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Actors You've Never Heard of Are Becoming the Ones Heard Most

By ANDREW ADAM NEWMAN

Oscar winners do it. Tony winners do it. Emmy winners, too. They enter sound studios, open books, clear throats and read into microphones. But the narrators who record the most audiobooks and garner the most recognition are actors you probably wouldn't know if they jumped out of your soup.

Like Barbara Rosenblat. While Ms. Rosenblat has enjoyed some success as a theater and film actor in New York and London, it is not her face that's most recognizable but her voice. She's earned 27 Golden Earphone awards from AudioFile magazine, the recorded-books industry barometer, and five Audies from the Audio Publishers Association, the most awarded to a single narrator. She's recorded more than 400 titles.

Watch Ms. Rosenblat work at the Chelsea studios of Recorded Books, and you get the sense that even an Oscar winner might not be able to pull this off. What screenplay, after all, would require an actress to do what she did during a recent afternoon's recording of "The Serpent on the Crown," the 17th installment of Elizabeth Peters' Amelia Peabody Mysteries series?

Ms. Rosenblat was delivering the dialogue of a handful of characters, most of them men, and was shifting quickly between characters with British, Indian, Arabic, Egyptian, Irish, Austro-Hungarian and Texan accents. Those distinct roles interacted with incredulity, shock, anguish and sarcasm. It was emotion layered on dialect layered on perfect enunciation.

She is a virtuoso, said John McElroy, a Grammy-winning, independent audiobook producer who last recorded Ms. Rosenblat reading Ken Follett's "Whiteout" (Penguin Audiobooks, unabridged, \$29.95), which she narrated with a light British accent while covering multiple characters with various Scottish accents. "She's the best dialect person I know, period," he added.



Marvi Lacar for The New York Times

Barbara Rosenblat is among the most accomplished narrators of audiobooks. She gained experience as a theater actor in New York.

During a break, Ms. Rosenblat invited a visitor into the small studio and closed the door. "It's so quiet in here I can hear my biological clock tick," she said. "I've heard horror stories about this star or A-list actor: They couldn't cope with having to do everything - I mean everything - with the voice. There is no upturned eyebrow, no body language."

Take away everything else, and actors may try to plow too much into a vocal performance. George Guidall, who for 20 years has recorded more than 850 titles and with Ms. Rosenblat made AudioFile's short list of Golden Voices narrators, said what's essential to performing a book is restraint. "Some actors perform as if they're on stage instead of just talking to one person," Mr. Guidall said. "Some actors have to act every line. Some overact. Readers don't want to be talked down to."

Mr. Guidall, who has performed on and off Broadway, possesses the regal air of the Shakespeare actor who has traded tights for gray slacks and running sneakers. His narration of John Irving's novel "A Widow for One Year" (Random House Audio, unabridged, \$49.95) and Wally Lamb's "I Know This Much Is True" (Recorded Books, unabridged, \$84.95) both earned Audies. His voice "sounds like velvet," said Rochelle O'Gorman, editor of audiobookcafe.com. "He could read the phone book to me, and I'd want to listen."

"The odds are probably 50-to-1 against a talented actor being a talented reader," said David Markowitz, director of operations at Recorded Books. "There are actors who are stellar on stage, and then you put them behind a mike and they struggle to bring the story to life. Frequently you get an actor who comes alive in dialogue but when you get to narration, it becomes a flat monotone. You tell them: 'That character is very big. You have to bring it down, and give me more life in the narration.' And they just don't get it."

Some prominent actors, like Campbell Scott, are accomplished narrators, but they're unlikely to appear in Recorded Books' studios soon. "We did try to get Steve Buscemi, and they laughed at us," Mr. Markowitz said. "One day would cost \$4,000 or \$5,000, and that would blow our budget."

Recorded Books, which is based in Maryland and records in New York, is one of three major audio publishers that eschew abridging books. Most publishing houses release both six-hour abridgements (a decade ago standard abridgements were three hours) and unabridged versions averaging between 10 and 20 hours, with some going 40 hours or longer. Some hire a Hollywood actor for the abridged version, and a less expensive, seasoned regular for the unabridged. Most studios work under contracts with the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists union. Recorded Books pays a minimum of \$150 for each hour they record - more for top narrators like Ms. Rosenblat and Mr. Guidall. Because of frequent stops and retakes for flubs, narrators spend about two hours at the studio for every hour they record, earning an average of \$75 an hour. Recording unabridged books can take weeks.

Authors occasionally approach the microphone, too. Some prove to have a great voice for print; others are naturals. John le Carré, who recorded his "Absolute Friends" (Time

Warner Audiobooks, abridged, \$26.98) last year is "simply one of the best author readers there is," according to AudioFile. Publishers Weekly adds this surreal-in-any-other-context endorsement: "No one reads le Carré better than le Carré." Frank McCourt's 13-hour performance of his "Angela's Ashes" (Simon & Schuster Audio, unabridged, \$50) in 1997 is widely considered the high-water mark among author narrations.

For authors with the cords, a voracious audience awaits. According to the Audio Publishers Association, the industry's annual revenues exceed \$800 million. The fastest-growing sector within the industry is download sales, with Audible.com (which along with audiobooks sells subscriptions to radio shows and audio versions of periodicals) reporting sales of \$18.5 million in 2003, a 69 percent increase over its previous year. Although Audible's 2004 sales won't be formally announced until February, the company spokesman, Jonathan Korzen, predicts totals will nearly double again, reaching \$33 million to \$35 million.

Audiobook sellers bristle at the suggestion that listeners downloading John Grisham's or David Sedaris's latest lack erudition. "It's a misperception that audiobook listeners are 'reader deficient' and like children who need to be read to," said Claudia Howard, executive producer at Recorded Books. "The truth is they're addicted readers who, because of the busy lives we lead, find there are dozens of places where your hands are busy but your brain is available."

Some authors have had to warm up to the idea of audiobooks. "I never listened to my other books on tape," said Barbara Mertz, who writes the Amelia Peabody series under the name Elizabeth Peters. "I didn't like them." In the early 1990's, a friend of Ms. Mertz recommended Ms. Rosenblat's narration of one of the author's mysteries. Reluctantly, she agreed to listen. "I fell madly in love with it," said Ms. Mertz, who now insists contractually that Ms. Rosenblat narrate her mysteries. (She also has Ms. Rosenblat, speaking in the British-accented voice of Amelia Peabody, suggesting that callers "please do" leave a message on the outgoing message of her answering machine at home.)

"You've got to know your endgame," said Ms. Rosenblat, who always reads manuscripts before entering the studio and who just finished recording the latest mystery by Ms. Mertz, whom she confers with to prepare. Narrators typically read the manuscripts before recording, highlighting proper nouns and foreign expressions, with which they need pronunciation guidance.

In a murder mystery, Ms. Rosenblat said she could develop a more sinister voice for the red-herring suspect, and make the voice of the little old lady next door who really did it more enduring.

"If you don't know what your endgame is, you don't know where the author intended to take the reader," Ms. Rosenblat said. "You can't embark because your energies and dramatic sense will be all over the place. You'll be guessing at who your prime suspects and protagonist and antagonist are. The art of being a good recording artist in this business is being very daintily manipulative."