

# Young Adult Audiobooks: The Audio Answer for Reluctant Readers

by Tim Ditlow

In recent years, educators and librarians have championed the audiobook format as a great way to reach young readers, regardless of their reading level, background, or even language. Listed below are some recent examples of this newfound interest and excitement.

- At the 2006 American Library Association (ALA) Conference in Washington, DC, the ALA's young adult (YA) division held the first-ever pre-conference event to focus solely on audiobooks.
- The ALA has announced the creation of the Odyssey Award, which will be given to an outstanding audiobook produced for children up to the age of 18.
- Schools are actively integrating audiobooks into curricula as downloadable media available on class and course websites and through the use of devices such as the iPod® and other digital music players.

The overall message is quite clear: The educational benefits and advantages of audiobooks are being discussed and celebrated by librarians and educators nationwide.

So why are audiobooks receiving such attention now, when the industry has existed for over fifty years? First, audio technology is now more affordable and more widely available. Second, today's young people are more comfortable using non-print formats than any other previous generation has been. (A quick trip to your local public library will show you that the shelves of YA audiobooks are often

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empty because of high circulation rates.) Finally, the numbers do not lie: Sales of audiobooks both on CD and via digital download continue to grow exponentially each year.

In fact, the best way to understand why audiobooks are currently in the spotlight is to review recent articles about YA audiobooks. Written by some of the top names in the fields of reading education and library science, these articles provide the background information you need to help your students start listening. If you are already using audiobooks in the classroom, then read on; new research can offer innovative ideas on expanding audiobook listening in your curriculum.

All of the articles cited below are easily accessible on the Books on Tape/Listening Library website ([www.school.booksontape.com](http://www.school.booksontape.com)):

First, a quick quiz:

True or False

1. You can't learn to listen. You are either good at it or not.
2. Listening requires very little effort.
3. We use speaking skills more than listening skills.
4. Good listeners are usually not good readers.
5. You listen better as you get older.

(DiStefano, Dole, and Marzano, 1984)

Believe it or not, each of these statements is false!

Let the tour begin!

“Audiobooks 101: How Listening Promotes Literacy.”

Sylvia Vardell, Ph.D. (of the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman's University), here provides a powerful snapshot of the direct relationship between listening and key literacy skills. This presentation is a good

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springboard, because Dr. Vardell clearly outlines the educational benefits of audiobooks for children of all ages and reading levels, providing the educational framework on which educators can continue to build.

#### “Why Listen”

Next on the article tour is “Why Listen” by Teri S. Lesesne, Ed.D. (Associate Professor of Library and Information Studies, Sam Houston State University). Dr. Lesesne provides a history of the classroom use of the audiobook, showing its transformation from ancillary material to key component of the reading curriculum. She highlights research studies, both completed and ongoing, that influence educators to consider using audiobooks as an aid for reluctant and struggling readers. Finally, she lists practical suggestions and recommendations both for beginning an audiobook collection and for building the collection into a vibrant addition to any classroom or school library.

#### “Open the Way to New Stories, New Interests, and a New Language: Using Audiobooks with English Language Learners”

Children can be reluctant readers for a variety of reasons. For educators, one area of challenge is students who are English language learners (ELLs). If you are working with this population at your school, a great resource is “Open the Way to New Stories, New Interests, and a New Language: Using Audiobooks with English Language Learners” by Francisca Goldsmith [Collection Management and Promotion Librarian at the Berkeley (CA) Public Library]. In her community, Ms. Goldsmith has created a highly successful program that she calls “Earphone English.” She explains how audiobooks offer ELL students the opportunity to listen to oral English that presents correct pronunciation of words and statement inflection. She also highlights the different approaches ELL students may have during their initial listening experiences.

#### “The Pleasure of a Culturally Authentic Listening Experience”

The aspect of cultural experiences reflected in YA literature and audiobooks is also highlighted in “The Pleasure of a Culturally Authentic Listening Experience,”

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written by Professor Junko Yokota (of National-Louis University, Chicago, IL). Prof. Yokota explores multicultural literature in the audiobook medium and discusses how and why educators should select audiobook programs that reflect the cultural and linguistic background of the book's setting and characters. She believes that this authenticity is an important tool if an audiobook is to serve as a "mirror or window to a culture." Both Ms. Goldsmith and Prof. Yokota agree that the life experiences of ELL students can be validated by listening to literature, which can also be an avenue for inspiring a reluctant reader to become a lifelong reader.

Reluctant readers come in all shapes and sizes and speak many different languages. One common denominator, however, for all reluctant readers is that each year they dread the assignment of the summer reading list.

"Summertime: Children's Books Hit the Road" / "Listen to the List"

Although schools may not be in session during the summer months, teens should not take a vacation from reading. Many school districts now allow students to listen to the books on their summer reading lists as long as the students listen to the unabridged versions. Isn't the thought of young adults listening to MP3 players filled with recordings by Philip Pullman, Richard Peck, and Tamora Pierce a delightful image? Two articles that discuss the role that audiobooks can play to help teens stay connected to books and reading in the summer are "Summertime: Children's Books Hit the Road" by Joan Kindig, Ed.D. (University of Virginia), and "Listen to the List" by Sharon Grover (Head of Youth Services, Hedberg Public Library, Janesville, WI).

Congratulations! If you have read all of the above articles, you know how YA audiobooks are being used in today's classrooms.

Don't let your students have all the fun! On your trips to and from work, take time to listen to the remarkable works of fiction being written by today's YA authors. It's a great way to become aware of all the new releases, as many

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audiobooks are released simultaneously with the book's hardcover version. Educators are busy: Getting to the newest titles while periodically reviewing the classics is a challenge, but audiobooks are a reader's best kept secret. Keeping you entertained and up-to-date at the same time, audiobooks can truly help you multitask.

After working with children's and YA audiobooks for over two decades, I know the lifelong impact they can have. I am thrilled to see that audio continues to head in a positive direction, with educators leading the way.

#### About the Writer

Tim Ditlow, Vice President and Publisher of Listening Library, has been producing children's and YA audiobooks for over 25 years. Listening Library was founded by his parents in 1955, and his father produced such YA classics as *Lord of the Flies*; *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*; and *A Separate Peace*.

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