

# TEN SECRETS of Audiobook NARRATORS

What goes on while your favorite books are being recorded?

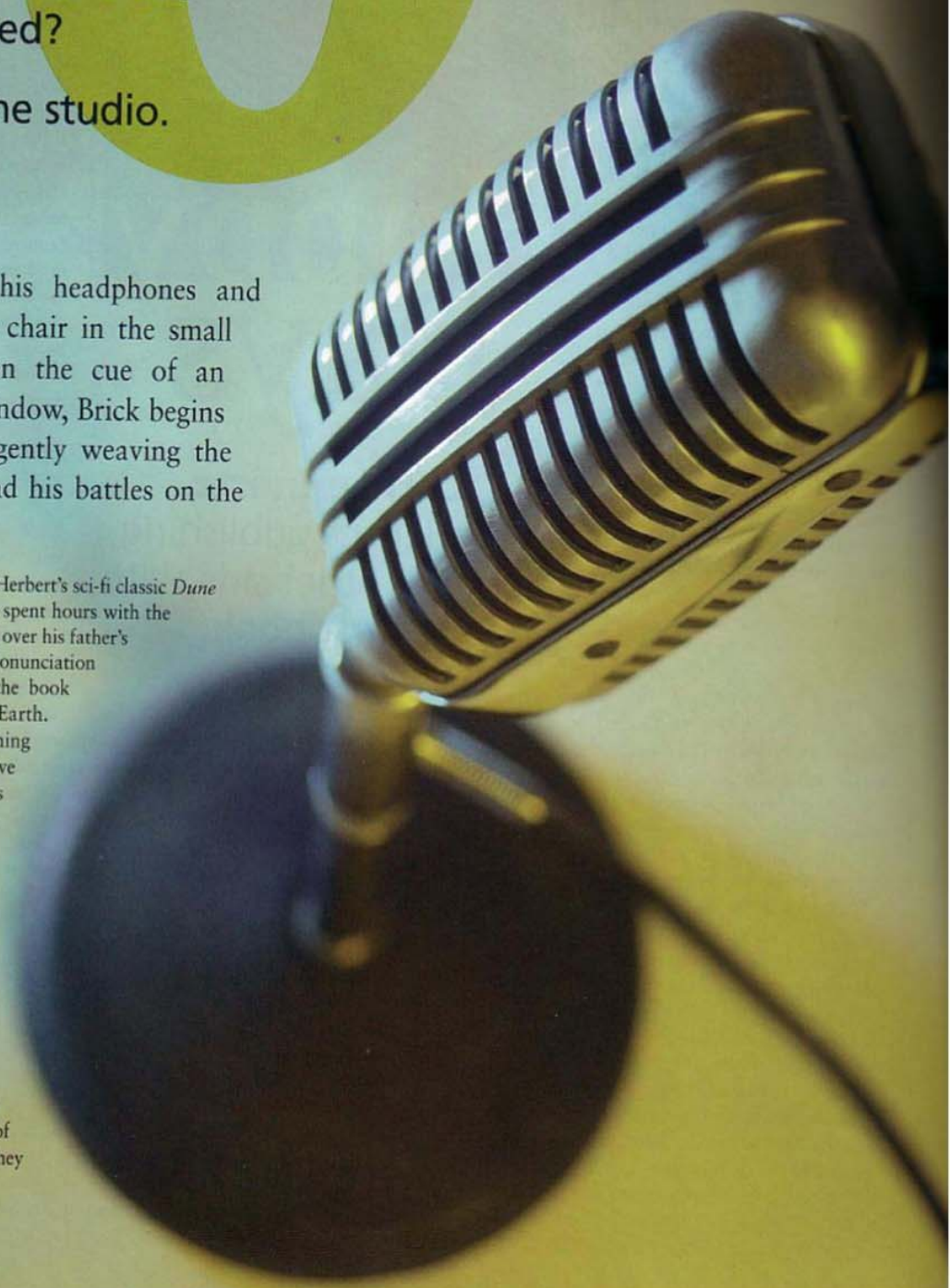
Step inside the studio.

by Jane Louise Boursaw

Scott Brick adjusts his headphones and shifts slightly in his chair in the small recording booth. On the cue of an engineer behind a window, Brick begins reading into a microphone, gently weaving the tale of Duke Paul Atreides and his battles on the desert planet of Arrakis.

But this recording of Frank Herbert's sci-fi classic *Dune* actually began long ago. Brick spent hours with the author's son, Brian, who pored over his father's notes to create a definitive pronunciation guide for the 498 words in the book that appear nowhere on Earth. "Pronunciations are something that Frank Herbert's fans have been debating for years," notes Brick. "Now, for the first time, that debate has been settled, all because of an audiobook! How cool is that?"

Audiobooks are found in more than 23 million homes, according to the Audio Publishers Association. But a lot happens before the robust, smooth voices of the narrators reach your cassette deck or CD player. Read on to learn a few behind-the-scenes secrets of audiobook narrators—some they might wish you never knew.





## IT'S NOT AS EASY AS IT SOUNDS.

Sitting still for hours on end is no picnic, says Jenna Lamia, narrator of *The Secret Life of Bees* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. "When I first started, I was very conscious of not making the slightest noise in the booth. I sat still for so many hours that by the end of the day, I was pretty sore. And my mouth got very dry, so the director had me munch on a Granny Smith apple every once in a while."

Narrators also have to embody all the characters, be good storytellers, listen for glitches, and remain true to the author. "The best narrators can intuit the sentences so they have a rhythm reflective of the author's work and not something they just dreamed up out of nowhere," notes Robin Whitten, editor and publisher of *AudioFile* magazine.

## IT CAN BE HEART-WRENCHING.

While narrating *Report from Ground Zero*, a riveting account of the rescue attempts at the World Trade Center, Brick got so choked up he couldn't continue. "The last chapter was one of the saddest things I've ever encountered," he says. "The last line of the book was a man's speech at the funeral of his son. 'I know my son is in good hands,' the father said. 'I just wish he was in my hands.' I challenge anyone to read that entire account out loud and not bawl your head off. I tried it several times and couldn't do it, so we just went with it."

George Guidall, narrator of more than 800 titles, recalls a similar experience with Wally Lamb's *I Know This Much Is True*. "It's an amazing piece of writing about brothers, love, family. Many times, the engineer and I had to stop because it was so moving."

On the other end of the spectrum, narrators sometimes go off on laughing jags. Barbara Rosenblat's recording of *Bridget Jones's Diary* had her hysterical from day one. "It got to the point where I had to frequently leave the studio to recover."

## THEY HAVE ADORING FANS.

It's a small niche in the entertainment industry, but audiobook narrators often garner lots of recognition. Some, like Jim Dale, narrator of the *Harry Potter* series, have been elevated to superstardom.

"I've had fans call me up at home and ask me to read something," says Brick. "Sometimes they call agents, publishers, and authors, asking them to use me for various projects. And bless their hearts for doing so. I've often wondered if I should give them 10 percent."

Guidall, who's narrated many of the *Cat Who . . .* books by Lillian Jackson Braun, says fans often send him pictures of their cats, pillows with cats embroidered on them, and other cat paraphernalia.

But it's a mixed bag. While touring libraries with his show, *An Evening with George Guidall*, the graying, 60-something narrator has met many fans across the country. "One time, a guy came over at the end of a show and said, 'Mr. Guidall, my wife thinks you have one of the sexiest voices in the industry. Now that I see you, though, I'm not worried.' Sometimes I feel like Frank Morgan in *The Wizard of Oz*. Behind the curtain he sounds great, but when you draw back the curtain, all you see is this little old guy!"

## THE BOOKS CAN BE SNOOZERS.

William Dufres, a well-known narrator who's also the voice of Bob the Builder, recalls one "incredibly boring" book: "The owner of the studio happened to pass by the recording suite and peered in," he says. "To his surprise—and, I imagine, dismay—he noted that the engineer was fast asleep, with the reel-to-reel tape flapping along beside him. Hearing the amplified sound of constant snores, he then discovered me in the booth, head nestled in my arms on the desk, also fast asleep!"

Guidall agrees that "machine-made" books can make the job less fun. "When it's a formula piece of action just hoping for a movie, or when there's explicit sex and violence for its own sake, that's really a shame, because it's just a waste of time."

But most books keep the narrators wide awake. "It sounds corny, but it's such a thrill to everyone in the studio when the reader clearly and consistently brings the author's words to life," notes Sandy Moore, vice president of audio production at Simon & Schuster Audio.

## SOMETIMES THEY RECORD IN A CLOSET.

Most recording booths are about 9' x 9' with a glass wall separating the narrator from the director and engineer. But Brick once recorded in a real-life closet. "The studio owner's clothes were hanging in it, his dirty sneakers piled up next to me," he laughs. "The 'coming out of the closet' jokes got a little old, if you know what I mean."

If there's one constant, though, it's that the sensitive microphones pick up every twitch and shuffle. "A shirt rustling from too much starch, a stomach grumbling, a watch ticking, and a jaw clicking are all examples of noises that everyone in the

recording studio can hear," says Dan Zitt, audio producer at Random House. "I once had a narrator say after a morning full of body noises in the booth, 'By the end of this recording, you guys are going to know more about my body than my doctor!'"

## THEY'RE WELL-PREPARED.

Most narrators read the book beforehand—sometimes several times. They also sip lots of water, get a good night's sleep, map out road signs in the script where changes occur, and occasionally confer with the author over pronunciations.

Brick makes a list of accents for each character, sometimes pairing them with actors he envisions playing the roles. "I don't do imitations of these actors, but I'll keep their speech patterns in my head while reading those characters and hope it translates slightly to the recording."

“Narrators who aren't prepared and take too long in the studio are never called back for more work. The level of focus is, quite simply, exhausting.”

## ONLY A FEW MAKE A GOOD LIVING AT IT.

While some high-profile narrators make six figures annually, that's not the norm, notes Whitten. Narrators are generally paid a rate per finished hour. If they're in the booth for 20 hours and the book comes in at 10, that's what they're paid for. A 10-hour book could net a narrator from \$1,000 to \$2,500.

But they must be conscious of production costs. "Narrators who aren't prepared and take too long in the studio are never called back for more work," says Heather Frederick, publisher and producer at *Audio Bookshelf*. "Most narrators can read for two to three hours with one break, while some read all day with short breaks. The level of focus is, quite simply, exhausting."

Most narrators work around other acting and voice-over jobs, but a few do it full-time, keeping a regular schedule of four to six hours a day. Dick Hill, a narrator with Brilliance Audio, makes a "decent living" working seven to 10 days a month. "I love the work, but I value just as highly the amount of free time this career offers me. I count myself blessed to have found this niche." ▶▶



▶▶ Actors like Jeremy Irons, Blair Brown, and John Travolta also have audiobook credits, but it's more out of passion than anything else. "It takes the quality of a John Cheever story to get the attention of someone like Meryl Streep," notes Whitten. "It's a lot of work for proportionately not much money."

### Wacky high jinks SOMETIMES ENSUE.

Hours of time in the booth can make even the most experienced narrators a little punchy, resulting in a caper now and then. Brick describes a friendly competition with John Lee, another Books on Tape narrator. "He used to read the bestseller lists in front of me and compare to make sure he [was the reader for] more than me. Wouldn't you know, we were both nominated for the Audie Award the same year, in the same category. When I won that night, no one clapped louder than John. He's a real quality guy."

After that, Lee tried to distract Brick by putting his arm inside the studio door with a thumbs down, or walking by the window with a sign proclaiming, "Audie Committee Re-Examines Results." Brick countered with signs like "Scott Brick Retains Audie." "We'd crack each other up," he recalls.

### STAGE EXPERIENCE IS A PLUS.

Most audiobooks require an audition—even from well-known narrators. Alisa Weberman, publisher at Listen and Live Audio, finds that stage actors make the best narrators. "They can express themselves through their voices without relying on hand and facial movements, which a listener can't see."

Mary Beth Roche, publisher at Audio Renaissance and president of the Audio Publishers Association, adds, "Getting a voice agent well-versed in the industry is the best way to break into the audiobook business."

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### IT'S THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD.

Most narrators would probably agree that seeing an audiobook come together is a thrill. "Nothing is more satisfying than finishing a work you've been true to, where you've set the tone from the outset and populated your recording with clear, well-defined characters the listener can easily follow," says Rosenblat.

Guidall's 40-year career has included scores of theater and television work, but he says nothing beats the bond between audiobook listeners and narrators. "I've been in plays where I've come out of the backstage door and people say they love the performance. That's fine, but it fades quickly into memory. Audiobook listeners, on the other hand, spend hours of prime time listening to me. That's an entirely different relationship. Nothing compares with the devotion of audiobook listeners." ◀

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