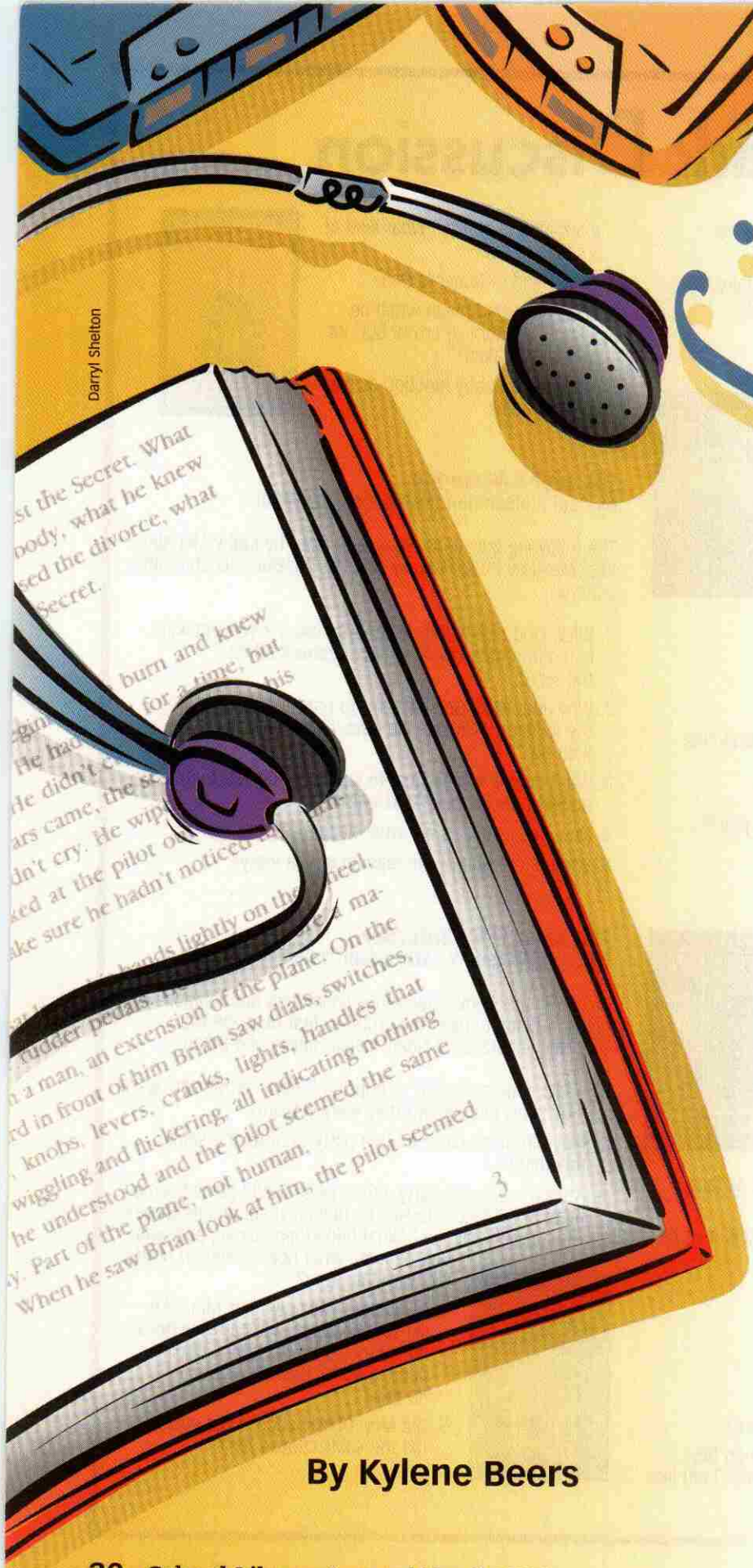

Listen

For comprehension, some readers need to see words, and hear them, simultaneously.

I noticed it right away. Everyone in the seventh-grade classroom was reading, really reading. No one was looking around. No one was thumbing through a book. No one was digging through a backpack, sleeping, doodling, or whispering to a neighbor. No writing notes, fixing hair, or staring into space. They were reading. All of them, all 32 of them. Some were reading sports books, a few were reading joke books, most were reading fiction. About half were reading while listening to cassette tapes.

"Okay, put your books away now," the teacher finally said.

No response. They kept on reading.

"Really. Now. We've got to move on."

Slowly they put their bookmarks into place, put their books down, turned off their tape players, and stretched.

"They all read the whole time," I said to the teacher during her break.

"Uh-huh," she replied, not too im-

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By Kylene Beers

Struggling Readers & Audiobooks While You Read

pressed with my insight.

"I mean they *all* read the *whole* time. How'd you get them to do that?"

"Well, I didn't have to convince all of them to read," she said. "Several of these kids came into my class liking to read. The others, well, I put them with books that are on tape."

"So they don't read? They just listen?" I asked.

"Of course they read. But they also hear the words as they read," she explained. "And they love it."

"Those kids, do they always listen as they read?"

"Some do. Some just listen occasionally. It really just depends on their mood."

"And the result is…" I began.

"The result," she cut in, "is what you saw. Kids reading. And because they are reading, their reading ability is going up, their interest is going up, and their confidence in themselves as readers is going up."

The conversation you just read is a transcription of a tape from a classroom I observed late in 1996. From then until January 1998, I repeatedly visited several Houston-area schools—an elementary school, two middle schools, and one ninth-grade campus school. The point of my visits was to continue my investigation into how teachers connect students to reading. Not surprisingly, I found teachers looking to the school librarian for help. Some librarians suggested audiobooks. Soon I began to understand how certain students were able to connect to reading through listening. Here's what happened in two other classrooms.

"I want it," the seventh grader in the English as a Second Language classroom yelled after the teacher finished talking.

"Me, too."

"I want one."

"I said it first."

"Me, Miss, I want to read it."

The teacher called five students to her desk and gave out copies of *Dear Mr. Henshaw* by Beverly Cleary (Dell, 1984). "Okay. After you five finish chapter four, I want to see a response journal entry from each of you," she said.

They each nodded, took the books, and walked over to the listening center. Each put on a pair of headphones, opened his or her book, and then one student punched play on the machine. They listened to the tape while following along in print.

Meanwhile, another set of five students went to a second listening station. They each put on headphones and pulled out their copies of *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry (Houghton, 1989). They were about halfway through the book. Five other students pulled out copies of Betsy Byars's *The Pinballs* (HarperCollins, 1977). They began reading, but weren't listening to the book on tape. A fourth group of five students moved to another corner of the room, pulled out *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen (Bradbury, 1987), and began responding to what was written on a card the teacher had handed them.

The final group of students, four in this group, all moved to a conference table near the teacher's desk. She met them there and they all began discussing *Soup and Me* by Richard Peck (Knopf, 1975, o.p.). After 15 minutes, the *Hatchet* group changed places with the *Soup and Me* group.

Now the *Soup and Me* group discussed something on a card from the teacher. The other three groups read and/or listened the entire 30 minutes.

Later, the teacher and I talked about what I had seen.

"They all wanted to read *Dear Mr. Henshaw*," I remarked.

"Well, if you do a read-and-tease, that always gets them interested. Plus, I had told them that was one of the books that we have on tape. That always appeals to a certain group."

"Not to everyone?"

"No. Some of the kids don't want to listen and follow along. They just want to read. That's what you saw one group doing—*The Pinballs* group. Those kids really already love to read and they are about to transition out of this class."

"Transition out?"

"Right. Their English is to the point

Audiobooks act as a scaffold that allows students to read above their actual reading level.

Straight from the Students

The following are written comments from fifth-grade English as a Second Language students on what they liked—and didn't like—about audiobooks. I've retained their spelling and grammar.

"I like books on tape because they can teach you words that you do not know."

"I like books on tape becuse it's get's boring when the teacher reads. I hate the headphone they herte your eyes, skesh [squish] your ears. But I like a tape becuse it takes a short time and a teacher take forever to read. And a tape it takes about a minit."

"I like to hear books on tape because I don't like reading to my firends or my techers. The ting about the tape I like best is you can put it in your radio and lay down and hear it wuil [while] you are eating popcorn. The thing I don't like about tapes is you got to flip it to the other side of the tape and you mite get a little lost of it. I like to hear the tape because you don't lose your spot and if you hear the teacher and she calls on you and you don't now wher we are she mite get mad at you and she makes you go to sleep when she is reading to you that's why I like to hear it on tape."

"I like the tape becuse it don't stop and goes slow and don't keep stoping for questions. The teacher stop all the time for questions and I lose my understanding with all those questions."

that they don't need this class. The others still need support. Listening to the English language is one of the best ways to improve their vocabulary, their usage, and their comprehension. Just reading books doesn't help these kids very much. They need to hear the language. So, I put them with books on tape."

"Are you seeing that listening to the books improves reading interest?"

"Sure. More important, because these kids have got to pass tests, listening to books helps their comprehension. On days when the kids aren't reading, but are meeting with me so I can ask some comprehension questions, these kids are getting those questions right. And their response journals show that they're improving not only what they say, but how they say it."

One day last spring a former middle-school teacher from Colorado sat at her dining room table and explained to me what she did to turn around one class's negative attitudes toward reading:

"The eighth graders I worked with the last year I taught were real difficult kids. They couldn't read, couldn't do math, would just as soon hit you as talk with you. Two were pregnant, many were in trouble with the law, many were regular drug or alcohol users. The only thing they had in common was that they all hated to read.

My promise to myself was that by the end of the year they would like to read and would read better.

So I bought lots of young adult literature over the summer. Read all of it so I could talk with the kids. Checked out lots of books for them. Set my room up as a reading workshop—tables, pillows, lamps, and lots and lots of books. Well, it was like throwing a party and not having a soul turn up. Having the books, talking about them—hell, begging them to read didn't do any good.

Finally, by mid-October, when I was wondering why I had ever made myself that promise and reminding myself of that phrase, "promises are made to be broken," I decided one day not to have them read, but to read to them. So I began reading *The Seance* by Joan Lowery Nixon (Laurel Leaf, 1981). After about 15 minutes everyone was still. Everyone was listening. That hadn't happened all year; so, I read all period.

The next day, I read to them again. For a solid week I read every day to them. That's all I did, all period. We finished the book about halfway through the class on Friday and for the rest of the class those students did something I had never seen them do: They talked about the book. What they liked, didn't like, didn't understand. The next week, we did the same thing. This time I read *Killing Mr. Griffin* by Lois Duncan (Laurel Leaf, 1990). Again, I read to them all week, all period, every day.

Again, when we finished, they talked about the book. Two students even compared the two books by discussing which they liked better and why. That day I knew I had found a way to get kids into books, or at least into the stories that are in books, but I also knew I couldn't keep reading aloud 55 minutes a day. I was talking about what was happening in class in the workroom when the librarian suggested I use books on tape. "Like for the blind?" I asked her. She then told me about audiobooks, saying she had some and would order more.

That next day we gathered up as many tape players and headphone sets as we could find, brought in the tapes, and brought in multiple copies of books. Now kids could listen and follow along. That did it. Within about two weeks everyone was listening and reading. We set aside three days a week to listen and read, one day to write and talk about what we were reading, and one day for booktalks so kids would know what to listen to and read next.

It was incredible. By February some of the kids were wanting to take the books home at night so they could keep reading to see what was happening. By the end of that year, all 23 of the kids in that reading skills class had come up about two grade levels in their reading and all had better attitudes toward reading. Audiobooks made the difference for those kids."

Good ideas are easy to discover when you begin to see lots of people using the same idea in several places and getting great results. And in lots of places I was seeing teachers use audiobooks in their classrooms as an integral part of the reading program. Plus, I was hearing city and school librarians tell me that a large part of their circulation came from audiobooks. In the spring of 1997, I flew to Michigan to speak to the young adult division of the Michigan Library Association. While drinking coffee with librarians from city and county libraries, I casually asked if they had audiobooks in their libraries.

"Absolutely," was the reply. They then explained that in some libraries as much

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as 60 percent of the library's entire circulation came from audiobooks. "How much of that is from children and teens?" I asked. Generally they agreed that children are less willing to check out audiobooks, but that teens are more willing "if we have the book to go with it."

However, not everyone agreed that audiobooks belong in a library. "They keep people from reading" was the most common concern.

Usually someone would counter that with, "But they let people hear stories when they otherwise couldn't be reading—like when they are driving."

"Maybe, but kids shouldn't be allowed to listen to books, they need to be reading," was sometimes the reply.

That surprised me because I had been seeing lots of teachers use audiobooks as a way to connect kids to text, not remove them from text. I returned home wondering which statement was true. I decided that listening to an audiobook was a similar experience to being read aloud to as a child. And I knew how important it was for developing readers to be read to aloud. I went back to two important findings in *Becoming A Nation of Readers* (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1985):

> The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. (p. 23)

> Listening comprehension proficiency in kindergarten and first grade is a moderately good predictor of the level of reading comprehension attained by the third grade. Evidence about the later role of listening comprehension is even stronger. In a study involving a nationwide sample of thousands of students, listening comprehension in the fifth grade was the best predictor of performance on a range of aptitude and achievement tests in high school, better than any other measure of aptitude or achievement in the fifth grade. (p. 30)

Those findings certainly indicate that hearing text read aloud improves reading ability—not stifles it. Additionally, my own work with middle-school reluctant readers verified that children who did not grow up being read to were unlikely to have positive attitudes toward reading. The aliterate students I've been interviewing since 1989 have few recollections of being read to aloud. Their parents confirm this. These same students often complain that now when they read silently they don't "hear" or "see" the text as they read. They define reading as "calling words" or "sounding out words" and rarely see it as a pleasurable, meaningful activity.

Contrast those statements with students who remember being read to as children: they say that reading is an "adventure" or "a wonderful escape" or is like "having a VCR in my mind." Avid readers have told me that they not only "hear" the words but they "see" the action as they read the words on a page. Perhaps that ability to "hear" the written word develops not through seeing the word on the page, but through hearing it read off the page.

Caroline, an 11-year-old, explained it this way:

"Lots of times when I'm reading I don't know what the word is but then if someone will say the word I'm, like, 'so that is what that word looks like' and then I know the word. Like, we were reading "buffet" and I kept thinking it was, you know, "buff-et," because when I would like sound it out it said "buff-et." But then I joined the group that was listening to the book and the next time I heard the person on the tape say it and it wasn't "buff-et" it was "buff-ay" and I was, like, so that is what that word is!"

Children still learning to read learn much about books, about print conventions, about vocabulary, about plot structures, about decoding from having books read aloud to them. As students get older, hearing text read aloud continues to help increase their decoding and comprehension abilities. Yet as they get older, the amount of time they spend one-on-one with an adult who might read to them decreases. For reading aloud to have important effects, it must take place often, over lots of time. Furthermore, the texts must be interesting to the listener, and often they need to be reread. In large classrooms with children who have a wide range of abilities and interests, a teacher might find enough time to read aloud one book in a class period, but not the multiple books that are needed to stimulate the range of student interests. One way around that problem is to use audiobooks in the classroom.

The use of audiobooks with struggling, reluctant, or second-language learners is powerful since they act as a scaffold that allows students to read above their actual reading level. This is critical with older students who may still read at a beginner level. While these students must have time to practice reading at their level, they must also have the opportunity to experience the plot structures, themes, and vocabulary of more difficult books. As Eric, a ninth grader who began the year reading at a fourth-grade level, said to me:

"I hate those baby books. That's why I like listening to books and following along. Then I can be in the same discussion as everyone else in my class. Just 'cause I got problems with my skills doesn't mean I don't have opinions about stuff."

Without audiobooks, Eric never would have become a part of a community of readers that discussed *The Contender* (Robert Lipsyte, HarperCollins, 1967), *Under the Blood-Red Sun* (Graham Salisbury, Dell, 1995), or *The Outsiders* (S.E. Hinton, Viking, 1967). Through discussions, ideas are formed, tried out, discarded, adapted, and negotiated. Meaning is explored and refined. Critical thinking leads the way as stu-

Monica repeatedly returned tapes, telling her teacher "it was too hard to follow along."

Listen Up! 10 Audiobook Tips

Since you, as librarian, are likely to order and house audiobooks, keep these 10 tips in mind:

1. **Choose audiobooks that interest students and/or match the curriculum.**
2. **Tapes, like books, don't sell themselves. You've got to sell kids on the story first, regardless of format.**
3. **Make sure teachers know what is available on tape. Many know there are tapes for picture books, but don't realize that middle grade and young adult literature is available on tape. Also, ask teachers what novels their classes will read and find the tapes for them.**
4. **Buy unabridged recordings.**
5. **Do business with companies that offer tape replacement, since tapes will get lost or eaten by tape players. Check the replacement guarantee that accompanies the purchase.**
6. **Look for audiobook companies that offer rental programs. If a teacher wants to use a particular tape for one class, you might prefer to rent rather than buy.**
7. **Check the speed of the tape. Struggling readers sometimes find normal tape speed difficult to follow. In that case, see if the company you are using provides tapes at slower speeds.**
8. **Determine whether there is money for extra tape players. There's no use having lots of tapes and no way to listen to them. Also, don't assume students have machines at home. You may need to send home tape players as well as the tapes.**
9. **Keep the book near the audiobook so kids can check out both.**
10. **Develop an audiobook management system, including checkout procedures for tapes and tape players and ways to package books and tapes together.**

dents debate similarities, offer differences, and discuss the issues the author presents. Participating in this type of discussion is critical because, as *Becoming a Nation of Readers* states: "Thought-provoking questions stimulate the intellectual growth needed for success in reading" (p. 22).

One fifth-grade English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher saw that using audiobooks honed her students' ability to ask questions as well as increased their comprehension. She explained in a note to me why she thought that happened.

> As a teacher of small groups of ESL students, I understand the importance of reading aloud to them above their independent reading levels. However, when you have to read aloud all day long, your voice and throat pay a price. Being able to share good literature through the use of a tape is a nice break for me.
>
> I have also discovered that students seem to respond to the stories better when I am included as an active listener instead of the instructor. Their questions at the end of listening are more insightful, and their comprehension is 100 percent better than when I am reading aloud to them. I believe that is because when I'm reading to them, I often stop and explain what I think they need to know. But with a tape, I don't stop it and therefore they must figure out what they don't understand.

Audiobooks also help create positive attitudes toward reading. Orion, an eighth grader who read at a third-grade level and had a very negative attitude toward reading ("It is my most hated thing in the universe"), became very involved in an audiobook program. Between October 1996 and March 1997 he listened to 18 books. During that time, his attitude toward reading changed. He met weekly with me to discuss what he was reading/listening to, what he thought about the books, and what he thought about listening to the books on tape. At the end of the four months, he said "Reading can be okay. If the stories are good."

"Early in the year you said 'It is my most hated thing in the universe.'" I reminded him. "What's different?"

"I like being able to hear them. They make more sense."

"Why?"

" 'Cause now I can see the words and hear them and know what they are."

"Is that helping you when you don't have a tape?"

"Yeah, 'cause now I know what they [words] look like so I know what they are."

Success stories like Orion's and Eric's make audiobooks look like the answer to all reading problems. If that were only true! The reality, though, is that audiobooks, although a powerful tool for connecting students to books, are only a tool. And just as you wouldn't expect a hammer, great tool that it is, to be appropriate for all building tasks, you cannot expect audiobooks to be suitable for connecting all students to texts.

For some students, audiobooks aren't appealing, because they lack listening skills. Monica, an eighth grader, repeatedly returned tape after tape, always telling her teacher "it was too hard to follow along" or "when I listen my mind just wanders." Seventh grader A.J. said that listening wasn't the problem but that "it's boring to just sit and listen."

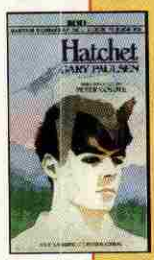
Leah, a ninth grader, found other excuses to not listen: "The guy who was reading, he, like, was too fast, you know, like reading it too fast." Ironically, Conrad, one of Leah's classmates, complained about the same tape: "That man was, uh, really slow." Another seventh-grade student continually complained, "I just don't like his voice. It sounds stupid." It is telling that he made that comment after listening to three different audiobooks, each with a different reader.

In one middle school, the teacher pointed out that the same students who had no interest in listening to audiobooks also had trouble focusing on oral directions, discussions, or interactions. On a few occasions, we took the print book away from the students and instead let them draw, doodle, or play string

games while they listened. That resulted in some great art but generally didn't appear to improve their listening skills or their interest in the story.

But most third- to ninth-grade students in the schools I visited enjoyed listening to audiobooks. Their teachers worked hard at making audiobook use succeed, which included letting students choose whether or not to listen. They used tapes in a variety of ways:

- as an introduction to a story
- as support reading for second-language learners or remedial readers
- as a way to develop a reader's ear—that ability to hear what printed text sounds like even while reading silently
- as a motivational tool.



Two of the schools administered standardized reading tests to their remedial reading classes. In both places, audiobooks were a strong component of those classes and in both places comprehension scores did improve. However, those teachers were highly motivated and used many strategies that probably all contributed to raising students' scores. They read aloud to students, let students participate in creative dramatics and readers' theater, provided lots of time for daily in-class choice reading, created response-centered classrooms, and let students choose their books.

Audiobooks in the library and reading classroom may at first seem strange. Most of us think of them as something for long car trips. But time and time again, the students I've observed and teachers I've interviewed have shown me that listening while you read has proved an effective way of changing attitudes toward reading and improving reading ability for some students. If creating lifetime readers is the goal, then every tool is needed: audiobooks are one such powerful tool. □

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Selected Resources

To find audiobook information, check the two-volume paperback *Words on Cassette* (Bowker), published annually. It lists tapes by title, author, subject, and producer. Award-winning titles are noted.

Prices for unabridged audiobooks start at less than $20. The following short list of companies that produce them is by no means complete:

Audio Book Contractors
Box 40115
Washington, DC 20016
(202) 363-3429
(all levels)

Audio Bookshelf
74 Prescott Hill Rd.
Northport, ME 04849
(800) 234-1713
audbkshf@agate.net
(K–12)

BDD Audio
1540 Broadway
New York, NY 10036
(212) 782-9807
www.bdd.com
(all levels)

Blackstone Audio Books
Box 969
Ashland, OR 97520
(800) 720-2665
blackstoneaudio.com
(all levels)

Chivers Audiobooks
1 Lafayette Rd.
Box 1450
Hampton, NH 03843
(800) 621-0182
(all levels)

HarperCollins
10 East 53rd St.
New York, NY 10022
(212) 207-7491
www.harpercollins.com
(primary/elementary)

Houghton Mifflin
181 Ballardville St.
Wilmington, MA 01887
(800) 225-3362
www.hmco.com
(primary/elementary)

Listening Library
One Park Ave.
Old Greenwich, CT 06870
(800) 243-4504
moreinfo@listeninglib.com
www.listeninglib.com
(all levels)

Little, Brown
34 Beacon St.
Boston, MA 02108
(800) 759-0190
(primary)

Live Oak Media
Box 652
West Church St.
Pine Plains, NY 12567
(518) 398-1010
(primary/elementary)

Recorded Books
2700 Skipjack Rd.
Prince Frederick, MD 20678
(800) 638-1304
www.recordedbks.com
(all levels)

Spoken Arts
Box 100
New Rochelle, NY 10801
(800) 326-4090
(primary/elementary)

Troll Associates
100 Corporate Dr.
Mahwah, NJ 07430
(800) 929-TROLL
www.troll.com
(primary/elementary)

Weston Woods
(Scholastic, Inc.)
Box 2193
Norwalk, CT 06852
(800) 243-5020
www.scholastic.com
(primary/elementary)