

## Audio narrator brings stories to life with versatile 'voice of the century'

BY JAY MACDONALD

As the unmistakable voice of Dorothy Gilman's Mrs. Pollifax, Elizabeth Peters' Amelia Peabody, Nevada Barr's Anna Pigeon and the characters in more than 400 other titles, Barbara Rosenblat's credentials as queen of the audiobook speak for themselves.

The only woman to win six Audie Awards, this multitalented, transatlantic character actress, singer and dancer has been on a wildly successful verbal run since she first heard her own voice on her uncle's tape recorder as a child.

"It was like a Proustean moment. My life changed at that moment," she recalls. "It's like looking at your reflection in a mirror for the first time and seeing what you look like."



BARBARA ROSENBLAT

*An award-winning reader who gives voice to characters from Amelia Peabody to Bridget Jones*

Rosenblat admits that in her role as an audio narrator, she's a stickler for preparation and reads her scripts "down to the letter."

"Even if a book is not sterling, a good audio can elevate substandard material," she says. "It's movies for the ears."

Rosenblat has created memorable audio performances of such diverse titles as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Amistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series and Larry McMurtry's *Terms of Endearment*. Little wonder she's won 40 Golden Earphone awards from *AudioFile* magazine and been named its Voice of the Century.

Born in London to Holocaust survivors, the precocious Rosenblat grew up in New York City, the perfect incubator for her often-spontaneous, Annie-like public performances in city parks and street corners. Later, when she enrolled at City College in Harlem, she fell in with the musical comedy society and discovered a new medium for her vocal gifts: radio.

"I had a weekly radio show for three years called 'Front Row Center.' I got to see and review Broadway shows, interviewed people and played clips from different cast albums," she recalls. Bitten by the acting bug, Rosenblat nevertheless took her father's advice and earned certificates to teach English, theater and speech in New York City schools. She barely had time to use them.

"The first job I got was playing Yenta in a three-city dinner theater tour of *Fiddler on the Roof* in Kentucky, West Virginia and Ohio," she says. "I had more fun than a bucket full of bunnies."

Versatility—and that marvelous, mellifluous voice—have kept Rosenblat in demand ever since, for a wide range of performing roles. On Broadway, she originated the part of Mrs. Medlock in the Tony Award-winning *The Secret Garden* and appeared in Eric Bogosian's *Talk Radio* with Liev Schreiber. Her screen credits include *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Reds*, "Guiding Light," "Law and Order SVU" and a number of BBC productions.

She provided the world-weary voice of Sal, the office manager, for those NPR car guys in the animated series "Click and Clack's As the Wrench Turns," and even voiced a Teutonic transsexual dope fiend in the classic videogame "Grand Theft Auto." Last year, friends convinced her to audition for the singing, dancing role of Gertrude Stein in *27 Rue de Fleurus*. She nailed it off-Broadway.

Still, audiobooks are where her star shines brightest. She often gets so into a performance that tissues have become a studio staple.

"I just did *Anne Frank Remembered* and at the end of it, we were all a mess, not a dry eye in the house," she says. "On the other hand, when I recorded Sue Townsend's *The Queen and I*, which is one of the funniest books I've ever done, I remember sitting in the studio with tissues all over the place, laughing myself hysterical."

Rosenblat credits her "phonographic memory" with the ability to create and recreate a sometimes-unwieldy cast of characters. She's up for another Audie this year for Katie MacAlister's supernatural comedy *Fire Me Up*, in which she not only performs as libidinous guardian Aisling Grey, but her drowsy Newfoundland dog, Jim.

Does she ever carry accents home with her?

"No, but when I go back to England, I get straight back into the Brit thing. The same is true when I get in with a mix of Europeans; (with *German accent*) I will start to pick up little bits of what they're doing and I can't stop myself!" she chuckles. "I've had people say to me, Stop mocking! and I say, it's not mocking, it's *research*. I'm flexing. This is my gym; New York City is my gym. The New York subway is a microcosm of the world." ♥

Jay MacDonald writes quietly from Austin, Texas, but occasionally moves his lips.

## THE SPOKEN WORD Contaminated waste, wasted lives

When Commissario Guido Brunetti sat across from Franca Marinello at an elegant dinner party at the home of Count Falier, his titled father-in-law, he had no idea that this charming woman, married to a much older, wheeler-dealer businessman, would



BY SUKEY HOWARD

become a major figure in one of his nastier cases. At the time, he just enjoyed their shared love of Cicero and Virgil and wondered at her mangled face-lift. That same day, an officer working for a special environmental branch of the Carabinieri had come to see Brunetti about a murder, probably linked to the illegal transport of toxic waste from the garbage-filled, Camorra-controlled South to areas in the Veneto. **About Face** (BBC Audiobooks, \$29.95, 12 hours unabridged, ISBN 9781602835665), ably read by David Colacci, Donna Leon's 18th novel starring Commissario Brunetti, the gently determined detective with a passion for justice, begins with these two disparate threads. And when it ends, Leon has skillfully twisted them into a nuanced tale of corruption, contamination and coercion. As always, she's combined a good Italian police procedural (well, Brunetti would probably call it a non-procedural), set in the real Venice tourists never see, with cogent commentary on contemporary problems.



### A darker shade of noir

Even though there's a lot of violent action and fast dialogue, a mesmerizing torpor hangs over **Nobody Move** (Macmillan Audio, \$24.95, 4.5 hours unabridged, ISBN 9781427206893), Denis Johnson's homage to noir pulp fiction. Will Patton's narration

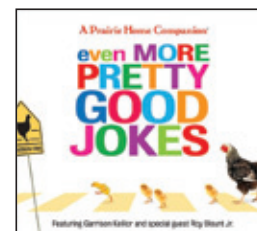
is so true to the mood, so evocative, that you'll feel like you've smoked a pack of Camels and swallowed a fifth of cheap vodka by the time it's all over. There are no good guys here, no wisecracking private investigator with a shapely secretary, just a pack of lowlifes heading lower. Right after Jimmy, a compulsive, small-time gambler in hock to some very unpleasant dudes, shoots the enforcer in the leg, he meets a dazzling, alcoholic divorcee, who's just been dumped by her lawyer husband and framed

for embezzling \$2.3 million. This not-very-dynamic duo, hoping to get their hands on the dirty dough, end up in the hands of the bad guys and everyone, almost, gets hurt. If you're a fan of this hard-boiled genre that can't help poking fun at itself, Johnson's grim, gritty, darkly funny walk on the wild side will be right up your alley.



### Laugh therapy

To lighten your load, elevate your spirit and escape the daily grind—just listen to the knock-knock and light bulb jokes, really good "bad" Unitarian, lawyer, blonde and dog jokes in **Even More Pretty Good Jokes** (High-Bridge Audio, \$24.95, 1.75 hours unabridged, ISBN 9781598878752). This collection includes the best selections from four "A Prairie Home Companion" joke shows, recorded live in St. Paul. All are told (and sung) by the show's usual suspects, along with special guests including Roy Blount Jr. Guaranteed to generate giggles, chortles, smiles and grins.



### Sukey's favorite

Way before movies, big-screen celebrities, TV, YouTube and Twitter, there were superstars. And Charles Dickens was the unrivaled literary superstar of his day, with a vast audience who waited with more than bated breath for every installment of every book and who battled for tickets to his public readings. When Dickens died in 1870, he left his final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, unfinished and his fans hungry for a finale. **The Last Dickens** (Random House Audio, \$39.95, 13 hours unabridged, ISBN 9780739344286), Matthew Pearl's third and, I think, best period novel, plunges us into that era and turns the mystery of "The Mystery" into a terrific historical thriller-diller, replete with duplicitous rogues, murderous opium traders, book-pirating rascals (a big deal at that time), cutthroat publishers, fevered chases, fervent romance, an all-American hero and a remarkably accurate, well-documented portrait of Dickens and his entourage. In turn, Paul Michael's faultlessly paced, pitch-perfect reading, with a range of convincing voices and accents, turns the book into exciting audio entertainment. ♥

