

Talking books

Literature to listen to



28.06.08 | the guardian | The 40 best audiobooks selected by our expert panel

Tell me a story

Listening to someone read is a captivating experience, which can illuminate the most opaque books. It might just change your world, says **Sue Arnold**

Why do people buy audio books? For the same reason they watch colour rather than black and white television perhaps. A great voice reading a good book really does achieve what those supermarket promotions for breakfast promise: “30% more flavour, 40% more fruit”.

Of course, you don’t believe a word of it, it’s a marketing gimmick and, anyway, unless you are the sort of saddy who actually counts the strawberries in a muesli packet, how could you prove it? But when you see on the back of one of Michelle Paver’s bestselling Chronicles of Ancient Darkness that it’s read by Ian McKellen, you know exactly what you are going to get: more colour, more flavour and Gandalf’s inimitable voice bringing to life the richly atmospheric descriptions of the rites, rituals and mysteries of an ancient civilisation.

It’s often a bit of a struggle convincing the uninitiated that certain books are more easily understood through your ears than your eyes. Take Proust, and before you come back with a heartfelt “no thanks, I’d sooner submit to bowel surgery in the woods with a stick”, let me say that I used to feel the same. I probably made as many attempts to read À la recherche du temps perdu as Mark Twain made to give up smoking, but page after page of those interminable sentences always brought me to my knees. Was literature meant to be this difficult? Was it worth hacking through acres of Marcel’s impenetrable jungle to find those legendary madeleines?

Then I heard the audio version of Swann’s Way read by John Rowe and everything changed. It made sense, in fact it was wonderful, the more wonderful because someone else was doing the hacking, the hard work. Listening to rather than reading Proust is like paying someone to chop the firewood. All you have to do is sit back in your chair and warm your feet in the glow. Surprise yourself, amaze your family, impress your friends. Plug in and switch on Finnegan’s Wake, A Brief History of Time, Paradise Lost and all those other impossible books you’ve tried but failed to finish.

Print ties you down; when you’re reading a book you can’t do anything else. An audiobook allows you to multitask. You could be listening to Anthony Beevor’s brilliant The Battle for Spain or The Ghost by Robert Harris as you’re painting the spare room, cooking, clearing out the garage, fishing, slogging along the West Highland Way or driving to Cornwall.

Ever since I introduced a non-believer to the virtues of audiobooks she actually looks forward to going to the gym every morning. Thanks to the hours she now spends working out while simultaneously engrossed in the romantic and military strategies of War and Peace (67 and a half hours unabridged) she has lost five kilos and her muscle definition, she claims, is as good as Jason Statham’s. I never leave home without my Discman. I’ve been caught short before on lightless tube trains, immobilised



Above: John Rowe's recorded version of Swann's Way by Marcel Proust (top) transports the reader to the very heart of this notoriously impenetrable masterpiece
Top photo: Getty. Above: Sarah Lee

Then I heard John Rowe's audio version of Swann's Way and it made sense. In fact it was wonderful

for hours by signal failure in Dagenham East. Instead of listening to people complaining, weeping, hyperventilating, I could have been quietly listening to Ian Rankin’s last Rebus story Exit Music, Ben Macintyre’s brilliant Agent Zigzag or, best of all, Richard Burton and cast reading Under Milk Wood. To paraphrase Norman Wood – “in four years the world went from 1870 to 1940” from his latest book World War One: A Short History – in the 20 or so years that I have been listening to them, the technology of audiobooks has evolved from the wheel to the space shuttle. In the bad old days, you needed a backpack to bring three audio Aga sagas home from the library. That was when they were on old-fashioned cassettes in plastic boxes that could double as cabin trunks. Portability aside, cassettes had other snags. Invariably, just as the plot was nicely thickening on side 22 of, say, Val McDermid’s new thriller there would be a strange

crackling sound as if Andrew Sachs or Sean Barratt or whoever was reading it, had choked on a fish bone, then silence broken only by curses as you tried vainly to untangle the twisted strands of magnetic tape from your machine. The move to CDs made a big difference except for those tiresome, brittle boxes they come in which crack under a hard stare or the weight of a carelessly dropped biscuit. And then suddenly my world changed. I went to an audiobook conference and heard the magic word “download”. Now, instead of my usual mountain of holiday books – histories, biographies, classics, memoirs, novels (unabridged wherever possible – I prefer my authors uncut), I take just one small player no bigger than a packet of 10 Silk Cut. It holds eight books (total running time around 110 hours) downloaded from the internet. Downloading takes a bit of practice, but it’s the way forward. Space-wise it works out at about 2cm a book. How clever is that?

In association with the Book Marketing Society

40 audiobooks: fiction



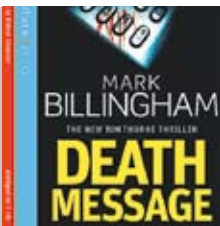
BIRDSONG, SEBASTIAN FAULKS, READ BY SAMUEL WEST (RANDOM HOUSE)
I somehow never got round to reading Birdsong when it was first published, and for that I am now grateful because I would have missed Samuel West’s wonderfully moving performance of this classic tale set during the first world war. LH



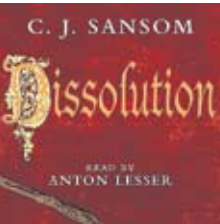
THE BROKER, JOHN GRISHAM, READ BY DENNIS BOUTSIKARIS (RANDOM HOUSE)
I always prefer to listen to John Grisham’s novels rather than read them as there is something about his fast-paced, multi-character, plot-twist narratives that just work so perfectly as an audiobook. This latest non-legal thriller is impeccably read by award-winning audiobook performer Boutsikaris. LH



THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME, MARK HADDON, READ BY BEN TIBBER (RANDOM HOUSE)
Christopher Boone is a 15-year-old mathematical genius, but also suffers a form of autism. He hates yellow, can’t relate to other kids and really misses his mum. Then one morning he finds his dog dead and his entire world changes. Beautifully written, stunningly read, a story to wring the hardest heart. SA



DEATH MESSAGE, MARK BILLINGHAM, READ BY ROBERT GLENISTER (HACHETTE)
Robert Glenister’s Tom has accompanied me through my 30s; he’s tired, pissed off and the only thing keeping him going is the desire to keep kicking against the pricks. The energy of this recording just zings out of the speakers. It’s gritty, dirty and absolutely human, and I can’t wait for the next one. Addiction is a filthy habit, but entirely justified with this series. JF



DISSOLUTION, CJ SANSOM, READ BY ANTON LESSER (MACMILLAN)
Matthew Shardlake, the crooked-back lawyer, experiences at first hand the viciousness and tragedy that accompany Henry VIII’s reshaping of religion in England. A commissioner overseeing the closure of a monastery is brutally murdered and Shardlake is sent to investigate. A mix of serious history and its political context, together with first-rate murder mystery. KN



EXIT MUSIC, IAN RANKIN, READ BY JAMES MACPHERSON (ORION)
The king of maverick cops thrashes the old-school competition. With no let-up in the pressure inside Rebus’s head, MacPherson gives us the best performance yet and proves that one reader does not mean one monologue – each character is given their own voice which makes this dramatic. It’s a rollicking good listen. JF



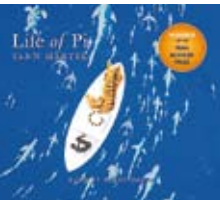
THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING, JRR TOLKIEN, READ BY FULL CAST (BBC)
The Fellowship of the Ring has never been bettered than in this superb BBC adaptation, recorded in 1981, with Ian Holm playing a magnificently valiant Frodo and Bill Nighy a marvellous Samwise Gamgee. Michael Horden is brilliant as Gandalf – and it’s impossible to write about this without using superlatives. A feast for the ears! KN



FLASHMAN ON THE MARCH, GEORGE MACDONALD FRASER, READ BY TOBY STEPHENS (HARPERCOLLINS)
The reluctant Flashman undertakes a perilous mission into deepest Abyssinia in the late 1860s, where his mastery of lechery, treachery and amazing good luck will be put to the ultimate test. Toby Stephens manages to capture perfectly the range of characters that populate this extraordinary adventure. JHe



GREAT EXPECTATIONS, CHARLES DICKENS, READ BY ANTON LESSER (NAXOS)
A cleverly abridged version of the tale in which an unknown benefactor’s bequest allows young Philip Pirrip to escape his humble background, though his newfound great expectations only manage to bring him sorrow. A classic novel of self-discovery, brilliantly read by Lesser. JHo

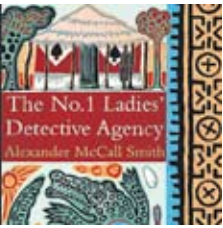


THE LIFE OF PI, YANN MARTEL, READ BY KERRY SHALE (HARPERCOLLINS)
Listeners have clearly responded to this recording by the Canadian actor Shale and to the spiritual themes of this Booker prize-winner as it has been a consistent bestseller since publication. Pi is the small Indian boy who survives shipwreck and sails across the ocean with only a tiger for company. RT

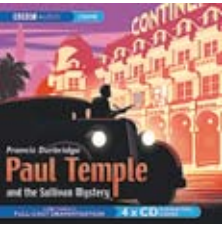
Fiction



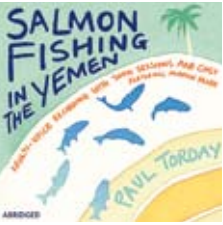
THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD, AGATHA CHRISTIE, READ BY HUGH FRASER (HARPERCOLLINS)
The whodunnit that clinched Christie's title as Queen of Crime. Did Roger Ackroyd die because he knew too much about the web of intrigue, the lies, the blackmail, the poison, the bodies, so many bodies, that were crowding into his quiet life? Only the murderer knows but they won't tell, can't tell, and in any case nobody but Hercule Poirot would believe them. SA



THE NO 1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY, ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH, READ BY ADJOA ANDOH (HARPERCOLLINS)
Introducing Botswana's first lady detective, Mwa Precious Ramotswa, and the reader, British actor Andoh, catches the warmth and acumen of this engaging character. This and the subsequent books (there are now nine) are noted for their gentle sense of humour and humanity, and for launching the career of the author Alexander McCall Smith. RT



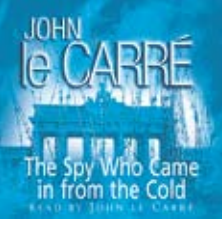
PAUL TEMPLE AND THE SULLIVAN MYSTERY, FRANCIS DURBRIDGE, READ BY FULL CAST (BBC)
Fast cars, chilled cocktails, dangerous blondes with cigarette holders, men in cravats and handmade shoes – welcome to the sophisticated world of BBC Radio's most popular detective Paul Temple and his glamorous wife Steve. A brilliant remake of the 1948 classic murder mystery with vintage sound effects. SA



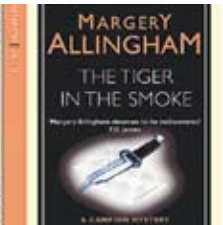
SALMON FISHING IN THE YEMEN, PAUL TORDAY, READ BY JOHN SESSIONS AND CAST (BBC)
A hen-pecked middle-aged scientist finds himself caught up in a bizarre project which changes his life, and in the course of which he discovers true love and learns to believe in the impossible. A stellar cast including John Sessions and Andrew Marr (as himself) bring this reading to life. JHo



SENSE AND SENSIBILITY, JANE AUSTEN, READ BY JULIET STEVENSON (NAXOS)
Juliet Stevenson, a noted audiobook reader, brings an inimitable style to this recording of the Austen classic, the story of two sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, and their varying fortunes as they move towards matrimony. RT

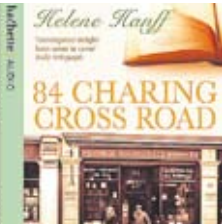


THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD, WRITTEN AND READ BY JOHN LE CARRÉ (ORION)
An author's enthusiasm to read his own novel can often be misplaced, but I would be happy to hear John le Carré read any book such is the compelling delivery of his voice while reading probably the best spy story ever written. LH

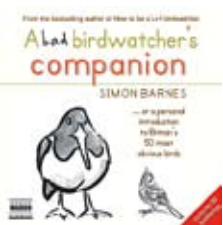


TIGER IN THE SMOKE, MARGERY ALLINGHAM, READ BY PHILIP FRANKS (HACHETTE)
Allingham wrote a number of novels featuring the detective Albert Campion – this has always been rated the best. Franks brilliantly manages to read the voices of a wide variety of characters and perfectly catches the menacing atmosphere of a fog-bound, postwar London and the desperate search through shabby streets and squares for a particularly nasty criminal. RT

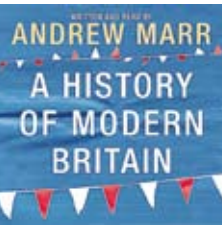
Non-fiction, poetry, plays



84 CHARING CROSS ROAD, HELEN HANFF, READ BY JULIET STEVENSON AND JOHN NETTLES (HACHETTE)
For 20 years Hanff corresponded from her New York brownstone with the manager of Marks and Co, booksellers on the Charing Cross Road. Her requests for rare books soon become more personal exchanges of news and even provisions for those living in postwar London. An expert reading brings to life the restrained bookseller and his exuberant correspondent. JHe



A BAD BIRDWATCHER'S COMPANION, WRITTEN AND READ BY SIMON BARNES (NAXOS)
Barnes, one of Britain's leading bird writers and humorists, reads his own illuminating introductions to 50 "obvious" birds of Britain, along with whimsical asides on their characters. What makes this reading special is the addition of the distinguishing birdsong of each species. JHo



A HISTORY OF MODERN BRITAIN, WRITTEN AND READ BY ANDREW MARR (MACMILLAN)
Marr is a virtuoso performer, even when not in full animated telly mode. He performs rather than reads, with wit and energy and a tongue placed perpetually in cheek; his impressions of old politicians are hilarious. A joy to hear this wonderful eyebrow-raised take on Britain from the man himself. JF

Full-length version

The price criterion of £15 for our top 40 audiobook selection caused a number of unabridged gems to be left out. **Sue Arnold** lists her favourites



Jonathan Cecil delivers Thank You, Jeeves by PG Wodehouse with great aplomb Can Nguyen/IDS

Riordan as Molly Bloom and you'll wonder what all the scare stories were about. It's less a book than a full-scale production (Naxos specialises in all-singing all-dancing productions) with the sound of the sea and contemporary bar-room ballads between chapters. Let Jim work out the pronunciation of Joyce's famous four-word wave speech: *seesoo hrss rsseeiss ooos*. How do we know it's correct? We don't, but it sounds terrific. A mere snip at £69.99 is the BBC's sublime sci-fi spoof by Douglas Adams, The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy. An alien from planet Betelgeuse comes to Earth, calls himself Ford Prefect, makes friends with a nice ordinary bloke from Guildford called Arthur Dent and takes him hitchhiking round the universe. I normally loathe sci-fi, but Adams brilliantly read by the author is different. It's funny. Here are Ford and Arthur, one of literature's great buddy relation-

ships, stowing away on an intergalactic spacecraft. "How do you feel?" said Ford. "Like a military academy," said Arthur. "Bits of me keep passing out." Ford stared at him blankly in the darkness. "If I asked you where the hell we were," said Arthur weakly, "would I regret it?" Ford stood up. "We're safe," he said. "Oh good," said Arthur. "We're in a small galley cabin," said Ford, "in one of the spaceships of the Vagon Constructor Fleet." "Ah," said Arthur. "This is obviously some strange usage of the word safe that I wasn't previously aware of." Any unabridged Jane Austen will do me, provided it's read by Juliet Stevenson whose blissful tongue-in-cheek gravity is exactly how I imagine the high priestess of Chawton reading the first drafts of her books aloud to her family. These days we'd call it a focus group. They start at a modest £27.99 for Persuasion and finish at £38.99 for Mansfield Park, a lot cheaper even than my seventh book Moby-Dick weighing in at 20 hours for £61.75. I wouldn't go as far as Woody Allen who famously replied to the question: if you could live your life over again what would you do differently? with "I wouldn't read Moby-Dick", but what did it for me was the rich dark double espresso voice of the reader William Hootkins and his irrepressible enthusiasm. Only one to go. This is impossible; I'd like at least another 20 but I'll have Jonathan Cecil rather than any of the other Jeeves impersonators reading Thank You, Jeeves, Wodehouse's first full-length book. It has an illuminating preface about voices which seems an appropriate way to end. For a change, instead of typing it, PG dictated it on to one of those prewar machines that recorded the sound of his voice on to wax. This is how he described the result. "There was a kind of foggy dreariness about it that chilled the spirits. It stunned me. I'd been hoping if all went well to make the new Jeeves an amusing book. Gay, if you see what I mean. Rollicking, if you still follow. But with a voice like that, the thing would develop into one of those dim tragedies of peasant life that you return to the library after a quick glance at page one. I sold the machine next day and felt like the Ancient Mariner when he got rid of the albatross." It's a shame he didn't persevere – it would have been the world's first audiobook.

It's less a book than a full-scale production with sounds of the sea and bar-room ballads between chapters

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Imelda Staunton: 'Listening to a good story feeds your imagination. We have to keep telling stories: that's what life is made of.' Linda Nyland

Master raconteuse

With her interpretation of the Gruffalo tales, Imelda Staunton has won over children and adults alike. She tells **Joel Rickett** why she loves telling stories

When Imelda Staunton first arrived on set to play Vera Drake, the role that was to win her an Oscar nomination, she had researched extensively for the harrowing script, fully aware of director Mike Leigh's stringent demands and preference for intensive improvised shoots. So Leigh's first words to her were a surprise. "Can I just say 'The Gruffalo' to you?" he asked.

Through spending time with friends who had young children, Leigh had listened to Staunton's recording of The Gruffalo, the modern children's classic by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. "I thought he was joking, but he was very impressed with my work on The Gruffalo," Staunton laughs. "Forget my other acting."

Leigh is just one of the hundreds of thousands of adults who've derived much pleasure from Staunton's sing-song narration of The Gruffalo and its follow-ups. She injects the picture book stories with an infectious energy, reveling in the range of voices required

(from snakes to monkeys to Gruffaloes). But she's aware that even adult fans have their limits: "Kids say 'again, again' and want to listen to it 200 times on long car journeys. I can only apologise to the parents."

Why do children get so addicted? Staunton pays tribute to the pleasing tension and vibrancy of Donaldson and Scheffler's original creations. "Children are dreading the Gruffalo, but they also really want to see it. It's beautifully tantalising and a very nice horror story."

All her career Staunton had turned down opportunities to dramatise fiction. "A few years ago I was rubbish at narrative and I couldn't bear the idea of being locked in a studio for two days." But when in 2001 The Gruffalo was mentioned, she leapt at the chance. "I'd read it to my daughter, so I thought it would be great to put it on tape to bore her. I like silly voices and a good story."

After years of stage and screen roles, Staunton appreciated the lack of pressure and expectation, although she stresses the work involved: "It's not an easy gig. The director doesn't let me get away

with anything, there's no sense it's a kid's thing and doesn't matter. I have to channel my energy because each [new Donaldson book] has to be better." It's a shame the work is rarely acknowledged; a recent newspaper exhaustively listed her achievements ("theatre, film, television, radio; tragedy, comedy, Shakespeare, Chekhov, Broadway musical and cabaret") without mentioning the audiobooks.

Yet lack of media recognition has barely troubled sales: The Gruffalo audiobook won two Spoken Word Awards in 2002, and went on to become publisher Macmillan's biggest audio title of all time (350,000 copies and counting). Seven more Donaldson/Scheffler CDs have followed, including The Snail and the Whale and Monkey Puzzle, shifting nearly 800,000 copies in total.

Staunton clearly relishes performing the animal noises and different voices, lacing the stories with regional accents. "It's heaven," she admits. She even sings on The Gruffalo song standalone CD. "It's extraordinary how many people have sung it back to me," she says.

Asked to analyse how the process works, she gives the example of

a single sentence: "And then they went into the forest." She says it once straight, and then injects it with the breathless Gruffalo treatment. I'm instantly transported to the edge of a dark forbidding forest until she suddenly stops. "You have to paint the picture, really fire it up," she chuckles. "It's about enthusing listeners."

At Macmillan, head of audiobooks Ali Muirden says: "[Imelda] is one of the most talented and fun people I have had the pleasure of working with. She never minds doing all the little extras like funny sound effects and noises."

Staunton has now progressed to recording a version of Eva Ibbotson's classic Journey to the River Sea. "I had read it and loved it, so I really worked hard at it," she says.

It's easy to understand why people listen to the longer narrative of an Ibbotson, but where's the appeal of hearing picture books without seeing the illustrations? "Listening to a good story feeds your imagination," she rhapsodises. "That's true in any form: audiobooks, theatre, film or around a campfire. We have to keep telling stories: that's what life is made of."

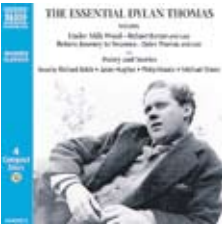
Non-fiction, poetry, plays



AGENT ZIGZAG, BEN MACINTYRE, READ BY ANTHONY HEAD (ORION)
The true story of Edward Chapman, a womanising criminal who became a double agent during WWII and who led many lives. His story is now brought together in a fantastic tale of espionage and adventure by Macintyre, using letters, diaries and M15 files that have recently been released for the first time. RA



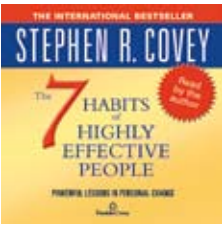
ATTENTION ALL SHIPPING, CHARLIE CONNOLLY, READ BY ALEX JENNINGS (HACHETTE)
Lundy, Portland, Fisher, German Bight, South East Iceland: you've heard the long mysterious litany of names on the shipping forecast every night and maybe even worried about the gale force eights and nines that threaten to overwhelm them, but where on earth are they and what if anything happens on them? Connolly tells all with panache. SA



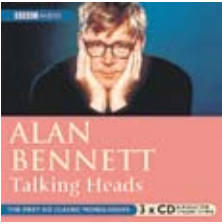
THE ESSENTIAL DYLAN THOMAS, READ BY RICHARD BURTON, PHILIP MADOC ET AL (NAXOS)
Poet, storyteller, broadcaster Dylan Thomas was charismatic, outrageous, unpredictable, impossible. He was also a genius with words. This glorious collection of his best-known, best-loved and wittiest writing – stories, poems and above all his mould-breaking radio play Under Milk Wood, read by the incomparable Richard Burton, other famous actors, and the poet himself, captures the quintessence of his genius. SA



ROMEO AND JULIET, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, READ BY JOAN WALKER AND CAST (SMARTPASS)
For students facing GCSE, SmartPass's superb Romeo and Juliet has an engaging performance of the entire play plus discussion topics, full read-along scripts, historical and social backgrounds and exam strategies. A totally brilliant way to revise. KN



THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE, WRITTEN AND READ BY STEPHEN R COVEY (SIMON & SCHUSTER))
A classic in its field, this self-help audio guide supports one of the most influential books written on the subject. Using his seven points, Covey offers ways to transform one's personal and professional life, through proactive approaches to the problems we encounter. RA



TALKING HEADS NO 1, ALAN BENNETT, READ BY FULL CAST (BBC)
It is hard to believe that Bennett's award-winning monologues were first broadcast 20 years ago – they have lost none of their impact and they stand up to repeated listening. I have lost count of the number of times I am surprised by the turn a familiar story takes. All credit to the genius of Bennett and Britain's leading actors. LH

Humour



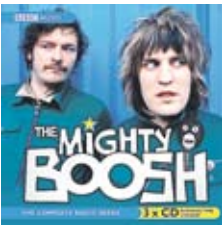
FLIGHT OF THE CONCHORDS, CAST RECORDING (BBC)
Precursor to the celebrated HBO series, the Radio 4 show follows Brett and Jermaine as they arrive in London fresh-faced from New Zealand, attempting to get a record deal for their folk guitar-based jazz, techno, hip-hop music. Featuring early versions of some of the songs which now feature on their eponymous debut album. RA



HANCOCK'S HALF HOUR – THE VERY BEST EPISODES, VOL 1, CAST RECORDING (BBC)
From the golden age of British radio comedy, this classic series deserves to find a new generation of listeners because it's still very funny. The first volume of the best radio episodes, selected by the writers Galton and Simpson is the place to start as it contains Hancock's finest half-hour: Sunday Afternoon at Home. LH



THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY: PRIMARY PHASE, DOUGLAS ADAMS, READ BY PETER JONES AND CAST (BBC)
On the day that Earth is demolished to make way for a hyperspace bypass, Arthur Dent is rescued by his friend, Ford Prefect – who turns out to be an alien – and taken on a surreal journey across the universe to update the bestselling hitchhikers' handbook. This original recording from the BBC Radio 4 series will take you on a journey you too will never forget. JHe



THE MIGHTY BOOSH, CAST RECORDING (BBC)
In its original incarnation, before it hit our screens, The Mighty Boosh on CD shows the humble beginnings of this now huge cult hit as a quiet late-night Radio 4 comedy, now enjoying bigger budgets on BBC3 and its own festival this year. Set in Bob Fossil's zoo, it's a delightfully weird and wonderful series, featuring some classic Boosh songs. RA

"I spend a year writing each Nic Costa novel, and those twelve months involve Roman history, art, culture and some pretty dark crime too. If any of that could be cut, I'd cut it myself. Please – if you want to try the real thing, buy the real thing. Unabridged audio." - David Hewson

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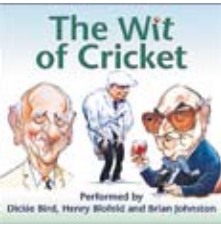
Humour



I'M SORRY I HAVEN'T A CLUE ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL, CAST RECORDING (BBC)
A celebration of 30 years of I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue, plus anniversary special, with an introduction by original producer David Hatch, the remastered pilot edition, and I'm Sorry I Haven't a Desert Island, which features celebrities' selections from the archives. JHo

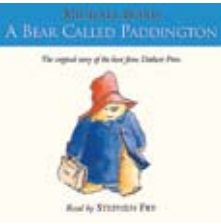


SUMMER LIGHTNING, PG WODEHOUSE, READ BY MARTIN JARVIS (CSA)
Wodehouse at his best: a sublime comedy of pig-napping, memoir-thieving and the usual romantic entanglements set at Blandings, in sunny Shropshire, home of the dotty ninth Earl of Emsworth. With a cast of characters larger than life, overseen by the enormous and unflappable butler Beach, the scene is set for an outing by one of the greatest humorists ever, read with masterly wit and style by Martin Jarvis. JHe

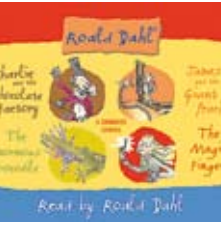


THE WIT OF CRICKET, DICKIE BIRD, HENRY BLOFELD AND BRIAN JOHNSTON (HODDER)
Broadcasting legends Bird, Blofeld and Johnston are brought together with a live audience as they present hilarious stories and anecdotes from their years of radio commentating. Featuring gaffes and practical jokes from the BBC archives, it's a superb collection for cricket fans. RA

Children's



A BEAR CALLED PADDINGTON, MICHAEL BOND, READ BY STEPHEN FRY (HARPER COLLINS)
The first series about Paddington Bear, discovered at Paddington station by the Browns, slightly the worse for wear after a long journey from darkest Peru. The Browns soon discover that ordinary things become extraordinary when Paddington is involved. Fry brings the well-meaning, but accident-prone bear – and a cast of great London characters – brilliantly alive in these classic family stories. JHe



FOUR FAVOURITE STORIES, WRITTEN AND READ BY ROALD DAHL (HARPERCOLLINS)
There is something that gives the listener a special frisson at hearing a great writer reading their own work, and on this recording Dahl himself reads four stories that have become classics: The Magic Finger, James and the Giant Peach, The Enormous Crocodile and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. RT



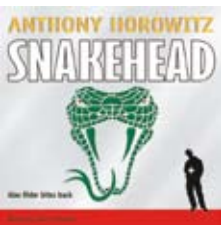
THE GRUFFALO, JULIA DONALDSON, READ BY IMELDA STAUNTON (MACMILLAN)
For every parent who has experienced the tedium of the same book night after night, week after week, rejoice in a book as effortlessly pleasurable as The Gruffalo. A charming tale of a wee mouse who proves that brains beat brawn every time, it's a little bit creepy and a little bit scary thanks to the sound effects and music, but mostly just made bags of fun by the supreme Imelda Staunton. An absolute cracker. JF



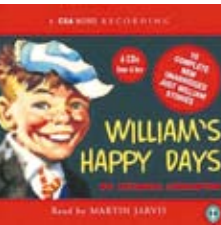
HORRID HENRY'S STINKBOMB, FRANCESCA SIMON, READ BY MIRANDA RICHARDSON (ORION)
A grand example of how an audio production can take a pretty great book into the "fabulous" category. Henry is snotty, frustrating and very, very naughty. And absolutely irresistible. A cool update of the Just William series, this is a superb performance, along with musical interludes and sound effects that keep everyone entertained. Wicked in all senses, a CD you won't mind listening to over (and over) again. JF



MY COMPLETELY BEST STORY COLLECTION – CHARLIE AND LOLA, LAUREN CHILD, READ BY CAST (PUFFIN)
This has been beautifully adapted from the Charlie and Lola BBC TV show. The five delicious stories (for ages 2-8) include My Wobbly Tooth Must Not Ever Fall Out which totally captures both the four-year-old Lola's dismay at the thought and older brother Charlie's patient understanding. The children's voices – Jethro Lundie-Brown and Maisie Cowell – are delightful. KN



SNAKEHEAD, ANTHONY HOWORWITZ, READ BY DAN STEVENS (WALKER)
Horowitz's Alex Rider character has totally captured unwilling boy readers, and listening to the action-packed Snakehead you can see why. Aged 14, Alex is in the secret service and can do virtually any physical action you can name. Enemies abound and Alex needs to save the world. Dan Stevens is a gorgeous reader and brings Alex to edge-of-the-seat life. KN



WILLIAM'S HAPPY DAYS, RICHMAL CROMPTON, READ BY MARTIN JARVIS (CSA)
A six-CD set featuring 10 newly recorded and unabridged William stories, read by the incomparable Jarvis and featuring such typical William exploits as his escape from an angry shopkeeper by pretending to be a wax dummy, and his experiments in Red Indian cookery. JHo

Books on the move

Publications are increasingly available as digital downloads for MP3 players and mobile phones. **Michelle Pauli** reports on a forward-thinking industry

There is a quiet revolution afoot in the genteel world of the audiobook. Whereas the music industry dragged its feet in the face of the digital challenge of the last decade, the audiobook industry is embracing it with open arms. "The audiobooks section of a publishing house used to be like the stationery cupboard with one person tucked away in a dusty office, but now audio is right at the centre of the publishing industry's plans," explains Joel Rickett, deputy news editor of the Bookseller. Although, surprisingly, you can still buy audiobooks on cassette, the vast majority of audiobooks are now sold on regular CD. However, digital is the fastest growing area of the market.



Go to the audiobooks section of any of the major publishers' websites and you'll find the option to buy the titles as digital downloads – files you can download to your computer and listen to on your PC, MP3 player or mobile phone. Downloads tend to be cheaper than the hard product, and, of course, they take up much less space. Digital advances are introducing audiobooks to a new audience. According to Chris McKee, the managing director of audiobook download site audible.co.uk, "Many of our customers have never considered audio before but because of the proliferation of devices available to listen to stuff on, matched by the availability of great content, they are seeing the appeal of spoken word." Audible is the giant in the world of digital downloads with over 20,000 books on its site and an exclusive contract to provide iTunes with its audiobook content. An original dotcom company, started 10 years

ago in the US, it was swallowed up by Amazon in March. Unusually in the books world, Audible's customers are 60/40 male/female and it does well out of business tomes and Bill Bryson. However, the tastes of its audience are also driving a major trend in the market – away from the traditional abridged audiobook, towards full-length recordings. McKee says: "We are seeing the simultaneous release of the book and the full audio version as producers are responding to the demand for immediate and complete audiobooks. It is another factor driving the content: making it available in a timely fashion." However, not all audiobook publishers agree that fast and furious full-length publishing is the way forward. "An unabridged War and Peace is 67 hours," points out Nicolas Soames, MD of Naxos, which specialises in publishing the clas-

Downloads are transforming the market, and listeners' living rooms, as piles of CDs give way to digital files Alamy

sics as audiobooks. "It's absolutely wonderful but many people would rather have a nine-hour-long good abridgement. Skilful abridgement can make it more accessible." Naxos was the first company to turn its back on the humble cassette completely in 1994 and is the only independent audiobook site with its own download site. For Soames, one of the big issues is digital rights management (DRM). While the music industry has run scared of file formats that allow customers unrestricted use of the content they buy, and some audiobook sites such as Audible apply a "light" form of DRM, Naxos is "staunchly MP3," says Soames. "We do not believe that people will rip us off and that is

borne out by the evidence." "We are at a tipping point," predicts Rickett. "There is huge potential and excitement but it has not yet translated into huge sales. The industry just needs a big push." Mobile technology is one area ripe for that big push. "Listening on mobiles is using what people already have, which is easier than trying to get them to buy something new, and it also offers an easy way to pay," suggests Rickett. Mobile download company Go Spoken hopes to be a player in this new market. It launched in April this year and offers titles from Random House, HarperCollins and Hachette as downloads for phones. Sales are low so far, admits its marketing manager, Rebecca Williams, but technology is moving its way. According to the phone networks, by the end of the year 30-40% of phones sold will allow the fastest download speeds (it's currently 4%), which means that downloading a four hour book on your phone takes less than four minutes, including payment. At the same time, companies are also bundling free dataplans in their contracts, removing the cost barrier of downloads. However, perhaps the most exciting direction in which technology is moving, says Rickett, is convergence of different types of media – the blending of audiobooks with text and video. Imagine reading a novel on a mobile screen, such as an iPhone. As you get into a car to drive, it slips effortlessly into audio without missing a word. Take it into the kitchen and your Nigella cookery audiobook moves into video mode to provide a demo. The technology is not there yet but it could soon be. But what about the instruction manual – will that be read to us too?

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Terms and conditions: No purchase necessary. Only one entry per person will be accepted. The prize is non-transferable and there is no cash alternative. Open to residents of UK and Ireland, except employees of the Bookseller's Association, National Book Tokens Ltd, Guardian News & Media. All entries must be received by midnight on Friday July 18 2008 and the winner will be notified by post no later than July 31 2008. The judge's decision is final. No correspondence will be entered into and no entry returned. For a full list of the winners please check www.nationalbooktokens.co.uk after July 31 2008.

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