

The Philadelphia Inquirer
Posted on Sun, Jan. 08, 2006

The delightful narrative may someday be a book

By Sandy Bauers
Inquirer Columnist

Forget a publisher. Norman Dietz couldn't even get an agent.

An audio book producer with a penchant for such things turned him down, too.

But in the end, Dietz — having written his masterpiece, performed segments live, and recorded the audio version himself with a volunteer producer friend — had his deal: Blackstone Audiobooks said yes.

The result is an original audio (no print version yet) of *Nailing It: The Sound of Distant Hammering in My Brain* (3 hours; \$27 on CD; \$22.95 on cassette; \$29.95 on MP3-CD).

Ignore the title; it's too cute and doesn't fit. But the book itself is so delightful, I can't decide whether to laugh or cry.

Part fiction, part memoir — Dietz calls it "a big lie in which there's a lot of truth" — the story is set in a small Upstate New York town.

It is a strange and wonderful place. A place where a Christmas tree flies off the top of a hearse. Where a 32-car pile-up on Christmas Eve becomes an occasion for a party (on the icy road, it was like a harmless bumper-car ride). Where a bored audience gets the better of a string puppet troupe. And where, at last, a boy must confront his father's mortality.

If you like the homespun humor of Mark Twain and Garrison Keillor, you'll love Dietz.

Dietz's narration is intimate, heartfelt, hilarious. He writes sometimes in big rolling sentences, rich with metaphors, and his performance is like a literary joy ride.

Like so many other successful audio-book narrators - Dietz is acclaimed as one of the top 50 "voices of the century" by an industry magazine - he's also an accomplished

actor. He reads *Nailing It* like he's playing to one of his live audiences.

Reminds me of a while back, when narrator Ron McLarty read his unpublished novel, *The Memory of Running*, for Recorded Books. It coasted along tepidly until Stephen King sang its praises in a national magazine.

Pretty soon, McLarty gained publishers here and abroad.

I'm not surprised about McLarty, and I won't be surprised if something similar happens to Dietz.

Call it the Narrator Edge. Surely, both authors were decent writers to begin with. But something wonderful happens when you read aloud (as well as listen to someone read). The words come at you more slowly, so there's more time to digest them, more time to pay attention to them. I'm convinced it makes for a better writer.

In fact, Dietz has narrated nearly a dozen Mark Twain titles, and I'm betting he learned much from the master.

Dietz, who grew up in a town similar to the one he writes about, also borrows liberally from other locales, including a town where he and his late wife turned an abandoned ice cream parlor into a theater - one that served sundaes before and after performances.

He now lives in Lancaster and performs with Theatre in the Works, which he founded.