

The Secrets to Success as an Audiobook Narrator; Building a career out of reading books takes commitment, research—and, probably, a sound booth in your home

Murphy, Kate . Wall Street Journal (Online) ; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]01 Nov 2020.

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FULL TEXT

Has anyone ever told you that you have a radio voice? Do people ask you to read at their weddings, MC at their charity events or record their voice-mail greetings? Are your children rapt when you tell them bedtime stories? If so, you might have a future in audiobook narration.

There is certainly demand, thanks to an explosion of content in recent years. According to the Audio Publishers Association , 60,303 new titles were published last year, almost 10 times the number produced a decade ago. Sales last year reached \$1.2 billion, tracking a steep upward trend that shows no sign of slackening, particularly when the pandemic has people spending more time at home, cooking, cleaning, gardening and exercising, often while listening to an audiobook.

Top-tier narrators earn as much as \$500 per finished hour of content (not including time spent doing retakes). Those just starting out might earn \$100 per finished hour but can earn far more in royalties if they are smart about identifying promising titles.

While there is plenty of opportunity, audiobook narration isn't as easy as simply reading out loud. It is a distinct art form that requires some natural ability but also determination, dedication and practice.

Just like there are a range of musical performers and genres, there are a range of books and narration styles. What makes a good narrator depends on the audience. Some listeners may like a lot of emoting and character differentiation, while others find that grating, preferring more subtlety and finesse.

"Audiobook performing is unique in that you have the responsibility for the entirety of the story," says January LaVoy, who has narrated more than 200 audiobooks by bestselling authors such as James Patterson, John Grisham, Nora Roberts and Ken Follett. "You have to internalize the whole rhythm, all of the characters and their inner lives and inner thoughts and what they see, and translate it all for the listener."

Her advice to aspiring narrators is to grab their favorite book, lock themselves in a confined space like a closet or bathroom and then read that book aloud. Whenever you make a mistake, go back to the beginning of the sentence and start again. "Do that for six hours without moving and then decide at the end of the day if you still want to do this," says Ms. LaVoy, who narrates 50 to 60 titles a year, often working seven hours a day, five days a week. "My chest diaphragm is sore at the end of the day," she says. "Narration is shockingly athletic."

Stage trained

Ms. LaVoy's background as a classically trained actress and seasoned stage performer gave her a competitive advantage when she first started sending voice samples, or demos, to publishers 10 years ago.

Audiobook producers tend to prefer hiring people with acting experience, particularly when it comes to works of fiction where there are multiple characters. But people who have little or no acting experience can also be successful.

"There are plenty of exceptions, it's just theater training really helps," says Jeff Tabnick, casting director for Recorded Books, which began recording unabridged audiobooks on cassette in 1978.

Back then, audiobook narration was done primarily in recording studios with a director and sound engineer on hand. But now, thanks to advances in technology, most professional narrators record alone in home studios, which is why content has continued to flow despite the pandemic.

"Narrators have been practicing social distancing for years," says Simon Vance, a British actor who, like Ms. LaVoy, has received multiple Audie awards, which are like the Oscars for audiobooks. "We lock ourselves in our little booths—I call mine my time machine—my Tardis, if you know 'Doctor Who'—I step into it with a well-written book and the words just take me off."

Simon Vance at his home studio, which he calls his "time machine." PHOTO: Rozette Rago for The Wall Street Journal

When audiobook producers and directors listen to a demo, they are listening to the quality of the recording as much as the quality of the narrator's voice. "The main reason for negative audience reviews is generally technical issues," says Callum Plews, a producer for Macmillan Audio. "Listeners really don't like mouth noise, clicky sounds, and they really don't like edited-out breaths and robotic reads," much less the hum of an air conditioner or dog barking in the background.

You might initially be able to get away with turning a closet into a sound booth by tacking up quilts and blankets for echo absorption. But eventually, you're going to need a professional-grade sound booth.

Prefab, a booth costs \$2,000 to \$8,000—depending on the size and sophistication—and can be erected in any room without a building permit. Equipment costs will run you at least \$1,000 for gear such as a good microphone; headphones; and recording and editing software.

And if you don't have one already, you'll need a computer for editing, compressing and sending audio files. (Note: free editing apps tend to be less user friendly than those you pay for.) You're also going to need an iPad from which to read your text. Turning pages introduces unwanted noise.

Speak and listen

But the real investment is time spent perfecting your craft before you even think about recording and sending demos to audiobook publishers or uploading samples to industry databases, such as AudioFile magazine's Audiobook Talent & Industry Guide and Ahab . You can have the best gear in the world, but if your voice isn't clear and compelling, all is lost.

Volunteering to read for the blind and dyslexic through Learning Ally , or for the general public through LibriVox , is a great way to gain experience performing and producing content. "I volunteered at the Georgia Radio Reading Service for five years before I ever did anything of a professional nature," says Karen Commins, an IT worker turned audiobook narrator in Atlanta.

It is also a good idea to listen to a lot of audiobooks so you understand what works and what doesn't. Steve Campbell listened to thousands of hours of audiobooks, often the same books over and over, while working on construction sites in Calgary, Alberta, before he seriously considered narration as a career in 2016. "Some of them I listened to and thought, 'I can do better than that,' " he says. "Then down the Google rabbit hole I went" to find out everything he could about the industry.

There is a wealth of information online provided by organizations such as the Audio Publishers Association as well as narrator websites like Ms. Commins's NarratorsRoadmap.com and Erin deWard's stepuptothemic.net . There are also countless Facebook groups devoted to the subject, including Audiobook Crowd and Everything Audiobook and Indie (ACX and Others) Audiobook Narrators and Producers .

Share Your Thoughts

What qualities do you like, or not like, in an audiobook narrator? Join the conversation below.

After two years of researching and six months of coaching from professional narrators he met online, Mr. Campbell uploaded his first demo to the Audiobook Creation Exchange , or ACX, a platform owned by Amazon.com's Audible division that is kind of like Match.com for self-published authors looking for narrators. Offers started tumbling in within three hours.

The only thing was that they all wanted to pay him a percentage of sales, known as a "royalty share," rather than

per finished hour of narration. If the book didn't sell, he could do a lot of work for nothing. As a result, Mr. Campbell became a student of the kinds of genres and cover art that did well. In some instances, he paid part of the cost of hiring editors and graphic artists to spruce up books he felt had potential.

Some of his picks have been so successful (up to \$20,000 a year in royalties), he's reluctant to take the next step of sending demos to big-name audiobook publishers because, while their books might be more high-profile, their pay wouldn't match what he's already making. "You can do really well if you do your research," Mr. Campbell says. Ms. Murphy is a journalist in Houston and the author (and narrator) of "You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters." Email reports@wsj.com .

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DETAILS

Subject:	Royalties; Listening; Audiobooks; Books; Pandemics; Editing; Sound
Company / organization:	Name: Audio Publishers Association; NAICS: 813910
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal (Online); New York, N.Y.
Publication year:	2020
Publication date:	Nov 1, 2020
column:	Journal Reports: Small Business
Section:	Business
Publisher:	Dow Jones &Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics
e-ISSN:	25749579
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2456258920
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/2456258920?accountid=4175
Copyright:	Copyright 2020 Dow Jones &Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Last updated:	2020-11-01

Database: The Wall Street Journal

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