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Behind a Book on Tape Is a Good Dictionary And a Glass of Water

**Mr. Brick Tackles Big Words,
And Invented Languages;
Hiding Stomach Rumbles**

By **ROBERT J. HUGHES**
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Scott Brick sat alone before a music stand in a small recording studio last month, puzzling over the word "fecundated" on the sheet of paper in front of him. Should the accent be on the first or second syllable? "I think it's safe to say I've never spoken this word aloud before," he said.

Mr. Brick has uttered many uncommon words -- "rapine," "retributive" and "circumvallated" among them -- on his way to becoming an invisible star in a growing business: audio books. In his five-year career, the 38-year-old Mr. Brick has narrated about 200 books, including such bestsellers as "The Lion's Game," a novel by Nelson DeMille, and "In the Heart of the Sea," a nonfiction work about a shipwreck, by Nathaniel Philbrick. "He has the kind of voice you don't grow tired of," says Scott Matthews, president of Books on Tape, a big audio publisher that uses Mr. Brick more than it does any other narrator. Audio books are now an \$800 million business in the U.S.

Publishers of recorded books typically try to recruit either the author or a celebrity whose photo on the package can help sales. But authors often don't have great voices and celebrities often don't have time, especially to do an unabridged book that can require 100 hours of recording for 25 hours of finished tape.



Scott Brick

Many turn to Mr. Brick, who has vocal talents peculiarly suited to his medium. "He has a flexible voice, in between a tenor and a baritone, which gives him a versatility in terms of the characters that he can play," says Mary Beth Roche, vice president of Audio Renaissance, a big publisher of audio books. Also, she says, he can sound the same at the beginning and the end of a production.

Some best-selling authors who could do their own reading if they wanted to have started asking for Mr. Brick. Brad Meltzer, whose novels include "The Millionaires" and "The Zero Game," has steered the work to Mr. Brick three times. "He lets you be scared. He lets you know the story is real, and the only time a thriller scares you is when it's real," says Mr. Meltzer.

To find the best voice for "Alexander Hamilton," biographer Ron Chernow listened to six

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audition demos. He ultimately chose Mr. Brick because he liked "his mellow baritone."

A year ago, Bob Deyan, the producer of Stephen J. Cannell's "Vertical Coffin," set Mr. Brick up to record the book out of a semiconverted bedroom closet, next to hanging clothes and shoe rack. That's the sort of recording studio independent producers often have, and the acoustics aren't bad. But the session was interrupted repeatedly by deliveries, neighbors and -- at one point -- by the producer himself who needed a sweater from the closet.

Mr. Deyan, head of Deyan Audio Services, in Van Nuys, Calif., said it was just one of those days: "As long as it sounds good, nobody knows where you're recording," he says. "It worked out great. Scott is such an efficient reader, he just flies through the stuff."

Accents are a big challenge. Mr. Brick got coaching for the invented language of a futuristic tribe in "Dune" and the variety of Sicilian dialect phrases in "The Godfather Returns," the mafia novel by Mark Winegardner that hits stores next week. When it came to doing a convincing French accent to win the chance to record the mega-selling "Da Vinci Code," Mr. Brick lost the job to a competitor named Paul Michael. Mr. Brick has since taken French lessons.

The day of the recording session last month, Mr. Brick was working at the Books on Tape studios in Woodland Hills, Calif., where the company -- a division of Random House Audio Publishing Group -- produces most of its inventory. Dressed in jeans and a soft gray sweater (less rustling), he was reading a portion of "Cloud Atlas," a densely worded novel by David Mitchell. Since each chapter is written in a different voice -- from a 1930s composer to the survivor of a distant apocalypse -- the producers had taken the unusual step of hiring six audio actors for the job. Mr. Brick's assignment for the day: navigating the journal of a fictional 19th-century American notary sailing the South Seas, whose prose is sprinkled with Polynesian, Latin and archaic English phrases.

Having skipped breakfast because traffic held him up en route to the studio from his home in Sherman Oaks, Mr. Brick held a pillow to his stomach to mask rumblings. "Stomach noises are the bane of our existence," he said. On a table beside him stood a glass of water and a thermos of Throat Coat herbal tea, which he periodically drank to soothe his vocal cords. After every two pages, Mr. Brick paused for a rest. He continued in stops and starts, throughout the recording day, which lasted from about 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Though he usually reads the books he narrates beforehand, Mr. Brick was stopping frequently during the course of this session to figure out some challenging pronunciations. When he came to "fecundated" (it means made fruitful or productive), he and the director, after checking a dictionary, agreed to stress all syllables equally.

On a good day, if his voice doesn't tire too much, Mr. Brick can read 80 to 100 pages. "It keeps me so busy, I don't have time to audition for other acting work," he said.

Five years ago, Mr. Brick was making ends meet in Los Angeles, doing children's Shakespeare theater, writing unsold screenplays. One day, a college buddy in the recording business was impressed by the sound of Mr. Brick's voice at a weekly sandlot baseball game among UCLA alumni. He heard Mr. Brick making jokes in different dialects and cheering on his teammates using odd voices, and offered to arrange an audio-book audition for him. At that audition, at the now-defunct Dove Audio, Dan Musselman, now executive producer of Books on Tape, heard him and offered him a gig.

Now, Mr. Brick narrates 45 to 60 books a year, earning about \$300 per finished hour, about double what other audio narrators make. It takes about four to five hours of recording to make one finished hour. Mr. Brick says he expects to earn about \$150,000 this year from his audio work.

The work can be very tiring, and readers' voices often give out. "There's something about the isolation of the booth and the concentration of energy there that really drains you," says Kate Fleming, an audio producer in Seattle who also narrates under the name Anna Fields.

There are other stresses. "I can't sing along to the radio anymore," Mr. Brick says, "or take part in karaoke," since he needs to protect his voice. "And I constantly have a sore throat," he says.

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