

3.13 What it's Like to Narrate an Audiobook

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that this work was developed and presented on the unceded territory of the Lenape people. I wish to pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano and twinkly triangle]

Angourie [host]

Hello, and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast and book club about stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

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Angourie [host]

Hello everyone, I hope you're doing well. This week's episode is an unexpected detour from my scheduled programming, but not to worry! We will be back on track next week. The reason I've had to shuffle things around a bit is that I am no longer in Australia. I'm sure you noticed that the acknowledgement of country is different this week, because I am back in Pennsylvania. It's been a hectic few weeks what with – you know – international travel during a pandemic, so podcast work has taken a backseat.

As a result, I hope you don't mind – well, if you do, there's nothing you can do about it, anyway! This week I'm going to do a more casual and chatty episode about what it's like to narrate an audiobook. I've had the pleasure of narrating two audiobooks: *There Was Still Love* by Favel Parrett and *Under the Stars* by Lisa Harvey-Smith. And of course I will link them both in the show notes if you're interested in listening to even more of me talking! Narrating both of these books was such a fun experience, and I also learnt a lot, so I wanted to talk about what it was like. And I asked you on Instagram if you had any questions for me about my experience, so I will also be answering some of those questions throughout the episode.

To begin with: how did I get the job? Both of these books came through my agent. So there's a production / casting team at the audiobook provider, which, for *There Was Still Love*, was Hachette Australia. So Hachette Australia contacted my agent with the first few chapters of the manuscript of *There Was Still Love*, and they also asked me to give a sample recording of my voice if I was interested in doing the project. I really loved the section of the book they sent through, and asked my agent to proceed. I actually – I don't think I ended up doing a sample recording for them, because they knew my reading voice from the podcast. After expressing my interest in the project, the Hachette team was keen, but ultimately the decision came down to the author. And I was very thankful that Favel Parrett approved, and so I got started on prep work.

First of all, what exactly am I reading? The physical book, or an eBook? At the time of recording *There Was Still Love*, it hadn't been published yet, so they didn't have finished copies of the book. They sent me a PDF of the manuscript, which I downloaded onto my iPad mini. My iPad mini is really old, but it managed to hold up throughout the recording process! The team at Hachette recommended I use iAnnotate as a reading and annotating platform, so I bought that app. It was \$15, which is more than I would usually spend on any app. Usually, if there's a free version of the app, I'll just get the free version, but the \$15 was definitely worth it. I use that platform to read and annotate any scripts or documents that I have on my iPad.

Now I have the manuscript on my iPad and I'm ready to start preparing. What goes into preparing to read a book out loud? To begin with, I read the whole book once through in my head, because ... obviously! You want to know how it's going to end before you perform it. And then read it for a second time out loud, and made annotations as I went along. My annotating system I completely stole from a VOX YouTube video I once watched on audiobook recordings. If I can find it, I'll link it for you in the show notes. That really helped me.

So what I did is I allocated a highlighter colour for each character, and then I highlighted their dialogue so I knew when to change into their voice. And this is necessary for me because usually the dialogue is read before you know who's saying it. So for example, when reading: "I'm upset," said Jane," I have to know to do Jane's voice before I read that it's Jane who's saying the words. If that makes sense. And I did a similar thing with adjectives. So for example, when reading: "I'm sad," whispered Jane," I have to know to whisper it in advance. So throughout the book, I underlined adjectives that described speech and then drew arrows to put that description into effect when reading the line.

I also underlined certain words that needed emphasis in a sentence. Word emphasis is really important, because it can change the whole meaning of a sentence. For example, if the sentence is: "Jane *said* she did not take his money, but Cathy didn't believe her," I have to underline "said" to ensure I place stress on it. If I place stress on a different word in the sentence, like "Jane said she did not take his *money*," it changes the meaning. The stress on the word "money" implies that Jane didn't take the money, but rather something *else*. So then, the second half of the sentence, which relates back to Cathy not believing what Jane said, doesn't really make sense. I'm not sure if I described that in a way that makes sense, but if you want to know more about this amazing phenomenon, or rather flaw, of the English language, then just google "word emphasis changes meaning". And you can find articles that have different sentence examples where if you emphasise a different word each time you say the sentence, it will change the meaning completely. So, if you want to know more about that, then google it, it's really interesting.

Another big element to annotating this manuscript was pronunciation. @noiselesschatter asked: "How do you know how to pronounce certain names or words you've only seen in print?" Well, if I didn't know a word, then I googled it. And I wrote it out phonetically in the margin, so when I read it out on the day, I would know how to say it. But the biggest challenge for *There Was Still Love* in particular was the Czech words. This novel takes place

partially in Prague, and the characters have Czech names and say Czech phrases. @thesub_mariner asked: “Who helped you with the Czech words?” Thankfully, the audiobook team provided me with a list of all the Czech words and an audio pronunciation guide, which was a great help. Another thing that I think helped was my knowledge of German. And so that understanding of pronunciation and Germanic sounds was quite helpful when learning the Czech words. That being said, pronunciation was still a big challenge. And actually, I mispronounced one of the lead characters’ names in my recording, and had to go back and rerecord those parts. But we’ll get to that later.

As well as annotating the manuscript in the preparation phase, I also had to come up with the characters’ voices. This was something I was both very excited and nervous about. I was excited because acting out different voices is just super fun, but nervous because this isn’t something I’ve done often, and I’m not very good at impressions. So the challenge with coming up with these voices is that I didn’t want them to sound silly or unbelievable, but they also needed to be distinctive enough so that the listener could tell who was speaking. And I didn’t go about it in a particularly methodical way, I just tried out a few different things and discovered what worked for each character. And I also had to factor in sustainability – you know, what voices could I comfortably sustain for hours at a time? @j.coente asked: “Do you think narrating is similar to acting?” And in this respect, yes. I think acting is about telling a story through a believable and engaging character, and the same thing has to be done when narrating an audiobook. But I think narration and voice acting is a lot more ... I guess focussed or pinpointed than film acting, because you have to put all your expression into how you say the words. I couldn’t rely on visual cues like body language or facial expressions. But when creating these characters through their voices, I approached it in the same way I would a film. I took cues from the text itself. So the age, gender and temperament of the character of course played into the voice, and also any adjectives or phrases that described a character’s voice or tone. And there was nothing really glamorous or serious about this process, it was just a lot of me talking to myself in various silly voices.

So, at this point I’ve read the book twice and prepped my notes. What’s my schedule like? The audio team allocates twice as much recording time as they estimate the finished audiobook to be. So *There Was Still Love* was just under 300 pages, and they estimated it would be a four hour finished audiobook. So they allocated eight hours of recording over two days. We did two four to five hour sessions, which I think is quite short.

@just.isabel.things.podcast asked: “How long would a typical 350 page book take to record?” Using this same imprecise method of calculation, I’d say it would take three days of four to five hour sessions. For something longer like *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, which is a twenty-one hour finished audiobook, I reckon they’d spread fortyish hours of recording over a week, or maybe even two weeks. But Stephen Fry’s a professional, he knows what he’s doing. He’d probably take a lot less time than me.

Now I’ve got the schedule, and I’m getting ready on the morning of the big day.

@margew76 asked: “Do you have to watch what you eat / drink before recording?” Yes! I didn’t even consider this beforehand, but before my first day of recording, the team sent me a memo discouraging me from consuming milk or orange juice in the morning. So

apparently those foods can intensify mouth noises. So I heeded that advice, and also had a peppermint tea in the car ride over to wake me up and warm up my voice, I guess.

Now I'm in the car on the way there, where am I going? I recorded both *There Was Still Love* and *Under the Stars* at a recording studio in Melbourne called SquareSound. They have a sound booth completely dedicated to audiobook recording, but they have many booths in a whole complex, and they do a range of things sound design and mixing for film and TV.

It was just me in a little sound-proof booth, and the producer in the next room, who listened and recorded. Having a producer there is integral to the production of an audiobook. Of course they're needed to hit the record button and edit as we go, but also just as an objective listener. So the producer would pull me up on mistakes like if I skipped a word or misread something without noticing. @literarybookishness asked: "Do they give you directions on how to read it?" So before going into record, I didn't get any specifications about what they wanted, so I just kind of did my own thing. But when I went into record in the room, sometimes the producer would jump in and ask me to rerecord a sentence with emphasis on a different word or something like that. So again, having someone listening as I read and giving direction accordingly was really helpful.

Once I get to the sound booth, I sit down and begin. Yep, start at the beginning, and just read. This was different but refreshing for me, because when you work on a film, you shoot out of order. The filming order is determined by things like locations, and weather, and cast members' schedules. But the great thing about audiobook recording, is that none of those factors come into play, so you can just start at the beginning and go through until you reach the end. When I was there, I asked the producer if audiobooks are ever recorded out of order, and he said that that very rarely happens, unless there are multiple narrators involved. He said that reading the novel out loud in order maintains the flow of the story, and it just makes sense.

So I begin reading. And ... what if I make a mistake? Well, it's actually not a big deal. I was really nervous for my first audiobook, and so I stumbled over my words a bit in the beginning. But when that happened, the producer stopped recording, and told me where to pick it up from to rerecord the little bit I stumbled over. And often we'd take it from the start of the sentence, or the most recent breath. @aromero1403 asked: "What happens if you sneeze during recording?" Well, same thing! We'd stop and take it from the top of the sentence. And as the day wore on, I really relaxed into the recording process and actually just kind of lost myself in the story. There were times where I forgot I was in a recording studio, I was just so absorbed in the world of the book. But then there were also times when I felt the complete opposite of that, and I was hyper aware of the way my mouth moved to make then sounds. And then I became super focused on the individual words and sounds, that's when I would make mistakes.

A few people asked me if I got tired or if my throat started hurting, and not really. I drank water whenever I felt my throat getting croaky or dry. I think you'd be surprised how long you can talk for before your voice starts to wear down, but maybe that's just me, I do like chatting. And I did get tired at the end, but it wasn't even that my voice was tired, it was more like my ears were tired of hearing myself speak. At the end of the recording session,

we recorded the first page again. And this is common practice for any type of audio recording. I've done this before when rerecording dialogue for a film, or the few times I've had to record songs for film productions. And they do this because when you start at the beginning, your voice might not be warmed up, or you're a little bit nervous and so your voice sounds different. So rerecording the first bit again at the end ensures continuity in your tone of voice.

So after two days of recording, I go home and wait. Someone – I don't know who, but whoever it is, I feel very sorry for them – listens to a rough cut of the audiobook and gives notes to rerecord. So, we might need to rerecord things because of background noises that we didn't hear at the time. This might be me shifting in my chair or a weird throat noise. Or, we might have to rerecord things because of botched pronunciation. Which is exactly what happened. So remember when I mentioned I pronounced a character's name incorrectly? Well, I had to go back a few days later and rerecord all of those parts. And it took a while. And I remember at the time I was so upset and embarrassed, and I genuinely thought they might just scrap my recording and hire someone else to read it instead. But thankfully, they seemed happy with the fixed up version, and they still released it. So, thank you, Hachette!

So now I've recorded the book, the recording has been patched up and finalised and edited, and now it's ready for the world! Once the book comes out, of course. And the big question on everyone's lips is ... well, actually no one asked me this question on Instagram, but I think it's an important one to answer anyway – the question is: did I listen to it? God, no! I, like many people, cringe at the sound of my own voice. And yes, I recognise the irony in me saying this, as someone who hosts and edits their own podcast! I know. But let me tell you, it is a very particular kind of torture for me to have to listen to and edit my own voice for this podcast. It has made me notice all of my annoying speech habits, and now I can't unnotice them. It's the worst. And yet, I do it for you. Well, and I do it for me, I love talking.

Anyway, that's beside the point. That was my experience with *There Was Still Love*. *Under the Stars*, my second audiobook, was a bit different for a few reasons. This was a nonfiction book, so I didn't have to come up with character voices or anything like that. This time I just read it through once in my head, and then again out loud while making annotations. With this book, too, I had some issues with pronunciation. *Under the Stars* is an astronomy book for kids, but it doesn't scrap the scientific names for stuff. So I had to do lots of research to figure out how to pronounce the names of stars and moons and astronomical things. I remember one word I really struggled with was the name of one of Pluto's moons. It was spelt C-H-A-R-O-N. And when I researched this, the examples I found were spoken by either British or American astronomers, who seemed to say it differently. So eventually I asked the author of the book herself, Lisa Harvey-Smith, and she told me it was pronounced "Sharon." So, there you go.

Under the Stars is a book for kids, so it was much shorter than *There Was Still Love*. The digital version I had was around 280 pages, but the text was quite large, and this included full-page illustrations. So we were allocated one six hour recording session, but I think we finished in about five hours. And this time, I managed to pronounce everything correctly and there was no need for pickups! Hooray! Again, I did not listen to the finished product of *Under the Stars*.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this episode, I learnt a lot from the experience of narrating audiobooks. It's such a unique way to experience a story, because when you read out loud, you really have to pay attention to every single word. Each word is important and there for a reason. When I read with my eyes or with my ears, I think I have a tendency to skim over words or view sentences as a whole – you know, anticipating the meaning before I actually read the whole sentence or paragraph. But reading out loud really breaks down the writing into simple building blocks. I guess it can feel tedious and maybe it can disrupt the flow of the story, but I think it's a really fascinating thing. Because it's like stripping back the layers of a story and seeing all the nuts and bolts. Okay, that was a weird mixture of analogies, but you know what I mean. The point is, reading out loud feels like such an intimate experience, because each word is paid attention to, each punctuation mark, each breath. So if you haven't read a story out loud in a while, then maybe give it a go. Whether you're reading it out loud for someone else, or just alone for your amusement, you never know what you might learn from it.

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano and twinkly triangle]

Thank you very much for listening, I hope you enjoyed. Next week, I will be discussing our book club pick for September, which is *Catching Teller Crow* by Ambelin Kwaymullina and Ezekiel Kwaymullina. This is also published under the title *The Things She's Seen* in the US. So you've got exactly one week left to finish reading it. In that episode I will also be announcing our book club pick for October, which will be a spooky one for the Halloween season, how exciting! As always, you can find me on Instagram @the_community_library, or @angourierice. Until next week, I hope you're all keeping safe and happy, and maybe reading something aloud in a dramatic fashion. Bye!

[fade out: theme music]