

The Guardian View on Audiobooks: A Growing Market That Asks Existential Questions

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News this week of a 17% hike in the UK's audiobook sales might seem like a niche business story, but it raises an existential question. What exactly is an audiobook today? Is it a book? Is it a play? Or is it becoming something else entirely? What is clear is that a jostle for market dominance is driving it into new dimensions. The streaming platform Spotify followed its move into podcasting two years ago with the launch of an audiobooks business. Though it has yet to start making its own recordings, last autumn it made a deal for 200,000 audiobooks to be available to its premium users.

Not to be outdone, Amazon-owned Audible – accustomed to being the market leader – upped its game, hiring the Oscar-winning director Sam Mendes to record multi-voice versions of the Dickens novels *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, and announcing last month that it had reached an agreement for a recording of JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, voiced by more than 100 actors and featuring a “groundbreaking new soundscape”. The new *Potter* audiobooks, it said, would not usurp but “sit alongside and complement” conventional recordings by Stephen Fry and Jim Dale, which Audible also hosts.

Dramatised audiobooks are not an entirely new phenomenon. Two Booker prize-winning novels, Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* and George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*, were given the treatment. Both were demanding reads – formal experiments in style and storytelling. The use of multiple narrators made them accessible to readers who might not have had the patience for the written versions. Saunders's novel, which surrounded the dead son of Abraham Lincoln with a polyphony of spirit voices, became a bravura game of spot the celebrity, with 166 narrators, ranging from Hollywood A-listers to well-known writers and members of Saunders's family.

Even single-voiced readings can significantly change literature in which style is of the essence. Lucy Ellmann's left-field hit *Ducks, Newburyport*, is a case in point: a thousand-page stream of an Ohio woman's consciousness, written in a single sentence. It unfolds on audio as a 45-hour monologue, which is not the same thing at all, if only because an actor needs to breathe.

To say that audio versions are different does not mean they are inferior to printed texts. For people suffering from dyslexia or ADHD, they can be a lifeline – as they can be for those who do not have time, or the habit, of reading books. Commuters, and men between the ages of 25 and 44, have been identified as key drivers of their growing popularity.

The good news for those who secretly find audiobooks more accessible, but are embarrassed to admit it, is that brain scans have revealed that they stimulate the same cognitive and emotional parts of the brain. But so, presumably, would a radio play. Listening to stories, another intriguing piece of research revealed, sets the pulse racing far more than watching them.

So while we celebrate what audiobooks have in common with their print versions – both enable the brain to create its own pictures in a world where pre-manufactured images too often do all the work for us – we should also appreciate that they are translations into a different medium, even when read by the authors themselves. What is certain is that there is room for both.