

News Feature Assignment
“We’re All Ears for Full-Cast Audiobooks”

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You’ve seen them. They’re everywhere . . . people with ear buds. You see them on the street, on the subway, on the bus, at the gym, at the park, at the beach, and in the library. They appear to be in a trance, listening so intently that they are oblivious to the world around them. They seem captivated, and somewhat mad, as various expressions flit across their faces. Is it the invasion of the body snatchers? No! They are listening to full-cast audiobooks.

“Full cast productions have always been part of the audiobook world,” said Michele Cobb, Executive Director of the Audiobook Publishers Association. In the past few years, “traditional book publishers who stuck to a single-voiced or non-interactive multi-voiced production previously are finding the room to experiment since sales revenues can support more complex and costly productions” Cobb said. “It’s not cost effective for every book to be done as a full-cast recording.”

Audiobooks generally have one narrator who reads the book, word-for-word, as it is written. The narrator often uses different voices for different characters. A full-cast audiobook has a narrator and voice actors to play the different characters. However, some books are rewritten as dramatizations (audio dramas) and include voice actors, music and sound effects. “Many full-cast productions being done today are original works that are crafted specifically for this format,” Cobb said—and for good reason.

Books are not written to be full-cast audiobooks; they are written to be read. Adding voice actors, music and sound effects to a verbatim audiobook doesn’t work because the book is not written to cue an audio listener about what is happening. “When you are listening to an

audio, regardless of the type, you need some cues to understand the content,” said Dr. Emma Rodero, Professor of Communication at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain. Books don’t have these cues because they are written language, not oral language. “The most typical example is Orson Wells and the *War of the Worlds* broadcast. It was a book that Orson Wells adapted. “He made a script especially for the representation for sound,” Rodero said. “If you use music and sound effects, along with different voices for different characters, you are going to improve the experience.”

Sound design makes all the difference. A well-written and produced audio drama will enable the listener to become immersed in the story. Immersion happens by creating images in the listener’s imagination, “essentially a movie in the mind,” said William Dufres, consummate voice actor, director and producer of audiobooks and audio dramas. “I prefer to have a script that details everything in a way that doesn't require a narrator to give guidelines to the action,” he said. “The listener should be fully immersed, remain in the story, and never be jolted out by questions about what is going on.” The power of full-cast audiobooks to draw the reader into the story might explain why all of those ear bud-wearing people are captivated by their audiobooks.