

I think ACX serves as a final underscore of the fact that audiobooks and the publishing industry as a whole are transitioning rather smoothly into the digital age. Though internet critics mourn the bastardization of literature with raucous cries of “Fahrenheit 451!,” the industry itself is not despairing, nor should it be. The flourishing and expanding audiobook industry is evidence of the benefits of refurbishing the face of literature. The innate appeal of audiobooks, this bringing to life that Jim Dale describes and Dylan Thomas first embodied way back in 1952, once

inhibited by cost and limited selection, is more accessible than ever before due to technology's cost-effectiveness, wide reach and broadening of what constitutes literature. The process from creation to consumption is now more efficient and full-bodied—Literature 2.0. Author J.K. Rowling is credited with getting children enthralled in reading with her magical weaving of words into a whole new and enchanting world. Jim Dale's masterful narration brings the story to life for many more, and now, companies like Audible are making literature like the Harry Potter series and its less renowned contemporaries more accessible than ever. The audiobook and its new and improved digitized version are the equivalent of airplaning creamed peas into a baby's mouth—a roundabout solution that ultimately feeds a need.