

# Sounds Good to Me: Listening to Audiobooks with a Critical Ear

by Mary Burkey

Audiobook acceptance is escalating, with library users leading the trend. A recent survey conducted by the Audio Publishers Association revealed that young, well-educated consumers who read more books than average are also audiobook fans. Circulation is steadily increasing as libraries add more audios to the collection and fund download subscriptions. Patrons are searching for the best in audiobook listening, and librarians face an increasing need for setting evaluation criteria and implementing listeners' advisory services. *Booklist* recently recognized the audiobook format by sponsoring the American Library Association's Odyssey Award for Audiobook Excellence. The award committee, comprising ALSC and YALSA members, is in the process of evaluating titles and will announce the first Odyssey Award winner at the 2008 Midwinter Meeting.

Many facets beyond mere re-creation of the text are considered when evaluating audiobooks. The interplay between content and technical production is a balancing act between two sides of a seesaw. An award-winning book might result in a poorly produced audio with lackluster narration and poor technical qualities. On the other hand, a marginal print title might find a quirky interpretation featuring a gifted narrator who raises the quality and reinvents the work. A truly effective audiobook maintains a perfect balance between meaningful content and faultless production values.

What are the qualities of an outstanding audiobook? Narration is the foundation, as the author's voice comes directly to listeners through the reading. Consider these attributes when evaluating the reader:

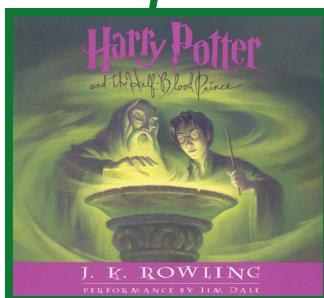
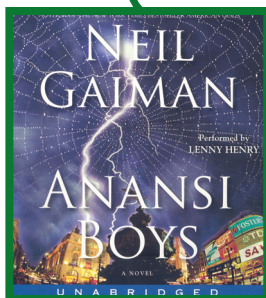
- The reading should be authentic and appropriate to content, with voices that match the time period and setting of the text as well as the genders, ages, and moods of the characters.
- The reader should use well-placed inflections and tones, conveying the prose through engaging expression, emotion, and energy.
- The reader should consistently maintain and differentiate character voices, accents, and dialects. Narrative descriptions ("He murmured," for example) should be read appropriately.
- Cultures and ethnicities should be presented authentically and without stereotype. Geographic terms, foreign terminology, and other challenging phrases and words should be pronounced correctly and with ease.

A single performer may read in a straightforward manner, using his or her natural voice with suitable inflection and tone, or the reader may vary his or her voice to change tone, inflection, accent, and emphasis to represent multiple characters. The reading might also be a combination of the two styles, with major characters receiving particular emphasis. Some audios

feature multiple narrators taking on specific roles and characters. Whatever the style, the narration should stay true to the spirit and context of the written word and forge a direct, personal connection with listeners.

Production factors are crucial and work in tandem with the reading to evoke total listener engagement. Consider these technical aspects when critically evaluating audios:

- High-quality productions maintain a clean, crisp sound that allows for periods of silence and a range of dynamics; volume levels remain consistent.
- Music may be used as an introduction or to delineate mood, setting, or time changes. Background music must be unobtrusive and not interrupt the narrative flow.
- If sound effects are used, they subtly enhance rather than detract from the reading.
- The recording should be free of sibilant or plosive microphone pickups. Distractions result if the reader moves off the microphone, speaks with an overly dry or juicy mouth, or swallows loudly.
- Audios that are too loud or intense, have missing or repeated text segments, show obvious dubbing or noticeable time differences in recording sessions, or contain abrupt or lengthy chapter or line breaks indicate sloppy production values.
- The packaging should correctly note title, author, readers' names, running times, and abridgment status.
- The audiobook must stand alone as a fully realized expression of the author's intent and meaning.



Three audiobook readers who "remove the wall of performance" and draw listeners in: Lenny Henry (*Anansi Boys*), Jim Dale (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*), and Barbara Rosenblat (*Let Me Go*).

Read-alongs (picture book and audio sets) require additional evaluative criteria. Because the intent is for youngsters to follow along with the book while listening, there should be no mismatches between words, pictures, and sound effects. Page-turn signals should allow time for listeners to follow the text and explore illustrations.

The mark of an excellent audiobook lies in its ability to remove the wall of performance and draw listeners into the reading with little effort. There are many top-notch readers, and it would be impossible to name them all. However, you can sample some of the masters by listening to titles read by Scott Brick, Stephen Briggs, Jim Dale, George Guidall, Lenny Henry, Derek Jacobi, Martin Jarvis, Judith Ivey, Jenna Lamia, Davina Porter, and Barbara Rosenblat, to name just a few. Those wishing to improve their evaluative skills should sample a variety of narrators and titles, including those from various distributors. You can also check out <http://www.booklistonline.com> for a list of Editors' Choice 2006 audiobook titles and ALSC and YALSA's lists of recommended titles. Happy listening!

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