

Through the Headphones, Clearly

Story has the power to create experience through language and imagery. Yet as the story is received, it is filtered through perception. The biblical phrase “Through a glass, darkly” reminds us of the difficulty of knowing another’s reality. Audiobooks offer the unique opportunity of altering the listener’s point of reference, allowing a new voice to speak inside our heads.

The Gender Factor

I realized the power of an audiobook narrator’s voice during a discussion with Michael Gill of Bolinda Audio. We were talking about the audiobook edition of John Marsden’s *So Much to Tell You*, a powerful first-person narrative about an abused girl. Mike had been involved in the production from the first reading on, but he was still stunned when he heard the voice of narrator Kate Hosking in the finished audiobook. Mike explained that the novel was transformed from a printed story filtered through his male mind into a female voice in his head expressing entirely new emotions. Audiobooks can push away our unrecognized biases and allow a different perspective into our minds.

The unconscious filter of male or female voice has been on my mind lately. I love to booktalk titles in my school library, especially when I can hook a reluctant reader. But I know that hesitant guy readers are more likely to grab Darren Shan’s *Cirque du Freak* series if their sixth-grade language arts teacher, Matt Longley, has read a selection aloud in his classroom. Matt also uses the Full Cast Audio



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edition of Amy Goldman Koss’ *The Girls* to teach characterization by playing a clip of the teenage female narrator for his students.

Authentic Voices

A skilled narrator transfers the story’s mood, characterization, and setting through expression, accent, dialect, and tone. When evaluating audiobooks, look for those that present cultures and ethnicities authentically and are either read by a narrator native to the culture or by someone who provides an accurate reading. Any geographic terms, foreign terminology, and other challenging phrases and words should be pronounced correctly and with ease. If there are musical features, these should match the culture and region portrayed.

The ability of audiobooks to both echo and generate voice is the foundation of Earphone English, an outstanding audiobook discussion group for students. A collaboration between Berkeley, California, public librarian Francisca Goldsmith and high-school teacher Heidi Ramirez, Earphone English provides English language learners (ELLs) the opportunity to build language listening skills through audiobooks and practice speaking skills in group book discussions. Because listening comprehension often is two or more years beyond reading comprehension, audiobooks can level the playing field and allow all students to experience touchstone young-adult titles.

The enthusiasm of ELL teen listeners in audiobook discussion groups can be matched by all students in classrooms around the country. Looking for guidelines for audiobook discussion groups? Try using the criteria for the American Library Association’s youth audiobook awards and provide students with proper terminology by printing out my audiobook lexicon (available on the *Book Links* Web site).

In my middle school, Matt Longley and I are collaborating on a project we call “The Author’s Voice,” in which students record their own writing in audio format. When these stories are compiled on CD, I will add the student-created short-story anthology to the school library audiobook collection. I am excited to see how other students react to an audiobook featuring words spoken by their peers! 

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