

# The audiobook way of life

Joshua S. Friedman

November 2007

## Introduction

I don't remember exactly which audiobook I listened to first. It might have been Sahaara's *The Killer Angels*, while driving with a buddy from Salt Lake City to Yellowstone National Park. Or it might have been J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* on Interstate 95, on a long drive from New York to Florida.

For me, as for most people, audiobooks were something to do on a long boring drive, something to make the drive go by fast—and it sure does. With the right audiobook, I could drive and drive and drive. . . . In fact, I once drove, with a friend, for eight hundred miles in a single day. We were listening to Tom Clancy's *The Sum of All Fears*.

## A new way to commute

Having enjoyed audiobooks for the cross-country drive, it was natural to start listening on my daily commute. This is where I differ from most people. Most people commute, by car, anywhere from half an hour to four hours each day. What do they do on their commute? Listen to the radio, listen to CDs, talk on the phone, satellite radio? Suppose you drive an hour and a half each day, five days per week. That sums to 7.5 hours per week that you could be spending with literature.

Assuming a commute time of 7.5 hours, you could listen to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* [takes one week], Frank McCourt's Pulitzer Prize winning *Angela's Ashes* [2 weeks], Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* [1.5 weeks], Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* [1 month]. Fifteen hours, or two weeks of driving, is all it takes to finish all but the biggest books. That's 26 books a year that can be squeezed into a schedule with no free time.

Some people tell me that they don't think they could safely drive while listening to audiobooks. My answer: can you have a two-way conversation while you drive? It is much harder to drive while talking than to drive while listening. I have driven over one hundred thousand audiobook miles, and have not been involved in an accident, nor have I even received a moving violation ticket. In fact, while listening to a good book, I find I am in no hurry to get to my destination, so I drive slower, and thus safer, and use less gas.

It sounds great to fill each spare moment of your life with audiobooks, but there are times when you mind will be racing: you just got fired, lost all your money in the stock market, failed a big exam, had a fight with a loved one, or just had a tough day at work. These events could make it difficult to concentrate on an audiobook. Instead, put on some good music.

## Why Choose Listening Over Reading

*listening to a book is not the same as reading.* This is what all of my friends tell me, in a supercilious tone. I have to admit, listening is not *exactly* the same as reading, but I think it is just as worthwhile. My friends seem to think that listening to books is not as intellectually stimulating as is reading them.

*Decoding*, the mechanical act transforming printed words to sounds or thoughts is not really what most people consider reading. Without comprehension, decoding is just meaningless. In fact, children with Down's syndrome, with IQs in the 40s (100 is considered average), can be taught to decode. But they have almost zero comprehension. When we talk about some one being a great reader, we mean they have extraordinary comprehension, being able to pour through the most difficult of concepts.

The hard part about reading is to make sense of the words, to make connections between words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters. So, if you listen to a book, rather than read one, I think your brain gets a pretty good workout. In fact, I think it is a lot harder to listen to books by Jane Austin, than to read them, especially if you are an American like me, listening to a british reader reading quite a bit faster than most people talk, all in a thick british accent using vernacular from 200 years ago.

I did listen to Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*. And even though I am an experienced audiobook listener, for the first hour or so, I really had to concentrate on the speech (mostly because of incredible speed that the character, Mrs. Bennet, talked). But once I acclimated, Jane Austin's character dialogue sounded exquisite. It is one thing to read text written 200 years ago, but quite another to hear it read, expertly. The words came alive and I really felt like I was an observer, sitting in the great parlors of the past. Of course, it may be due to Austin's genius, being an all-time english prodigy second only to Shakespeare. I have read many classics, but having them performed seems to bring them alive. I was mesmerized by the sound of the dialog and narrative. But it took quite a lot of brain power, and I don't recommend starting your audiobook journey with the 19th century classics.

Linguists tell us of two type of language: high and low. Low language is what you heard on your mother's knee while growing up. It sounds like this "Hey, what's up. Nothing, um, um so want to um..." It is the language of every day speech. You wouldn't say *I intend to return for our nocturnal repast*. Rather *I'll be back for dinner*. The latter is *low* and the former is *high*. Low language is learned, completely, through speech, high, from scholarship (reading, writing, and study). While reading is important and worthwhile, it is not the most efficient way to augment ones vocabulary: the most efficient way is to hear the words spoken and used in meaningful ways, to hear them in proper context. What better way than to listen to a work of literature with sophisticated vocabulary (like *Pride and Prejudice*). Now, you don't need to listen to the classics to enrich your vocabulary, most works of fiction and nonfiction use high language.

Have you ever tried to read through a really slow book? I once listened to Jared Diamond's *Guns Germs and Steel* on cassette. I was really enjoying the book when suddenly, the last cassette jammed up. I was forced to pick up printed version of the book, and do you know what, I found myself being bored to tears trying to read through the last chapters. I concluded that it is easier to get through slow or boring material in audio format than in printed format.

## Exercise

You should be exercising on a regular basis. It is good for your body, life expectancy, and peace of mind. But with an audiobook, it can be good for you intellect and make the experience more interesting. In order to enjoy an audiobook while exercising, you will need a portable music device. For more information on the setting up portable music devices, see my forthcoming article *Setting up an audiobook listening system: devices, headphones, and computers*.

## Walking and Jogging

Perhaps the easiest way to enjoy an audiobook is find a quiet, safe place to walk, like a path in a park, a trail through the woods, or the sidewalk on a quiet street. (If you choose to walk near traffic, choose headphones that allow outside sound to be heard and do not play the volume too loud so that you can't hear traffic.) If it is raining, dark, or cold outside, find your nearest superstore or mall, and walk around. The idea is really simple: listen to the audiobook while you move your legs.

Some people can walk for hours each day without listening to music or audiobooks; most of us can't. The audiobook keeps your mind so occupied that with an audiobook, you could walk much farther before getting bored. Think about reading: people can sit and read for hours at a time. But how long could they sit doing nothing. Most of us would become bored in about a few minutes, maybe we would fall asleep. On the other hand, most of us can walk for at least 15 minutes before becoming bored: walking is more interesting than sitting. I claim that *walking and listening* is more interesting than *sitting and reading*. In addition, the former provides worthwhile exercise while the latter tires ones eyes and backside.

If you find a quiet place to walk, any pair of headphones will suffice. On the other hand, if you choose to walk in a safe but noisy area (like a bike path next to a road, a store or mall, ...) then you should look into a pair of *marshmallow headphones* by JVC. Marshmallow headphones have a piece of squeezable foam for an earbud. One squeezes the foam until it is thin enough to fit into ones ear, then, holding it in place, the foam expands for a perfect fit. To me they feel much more comfortable than any other *in your ear* headphones. They block out almost all exterior sound, so please be careful to use them in a place where you don't have to worry about getting hit by a car.

Everything above applies also to jogging except that you probably don't want to jog in a store or mall. Give it a try, you'll be walking or jogging quite a bit longer with an audiobook.

## Gym and exercise machines

Working out in a gym is a perfect place to listen to audiobook whether you use the weight machines or the aerobic machines (like the treadmill or elliptical). There is, however, one major problem with most gyms: they are too noisy. The radio is usually on much too loud to concentrate on a good book. As we mentioned before (in the *Walking* section) get a pair of *marshmallow headphones*.

Lifting weights, walking in-place, doing sit-ups, stretching, gliding on an elliptical; are all great for your body but boring for your mind. A good audiobook will distract you: the result being, more time spent working out. You'll be more motivated.

## Bicycle riding

My favorite method of listening to audiobooks is while riding on a *car-free* bike path, a path that snakes through the woods. I have seen people riding bicycles—on busy streets—with headphones plugged into their ears. *This is very dangerous.* I only recommend biking with audiobooks while on a dedicated bike path. If the bike path parallels a highway (as many do in New York City), you will definitely need a pair of *marshmallow headphones*.

Many people can ride bikes for hours at a time without mental stimulus. Once you add an audiobook to your ride, the enjoyment is increased immeasurably.

## Cleaning Cooking and Supermarket

Almost any household chore, or activity that doesn't require too much concentration can be performed with the help of an audiobook. Next time you have to clean a sink full of dishes, turn on a good book.

## Raising your children with audiobooks

I am not going to tell you to substitute reading-aloud to children with audiobooks. The development of a child is such a complex endeavor that one should be extremely careful in every decision pertaining to them. There is some very solid research suggesting that time spent reading-aloud to children is one of the most important predictors of future success. In simple words: the more you read to your child, the smarter they will be.

You might ask "what is the difference between reading-aloud and listening to an audiobook?" Perhaps for an adult, there is little difference. But for a child, the former is interactive, they can ask questions, see the expressions on your face, tears in your eyes, laughter, comments, . . .

But what happens when you are not home or too tired to read-aloud. Don't turn on the television; turn on an audiobook. It is incontrovertible that listening to audiobooks is preferable, with respect to mental development, than to television.

A child aged 3–10 can pick up a new language, and all the vocabulary that it contains; effortlessly, fluently, and without an accent. Imagine what listening to streams of audiobooks would do to their vocabulary. As adults, we have acquired extensive vocabularies that we mostly use to comprehend writing, and sometimes to write, ourselves. But we don't use *big* words when we talk unless we want to sound portentous. So the only way to actually *hear* these words used properly is to listen to audiobooks.

I claim that since we don't actually talk with *big* words, we don't really know them well. We may understand them well enough, but not the way we understand low language. When you hear the word *mom*, a picture should immediately pop into your mind. When you hear *matriarch* your mind translates it into "a woman who is the head of a family or tribe." If you hear the word often enough, your mind will jump directly to the meaning (though you probably think of a old female elephant right now). You'll know the word better.

For children, when their age is ripe for an explosion of vocabulary size, listening to audiobooks should be invaluable to their vocabulary development. And the more words they know, the smarter they are (this is one of the measurements of intelligence, and I think it is the most reliable).

A recent study *fMRI Investigation of Sentence Comprehension by Eye and by Ear: Modality Fingerprints on Cognitive Processes* by EB Michael, TA Keller, PA Carpenter, and MA Just (published

in *Human Brain Mapping Volume 13, Issue 4*) mapped out the different areas of the brain that are triggered when one reads and listens. The study found that when one listens, the brain shows more activity in working memory storage than when one reads. In other words, our brains may be wired to more efficiently absorb audio material than written material. To me, this makes perfect sense: Human beings have been communicating orally for a long long time (at least 50,000 years). We have only writing for around 5,000 years. One can make the case that our brains are not really *designed* to read: "...The total amount of activation was also significantly greater in the auditory conditions than in the visual conditions in LIFG, particularly in the anterior, inferior portions of this area.... The greater amount of activation in Broca's area suggests that there is more semantic processing and working memory storage in listening comprehension than in reading...."

The quote from the research paper basically says that when one listens, as a apposed to reads, one transfers material to memory quite efficiently, perhaps more efficiently than when reading. The investigators hypothesize that when one listens, if one doesn't remember, the oral information is gone forever. So, our minds knowing this are extra careful to store and process auditory information. On the other hand, when one reads, one can leisurely backtrack to review unprocessed information.

Books are great, but if we didn't have them, we would all have phenomenal memories. When one reads a book, one has the option of backtracking, of reviewing previous sentences and pages. When one listens there are no such options. There is only one chance to absorb the information—and our mind knows this—and is more careful to store audio information.

If an adult mind can store audio information more efficiently than written information, imagine the effect on a child whose age is in the golden years of language development. Not only will a child absorb a tremendous amount of vocabulary, but also complex sentence structure usage.

Most people learn only one language during their life, even though *any* child can pick up, without difficulty, three languages concurrently. This fact tells us that we are not utilizing our brains nearly to the extent possible. Once a child turns 13 or 14, they start to lose the ability pick up languages. Parts of their brain start shutting down. Imagine what other capabilities our children's brains posses?

### **The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3**

There is a famous research study (*Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children* by Hart and Risley, [click here for an excerpt](#)) that suggests that by the age of three, some children hear 30 million more words (in everyday conversation with parents) than other, less fortunate children.

Three types of families were selected for the study: professionals, working class, and welfare recipients. Children of professionals generally have higher reading scores than their counterparts in the working class, and, in turn, working class children score higher than children in poverty.

The researchers focused on the conversations taking place in each of the families (42 in all) and found that the professionals spoke considerably more to their children than their counterparts did. They calculated that by the age of three, the professional's children heard 30 million more words than those in poverty.

Some researchers feel that the 30 million word gap is a permanent impediment to these disadvantaged children, and attribute it to life long academic deficiency.

If you believe these conclusions, then it looks like the poverty cycle could never be broken. Children of poverty grow up hearing too few words, have trouble succeeding academically, fall

into poverty as adults, have children, speak too few words to them. It seems hopeless. But there is a way to break the cycle, there always has been: reading.

Let's be honest. If someone is struggling to put food on their table, reading is not going to be a priority. After working long hours at an unfulfilling job, a parents is going to sink into a comfortable chair in front of the television. Studies have shown that children of poverty watch huge amounts of television, and that TV does not make up for the 30 million word gap.

Audiobooks would be great for children in adversity. They would hear stories filled with rich vocabulary, stories that would invite them to books. Parent and child could sit together on a comfortable chair and listen to a compact disk full of stories.

People have tried to solve the reading problem of child poverty by sending books to poor families. They claim that the parents are too poor to purchase books, and that the libraries in their neighborhoods lack money and essential resources.

Suppose you get books into the hands of poor families. There are two possibilities one hopes for: the parents will read the book aloud, or the children will read the books themselves. We have already discussed the former: parents who work long hours will be too tired to read. Will the children read the books themselves? If they do, that's great, but not good enough. Why? because in children, the listening level is typically at least 3 years ahead of the reading level. A four or five year old can easily listen, understand, appreciate, and enjoy a book in the second and third grade reading levels. A second grader should be listening to books in the fifth grade reading level. Audiobooks can fill this niche wonderfully.

## **Getting your child to listen to audiobooks**

You can turn an audiobook on for a child, but you can't make them listen. Now, it is not natural for a child to quietly sit on the couch while an audiobook plays (though some children will). I don't even recommend a sedentary listening experience for adults: Our eyes are too accustomed to receiving sensory input for us to sit still and listen for long periods of time.

Children should ideally be doing *something* while listening. What can they do? eat, draw and paint, build blocks and *Legos*, play dolls and trucks. They can play with almost any toy that doesn't make sound. It is, however, important to give children quality playtime, where they can be creative, *free-play*. So don't try to fill up every free minute of your toddler's life with audiobooks.

In American families fifty years ago, typically, only the father worked, and he worked a forty hour per week job, being home for dinner, daily. How great it would be if today's children were raised in such a family. The mother could spend hours reading to the children, the father could read after dinner. Unfortunately, nowadays, we have a lot more *toys*—cars, electronic objects, vacations—and we must pay for them, and a proportionally more expensive house, with dual parent workers. It is not unusual for both parents to leave the home early in the morning, and return for a late dinner before bedtime. Kids need to hear stories, and you don't have the time to read to them, turn off the television, and put on a good audiobook.