

Listening in on lives

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These days when I imagine the dust heap of history, it is a mountain of obsolescent playback technology and all its accoutrements. Whither the audio book? That is the question. My regrets for vanishing ways of listening would fade if only we could easily download audio books from public libraries and other outfits into small players -- and that didn't have those little ear bud deals. What? Am I dissing the iPod? Yes, but for one reason above all: This modern miracle, it may stun you to learn, will not by design play the books you can download from your library. Apple's intransigence is something you should keep in mind as the fast-approaching season of giving descends. You will, for instance, be doing your doting Aunt Dahlia, who loves her library audio books, no favor in giving her anything Apple. Instead, be sure you check that whatever you do get -- and are prepared to teach her to operate -- is compatible with library downloads. (One source of this crucial information is www.overdrive.com/deviceresourcecenter/compatible.asp.)

The number of library-downloadable audio books is growing even as you read these words. In fact, Books on Tape's releases, all of which are unabridged, are now routinely available in this form. Among the most engaging is Mark Haddon's *A Spot of Bother* (11 3/4 hours, 10 CDs, \$64; www.booksontape.com; download from audible.com, \$27.97), also available in an abridged version from Random House Audio (6 hours, 5 CDs, \$29.95, download from audible.com, \$20.97). This is the poignant and darkly comic story of the Hall family. There is George, recently retired and convinced he has cancer; his wife, Jean, who is having an affair with a fop; their daughter, Katie, who intends to marry a man from the distressingly lower classes whom she may not love but who is kind to her child; and the Halls' son, James, who has broken up with his lover, Tony. This is not a plot-driven novel, to say the least, but a fraught trek toward a wedding that amounts to a series of episodes, mostly mishaps, and inner musings, often incongruous, that are very, very funny and immensely satisfying.

The unabridged version is read by Simon Vance in slow, unguent, often bemused tones that exactly fit the novel's reigning spirit of baffled repression and inhibition: "The secret of contentment, George felt, lay in ignoring many things completely." That particular aperçu, along with much else, has been excised in the abridgement. Still, nothing really essential is missing and, indeed, the shortening occasionally augments a passage's comic power, as when George spots what he takes to be a fatal lesion: "Cancer. He would have to kill himself." In the unabridged version, the diagnosis and the "remedy" are surrounded by what now seem excess words. The abridged version is read by Charles Keating, a crusty old customer who handles every calamity with aplomb and whose voice is perfect for poor George, beset by phantom cancer and an unfaithful wife.

The consequences of adultery are more shattering in Margaret George's magnificent *Helen of Troy* (Penguin Audio and Books on Tape, 30 1/2 hours, 18 cassettes, \$103.20, 25 CDs, \$119.20, download from audible.com, \$41.97). In this embellished variation on the myth of Troy and its downfall, George has adeptly conjured up an ancient understanding of the human predicament without the clunky tutoring that often deforms historical novels. As the tragic tale unfolds, we observe the treachery of passion, the nature of fate, its ineluctability and irony, the relative impotence of human will, and the role of the supernatural as manifest in the whims and bad behavior of the gods, as irresponsible a gang of miscreants as ever there was. The gods'

internecine squabbles are not recorded here, but their meddling in human affairs is a sinister, hazy presence in the action. The story is narrated by Helen herself, and Justine Eyre reads it in a cultured English voice that at first seems teeny-weeny, but grows in depth and sensuousness until one feels that one is, along with Helen, under a spell.

I, at least, may have been. Having felt a newfound appetite for the Trojan War, I turned promptly to the recently recorded Iliad as translated by Stanley Lombardo (Parmenides Audio, 12 1/2 hours, 12 CDs, \$42, www.parmenidesaudio.com). Susan Sarandon reads an introduction by Tom Palaima as well as synopses of each book, all of which are included in a useful little booklet. Lombardo, a veteran of many performances of his translation, delivers the poem himself in a well-modulated, walnutty voice that occasionally roars out dramatically to handle the more exuberant, even bumptious, passages. "I can't wait," Telamonian Ajax cries, "to wrap my hands/ Around a spear. I'm all pumped up and my feet/ Are flying beneath me. Bring on Hector."

Yes, these Greeks are real guys. Still, Lombardo's translation and delivery are not without pomp, but there again that pomp is not without a certain op-ed quality: "RAGE," Book One begins, "Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage,/ Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks/ incalculable pain." Incalculable pain? I found myself laughing at the outrageous pedestrianism of certain parts. ("Hector, you always lay into me in assembly.") On the other hand, the poem is the furthest thing from boring, and the drum and violin music that punctuates the episodes, composed by Vincent Castaldo, is splendid, evoking that which is ancient, menacing and tragic.

Robert Harris's *Imperium: A Novel of Ancient Rome* could be, *mutatis mutandis* (as the ancients might say), a *Novel of Today's Washington, D.C.* It is the story of Cicero's self-propelled rise during the last years of the Roman Republic to the longed-for position of counsel. It is told by his secretary-slave, Tiro, a person who actually existed, though his life of Cicero, which this account purports to be, was apparently lost during the Dark Ages. As much as a biography, it is a fast-paced tale of political intrigue, of the corruption of government by avaricious legislators and their wealthy, grasping patrons, all spelled out in scheming, double-dealing, back-room detail. Privatization of public land, rigged elections, opportunistic military adventures, spoils-sharing, and the general erosion of democracy and freedom -- it's all here in prototype, but also in precise, circumstantial historical detail. The novel is available in both abridged and unabridged versions from Simon & Schuster Audio. Both readers are excellently suited to the material. Oliver Ford Jones brings quiet urbanity to the abridged book (6 1/3 hours, 5 CDs, \$29.95, download from audible.com, \$20.97), while Simon Jones is a mite wearier and gloomier in reading the unabridged version. But come to think of it, his Tiro is looking back on all this from the age of 100, and he has seen far more than he may have wanted to (11 1/2 hours, 12 CDs, \$49.95, download from audible.com, \$34.97.) *

Katherine A. Powers regularly reviews audio books for Book World.