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# Wired for Sound

By **JOHN SCHWARTZ**

I've gotten used to the Look.

When I talk with one friend or another about books we've both read, I often have to admit that I read the particular work in audio form. Although I'm not especially perceptive, it's pretty easy to translate my interlocutor's expression. It's a blend of surprise, condescension and an unmistakable dash of "that's cheating."

So best to say this right away: For half a decade now, audiobooks have accompanied me during exercise and long drives. It began with an audio version of "Treasure Island" I grabbed to pass the time on a trip I made alone to pick my daughter up at college.

It turned out to be the shortest 10-hour drive in history. Since then, I've listened my way through classics like "Middlemarch" and ripping yarns like Patrick O'Brian's 20 sea novels featuring Aubrey and Maturin, and the five volumes (so far) of George R. R. Martin's "Song of Ice and Fire" fantasy series. I've also laughed along with readings of novels by Gary Shteyngart, wept with David Mitchell's and vicariously inhabited the lives of John Adams and J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Many books have been the kind that I used to read in college — serious, often demanding — but that I seldom find the time to sit down with these days. And yet, when I'm doing something else that would otherwise be tedious, audio versions of these books have become my ideal companions. But through it all, I keep getting the sense that other people think I'm settling for a kind of second-rate reading. I'm not exactly sure why this should be. Maybe they suspect I'm not working hard enough — devoting my undivided attention to serious books. Maybe absorbing literature in this way is like having the waiter cut up my food.

A prime skeptic is my wife, Jeanne, who also happens to be the principal recommender of the new books I read. She is not unalterably opposed to aural reading; in fact, she's a fan of recorded lectures. But when it comes to fiction, she insists on holding the printed text in her hand. Also, she has a problem with that alien Other — the intervening reader who takes command of the entire text.

“I want the voices in my head for the characters,” she once said. “I don’t want that person in my ear.”

We developed a retronym: if I slipped a book — the kind with covers and pages — into my backpack for the train or to get started on at home, that meant I was reading a “book-book.” Of course the term itself reinforced her belief — I won’t call it a prejudice — against audio reading. It was firmest in the case of novels, which she thought I couldn’t possibly absorb, especially if they were complex narratives. Not that we argued or fought over this. I would never say such a thing. Out loud.

But the mood became a little tense when we were discussing Mitchell’s “Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet,” a many-layered novel we’d both read (in our different ways) and loved. The conversation turned to the story line concerning two 19th-century Japanese magistrates operating in Edo and Nagasaki. Jeanne said one of those two magistrates was a major character, Enomoto. I recalled the second magistrate as a marginal figure in the novel, wholly separate from the wicked Lord Abbot Enomoto.

Who was right? Amazon’s “search inside this book” function established that my memory was correct, and I delivered this news with mild triumph. Jeanne conceded — this was evidence “that you were listening as closely as I was reading,” she said — but also noted that she had read the passages months before I had. And, she added, “it was very confusing.”

At this point it occurred to me that what divides us on this issue may involve more than our preferred methods of reading. It may, in fact, be a matter of how we each best absorb difficult material. When I was in college I always got more out of lectures than out of the reading, and now I work in a trade, journalism, that is largely about listening to the spoken voice. And this, in turn, led me to wonder whether I’m wired in some way to listen rather than read.

And so I did what reporters are trained to do. I consulted an expert, in this case Howard Gardner, a professor of cognition and education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Gardner is celebrated for his theory of multiple intelligences, which holds that there are many different kinds of smarts and learning. In his work, Gardner has parsed linguistic intelligence from logical-mathematical and musical intelligence, and has also described other kinds of intelligence linked to interpersonal relationships and the body.

In a recent e-mail, I asked Gardner whether his theory could apply to an affinity for audiobooks. “I get tremendous pleasure from audiobooks,” I wrote. “My wife gets none at all, and spends her evenings holding by-God books.”

Gardner responded quickly. “This is very funny,” he said. Reading approaches in his marriage

were the exact opposite of those in mine: his wife “loves audiobooks and listens to them endlessly,” while “I never listen to audiobooks.” He is married to Ellen Winner, whose résumé resembles his. She is chairwoman of the psychology department at Boston College, and a senior associate at Project Zero, an arts-education program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Gardner suggested I speak with both of them that evening by phone.

When I called, Winner said she listens to books while exercising, grocery shopping or waiting in long lines at the airport. And what kinds of books? “Great literature, classics that I would not have the time or patience to read if they were in print.” She has happily worked the treadmill to “Bleak House” and “Daniel Deronda,” “Crime and Punishment” and “War and Peace.”

“I want to just sink into a fictional world,” she said. She could have been speaking for me.

Gardner, for his part, sounded a lot more like Jeanne. “I like to provide my own soundtracks in life,” he said, adding that he loves listening to classical music, and not as a means of escape. “I’m not trying to get away from anything,” he said.

As a practical matter, Gardner went on, he wants to read at his own pace, and to be able to flip back to earlier passages — no easy feat on an iPod. “To me, reading is something I do with my eyes,” he said.

At times during our conversation, the couple seemed to grow somewhat heated. Not that I would call it arguing.

The truth, it seems, is that the way we read, and our reasons for loving or disliking audiobooks, are deeply personal. They are expressions of self, so tied to who we are. If you belittle the way I read, you’re belittling me.

When I pressed Gardner on whether multiple-intelligence issues might enter into these differences, he said he had not heard of any research in the area.

“We don’t have enough of a sample to make a decision,” he said, “but there could be something in that.”

But I hadn’t wasted the couple’s time, Gardner assured me. At least not his wife’s. “You may have given her a research topic,” he said.

*John Schwartz, The Times’s national legal correspondent, is the author of “Short: Walking Tall When You’re Not Tall at All.”*

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