

# Teacher's Guide

## The Next Battleground

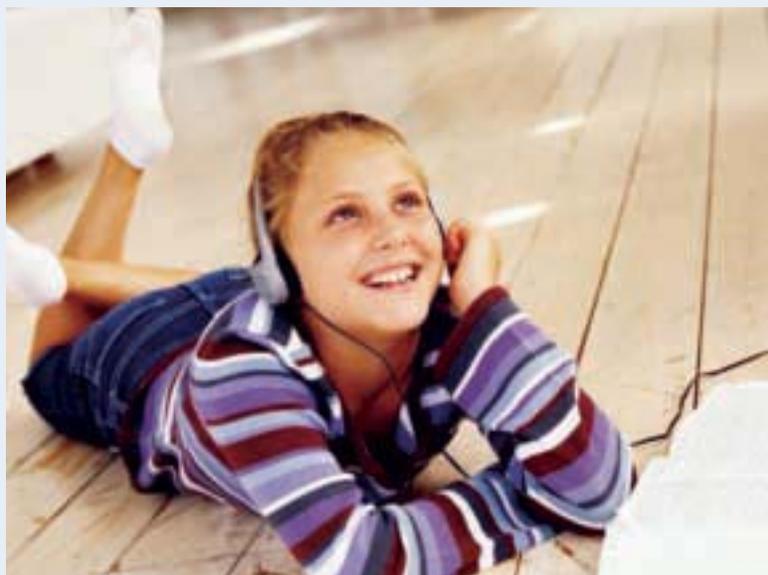
### AUDIOBOOKS AND CENSORSHIP

BY TERI S. LESESNE

When audiobooks were a fledgling industry, I had an uphill battle getting educators to consider this alternative form of “reading.” There was a great suspicion that listening to a book was somehow easier and, therefore, cheating. No longer do I have to cajole educators when it comes to the value of using audiobooks in school. With classics and popular curriculum titles available on audio, with the emergence of the American Library Association’s lists of distinguished audiobooks to use with children and young adults, and now with the inauguration of the Odyssey Award—the first major award for distinction in audiobooks for children and young adults—audiobooks are becoming a standard in classroom collections and in school and public libraries. Audiobooks are being successfully used to assist English language learners, ADD and ADHD students, and struggling readers. And let us not forget that audiobooks work just as well for skilled readers. Gifted, accelerated, challenged, or on-level: the ability of the reader is not at issue when it comes to audiobooks. Audiobooks provide simply another way for ALL readers to find time with books.

One battle appears to have been won—audiobooks are accepted and respected by educators. However, with more than 30 years as a warrior for audiobooks, I know there is more to come. After all, we have seen children’s and YA literature make inroads into classrooms across the country, only to find ourselves embroiled in controversy after controversy over content. That’s right: censorship continues to increase; books are still targets for those who wish to control what children and teens read. How long will it be before we see the same battles waged against audiobooks that are now fought against texts of the more conventional sort?

Of the Top Ten Challenged Books from 2007 (American Library Association, [www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbookweek/bannedbookweek.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbookweek/bannedbookweek.cfm)), eight are available in audiobook formats, including: *The Chocolate War*; *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*; *The Bluest Eye*; *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* series; *The Gossip Girls* series; *Athletic Shorts*; *The Perks of Being a*



*Wallflower*; and *Beloved*. Also consider these books that were included on the Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults from the Young Adults Library Services Association of the American Library Association (YALSA), and/or the Notable Children’s Recordings from the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) for 2008: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, *The Higher Power of Lucky*, *The Rules of Survival*, *The Wednesday Wars*, *Before I Die*, *Forever in Blue*, and *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Wizards, sex, death, suicide, abuse, religion, and a myriad of other issues that have been problematic in the past crop up in these honored audiobooks.

According to statistics from the American Library Association, approximately 20% of challenges made to books are due to objectionable language, another 20% to sexual content, another 20% for unsuitable content for the intended audience, 15% for occult content, 9% for homosexual content, 8% for violence, and 7% for religious content. These percentages are approximations; full statistics are available at <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbookweek/challengedbanned/challengedbanned.cfm>. The aforementioned titles include books with sexual content (*Before I Die* and *Forever in Blue*), references to the occult (censors point to the spells cast in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*), violence (*Rules of Survival*), objectionable language (recall the furor raised over the use of the word “scrotum” in *The Higher Power of Lucky*, and *Thirteen Reasons Why* has a few choice words for the censors as well), and homosexuality (Dumbledore is gay?). These are, in many instances, ephemeral charges. One person’s objectionable language may be acceptable to the next person. F-bombs notwithstanding, how do we determine what is objectionable? One of my favorite anecdotes is about the person who objected to *A Wrinkle in Time* because of a character she thought was named Mrs. Witch, but in reality was Mrs. Which.



That said, why have audiobooks and other digital media gone unnoticed? There are two possible explanations. One is that audiobooks and other “non-traditional” formats have been flying under the radar of censors. For years, teen magazines have included content that, in another medium, would be found objectionable by the censors. However, magazines remain relatively unscathed. Graphic novels, manga, and comics have generally escaped the scorn of the censors. In large part, this is because they are emerging genres that are less prominent than traditional texts. The same is true for audiobooks and other digital media. One reason that we have not seen wholesale challenges for audiobooks is that they have been most often used on an individual basis and not in whole class settings. Educators have used them in booktalks, played clips for students as motivation for individual reading, or placed them within collections alongside their print counterparts.

As audiobooks continue to make inroads into classrooms and libraries, complaints and challenges are certain to follow. Educators should prepare now for the censors, and ready the ammunition to defend the use of audiobooks with controversial content in instructional situations. What follows are a few tips that just might forestall future challenges. Audiobooks offer a tremendously exciting opportunity for educators to welcome more and more readers into the “reading club.” We must be armed to fight for their inclusion in the classroom and in library collections.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS AND LIBRARIANS

**1** Make sure that library collection development policies for your school include digital media (audiobooks on CD, downloadable audiobooks, etc.) Have a copy of that policy on hand and use it for classroom collections as well. Talk to your school librarian about these policies and create procedures that will follow should a challenge arise—often called a “reconsideration” of challenged materials policy.

**2** For those audiobooks that will become part of whole group instruction, consider developing rationales for their use. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has developed many such rationales (<http://www.ncte.org/about/issues/censorship/>)

**3** Read reviews, talk to colleagues, consult online sources and recommended lists from YALSA and ALSC ([www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/selectedaudio/audiobooks.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/selectedaudio/audiobooks.cfm) and [www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/childrensnotable/notablecreclist/currentnotable.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/childrensnotable/notablecreclist/currentnotable.cfm)) and other professional organizations about potential audiobooks to add to collections. Best of all, listen to audiobooks under consideration. Be knowledgeable of the materials being added to audiobook collections. Note: most public libraries are a great source for unabridged audiobooks, and some audio publishers also offer clips of their titles on their websites (see: [www.booksontape.com](http://www.booksontape.com)).

**4** Be familiar with the research on the benefits of using audiobooks with students. While this is still a relatively new area for research, early work by Kyrene Beers, Sylvia Vardell, Mary Burkey, and others has demonstrated the value of audiobooks with English language learners, dyslexic readers, struggling readers, and others who have difficulty with traditional texts. (A select bibliography at the end of this article contains some links to articles and presentations that discuss some of the nascent research on the effectiveness of audiobooks for students.)

Finally, know that there is a fine and often fuzzy line between selection and censorship. Failing to add an audiobook to a collection because it *might* be offensive is censorship. However, adding an audiobook because it meets the needs and preferences of the students with whom you work is selection. Censorship seeks to exclude; selection aims to include. Be an advocate of considered selection. Stand up against censorship in all its guises. ■

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

<http://ala.org/ala/aasl/conferencesandevents/confarchive/pittsburgh/UsingAudiobooks.pdf>

<http://www.audiobookshelf.com/listen.html>

<http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/audio-books2.html>

[www.freewebs.com/professornana/ALSC.ppt](http://www.freewebs.com/professornana/ALSC.ppt)

<http://audiobooker.blogspot.com/>

## About the Writer

TERI S. LESESNE is the 2007 ALAN Award recipient and a professor in the Department of Library Science at Sam Houston State University. Teri is the author of *Making the Match and Naked Reading* (Stenhouse Publishers), and

has served as a member of the first ever Odyssey Committee. When not reading or listening, Teri can be found traveling around the country speaking to teachers and librarians.



# Suggested Listening...

## BANNED BOOKS ON AUDIO



**THIRTEEN REASONS WHY**  
by Jay Asher; read by Debra Wiseman and Joel Johnstone  
978-0-7393-6122-1 • 5 CDs

**FAHRENHEIT 451** by Ray Bradbury; read by Scott Brick  
978-1-4159-1619-3 • 5 CDs

**FOREVER IN BLUE** by Ann Brashares; read by Angela Goethals  
978-0-7393-4845-1 • 7 CDs

**ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME, MARGARET.**  
by Judy Blume; read by Laura Hamilton  
978-1-4000-8994-9 • 3 CDs

**BLUBBER** by Judy Blume; read by Halley Feiffer  
978-0-8072-1781-8 • 3 CDs

**IN COLD BLOOD** by Truman Capote; read by Scott Brick  
978-1-4159-3092-2 • 12 CDs

**THE CHOCOLATE WAR**  
by Robert Cormier; read by Frank Muller  
978-1-4000-8996-3 • 5 CDs

**OLIVER TWIST** by Charles Dickens; read by John Lee  
978-0-7366-8790-4 • 14 CDs

**BEFORE I DIE** by Jenny Downham; read by Charlotte Parry  
978-0-7393-6290-7 • 6 CDs

**AS I LAY DYING** by William Faulkner; read by a Full Cast  
978-1-4159-2773-1 • 6 CDs

**OLIVE'S OCEAN**  
by Kevin Henkes; read by Blair Brown  
978-0-3072-0728-9 • 3 CDs

**THE OUTSIDERS** by S.E.Hinton; read by Jim Frye  
978-0-8072-1606-4 • 5 CDs

**THE GIVER** by Lois Lowry; read by Ron Rifkin  
978-0-8072-86098 • 4 CDs

**BELOVED** by Toni Morrison; read by the Author  
978-1-4159-3535-4 • 10 CDs

**LOLITA** by Vladimir Nabokov; read by Jeremy Irons  
978-1-4159-0126-7 • 10 CDs

**1984** by George Orwell; read by Richard Matthews  
978-0-7366-8768-3 • 9 CDs

**THE HIGHER POWER OF LUCKY**  
by Susan Patron; read by Cassandra Campbell  
978-0-7393-4851-2 • 3 CDs

**HIS DARK MATERIALS TRILOGY**  
by Philip Pullman; read by the Author and a Full Cast

**HARRY POTTER SERIES** by J.K. Rowling; read by Jim Dale

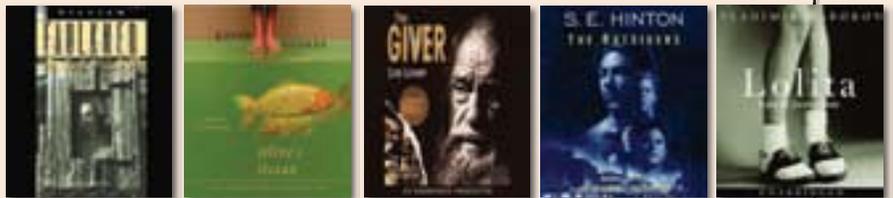
**HOW TO EAT FRIED WORMS**  
by Thomas Rockwell; read by Jay O. Sanders  
978-0-8072-1156-4 • 2 CDs

**FRANKENSTEIN** by Mary Shelley; read by Jim Weiss  
978-0-7366-8598-6 • 9 CDs

**ROLL OF THUNDER, HEAR MY CRY**  
by Mildred Taylor; read by Lynne Thigpen  
978-0-8072-1608-8 • 6 CDs

**THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN**  
by Mark Twain; read by Michael Prichard  
978-0-7366-8640-2 • 10 CDs

**THE RULES OF SURVIVAL**  
by Nancy Werlin; read by Daniel Passer  
978-0-7393-5115-4 • 5 CDs



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