

## Books That Speak To Us

The drive from Toronto to Philadelphia is eight hours long, with little promise of any postcard-perfect scenery to punctuate the journey. I have brought Barack Obama along for the ride. His distinctive voice as familiar now as any friend or relative fills the car as vivid images from his past take shape amidst the relentless, late-November landscape of upstate New York. He is reading from *Dreams from My Father*, his fable-like memoir of his search for identity as the son of a black African and white mother.

Leafless trees and faded billboards along Route 90 dissolve into rice paddies as Obama recalls arriving in Indonesia as a young child. A boy, "wet and slick as an otter", sits on a water buffalo. The smell of diesel oil and wood smoke lingers. Men pull carts loaded with gravel and timber. In the hands of a gifted narrator like Obama, cadences become their own sound effects. Tone, rhythm and pace are orchestrated, audio books after all, are produced in a studio to evoke a world in which a voice is a brush and the text a riot of colours.

I am the sole passenger in the car but I am not alone. Thanks to Obama, mine is an accompanied solitude, underscoring the seeming contradictions that define audio books.

Is "audio book" an oxymoron? Is a book still a book when it is only spoken, without the tactile pleasures of a turned page, of flagging our progress with a bookmark, of holding open covers in open hands?

Books-on-tape, as they were fondly called in the pre-digital world, differ from the stories we tell over dinner in that they are highly structured, pinned by chapters and framed by a narrative arc. And they are significantly longer or should be. The most compelling dinner guest would be hard-pressed to engage anyone beyond dessert, let alone match Obama's seven-and-a-half hour odyssey.

Still, audio books formalize the informal by giving structure and cohesion to what we do naturally. They are the direct descendants of an oral literature that has been with us since we were living in caves. That a book like *War and Peace* could effectively fit into the palm of one's hand is a marvel of technology that can blind us to the power of the narrative itself. Sophisticated hardware is behind every book we download but what fuels the appeal of audio books is a need that predates Gutenberg and his printing press. The timeless appeal of having a story told to us speaks to a need as primal as food.

Every parent of a preschooler who has yet to learn her ABCs offers their own version of audio books when they read stories aloud to children, children who learn to appreciate narratives long before they can navigate them on their own. A parent's delivery may lack the gloss of a professional actor but the effect is the same: the child is carried afloat by the words as they are spoken.

The need for oral literature that nurtures and sustains us is carried into adulthood. How else to explain the popularity of authors' readings, from the days when Dickens gave national tours to the faithful who gather at festivals to hear a chapter brought to life by a favourite author. We are children once again, rocked in the berth of a compelling narrative, soothed by a modulated voice. And like children, we listen and wait to be engaged, challenged, surprised, amused, and occasionally ambushed by a moment that drops in our lap and lingers.

Obama shares this very kind of moment when he recounts seeing a photograph that changed his life. He was nine years old, flipping through a copy of *Life* magazine when he came across a photograph of "an older man in dark glasses and a raincoat walking down an empty road." At first, the young Obama mistakes the man for an albino or a radiation victim. But the accompanying text explained that the man had undergone a chemical treatment to lighten his skin. "He expressed some regret about trying to pass himself off as a white man," Obama recalls, and "was sorry about how badly things had turned out." And Obama is never the same again. For the first time, he noticed how blacks were marginalized in popular culture and made absent, from Santa Claus to the Sears Roebuck Christmas catalogue his grandparents sent him.

Obama doesn't belabour his pain but his voice is more than just a supporting character. An audio book can be as much about performance as it is about prose. I never tire of hearing Judith Ivey read Deborah Wiles's *Love, Ruby Lavender*, a delightful children's tale set in small-town Mississippi that has become as much a part of my family's annual drive to Florida as border crossings and bathroom stops. Ivey doesn't read the book; she incarnates it. She displays a remarkable range, shifting seamlessly from young, put-upon Ruby to her endearing, expressive grandmother, Miss Eula.

Casting is essential if content is to be honoured. Not all authors are best suited to read their work but a few have a gift for how to weave a story, and how to tell it. It is difficult to listen to Rohinton Mistry reading *A Fine Balance* and not surrender to the story and the storyteller. His voice - so mellifluous, so rich you expect a calorie count - is the perfect lure to draw one into the bitter truths of India.

And like the characters one would find in a Mistry story - one blind, the other illiterate, a third who is both - an audio book opens a door to those who would otherwise be denied access to stories the book-buying public takes for granted. Those who cannot read or have limited or no vision - there are only so many books in Braille - can sit back and listen like everyone else.

As I approach Philadelphia Obama reaches Africa. He sits between the graves of his father and grandfather and weeps. "I felt the circle finally close," he says. His life in America was "connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away." To hear Obama read his memoirs is to taste his struggles and triumphs.

As children, we are cautioned to look before we leap. Audio books invite us to listen as we leap. And so we plunge, buoyed by the spoken word.

Emil Sher

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