

PUBLISHING NOW

Audiobooks are big business. Kathleen Whyman asks the publishers how authors can benefit

The audiobook industry expanded 13 per cent last year and remains the fastest growing area of publishing,' says Duncan Honeyman, senior commissioning editor in the Penguin House Audio team. 'Recent research from Deloitte predicts that sales of audiobooks will overtake those of ebooks in 2020.'

Ellie Wheeldon, editor for Audio & Digital for Hodder & Stoughton and John Murray Press, also has some impressive statistics.

'Research shows 15 per cent of people in the UK listened to an audiobook in 2018, and we expect to see that percentage grow,' she says. 'It's been a bumper few years for audiobook sales. At Hachette UK we saw strong double-digit growth during last year.'

Paul Stark, senior audio manager at Orion, says: 'We're in a boom period for audiobooks, with year-on-year growth of more than 30 per cent across the market.'

With figures like these, should authors be paying special attention to this market?

Unabridging the gap

When audiobooks first launched, novels had to be abridged because of the file size, but now the majority of novels are released full length as audio, often to accompany the book.

'With the rise of the smartphone, listeners can have scores of unabridged books in their pocket available on the same day as a book's publication,' says Honeyman. 'Production techniques have also advanced, so more

immersive productions featuring music or surround sound are possible.'

Convenience is a big factor for readers: the ability to listen when it's not possible to hold a book, such as while exercising, doing housework, cooking or on the commute.

Stark says: 'That freedom to listen at any time has had a massive impact on the market.'

For Wheeldon, audiobooks also bring a unique aspect to a book.

'The narrator is the most important thing in successfully moving a book from the page to your ears. There's something special and nostalgic about having a book read to you.'

She cites Lady Anne Glenconner's *Lady in Waiting* for Hodder as a book that's really resonated in audio. 'That charm factor and fascination in listening to Anne's story in her own unique voice can't be underestimated.'

'In non-fiction, rising stars like Rob Moore and Jen Sincero have narrated their own audiobooks, and that personal element really stands out to their readership.'

Stark finds that comedians who narrate their own books do well. 'Listeners are effectively getting a 10-hour gig,' he says.

Listen up

Do any particular types of books work better for audio? I wondered.

'The bestselling audiobooks generally correlate with the print bestseller chart,' says Honeyman. 'People want to experience the story everyone's engaging with, irrespective of format, so they can join the conversation. If an author or personality already has a presence in the audio world – podcasts, radio and so on – we get strong engagement from existing fans.'

Penguin's most popular audio titles for 2019 included *Becoming* by Michelle Obama, Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* and *The Secret Commonwealth* by Philip Pullman.

'Getting that combination of great writing and great readers is key,' says Stark. He believes this is the reason *The Silent Partner* by Alex Michaelides did so well for Orion in 2019. 'It's a gripping, superbly written thriller narrated by fantastic readers,' he says.

'Big ideas and aspirational non-fiction titles like *Factfulness* are also popular. On the fiction side, science fiction and fantasy do well. If you get the reader right, the content



Hachette's
Ellie Wheeldon

transfers effectively and captures listeners' imaginations. Our research shows that SFF fans tend to be tech fans too, which plays to audio's advantage.'

Audiobooks have another advantage, too. Stephen King's novel *It* is almost 45 hours long. Not only are readers getting their money's worth, they also save themselves a potential hernia from carrying the book around!

'Favourites like Stephen King do well year after year,' says Wheeldon. 'His style of writing suits the format so well.'

Narrative appeal

So, is there anything we can do to make our novels easier to adapt into an audiobook and more appealing for this format?

'Read your writing back to yourself and spot those sentences that don't flow as well when spoken compared with when written,' advises Stark. 'Some things look beautiful on the page but are tough to record.'

'Being conscious of your future narrator is crucial,' says Wheeldon. 'Actors are unlikely to enjoy a character with an "indescribable" accent, or a defined, yet irreplicable voice.'

'Include key character information,' she adds. 'The narrator's interpretation for each character may not always be exactly what you had in mind, but it'd be disappointing for a character to be given, say, a Welsh accent when you envisioned them as Scottish.'

'Crime in particular can be tricky,' she continues. 'A killer's identity can be hard to conceal when text formatting isn't a viable method of disguise. Finding a way to keep plot twists a secret when every character is given a distinct voice can be problematic, and it's worth being aware of that.'

Honeyman has some final words of comfort. 'If you have a compelling story with interesting characters – the same elements you would have in print – you'll have a great audiobook.'



Penguin Audio's
Duncan Honeyman