CLOSE LISTENING
The metaphysics of reading an audio book
By Sven Birkerts

In the beginning, before any words, a sudden splash. The sound of agitated water, rushing. Then, in quick segue, a woman's voice: "The rented Toyota, driven with such impatient exuberance by The Senator, was speeding along the unpaved unnamed road, taking the turns in giddy skidding slides, and then, with no warning, somehow the car had gone off the road and had overturned in black rushing water, ..." Amanda Plummer reads the opening passage of Joyce Carol Oates's Black Water at a headlong clip. Too quickly, perhaps. Certainly a beat or two ahead of what I can deal with just now, here. But I try to keep up. The narrative spins out in widening recursive loops. The Senator and his date, Kelly Kelleher—ha!—are racing to catch the July 4 ferry. I'm starting to shift my thoughts and local agitations to the hereof Oates's story. The paradox is too rich: the Senator and Kelly going hell-for-leather in his Toyotawhile I sit wedged in traffic in my Toyota, windows rolled up, air conditioner blasting against the 90-degree heat as I listen to them plunge into the icy black stream. Hurtling I'm not; my car is a scale on a glittering snake that is winding its length along the whole Eastern seaboard. Indeed, it was this prospect that pushed me to inject the cassette into the player and the phantasmic life of Kelly Kelleher into my own.

This is the confession of a former audio-book virgin. Sure, I'd listened to the occasional tape of a famous poet reading famous poems, or those radio mysteries that are impossible to avoid if you drive through the Midwest late at night. But I had never thought to listen to an actual book on cassette. Books, for me, have always been about covers and pages and grappling with the syntactic rigor of stationary prose. The passivity of listening seemed to me on a par with the passivity of television watching. How could it fail to reduce any work of merit to, at best, a companionable blur, a string of easy cadences in the ear?

Yet here I was, inching past the rotary and heading toward the now-defunct train yard by Cambridge's Alewife Station. Outside the window, raw urban scarf—billboard signs for appliances and the glare of the liquor mart. Inside, in the corolla of my Corolla, the overheated drama of a young woman's destiny: "Am I going to die?—like this?" I have to know. A long-dormant memory trace flares out. Is it the feeling of being read to as a child, or something deeper, more ancient? I don't get the time to plumb it. As the Senator and Kelly meet during a flashback and hit it off, I hit the gas. The light turns green and the traffic breaks. Amanda Plummer's voice fades as I jockey for my slot in the westbound chariot race.

Audio books—for me such an anomalous encounter—are a billion-dollar-a-year industry. According to the most recent statistics, 1,139 publishers put out 55,000 audio titles in 1991 alone. We are in the first stages of a phenomenon that may prove as socially transformational as the paperback revolution of the 1960s. First there was the American love affair with the cassette, that painless, portable gizmo that allowed us to listen to things while we were otherwise occupied. Music broke in the habit, and now comes the spoken word. What makes it all possible—maybe even necessary—are the changes in the way we live. The microchip may have split time open like an atom, but we nevertheless have less of the stuff—the real stuff—than ever. Prophets once promised that technol-
overy would set us free, creating vast quantities of leisure time; the fantasy backfired. Instead we got swelling pockets of empty time; our lifestyles have us in harness, we are unable to move, spiritually gridlocked. So we look to technology to undo what it has wrought. Though the audio book was originally designed for the blind and infirm, it is now targeted to Americans who commute. And with the average commute now as long as forty-five minutes a day, publishers are tilling fertile ground.

My experience with Oates's novel unsettled me, but it also piqued my curiosity. So I listened and listened—listening takes time—and drove and drove. For I quickly realized that listening while driving is infinitely preferable to listening while walking, sitting in a chair, or chopping vegetables. To be ambulatory, even with headphones on, is still to be in a live environment—too distracting. Sitting still is too much like being in a classroom: the pencil doodles, the mind drifts. But driving... There is something about moving while in an enclosure, with scenery slipping past—the soul lays itself open for seduction by the word. And this, finally, was my question, the point of my search: Is seduction what this version of the literary encounter is about? Is listening to books an extension of reading, or is it a simplification, yet another ingenious way of turning everything into entertainment?

So I drove—past blighted roadides, through open country, jerking behind rows of bumpers, and panting along open highways—and as I drove I was lulled by the fluid ease of it all. But whenever I took a step back I grew appalled at my submissiveness. This was something new, possibly portentous; a McLuhanesque wrinkle in the collective sensibility. Change the medium and you change the message, right? Here we are, centuries removed from the ways of our progenitors, smugly evolved past the tribal storytelling of the oral tradition, partaking again of the pleasures of that ancient mode. Everything in creation has changed, but the triad endures: the voice, the story, the listener.

We should not, of course, push the similarities too far. Our driver has his windows up, his air conditioner purring; several thousand dollars' worth of machinery guide his progress past high rises and service stations. The shepherd hunkers by the communal fire, giving ear to what the teller embroiders from the tribal archive. Listening to a cassette in your car is not the same as gathering with your mates on a charred log, or even cobbling up around the Victorian tea table. It is more like stepping into a disembodied trance.

I have come to listening late, and I have come tentatively: my biases are those of a reader. It was my predilection for the printed page, as well as for the intransigent and somewhat secretive nature of the reading act, that led me to become a literary critic. I have more than a few times gone public with my grumpy-sounding notions: that our growing immersion in our various circuitries is cutting us off from the civilizing powers of the written word; that electronic books are the coming thing, I hear; and interactive videos will leach away our capacities for reflection, and so on.

But those are all scenarios for the future—the audio book is now. The range of the audio titles roughly parallels that of printed books, with everything from Beginning Passamaquoddy to How to Love Yourself: Cherishing the Incredible Miracle That You Are to The Brothers Karamazov read by that husky-voiced diva Debra Winger. You can hear Deborah Tannen's That's Not What I Meant, complete with staged vignettes and pinafore music tinkling in the background. And then there are the pairings of book and reader—Arlo Guthrie reading Woody's Bound for Glory, John Malkovich giving eerie intonation to Anne Tyler's The Accidental Tourist, or Lou Diamond Phillips narrating James Fenimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans. Dudley Moore is a perfect choice for Oscar Wilde's The Happy Prince, but what about Hollywood firebrand Ed Asner as the reader of Curt Gentry's J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets? I recently heard a tape of actor Tony Roberts doing Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon. Consider the loops here—Heaney reciting verses in his buttery brogue. Either option is superior to the vacuous monitoring of your neighbor's exhaust pipe.

But once we grant the audio book its attractions, we are still confronted with the question of its wholeness. This is no mere epiphenomenon; it promises to become a full-fledged trend. As life gets more complex, people are likely to read less and listen more. The medium shapes the message and the message bears directly on who we are; it forms us. Listening is not reading, but what is it?

The origins of literature were, of course, oral. And though literature is grounded in the idea of speech (we can't read without hearing words in our auditory imagination), the fact is that the invention of the written sign kicked off a process of evolution. The storyteller was naturally constrained by the attention of his listeners; thus the tales were often formulaic, built around repetitions and mnemonic tags, and structured to maximize suspense. But the word on the page is implicitly a memory device, and it long ago liberated the writer to pursue non-formulaic incentives. Our more serious literature incorporates levels of difficulty—in narrative sequence, referentiality, syntax,
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The complexity curve is not, moreover, a static construct. Works of an earlier period, even works that may once have been staples of the family reading circle, slip from our aural grasp. We are no longer at ease with the extended sentence or with too many complex or compound constructions; syntax has been virtually streamlined out of existence. There are also the more elusive subjective barriers. As I listened to Saul Bellow reading Herzog, I found I was up to pace in certain places, riveted by passages of description, dialogue, or animated narration. But as soon as he launched into one of his flights of philosophical or moral conjecture—which are perhaps my main incentive for reading Bellow—I became disoriented, fidgety. Not because I couldn’t apprehend the words, but because these were the very places in my reading where I would stop my finger at the margin and gaze out into the middle distance. We don’t just speed a thought into our neural network—we inhale it, hold it, and wait for it to send ripples through the whole of our being. Rewinding the tape is no solution.

Pace is a serious problem; since paid readers are under obligation to get through the text expeditiously, they cannot linger. But this enforced relentlessness underscores the degree to which reading is an ever-modulating engagement. Until I listened to a book on tape, I didn’t realize how much I depend on the freedom to slow down, speed up, or stop altogether while reading. With certain writers, I might pause and linguistic density—and presumably a reader who is free to hover over a phrase, reach for a dictionary, and dart back. Indeed, modern literature can be plotted along a complexity curve, and past a certain point on that curve the prose is likely to elude even the most dedicated listener. Novels such as E. L. Doctorow’s Ragtime and Terry McMillan’s Waiting to Exhale can be ingested with relative ease, whereas writers such as Virginia Woolf and Thomas Pynchon are likely to flummox their listeners. What all this means, of course, is that the limitations of the medium may substantially narrow the spectrum of the literary. Certain works will not circulate within the culture, at least not in spoken form.

SOLUTION TO DECEMBER DOUBLE ACROSTIC (NO. 120). DYLANTHOMAS: A CHILD’S CHRISTMAS (IN WALES). One Christmas was so much like another, in those years around the season... that I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six.
significantly a dozen times over the course of a few paragraphs: once for comprehension, several times more to savor a phrase, once to scratch my neck, and one or more times because something drives me off the page and out into my mind—a half-remembered face, the look of a spot by a certain lake, a whiff of autumn in the summer air. For me this is the true life of reading—the interior life, that slow, painful, delicious excavation of the self by way of another's sentences. I can lift up and hover while listening, to be sure, but always at the risk of losing my way. If I choose a memory, I miss something; when I tune in again I am slightly wobbly from trying to catch up. The only way to combat this is to restrict the radius of the private flights: buzz like a bee around the words, but don't dare go winging out over the clover.

Reading, because we control it, is adaptable to our needs and rhythms. We are free to indulge our subjective associative impulse; the term I coin for this is deep reading. Deep reading is the slow and meditative possession of a book. We don't just read the words, we dream our lives in their vicinity. The printed page becomes a kind of wrought-iron fence we crawl through, returning, once we have wandered, to the very place we started. Deep listening is rarely an option. Our ear, and with it our whole imaginative apparatus, marches in lockstep to the speaker's baton.

When we read with our eyes, we hear the words in the theater of our auditory inwardsness. The voice we conjure up is our own—it is the soundprint of the self. Bringing this voice to life via a book is one of the subtler aspects of the reading magic, but hearing a book in the voice of another amounts to a silencing of that self—it is an act of vocal tyranny. The listener is powerless against the tape-voice, not at all in the position of my four-year-old daughter who admonishes me continually, "Don't read it like that, Dad." With the audio book, everything—pace, timbre, inflection—is determined for the captive listener. The collaborative component is gone; one simply receives.

Both the reader's inner voice and the writer's "voice" are, obviously,-sexed. When I read a male writer I simply adjust my vocalization to the tone of the text; when I read a woman I don't attempt an impersonation, but I am aware that my voicing is a form of translation. But when I listened to a cassette of John Cheever's stories read by an expressive female voice, I just couldn't take it. After a few minutes of "The Enormous Radio" I tore the tape from the machine to stop her from wreaking havoc upon my sense of Cheever. Cheever's prose is as imprinted with his gender as Virginia Woolf's is with hers. Nor could I get past the bright vigor of the performing voice; I missed the dark notes, the sense of pooling shadows that has always accompanied my readings of the man.

Sometimes, to be sure, the fit is excellent—either because the reader achieves the right sort of neutrality, allowing the voice to become a clear medium for the text, or because the interpretation somehow accords with my own expectations. Then, too, I have had the pleasure of hearing an author rendering his or her own work. Indeed, listening to certain remastered recordings of the "greats," I have experienced the skin-prickling illusion of proximity (I am actually listening to James Joyce...). The author can open up a work in ways that no other reader can. To hear the theatricality of Nabokov as he serves up Pale Fire is to discover new rifts of comedy in the novel. And when I heard John Updike's voice catch slightly at a climactic moment of his superb divorce story "Separating," I felt a momentary parting of that membrane that supposedly divides art from life. At moments like this I find myself wavering, questioning the fixity of my assumptions.

Most of my audio gripes have to do with the loss of the reader's perquisites—or, better, his rights. But with the issue of abridgment we are also talking about the rights of the work itself. With few exceptions, books on cassette have been cut; in some cases, gutted. The percentage of the loss varies. A short work like Oates's Black Water, on two cassettes, is designated "slightly abridged"; with longer novels we miss up to half the text. In these cases we are asked to commit a rhetorical fallacy: to take the part in place of the whole. What gets cut? The longeurs, certainly. The hard parts, often. But also those sometimes flat but nevertheless all-important scenes that help to prepare the climactic moments. We have to ask: What is the value of a symphony from which half of the second and all of the third movements have been cut? To what extent is the listener entitled to claim the experience of the work?

I was genuinely appalled when one day slipped a cassette of Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano into my player. The tape was an abridgment, but what stopped me cold was the nature of the abridgment; it began with Chapter 2. Lowry's complex and retrospective opening had been scuttled without a trace. What was lost—certainly for the listener unfamiliar with the book—was all suggestion of the author's circular scheme. Lowry had meant his novel to turn like a wheel; everything in it is keyed to the concept of circularity, making Chapter 1 absolutely indispensable. No amount of civilized gnashing by reader Christopher Cazenove could make up the deficit.

Everything about modern—or is it postmodern?—life carries us away from the state that is propitious for deep reading. The generations now coming up, reared on music and visual media, have reflexes and combinatory capacities that are something new in the world. They perform acts of multitrack cognitive juggling that leave their elders tied in knots. As Camille Paglia affirmed in these pages (and Paglia is no spring chicken): "When I wrote my book, I had earphones on, blasting rock music or Puccini and Brahms. The soap operas—with the sound turned down—flickered on my TV. I'd be talking on the phone at the same time. Baby boomers have a multi-layered, multitrack ability to deal with the world." And what is this ability but a new evolutionary acquisition, a neural response to changed environmental conditions? In itself it is neither good nor bad. But we have to see that it does not bode well in the long run for certain kinds of concentrated or deep reading. Multitrack sensibilities will likely be less and less able to perform the single-track tasks demanded by the silent page; so it is not farfetched to suppose that a good part of the future of literature will be bound up with the audio process.

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(Signed) John R. MacArthur, Publisher

This prospect leaves me feeling strangely divided; as much as it pains my old literary soul to say so, I find that there are many virtues in the listening experience. For one thing, some literary works do play very well in the audio format. Short stories, which tend to be more focused, often work beautifully. I have heard stories by Updike, Welty, and Carver—all artists highly attuned to word sounds and sentence rhythms—that achieve a delightful resonance. The prose of Garrison Keillor—for whom the printed page is less an avenue to his vision than a detour around it—is actually improved by spoken rendition.

Nor should we feel altogether hopeless about the fate of books that are perched higher on the complexity curve. Although it is true that a first hearing may not convey the full aesthetic experience of a given piece of writing, the audio medium makes it very easy, even tempting, to go back and listen again. I am far more likely to insert a cassette for a second hearing than I am to reread a novel from the top.

I find I have been listening to Joyce's beautiful and densely woven story "The Dead" over and over, and listening to it in different ways—as a narrative, as a portrait of a place and time. I approach the story like a difficult piece of music, first acquainting myself with the structure and then listening further for the tonal, textural, and harmonic subtleties. And truly, with a writer such as Joyce, language can be a kind of music, with vowels and consonants and rhythm shifting pipping an intricate accompaniment to the other senses.

Audio books remind us of the sound of literature. For unless we are pledged to reading a work with exceptional attentiveness, voicing it inwardly with care and monitoring its slightest inflections, we tend to gulp the words at something close to the speed of garble. Too often we read serious books at the same rate at which we read the morning paper, stripping the sentences of their sense and jamming phrases together like the pleats of a compressed accordion. It can be tonic in the extreme to hear well-written prose uncluttered, fleshed out to its intended proportions. An evocative reading can capture the shifting tension that ex-
ists between sound and sense; it can unearth the overlooked sentence rhythm and whet the blade of irony.

Reading is different from listening, yes, but in listening's limitations I found unexpected pleasures. When you read, both eye and ear are engaged; when you listen, the eye is free. Slight though the freedom may seem, it can declare itself resoundingly. The listener can attain a peculiar exaltation—a vivid sense of doubleness, of standing poised on a wire between two different realities.

I felt that exaltation quite recently. I had been to Concord's Walden Pond for an afternoon swim and I was taking my usual backcountry route home. I was wet-haired, relaxed from the water, and the speed-limit signs were there to be ignored. In this mood, I slipped a cassette of Thoreau's Walden into the player. Said the master (in the voice of Michael O'Keefe):

"Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond: that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tching-thang to this effect: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again and again, and forever again."

It was high summer. The road was open and the countryside was in bloom. I sped through an arcade of trees as the voice went on to retail the terms of our daily enslavement. I felt myself soaring. The words streamed in unmediated, shot like some kind of whiskey into my soul. I had a parenthesis of open country, then came the sentence of the highway. But the state held long enough to allow a thought: that in the beginning was the Word—not the written or printed or processed word, but the spoken word. And though it changes its aspect faster than any Proteus, hiding now in letter shapes and now in magnetic emulsion, it remains. It still has the power to lay us bare.