

an earful of books

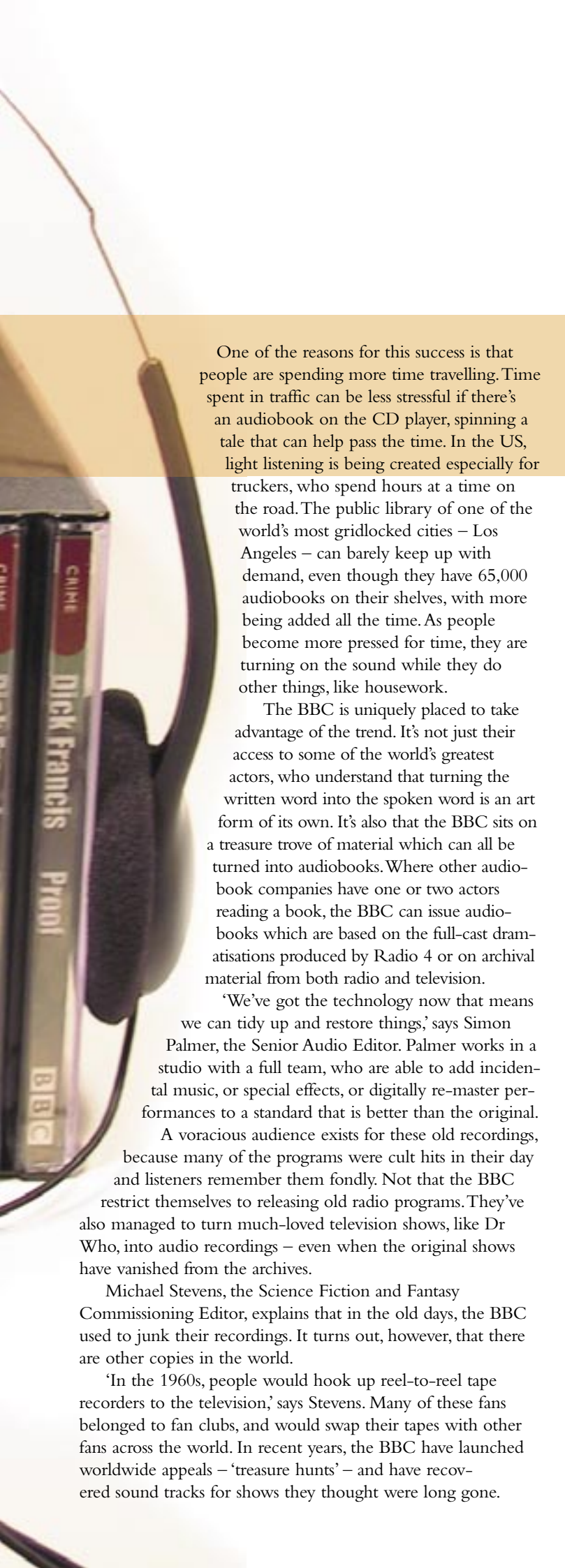
It's odd that in a country as vast as Australia, where we travel long distances, audiobooks still haven't reached their potential audience. But when they do, says FELICITY CARTER, listeners will discover a huge repository of well-told tales.

Author Gervase Phinn stands in the tearoom at St James House in Bath, England, telling stories from his time as a school inspector in Yorkshire. His audience is a bunch of actors and producers on their tea break, and they're howling with laughter.

St James House is the home of BBC Audiobooks, the place where printed books are turned into what used to be called 'talking books'. Normally it's actors like Kenneth Branagh or Bill Nighy who do the recordings. It's a rare author who gets to read their own work aloud, even if their works are bestsellers. What makes Phinn different, as he's busy demonstrating, is that he's got the gift of comic timing, and a rich and inviting voice.

Here, the voice is everything. Books will be turned into audiobooks if the producers can imagine them being read aloud and if they can find a voice that people will want to spend time with in their homes or cars. And the reason the BBC – and other producers – spend the time getting the best talent they can is not only a commitment to quality, but also the fact that audiobooks are big business. Last year in the US alone, audiobooks made more than \$US800 million in sales. Walk into any big bookstore in the UK and the USA and you'll find whole walls devoted to audiobooks. It's a trend that is yet to take off in Australia – but when it does, Australians will find a wealth of beautifully crafted audiobooks within reach.

'Our audience was traditionally older people,' says Kiran Kataria, the BBC's Editorial Manager of Adult Unabridged Audio. She says that audiobooks were originally intended for people who had sight problems. Audiobooks, however, have recently moved out of direct mail catalogues and libraries, into bookstores and homes – and it's younger people who are listening to them.



One of the reasons for this success is that people are spending more time travelling. Time spent in traffic can be less stressful if there's an audiobook on the CD player, spinning a tale that can help pass the time. In the US, light listening is being created especially for truckers, who spend hours at a time on the road. The public library of one of the world's most gridlocked cities – Los Angeles – can barely keep up with demand, even though they have 65,000 audiobooks on their shelves, with more being added all the time. As people become more pressed for time, they are turning on the sound while they do other things, like housework.

The BBC is uniquely placed to take advantage of the trend. It's not just their access to some of the world's greatest actors, who understand that turning the written word into the spoken word is an art form of its own. It's also that the BBC sits on a treasure trove of material which can all be turned into audiobooks. Where other audiobook companies have one or two actors reading a book, the BBC can issue audiobooks which are based on the full-cast dramatisations produced by Radio 4 or on archival material from both radio and television.

'We've got the technology now that means we can tidy up and restore things,' says Simon Palmer, the Senior Audio Editor. Palmer works in a studio with a full team, who are able to add incidental music, or special effects, or digitally re-master performances to a standard that is better than the original.

A voracious audience exists for these old recordings, because many of the programs were cult hits in their day and listeners remember them fondly. Not that the BBC restrict themselves to releasing old radio programs. They've also managed to turn much-loved television shows, like Dr Who, into audio recordings – even when the original shows have vanished from the archives.

Michael Stevens, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Commissioning Editor, explains that in the old days, the BBC used to junk their recordings. It turns out, however, that there are other copies in the world.

'In the 1960s, people would hook up reel-to-reel tape recorders to the television,' says Stevens. Many of these fans belonged to fan clubs, and would swap their tapes with other fans across the world. In recent years, the BBC have launched worldwide appeals – 'treasure hunts' – and have recovered sound tracks for shows they thought were long gone.

Full-cast dramatisations from BBC Audiobooks – one of the best ways to enjoy audio!



ISBN: 0663494212

The Complete Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Features both series of the BBC Radio 4 comedy drama, which spawned the phenomenal Hitchhiking legend.

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The Chronicles of Narnia – The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

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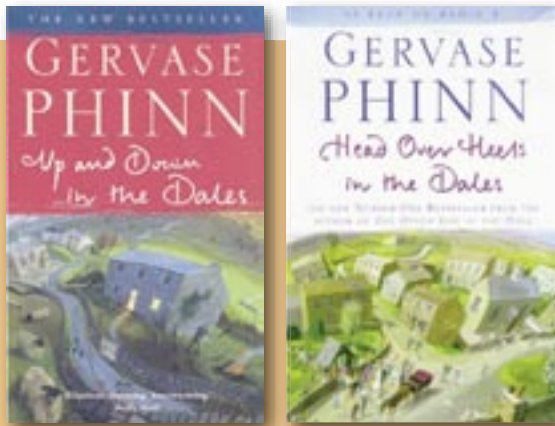
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SRP: \$34.95



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It's a rare author who gets to read their own work aloud, even if their works are bestsellers. What makes Phinn different, as he's busy demonstrating, is that he's got the gift of comic timing, and a rich and inviting voice.

Recordings have flooded in, and have been sent to the studio to be cleaned up.

'We've published sound tracks of stories that no longer exist,' says Stevens. He adds that the BBC believe they now have just about everything that anybody anywhere once recorded.

Stevens' latest project is the 2005 launching of the last of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* radio series as audiobooks. It's a project that shows how adaptation can be a highly artistic process in its own right. Douglas Adams' original *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was written for radio. The series, which was broadcast in 1981, was such a success that Pan Books commissioned Adams to write it in book form. A second radio series led to another book. But Adams wrote subsequent episodes of the story in book form only, and no radio adaptations of them were made. According to Stevens, it's clear that Adams was no longer thinking in an auditory way when he wrote his later books.

'They were hard to adapt,' he says. 'The plot lines don't work in the same way.'

Gervase Phinn, on the other hand, originally wrote his autobiographical stories, like *Head Over Heels in the Dales*, for the printed page, without any regard to whether his work would be adapted for another medium. After his books became bestsellers, the BBC commissioned him to read them as audiobooks. He now knows that any subsequent books he writes have to work for the ear, as well as for the eye. Phinn acknowledges that this has changed the way he writes.

'I don't put in Welsh characters, for a start,' he says.

The reason? He's not good at Welsh accents – and he's had letters telling him so. The producers in the tearoom laugh as he speaks. They can't wait to talk about the problems they've had with stories peopled with foreigners.

'We did a book where there were these four spies in a van,' says a producer. 'And one actor reading it.'

Apparently each spy came from a different country, and each had a thick foreign accent. As the spies sat there in the van, they became more agitated. By the end of the scene, they were supposed to be shouting at each other.

'And then the Russians closed in,' says the producer. 'We had to stop after each line so the narrator could think in a new accent.'

'You think that's a problem,' says another producer. 'This book I'm doing? I've got twelve blokes in a submarine.' The producer says she's taken an artistic decision and made the twelve men from different parts of the British Isles. One actor can read in twelve different accents, ensuring that the listener will always understand who is speaking.

Sex scenes can be a problem, too. 'You get the actors panting,' explains the first producer, 'and the Northern Libraries begin to complain.'

You can see that Kiran Kataria has to think very carefully before she agrees to turn a book into an audiobook, even if it's

of the more traditional type involving only a single reader. Kataria sits at the back of a huge open plan office, surrounded by bookshelves and trolleys filled with books. She receives about 100 books a week from publishers who are keen to have their books recorded. Kataria says she looks first and foremost for a good story, saying that crime, sagas and thrillers work very well as audiobooks.

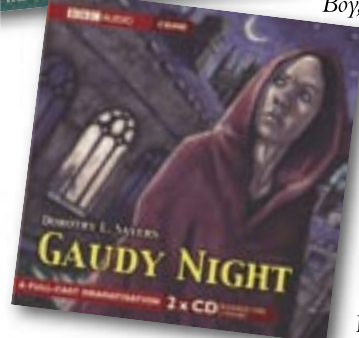
The BBC, of course, aren't the only people making these kinds of decisions. Bernadette Neubecker, Manager of Australia's ABC

Audiobooks, is in the same position. Neubecker sends out books to readers experienced with radio and waits for their recommendations. She says a book that works well on the page will work for the ear.

'The added enhancement of it being read to you is that the actor can bring drama to the story,' says Neubecker. She adds that sometimes literary fiction can be more accessible when read aloud. 'One of the best in recent years was *A Suitable Boy*, done on location. It was heavily abridged, but fabulous.'

As far as non-fiction goes, self-help doesn't work very well, while biography, autobiography and history do. 'As long as it has a good story,' says the BBC's Kataria.

Recording autobiography raises the delicate question of who should be reading it – the author, or an actor? It turns out that the Gervase Phinns of the world are very rare. Mostly, audiobooks work better if an actor is





Kenneth Branagh recording in the BBC studios

reading them, rather than the author. So how do you tell someone they're not up to the job of reading their own work?

The ABC's Neubecker says most people understand. 'Once they get into a studio, they realise it's not that easy. You have to sustain your voice at a very high level,' she says. 'Depending on the length of book, it could take ten days of recording.'

One thing the ABC doesn't do, because of budget constraints, is full cast dramatisations. Even the BBC, with more lavish budgets, has restrictions on what can be brought to life.

'For a long time we didn't approach Dorothy Sayers' *Gaudy Night*,' says BBC Commissioning Editor Louise Armitage. 'It has a huge number of characters. Because of the difficulties of dramatising it, Radio Four hadn't touched it.'

Armitage says that they eventually got around the problem by turning one of the main characters – Harriet Vane – into the narrator of the story. 'We commissioned Michael Bakewell, the radio dramatist, to do it. This is our first home-grown dramatisation.'

The normal course of events at BBC Audiobooks in Bath, however, is to put a single narrator in a booth, and have that person read while a producer listens. After lunch, it's Gervase Phinn's turn. The producer has a copy of the book in front of him, and makes notes in a red pen, stopping Phinn every few minutes to correct his pronunciation or make him aware that certain words need more emphasis.

'I turn into Mr Picky after I've had lunch,' says the producer.

After the book has been recorded, the sales and marketing begins. From this point the fate of the audiobook is out of the hands of the dramatists, adaptors, producers and readers.

Fortunately, a voracious audience for audiobooks exists internationally, ready to embrace the work. It will only get bigger, thanks to MP3 technology, which allows people to carry long recordings around with them, to pass the time wherever they are. The other big trend is downloadable audiobooks, from sites such as www.audible.com

It's another step in the development of literature, moving it away from the printed page and somewhere back towards an oral tradition, where a listener sat entranced by a storyteller.

Though sometimes you have to be careful about just how bewitching audiobooks can be. Phinn had a lorry driver go off the road because he was laughing so hard.

'I've had a woman wet herself, too,' says Phinn. He sounds completely unrepentant – and there are more audiobooks where that one came from. **gr**

As you'll see in next month's *gr* when the BBC gives you the opportunity to win some of their fantastic audiobooks.

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