

“I just can’t stop myself from racing to the end of a book. But when I put the headphones on, I relax and let the story take control. It’s like getting to know a best friend all over again.”

—A Book-a-Day Eighth Grader

Turned on to Literature

AUDIOBOOKS and the Gifted Student BY MARY BURKEY



Young millennials are plugged into their MP3 players and cell phones every waking moment, but don’t assume that the digital revolution has led to a drop in literacy. The Audio Publishers Association’s 2008 Consumer Survey found that the fastest growing segments of audiobook listeners are young adults and teens, with a staggering 95% of these teens owning a personal MP3 player. The APA’s survey also found that young people who listen to audiobooks are more likely to have college-educated parents who listen to literature and are avid readers of printed books. These statistics challenge the notion that the audiobook’s primary function is to boost reading achievement for struggling students. The next time you see an iPod-wearing teen who seems to be on another planet, look again: It may be that the power of the spoken word has transported that listener into the world of great literature.

Digital natives carry literature in many forms. They easily switch from text on a cell phone, to an audiobook through headphones, to a paperback in hand. These multimodal learners develop skills vital for success in a world where literacy is redefined with every new technology. As the New London Group explains in *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures*, the ability to

understand spoken language and make inferences from it is crucial to students’ development as productive workers and citizens. Audiobooks are the ideal path to this development. With audiobooks, students trade Post-it notes for electronic bookmarking and use pause and reverse to predict and reflect on what they’ve heard. The narrator’s voice immerses the listener in each audiobook and encourages alternate insights. By developing active-listening skills, listeners become critical consumers of information, ready to decipher media messages.

In the school setting, Renzulli’s enrichment triad model for gifted learners is enhanced through professionally narrated nonfiction and biographies, engaging the able reader through independent research. Challenging vocabulary is easier to understand when words are both seen in print and heard in context. Culturally authentic narrators open the door to another way of life and give English-language learners a more visceral connection to the language. Listening Library’s bonus materials (such as author interviews and visual material playable on a computer) deepen understanding, as does the incomparable experience of hearing an author read her own work. As one scholarly young lady noted when she returned the

audiobook of *Charles and Emma: The Darwins’ Leap of Faith*, “I never thought that researching evolution could make me cry.”

Students who devour books by speed reading enjoy revisiting the works in audiobook format. Strong readers turn to audio as a way to slow down and revel in word craft and description. A book-a-day eighth grader explained his love of listening, “I just can’t stop myself from racing to the end of a book. But when I put the headphones on, I relax and let the story take control. It’s like getting to know a best friend all over again.” Students who learned to read before starting school can recognize printed words they cannot pronounce, but may lack the phonetic decoding skills of their peers. Such students can build better spoken vocabularies through listening. Parents turn to classic literature to challenge gifted children with age-appropriate content, and audiobooks beautifully convey their cadence, expressions, and complex sentence structure. Parents and children find that listening to audiobooks together creates a shared bond. One seventh-grade girl initiated her own mother-daughter in-car audiobook group by checking out *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, confiding that “My mom really doesn’t have a clue what it’s like to be a teenager these days. I think she needs to hear this with me.”

Talented learners who struggle with self-imposed standards of perfection discover that audiobooks set a measured pace and allow listeners to release control to the narrator. A common attraction of audiobooks for overbooked, over-stressed, information-compulsive tweens and teens is the chance to turn off the lights, close their eyes, and just listen. In the words of one overloaded teen, "I love letting someone else do all the work for me. I don't even have to move my eyes or turn the page!" For gifted students who are textual learners, audiobooks facilitate higher-level literary discussions; students can read the text pre- or post-listening or follow along in the book. Gifted students who are auditory learners benefit from inclusion of audiobooks as well as digital-reference sources with read-aloud capability. Kinesthetic learners find that movement while listening, whether running at cross-country practice or playing Minesweeper on the computer, helps them absorb audiobooks. Visual learners prefer to listen to literature while drawing an audiobook's setting and characters on paper or with a computer paint program, or by creating a graphic web of plot structure. Studies by Fehrenbach determined that strategies of rereading, inferring, analyzing structure, predicting, evaluating, and relating to content were used significantly more by gifted than by average readers. Audiobooks offer unique opportunities for practicing these skills in every learning modality.

Strong readers also turn to audiobooks to expand their literary experiences. Titles that offer quirky characters, word play, and tongue-in-cheek humor, such as M. T. Anderson's *Thrilling Tales* series, *Artemis Fowl* and *Emma-Jean Lazarus Falls Out of a Tree*, strike a chord with able young listeners. Novels that feature high-ability young people, such as *The Mysterious Benedict Society* and *Andromeda Klein*, connect with like-minded listeners. Fantasy audiobooks *Inkheart*, *The Golden Compass*, and the *Bartimaeus Trilogy*, with their rich and complex vocabulary, are perennial favorites, especially for family listening. Bright elementary students find developmentally appropriate listening in the classics *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* and

Treasure Island. Gifted students searching for role models find politically savvy teens in *Vote for Larry*, *Hope Was Here*, and *Peeled*. Strong readers revel in intricate and emotional novels such as *When You Reach Me* and *The Rules of Survival*. Books that confront social norms, such as *Marcelo in the Real World*, *Little Brother*, and *Before I Die*, challenge high-achieving listeners. Historical fiction titles *Riot*, *Elijah of Buxton*, and *The Boy Who Dared*, paired with nonfiction audiobooks *Secrets of a Civil War Submarine*, *Lincoln: a Photobiography*, and *Hitler Youth*, foster independent inquiry. No matter the interests of the listener, audiobooks lead to a deeper connection with the best in literature.

Peterson and Colangelo, in their study of gifted underachievers, found that males were much more likely than females to become extreme underachievers. This finding echoes the observation that many boys fall behind girls in reading ability. I've observed young men who have disconnected from literature because they've had an author's words filtered through a female voice reading aloud, from mother's lap to teacher's classroom. Audiobooks can provide male voices that resonate with young men. One disaffected reader who heard a short segment of *The Book Thief* played aloud said, "When I heard the voice of Death, I knew I must check out the audiobook and finish the story." Hearing great literature on audio allows us to inhabit another culture, time, and experience, and return each listener to the most essential truth of literature: the author's voice.

Look for the titles mentioned in this article online as digital downloads or in your local bookstore or library.



Mary Burkey is a National Board Certified teacher-librarian in the Olentangy School District in Columbus, Ohio. She is the past chair of the American Library Association's Notable Children's Recordings, was part of the Odyssey Award Task Force, and served as the chair of ALA's first Odyssey Award for Excellence in Audiobook Production committee. She currently serves as a judge for the Audio Producers Association's Audie Awards, writes *Booklist Magazine's* audiobook column "Voices in My Head," and blogs as Audiobooker.

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