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STYLE & CULTURE

## Their work speaks volumes

■ Just how does the commuter's salvation, a.k.a. the audio book, make it from page to iPod? Hint: There's a lot of patience required, not to mention Blistex and reverie.

By Mimi Avins, Times Staff Writer

THERE'S no sign on the dark glass doors of the Books on Tape recording studio tucked into a plain-wrap business park in Woodland Hills, nothing to indicate that life's certainties — death and taxes, as well as sex, heartbreak, war, murder and religion — are regularly talked about within.

The state-of-the-art studio, built in 2004, handles the production of 400 audio books a year. While the music and publishing industries struggled in the last few years, audio books enjoy annual growth spurts of 15% a year. They constitute an \$800-million-a-year market, according to the Audio Publishers Assn., and the proliferation of websites offering digital downloads is making audio books more affordable and convenient for America's 42 million owners of iPods and similar devices. AudioFile magazine, which reviewed 2,100 books in 2005, estimates that from 2,500 to 3,000 titles are recorded each year for sale to libraries and the public.

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On a typical weekday last month, all six of the Valley facility's studios were in use. At midday, a stellar group of narrators, all in the process of recording novels, gathered in the lunchroom. Although a majority of the 40 to 50 most in-demand readers in Southern California also act in television and film, the best and busiest could make a living just recording audio books.

Paul Michael, whose voice is familiar to anyone who listened to "The Da Vinci Code," had spent the morning recording the latest Dean Koontz novel. Scott Brick, whose personal best is recording 200 books in a single year, was narrating a thriller, "The Skin Gods," by Richard Montanari. Kathe Mazur, who followed Hillary Rodham Clinton's "Living History" with Ann Coulter's "Treason," was in the midst of "Veronica," a novel by National Book Award finalist Mary Gaitskill. Kirby Heyborne was finding

his voice again after a morning of speaking as a 13-year-old British boy, the narrator of "Black Swan Green" by Booker Prize finalist David Mitchell.

"At the end of a day like today," Heyborne said, "I get home and I can't talk, or read, or watch TV, or anything. I'm just completely exhausted."

The others understand. They know the challenge of voicing a dozen characters in a scene heavy with dialogue, how the rustle of a starched shirt or a gurgling stomach can ruin a perfectly executed paragraph. They have learned how to sound the same at the end of the day as at the beginning and have mastered the pronunciation of arcane words that most people simply read past. Alone in a chilly, darkened studio with only a director and without feedback from an audience, they carry the narrative, even for books they don't like.

Mazur says: "You have to really love to read to do this. We all love to read."

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After lunch, Brick heads back into a small studio, where a glass window separates him and his director, armed with a bottle of water, breath mint drops (to foil cotton mouth), a thermos of throat-coating tea and Blistex, a hedge against the dreaded sound of dry lips smacking together. Water, mints, tea, Blistex. Whenever he pauses to turn a page, he uses each item, in turn. He reads with remarkable fluidity, flubbing only once in five minutes. Water, mints, tea, Blistex.

In the absence of mistakes, there are other reasons to stop and rerecord a sentence. Brick changes the inflection of a line of dialogue, making it more sinister. Once satisfied, he moves on.

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### Transporting commuters

IF modern existence were simple, there'd be no need for magazines that teach the harried how to streamline their lives. Increasing traffic adds extra minutes, even hours, to commuting, making a 24-hour day too short. Reading is more readily given up than sleeping or eating, but not by those for whom time on the road isn't wasted. More than 50% of audio book listening is done in cars, and listeners who aren't vehicle-bound are otherwise multitasking — they exercise, garden or do chores wearing earphones.

A survey done by the trade association found the average listener earns 25% more than nonlisteners, has a higher level of education and is more likely to hold a professional or managerial position. "We've always reached the hardcover buyer more than the paperback buyer," says Chris Lynch, publisher of Simon & Schuster Audio.

Audio book fans drawn to heavily promoted bestsellers get to hear a strategy for "Winning" in Jack Welch's voice, listen to Edward Herrmann read David McCullough's biography of John Adams, or trust narrator Dylan Baker to keep them entranced throughout 31 hours of Tom Wolfe's "I Am Charlotte Simmons."

Most people born after World War II didn't grow up with the mysteries, thrillers, adventure yarns and romances that flourished during the golden age of radio, so they aren't accustomed to listening to stories read aloud. Yet they acquire the skill quickly. "Audio books are very much a try-it, you'll-like-it thing," says Shannon Maughan, audio editor of Publishers Weekly. "I don't know many people who've turned back, once they've tried it."

Like many new listeners, Maughan began with books she wouldn't have bothered to read, as if listening were a lesser activity that would have deprived her of the pleasure that came from actually reading a good book. Soon she got audio versions of the books that chronically languished on her nightstand, a realistic move once she'd admitted to herself that books she didn't listen to while commuting never seemed to get read.

Talented narrators give audio books the quality of entertainment, a fact that can be troublesome to puritans who consider reading a virtuous activity and listening a cheater's shortcut, no better than skimming CliffsNotes. True audio book fans don't rank listening below reading. They figuratively sit at the knee of such well-known narrators as Ken Howard, Campbell Scott, Joe Mantegna, Judith Ivey, Will Patton, Michael York, Blair Brown and Len Cariou, who do justice to great books and make mediocre offerings more compelling than they have a right to be.

"When the narration of an audio book is effective, it's an intimate thing," says Jacob Bronstein, one of Random House Audio's five full-time producers. He produced and directed former President Bill Clinton's "My Life," which won the Grammy Award for best spoken-word album last year, and Sen. Barack Obama's memoir, "Dreams From My Father," this year's winner. "With a memoir or autobiography," he says, "it's so much more poignant when the person who lived the life reads his own story. When I first started recording with Obama, I said, 'You know, you're unbelievable at addressing large crowds. This is not that. This is recounting your story to a friend, over a beer.' "

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### In their own words

IT'S common for a celebrity author to record an abridged manuscript while an actor will do the uncut version of the same book. Bill Clinton was sent a group of audition tapes and chose Michael Beck, who has narrated many John Grisham novels, to record all 1,000 pages of "My Life," which took 20 days. Most unabridged books run about six hours and take a little more than two days to record; the rule of thumb is that one recorded hour takes three hours to create in the studio.

"An unabridged book takes a week or two to record, and I can't get a well-known author or a celebrity narrator to sit still for that long," says Dan Musselman, executive producer of Books on Tape, a division of Random House that produces unabridged titles for libraries.

There are exceptions, of course. Carl Reiner narrated his new comic novel, "Nnnnn," in its entirety. Giving voice to a psychiatrist with a German accent, brothers raised in different parts of the world and their wives was tricky, but Reiner enjoys the process. "I'm an actor," he says, "so doing voices and accents come naturally. I see the words on the page and a voice just comes out."

Publishers once thought consumers' attention spans wouldn't accommodate unabridged audio books, but libraries and bookstores say they get frequent requests for the longer versions. "The market for unabridged has increased dramatically, even for \$50 to \$75 a book," says Lynch of Simon & Schuster. "We didn't think we'd be able to sell enough copies at that price to cover our production costs, but there are people willing to pay for the whole book."

With iTunes, Audible.com, Mediabay.com, Jiggerbug.com and other websites sending downloadable audio books through cyberspace, prices will inevitably go down. "The distribution and delivery system of downloadables eliminates a lot of different kinds of overhead," says Maughan of Publishers Weekly. "You're not shipping, warehousing and producing expensive packaging for every book."

Up to now, the audio book business has primarily been driven by bestsellers. Publishers hope that as downloading becomes more common and prices drop, they'll be able to record more books by lesser-known authors, even those that weren't hugely successful in print.

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

A sampling of audio options

Bestsellers

**"Mary, Mary"** by James Patterson, narrated by Peter J. Fernandez, Melissa Leo, Michael Louis Wells (Time Warner AudioBooks).

**"S Is for Silence"** by Sue Grafton, narrated by Judy Kaye (Random House Audio).

**"The Ambler Warning"** by Robert Ludlum, narrated by Scott Brick (Audio Renaissance).

**"The Camel Club"** by David Baldacci, narrated by Jonathan Davis (Warner Adult).

**"The Da Vinci Code"** by Dan Brown, narrated by Paul Michael (Random House Audio).

**"The Chronicles of Narnia"** Box set by C.S. Lewis, narrated by Kenneth Branagh (HarperChildren's Audio).

**"Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince"** by J.K. Rowling, narrated by Jim Dale (Random House Audio).

**"The Fellowship of the Ring"** by J.R.R. Tolkien, narrated by Rob Inglis (Recorded Books).

**"Forever Odd"** by Dean Koontz, narrated by David Aaron Baker (Random House Audio).

**"Memoirs of a Geisha"** by Arthur Golden, narrated by Bernadette Dunne (Random House Audio).

Publishers Weekly online

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New titles of note

**"The Truth (With Jokes)"** by Al Franken, read by the author (Brilliance Audio).

**"Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln"** by Doris Kearns Goodwin, read by Richard Thomas (Simon & Schuster Audio).

**"Moby-Dick"** by Herman Melville, read by William Hootkins (Naxos Audiobooks).

**"Cover the Butter"** by Carrie Kabak, read by Kate Reading (Books on Tape).

**"Brokeback Mountain"** by Annie Proulx, read by Campbell Scott (Simon & Schuster Audio).

**"Must Love Dogs"** by Claire Cook, read by Carrington MacDuffie (Blackstone Audiobooks).

— AudioFile magazine

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