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HEADLINE: How Should a Book Sound? And What About Footnotes?

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BODY:

When David Foster Wallace, reading the audiobook version of his newly published collection of essays, "Consider the Lobster" (Time Warner AudioBooks), hits one of its many footnotes, listeners may be inclined to adjust the volume -- his voice sounds suddenly distant, as if he has fallen down a well. Then, footnote finished, his voice returns just as abruptly to normal. But don't touch the dial. The voice manipulation, for which audiobook producer John Runnette used a "phone filter" -- a voice-through-the-receiver effect used in radio dramas -- was an attempt to aurally convey Mr. Wallace's discursive, densely footnoted prose.

Or as he says in the audiobook introduction: "I sometimes use footnotes in these essays, which presents kind of a nasty problem for an audiobook: where do the footnotes go? There is no bottom of the page in an audiobook, obviously."

For Mr. Runnette, who has recorded audiobooks for 15 years and won three Grammy Awards, this is the first time he has had to ponder what a footnote sounds like. But the industry increasingly has to address such vexing one-hand-clapping questions: What does an illustration sound like? Or a chart? A map? A photograph? A blank page?

Because an audiobook is essentially a performance, there is less a right answer than myriad choices. Another production, Susanna Clarke's novel, "Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell" (Audio Renaissance), also recorded footnotes. Like Mr. Wallace, the book's narrator, Simon Prebble, read the footnotes wherever they appeared, but the producer, Paul Ruben, did not alter his voice. Instead, the narrator says "footnote" prior to each one. The notes have been given their own CD track. Listeners who want to hear them do nothing. Those who want to skip the notes can hit the next-track button.

In its review of the recording, AudioFile, the bimonthly magazine that covers the industry, lauded the narrator but added that Ms. Clarke's "copious 'faux scholarly' footnotes force Prebble to interrupt often enough that the narrative flow suffers." Indeed, in her own readings, Ms. Clarke simply skips the notes, said Yelena Gitlin, a publicist for Bloomsbury, the book's publisher. At his public readings, Mr. Wallace either skips footnotes, reads them as if they were in the main text or -- the "worst option," he said in a telephone interview-- brackets them by saying "begin footnote" and "end footnote."

"I spend a very long time trying to get the writing to hang together grammatically on the page more than for a sweating, breathing person to read to an audience," Mr. Wallace said from his home in Claremont, Calif., his voice sounding oddly footnote-ish. "Most poetry is written to ride on the breath, and getting to hear the poet read it is kind of a revelation and makes the poetry more alive. But with certain literary narrative writers like me, we want the writing to sound like a brain voice, like the sound of the voice inside of the head, and the brain voice is faster, is absent any breath, and it holds together grammatically rather than sonically."

So single-minded is Mr. Wallace, who is 43, about how his work looks over how it sounds that at his first public reading in the late 1980's, "I inserted the punctuation," he recalled, adding: "I would read a clause and say 'comma' or 'semicolon.' Or I'd say, 'new paragraph' and 'indent.' Now looking back at it I can see what a silent deal this is for me." At one point in "Consider the Lobster," Mr. Wallace encounters an ellipsis and reads "dot, dot, dot," which producers say is verboten. "Part of it is I'm not an actor and I don't know how to trail off, and I become somewhat autistic about it," he said.

For abridgements, where up to 70 percent of a book is excised, typographical curiosities are whacked first. But Recorded Books, the audio-publisher of both Mark Haddon's novel "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" and Jonathan Safran Foer's "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close," never abridges, forcing its executive producer, Claudia Howard, to grapple with every page. "An audiobook is a monologue that should be kept intact," Ms. Howard said. "The problem is that a book is not a monologue. The visuals have to be worked in somehow, so you spend an enormous amount of time trying to render those visuals into words."

Early in "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" is the passage: "When I first met Siobhan, she showed me this picture," under which is the inverted-smiley face, and below that the text, "and I knew that it meant 'sad,' which is what I felt when I found the dead dog." In Recorded Books' version, the narrator, Jeff Woodman, reads, "when I first met Siobhan, she drew a picture of a face, and I knew that it was a sad face. Sad is what I felt when I found the dead dog."

"Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close," which Recorded Books produced in 2005, was an obstacle course, full of photographs, blank pages and over-inked illegible pages. Where it says, "this was all I saw:" followed by three blank pages, one of the narrators, Richard Ferrone, reads: "this was all I saw: Blank page. Blank page. Blank page." Where a chapter title has the words "Heavy Boots" stricken out and "Heavier Boots" underneath it, another narrator, Mr. Woodman, reads: "Heavy Boots. No, Heavier Boots." (Ms. Howard said: "We could have said, 'Heavy Boots -- that has been crossed out. Heavier boots.' But that would have taken you outside of the monologue.")

When a character wonders, "What is the sum of my life?" a sequence of single-digit numbers stretches for two and a half pages. Mr. Ferrone reads the first 15 numbers and -- mercifully -- substitutes "and I went on and on" for the rest. Ms. Howard's reasoning: "Reading that would have lasted seven or eight minutes, which would have been a quick way to get rid of your audience. Readers see it and perceive the author's point in a single thought." The recording ignores the photographs and illegible pages.

In its print version, Jon Stewart's "America" was laid out like a textbook -- complete

with discussion topics and class projects -- but what does a textbook sound like? John McElroy, who produced the book for Time Warner AudioBooks, introduces classroom activities with chimes, reminiscent of educational films. And instead of addressing his audience as "listener," Mr. Stewart opens with mock derision: "Welcome nonreader."

The narrator of "The Pleasure of My Company," the 2003 novel by comedian Steve Martin, creates elaborate charts of his life. When Mr. Martin reads the book for the Hyperion Audiobooks recording, he simply describes them.

And the introduction of Oasis Audio's "Breaking the Da Vinci Code," by Darrell L. Bock, advises listeners to "turn to the glossary in the back" to "make sure you know where you are." But as noted in a review on audiobookcafe.com, a Web site devoted to recorded books, the recording doesn't come with a glossary. (The company had been oblivious to the mistake until fielding this reporter's call, and it quickly posted the glossary on its Web site.)

In some cases, publishers are sidestepping the issue by putting graphic elements -- maps, charts, and recipes for history, business and fitness titles respectively -- on additional CD's that can be viewed on a computer while listening. But how that works in practice is an open question: according to a recent AudioFile magazine survey, 53 percent of audiobook buyers listen while driving.

If You Decide Not to Read but to Listen

Here is information about the audiobooks mentioned in this article:

SELECTED ESSAYS FROM CONSIDER THE LOBSTER AND OTHER ESSAYS by David Foster Wallace, read by the author. Time Warner AudioBooks. 3 CD's; 4 hours; \$24.98.

JONATHAN STRANGE & MR. NORRELL by Susanna Clark, read by Simon Prebble. Audio Renaissance/Bloomsbury Publishing. 26 CD's. 32 hours; \$59.95; audiorenaissance.com.

EXTREMELY LOUD & INCREDIBLY CLOSE by Jonathan Safran Foer, narrated by Jeff Woodman, Barbara Caruso and Richard Ferrone. Recorded Books. 10 CD's; 11 hours. \$34.99; recordedbooks.com.

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME by Mark Haddon, narrated by Jeff Woodman. Recorded Books. 5 CD's; 25 hours; \$24.99; recordedbooks.com.

AMERICA (THE AUDIOBOOK) by Jon Stewart and the cast of "The Daily Show." Time Warner AudioBooks. 3 CD's; 4 hours; \$24.99.

THE PLEASURE OF MY COMPANY by Steve Martin, read by the author. Hyperion Audiobooks. 4 CD's; 5 hours. \$31.98.

BREAKING THE DA VINCI CODE by Darrell L. Bock, read by Chris Fabry. Oasis Audio. 4 CD's; 4 1/2 hours; \$25.99.

URL: <http://www.nytimes.com>

GRAPHIC: Photo: Audiobooks, like those above, are popular, but some books can be obstacle courses to record. (Photo by Lars Klove for The New York Times)(pg. E37)Drawing (Drawing by Nigel Holmes)(pg. E33)

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