

An Electronic Gutenberg Phenomenon?

by Robert Dirmeyer

We're all a bit squeamish when it comes to considering certain parts of the human anatomy. Yes, these parts are only discussed in whispers between two who are sounding the attributes or shortcomings of a third; or, perhaps in shrill, schoolboy tones meant to deride or injure. And talk of clinical, probing instruments violating these areas sends chills down our spines. Only good friends, or best, lovers, do we allow to fondle these areas. These are also regions about which we feel naked unless they are covered, or at least fringed, by hair. So sacred, so private, are these parts, they can't help but fall, as does the sanctity and purity of motherhood, to the uncouth or wrathful phrase. Consider the words: "In your ear!"



Yes, the ear. That aural cavity which is sometimes a silver chalice brimming with symphonies, at other times a slop pot coagulated by early morning garbage truck sounds, but more usually a styrofoam cup half empty with the tepid din of day to day life.

According to a friend, who happens to be a cultural curmudgeon of sorts, there is another alarming encroachment on the sanctity of the ear. Akin, he says, to the compromising of sexual morals by the airing of condom ads on "the television machine." Now I call them "books on cassette" or "audio books." He disparagingly refers to them as "those electric books;" but what do you expect from a guy who wishes power lines were around during Ben Franklin's time only so one of his experimental kites would get hung up and "put the whole silliness to an end then and there."

Anachronistic curmudgeons aside, books on cassette are probably here to stay. According to Jane Friedman, Publisher of Random House AUDIOBOOKS, the market hasn't yet "exploded" but sales have been steady, so much so that Random has seen its way to expand its offerings beyond titles

available from Random House, Inc., or its various imprints.

Why books on cassette? What's the use? And, hearkening to my curmudgeon friend, doesn't the phenomenon somehow violate the sanctity of printed works? Don't they just add more noise to an already cacophonous civilization. Consider all the mindless household chores one does while listening to music or nothing at all. Consider commuting, especially car or bicycle commuting. Consider the white slash across the stomach after a day of reading on the beach. Consider that there are probably very few writers who'd be alarmed at the prospect of having their work read aloud.

Recorded books have a place, though it's doubtful they will ever supplant printed books. I've tried just plugging in a cassette, sitting down and listening. Unlike actually reading, you get fidgety. It's also harder to go back a couple of lines to relish a sublime phrase or clear up a misunderstanding. Ano-

words are never really changed, just certain amounts of text are excised and verbal bridges are written to cover the gap and that these are always read in another narrator's voice.

Then, if required, the author is called in to give final script approval. Once approved, the audio producer goes to talent agents and hires an actor or other similar person to audition for reader. Sometimes the authors themselves opt to read. I listened to *NERILKA'S STORY*, by Anne McCaffrey (Random House, 3 Hrs. \$14.95) read by the author herself. The inflection was great, she knew, of course, the story inside and out; but I just didn't like her voice. While you may be thinking you can turn your bedtime, baby-sitting skills into cold cash, Friedman warned that reading is a very demanding, very hard job—proper inflection, no clearing of the throat, no noticeable catching breath, etc., being some of the rules.

Remember that this is the Random

ther thing-purists will cringe—is that some books are abridged and some works that lend themselves to the treatment are dramatized. On top of this, Jane Friedman said that some titles just won't come across well as recorded books. Hence, books are here to stay, at least for some time. In answer to the cacophony question, I did household chores while listening to Peter Egan read Oscar Wilde's *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* (Listen for Pleasure, LTD., 2 Hrs., \$13.95) in a smooth, delicious English accent. I had a delightful listening experience and I also felt like I'd done more with my time than just toss out dust cats.

As I talked to Friedman I learned the rudiments of the production of recorded books. First, of course, titles are selected for their adaptability to the medium. That's considered along with rate of sales while in print. She went on to say that publishing houses concerned with books on cassette usually have professional audio producers on staff who oversee the production of the tapes. After a title is selected, the producer calls in a professional abridger to consider the work and how it can best be shortened to fit tape format. I can only imagine abridgers being akin to surgeons, or better yet, weight salon instructors; but, these professionals are dealing with disease or fat, not art. How would one decide which section of Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World" to crop for a mini art book? A poor analogy perhaps, but you get the jist. Friedman stated that the author's

House process. There are other houses active in the field of audio books. Some of these offer entire texts of the classics on cassette (*WAR AND PEACE?*) and undoubtedly go through production processes which are somewhat different.

One reason I'm in favor of books on cassette is our sight impaired, or otherwise handicapped friends who can't read for one reason or another. ("Braille," says my misanthropic, traditionalist friend, not considering the full scope of the handicaps.) Having worked in a bookstore and wanting to share my love of books with everyone, it's daunting to have to turn away eager appreciators of literature simply because no one thought to consider people with impairments.

It's probably just a matter of time before recorded books really catch on. What I'm wondering is who's going to exploit the gay and lesbian market. While there are books on cassette of interest to that specific market, there are no recorded books aimed directly at it. I'm hoping one of our presses (Alyson, Naiad, etc.) will see the potential and have the money and energy to underwrite such an enterprise. That would be so much better than having a larger house producing tapes for the money, not because of an interest in gay and lesbian literature, not because of an interest in the community.

Meanwhile, dust off your Walkman, go to your local bookstore, get one of the mainstream tapes and try it out. There is already a wide variety of titles out there and they are

not restricted to fiction alone. Remember that today's market probably evolved from beginnings in an educational environment. There are all sorts of instructional tapes, self-help titles (sometimes called "subliminals" in the market), as well as an ever expanding fiction realm which includes everything from *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED* to *THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE*. There is even a recording of Tennessee Williams reading *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*. Don't be a curmudgeon, you might shock yourself by finding that books on cassette can fill a literary gap in your life. Anyway, you can't thwart progress. Remember, it was only a matter of a couple of hundred years after Gutenberg invented movable type that hundreds of monks who were illuminators and scribes were out of a job. And things move so much faster (fast forward?) now.



Robert Dirmeyer is a member of the *BOOK REPORT* editorial staff.

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Birth Writes

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

JUNE 3, 1938

- Planet Savers
- Bloody Sun
- Sharra's Exile
- Catch Trap
- City of Sorcery
- Darkover Landfall
- Stormqueen
- Free Amazons of Darkover

Greyhaven

Hawkmistress

Warrior Women

Winds of Darkover

World Wreckers

Mists of Avalon

WALTER RINDER

JUNE 3, 1934

Aura of Love

Friends and Lovers

Love Is an Attitude

Spectrum of Love

This Time Called Life

EDWARD FIELD

JUNE 7, 1924

Full Heart

- Geography of Poets
- Stand Up Friend with Me
- Stars In My Eyes
- Sweet Gwendolyn & Co.

FRANK O'HARA

JUNE 27, 1926

Poems Retrieved

Lunch Poems

Selected Plays

Meditations in an Emergency

Standing Still and Walking

OTHERS BORN IN JUNE:

Violet Trefusis, June 6, 1894

Marquis de Sade, June 2, 1740

Cole Porter, June 9, 1892

Ivy Compton-Burnett, June 5, 1892

Terence Rattigan, June 10, 1911

Happy Birthday to all these fine artists, to any we missed, and to all the readers born under the signs of Taurus, Gemini, and Cancer.

Tony Dean is a member of the *BOOK REPORT* editorial staff.

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