

The Audible Art of Poetry

I am so old-school that I remember buying my first LP recording: *Meet the Beatles*. Through the years, I've added music in a variety of formats, from vinyl copied on cassette tape to records replaced by compact disc. Paul McCartney's newest release won't be found in my CD collection, but it is on my iPod. I've made the twenty-first-century switch from amassing the physical to storing music in a digital format.

Transformations in Literary Formats

Literature is following a similar path. Stories that were once told aloud, later captured on paper, are now being preserved in a digital medium. The changing world of publishing offers a writer's work in multiple formats: paper, eBook, and audiobook. A reader may now toggle through a single novel by adjusting the format to the moment: a paperback while curled on the couch, an eBook on a laptop at the airport, an audiobook while walking the dog.

Amazon, the world's largest retailer of books, embraced this change with the development of the Kindle Wireless Reading Device, launched with more than 100,000 titles available for download. Kindle's capability to download and play audiobooks will be supported by Amazon's recent purchase of audiobook retailing giant Audible, allowing readers to listen while they read. I predict that Amazon will soon offer a single price for best-sellers, with the buyer owning the rights to both print and digital formats. Add the book to your shelves, download the eBook to your laptop or Kindle, and upload the audiobook to your MP3 player. Soon Mom and Dad will have an array of literature formats on hand, while their children will collect treasured favorites in print as they sample a spectrum of stories digitally. Welcome to Book 2.0!

EBooks and Audio

The combination of electronic text plus sound is not limited to Kindle. The hybrid book concept—an eBook combined with audio—is available for educators from a variety of sources. The ClassMate Reader is a new product that features text-to-speech capabilities and offers curricular assistance to improve reading. TumbleBooks offers titles from popular picture books to hi/lo young-adult titles through an online subscription that combines streaming text, animation, and audio. LoudLit is a no-cost Web site that combines public domain electronic text and audio narration, with titles ranging from poetry to children's and adult classics. Will these hybrid books replace the pleasures of holding the printed page? Never. Will today's young digital natives alternate with ease between audio eBook and hardcover novel? Naturally.

Integrating Technology and Literacy

Will these transformations in literary formats change our definition of language arts? Not at all. Rather, the integration of eBooks and audiobooks into literacy learning fosters holistic teaching of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Some argue that listening to an audiobook is not the same as reading. I agree. Listening to an audiobook is different from reading, a process that requires unique skills and offers important benefits. Audiobooks do not replace the written word but offer their own aural method to communicate story. The benefits lead to greater comprehension, fluency, and understanding of vocabulary. A pairing of text plus audiobook has a synergetic effect that often results in literacy gains that do not occur otherwise.

Yet the audiobook genre is not a supplement to text, or a replacement. It is a way to experience literature that teaches the important skill of listening, in a world where, according to P. T. Rankin in "Listening Ability: Its Importance, Measurement, and Development" (*Chicago Schools Journal* 12), "45 percent of the time adults spend in communication activities is on listening, 30 percent on speaking, 16 percent on reading, and 9 percent on writing."

"Words with Music Inside"

Looking for a simple way to integrate audiobooks into language arts? Start with a literary format that begs to be heard aloud: poetry. Try the titles below paired with suggestions found in *Poetry Aloud Here!* by Book Links "Everyday Poetry" columnist Sylvia M. Vardell (ALA Editions, 2006). These titles provide multisensory learning for



"Welcome to Book 2.0!"

WEB CONNECTIONS

For links to resources about learning through listening and teaching poetry in the classroom, visit the **Book Links Web site** at <http://www.ala.org/booklinks> and click on “Web Connections.”

listeners of all ages. Even the youngest listener will enthusiastically embrace what one of my kindergarten students once called “Words with music inside.”

Begin with the Basics

Contrast Lynn Redgrave’s soothing narration of nursery rhymes in the book-and-CD edition of *Mary Engelbreit’s Mother Goose* (HarperCollins, 2008) with the rollicking jazz chant versions found in Carolyn Graham’s *Mother Goose Jazz Chants* (Oxford, 1995). Encourage young listeners to create their own chants after sharing these titles.

Add Old Favorites

The Jack Prelutsky Holiday Audio Collection (HarperAudio, 2005) is a compilation of Prelutsky’s *It’s Halloween*, *It’s Thanksgiving*, *It’s Christmas*, and *It’s Valentine’s Day*. Share this title with the twenty-fifth anniversary book-and-CD edition of *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein (HarperCollins, 2000). Every child will be compelled to read along out loud when these two beloved poets recite their own work.

Mix in Some Music

Get into the rhythm and teach poetry in tandem with music. Live Oak Media’s book-and-CD edition of *Blues Journey* by Walter Dean Myers (2005) is just one of Live Oak’s Music Makers audiobook titles. Another Music Makers title is this year’s Odyssey Award winner, *Jazz*, also by Walter Dean Myers.

Challenge high-school listeners to select their own music to accompany the classic poems in *Seven Ages: An Anthology of Poetry with Music* (Naxos, 1998), read by more than 40 leading British actors, accompanied on CD by classical music.

Create a Continuum

Offer a wide variety of poetry throughout the ages, read by the author or gifted performers. In *Poetry Speaks to Children* by Elise Paschen (Sourcebooks, 2005), share with children the author’s note on how the poets who read aloud their own work have changed the words from the printed poem to the recorded recitation—a real-life example of revision.

Poets’ Corner: The One-and-Only Poetry Book for the Whole Family, compiled by John Lithgow (Grand Central, 2007), features great listening for all ages, with poems read by an all-star cast that includes Jodie Foster, Morgan Freeman, Helen Mirren, and more.

I, Too, Sing America: Three Centuries of African American Poetry by Catherine Clinton (Audio Bookshelf, 2000) is a stellar collection of works by 25 African American poets performed by Ashley Bryan and Renee Joshua-Porter.

The Caedmon Poetry Collection: A Century of Poets Reading Their Work (HarperAudio, 2000) and *Poetry Speaks Expanded: Hear Poets Read Their Own Work from Tennyson to Plath* by Elise Paschen and others (Sourcebooks, 2007) are two marvelous audiobook anthologies that are essentials for all secondary students.

Listen in the Language Arts Classroom


Karen Hesse’s free-verse Newbery Medal winner *Out of the Dust* is even more compelling as an audiobook, and the short length of the Listening Library edition (1998) allows teachers to create a learning-to-listen classroom unit. (See the “Web Connections” sidebar for resources.)

Rather than a read-aloud, offer the Recorded Books edition of *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes (2005) as an audiobook-aloud. The full-cast narration of Grimes’ story about a high-school open-mike poetry project may inspire students to perform their own writing.

Perform Publicly or by Podcast

Paul Fleischman’s Newbery Medal-winning title *Joyful Noise* and companion title *I Am Phoenix* were written to be read aloud, and the Audio Bookshelf recording (2001) delivers. The combination of professional narrators plus young readers will encourage students to present their own renditions in front of the class.

Every American history teacher should have *Flocabulary: The Hip-Hop Approach to U.S. History* by Blake Harrison and Alexander Rappaport (Cider Mill, 2006). What student can resist performing “O.D.W.M.” (Old Dead White Men) in front of the class—or as a Podcast on the class Web site?

In *The Spoken Word Revolution Redux* by Mark Eleveld (Sourcebooks, 2006), high-school students can experience the world of the poetry slam with performers that include actor Ethan Hawke, musicians from Wilco and Smashing Pumpkins, and former U.S. poet laureates. (Note that mature language is included.) 

Mary Burkey is a teacher-librarian in the Olentangy School District in Columbus, Ohio. She served as the chair of the first Odyssey Award for Excellence in Audiobook Production and is the author of the Audiobooker blog at <http://audiobooker.blogspot.com>. For a complete list of titles mentioned here, turn to “Comprehensive Bibliography” on p.62.