



Books on Tape (Again)

Whenever I overhear a complaint of someone's long time-wasting commute I want to shout, "It doesn't have to be that way. You can read books while you drive!" By "read," I quickly add, I mean listening. Books on tape aren't new, but they aren't as common as they should be. Which is a shame because the selection of books available for auditing continues to expand, their relative price continues to drop, and the venues where they can be rented or bought continue to increase. Many public libraries have decent collections, more online bookstores sell them, and now many titles are available on CD. I've read, oh I suppose, hundreds of books this way. And I've met others likewise initiated into this underground. Here's what we know about how to maximize this great medium.

1) Being read to is a pleasure. Hearing a book instead of "watching" it can be a powerful experience.

2) Start with a good story. If you have never listened to a book on tape before, pick what you know is a good tale to begin with. You can always get to that self-help or executive summary later. Try the Pulitzer-winning novel *Lonesome Dove* for a memorable treat.

3) If at all possible choose an unabridged version. The unabridged is how the author wanted you to get his/her story. One of the delights about books on tape is that they are far more leisurely (reading aloud takes longer), so you can exploit this pace by getting the full unexpurgated version. As a rule of thumb, most unabridged books will require at least eight cassettes at minimum, with very long ones like *Peter the Great* taking up to forty or more. Many of the books on tape for sale in bookstores are slim two- or four-cassette abbreviated versions. I consider these a second choice.

4) If a book is only available in an abridged version, it can still be enjoyable. Very rarely, it can be better. Cyberpunk author William Gibson actually prefers the abridged audio

version of his book *Neuromancer*. Occasionally I've deliberately chosen an abbreviated version because I just didn't want to sit through the long edition. Still, a book worth reading is usually worth the original text.

5) Avoid dramatizations. These were in vogue for a while but luckily they've mostly disappeared. More than one person acts out the dialog, but the histrionic tone usually turns a book into theater. There is something incredibly satisfying about having one voice (with accents and drama, yes) continue through the work.

6) Narrators matter. I have learned to never listen to an author read his own work, no matter who. A professional narrator can make all the difference between a book that sings and one that dies. Good narrators can pronounce technical and foreign names exactly, and often do accents properly. Their voices don't waver or dull. But the wrong narrator can pollute a book. I will return a book if I find the narrator's voice makes me wince. Conversely, if I notice a great narrator I will now seek out the other books they have done. Narrating is a very laborious process and good narrators are in top demand, so they won't invest their time in a mediocre book. Half the spell of a book is cast by the narration.

7) With that in mind, sometimes a narrated version of a book is actually better than reading it. The example on everyone's mind these days is the Harry Potter series. I have no hesitation in saying that Jim Dale's narration of Harry Potter is better than reading it. (If you want my best candidate for a book to start out, pick any Harry Potter book and listen to it on tape; Dale's is the only version available at the moment). Dale does something like 120 different voices for the series (so far) and each one is absolutely perfect. He makes an already remarkable series of books fantastic. Another book that was better on tape than reading it was *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Again, the narrator got the accents of these characters more exact and colorful than my reading ear could have. Russian novels are often improved by audio because they can get all those Russian names and places perfect.

8) Over the years I've found that the best books for auditing are either fiction or history. I still read a lot of nonfiction on tape, but fiction and history work best for me. Both have deep narrative structure. I choose more and more history now because I realize that I don't have the patience to read history, as in using my eyes while staring at the page. The captured-audience nature of listening (can't skip easily) demands that I follow the course all the way through. And I'm usually glad I did. So most of the history I read now, I actually audit. Happily, there are a lot of great historical books on tape.

9) Having a parallel printed copy of a book can help alleviate one of an audio book's primary weaknesses: there's no way to bookmark a passage. Stewart Brand, another audio book fanatic, will usually keep a hard copy of the

text in book form handy so that he can mark sections he wants to refer to later. I don't do that but I sure wish I could bookmark stuff.

10) You have a choice of channels. A) Cassettes are still the default. The pros: most cars have players; easy to retain your place if you take it out. Cons: break too much, too many tapes for long books. B) CDs are the up-and-coming venue. Pros: Crystal clear, compact, reliable. Cons: Lose place if you yank it out to put on some music, and not all cars have players. C) Coming soon: downloaded versions. You can already get MP3 versions of books to play on dedicated players. I confess I haven't tried any of these because tapes and CDs work well enough, but I can see the advantages clearly: very compact, very fast delivery, and possible mechanisms for bookmarking.

11) Auditing while driving is not dangerous. I don't know how it works but you can be completely engrossed in a story, while the other you somehow drives at your top skill. It's not the same as talking on a cell phone. Works best if you know exactly where you are going, like on a commute. Doesn't work if you have to navigate; you'll miss a turn for sure.

12) Rent or buy? Public libraries have gotten smart and are stocking up. You can usually find what you want via the interlibrary loan system. Book shops mostly sell. I occasionally will buy a particularly good tape and then circulate it to friends, who will do the same. It makes an informal books-on-tape lending circle. The two main sources for rental—which costs about \$10 per short book, or part of a long book—are below.

Where to start? Let's see; this summer my wife and I (on separate commutes) listened to *War & Peace*, all of it. Great book, great narration. Took three months, but worth every second. Adventures like *The Perfect Storm* and *Into Thin Air* are just right. Robert Hughes' history of Australia, *The Fatal Shore*, listened well. Occasionally I throw in some lightweight mystery or technothriller. Right now I'm auditing the *Odyssey* and the *Illiad*. You get the picture. Traffic jams are just story-time extenders. If I've got a good book, and someone to read, I'll go slow and learn something.

—KK

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