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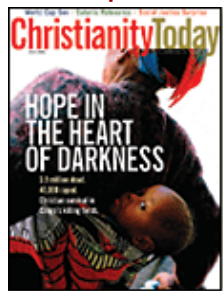
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Christianity Today, June 2006

Heard Any Good Books Lately?

Audio is the new medium, and Christian publishers are getting the message.

by Jonathan Lowe | posted 06/01/2006 09:30 a.m.

If you sat next to Scott Brick on a jet, you probably wouldn't recognize him. But if you

listen regularly to recorded books—known in the industry as audiobooks—during long flights, you'd probably know his voice. Brick, who commands \$300 per finished hour, is one of the highest paid audiobook narrators in the business. At 39, he has recorded more than 250 titles and hopes to do more work in the Christian segment of the \$800-million industry that has traditionally employed authors to read their own works.

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The Christian audio market is producing impressive sales. As noted by *Christian Retailing*, while religious print book sales declined by 8.6 percent for the recent quarter, audiobook sales gained 15.5 percent. And it's not just Tyndale House, publisher of the Left Behind series. Tyndale licenses unabridged (full text) rights to companies such as Recorded Books, a nonreligious rental and library specialist based in Maryland. Similar partnerships exist between Christian publishers and audio companies such as Books on Tape and Blackstone Audiobooks.

Zondervan, the Christian division of HarperCollins, reports a 24-percent increase in audiobook sales in the past two years. (Its top seller is *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren.) Time Warner AudioBooks (TWA) is seeking a 10-percent audiobook share of its million-plus hardcover sales, books such as *Approval Addiction* by Joyce Meyer. TWA first achieved this goal with *Your Best Life Now*, written and read by Joel Osteen.

Anthony Goff, TWA's associate publisher, tells CT, "For a

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Poll

Should evangelicals lobby on global warming?

- No, there is no such thing.
- No, our priority should be evangelism.
- No, the science is still unclear.
- Yes, it is our job to care for creation.
- Yes, concern for the climate is neighbor love.
- Yes, we need to address all social issues.
- I don't know.

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relatively new medium, these are explosive numbers, and now we are attracting younger listeners with new technology, while promoting audiobooks to networks of pastors with free samples."

Hovel Audio, an audiobook imprint of Christianaudio (*Christianaudio.com*), though relatively new to the business, reports a 75-percent increase in revenues in each of the last two quarters. This is thanks, in part, to unabridged nonfiction by authors such as John Piper and Dallas Willard. Oasis Audio, the leading Christian-only audiobook publisher, anticipates "another record-breaking season," according to acquisitions editor Carolyn B. Shaw. She purchases audio rights from print publishers such as Broadman & Holman, NavPress, and Nelson. According to Oasis publisher Ed Elliott, "We tripled in size in 2003, then doubled again in 2004."

Media and Message

Why the growth? For one thing, fewer people have time to drop everything and read print books. Only audiobooks afford the ability to multitask. Production values have also improved steadily since the industry's early days in the 1970s. Today's features include music, sound effects, multiple readers, and even enhanced CDs. For example, the nonfiction audiobook *Where God Was Born* by Bruce Feiler includes photos from the print book in JPEG format.

But audiobooks are not simply about recording the written word on a CD. As audiobooks increase in popularity, they may force writers to reconsider how they do their craft. As the late Marshall MacLuhan famously said, "The medium is the message."

Emily Langan, assistant professor of communications at Wheaton College, told CT that it is a matter of constructing messages to most effectively take advantage of the medium. "Authors may need to begin writing more for the ear than the eye," Langan says. "The same message communicated effectively in writing might be ineffective if spoken." Verbal communication is clearly more relational.

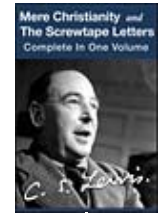
Communication trends have turned against cassettes, which formerly dominated. Take Brilliance Audio (BA), the largest independent secular publisher. BA's Eileen Hutton reports that 64 percent of the company's product sales now come from CDs, only 31 percent from tapes, and 5 percent from MP3-CDs. This last format has languished as technologically curious consumers have opted instead for iPods and other portable audio devices; as a result, download sales at sites such as *www.Audible.com* are exploding (by 78 percent last year).

So perhaps this is the future—no CDs or tapes at all, but rather companies such as Audible and MediaBay delivering Christian content directly to cell phones, PDAs, and car stereos. Until then, Christian audiobooks look

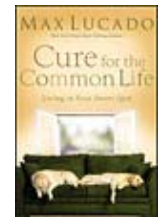
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like a trend that will travel.

Jonathan Lowe has written widely for magazines such as AudioFile and is author of the crossover Christian suspense novel Awakening Storm for BlackstoneAudio.com.

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June 2006, Vol. 50, No. 6, Page 42



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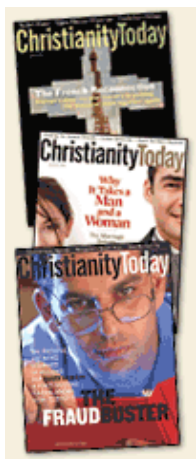
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