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# Children's Audiobooks and Diversity: The Absence of Metadata

**Kalliopi Dimopoulou**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to explore the publishing environment of audiobooks and to examine the ways of discoverability of audiobooks for small children. Particular attention is given to the growth of audiobooks' market in order to understand the reasons why, nowadays, an old format has become a new trend. An overview of how diversity is presented in children's books and how necessary it is nowadays to be able to discover diverse books using appropriate tools will follow. The main purpose is to find out if and how metadata as a paratextual element is applied and used by publishers as tools of discoverability of the specific genre.

## **Key Words**

Audiobooks, children's audiobooks, diversity, epitext, metadata

## **Introduction**

From the invention of the phonograph listenership has changed dramatically.<sup>1</sup> The so-called 'talking books' were available for the blind. Nowadays readers can listen to hundreds of hours of audiobooks using their mobile devices, optimising their time (Thoet, 2017): the time spent in between spaces and places or the time where two or even three activities can take place simultaneously (jogging, cooking, and commuting). Users becoming multitasking

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief history of the audiobook, see Appendix 1.

experts (Anderson, 2019). The growth of this updated format is massive as a result of a time-strapped population (Newson, 2016), the important investment of publishers to renew and enrich their catalogues and a constantly developing offer of new technological means for listening. For Nielsen's Andre Breedt 'the uptake of audiobooks is almost entirely device-led. We have to see this as an example of a format and a business model that's been all but revolutionised. And it's helped the book industry find new readers' (Anderson, 2018). Digital music players which support audiobook files are now affordable and easy to use. Online downloadable audio collections were created to meet the needs of consumers and the demands of library patrons (Moyer, 2011, 341). Smart speaker technology gain popularity day-by-day as they can actually 'replicate the nostalgic experience of gathering around a radio, as families once did' (Burnett, 2018). Poole argues that this surge in audiobook sales may be a 'halo effect of the huge popularity of podcasts' (2019). Even so, the audio market presents a sizable growth, becoming a medium of choice for consumers and showing potential of transformation from a 'subsidiary category to a primary rights category' (Burnett, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

An audiobook can reach us through a certain procedure: we prepare the experience by obtaining the necessary equipment and prepare the circumstances of the experience, such as listening to the audiobook of our choice in our car, home smart speaker or MP3 player at the gym (Wittkower, 2011, 216). According to Wittkower the experience of audiobook listening exhibits distinct but interrelated movements:

1. The audiobook is a temporal object of experience;
2. The audiobook is spoken;
3. The audiobook has a speaker;
4. The audiobook is started, stopped, and restarted;
5. The audiobook forms a context of physical and social experience (Wittkower, 2011, 217)

Written and spoken words are different in many ways: reader puts written word into motion in her/his favourite place at her/his own pace. A reader may go back, repeat and

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<sup>2</sup> For a factsheet on audiobooks and a brief presentation of audio world market mapping, see Appendices 2 and 3.

review a text. A written thought must be completed and consistent before it is expressed (Wittkower, 2011, 222). In the spoken word speaker and listener co-exist in between the starting and stopping button. The audiobook follows a user-independent and context-insensitive way (Wittkower, 2011, 222). Giving the opportunity to the listener to do many parallel activities while listening, audio forms a context where the activity, like running or walking, occurs rather the other way around. Borrowing Merleau-Ponty's visual terminology we could say that 'listening is the figure, and the driving or walking is the background' (Wittkower, 2011, 228). As Lutz Koepnick argues, audiobooks don't belong to our Gutenbergian galaxy of printed materials but 'to Walter Ong's oral culture' where memory is privileged or even to Walter Benjamin's 'artisanal era of storytellers' where reception is non-privatized and the tradition of knowledge and wisdom is participatory (Koepnick, 2013, 234).

### **Learning by ears**

Audio is 'a primal form of storytelling that is wonderful for children' (Burnett, 2018). Audiobooks are a means for children to become readers, think critically about the content and use their imaginations, making connections with the book and developing their listening skills at the same time (Clark, 2007, 49). Audiobook publishing is no longer a niche market but is a part of the mainstream, having been embraced by readers of all ages, and is 'especially relevant to parents who are seeking alternative ways to getting children to interact with stories' (Nawotka, 2019). The latest data not only shows that the average age of audiobook listeners has fallen but also that 'younger listeners are the fastest growing market segment' (Nawotka, 2019). An interesting key point concerning the youngest audience is that children can understand an audiobook even two grade levels beyond their reading comprehension level (Nawotka, 2019). The audiobook is truly a space for audio-performance, giving space for different levels of comprehension: 'I was learning Dickens by eye, whereas my son is learning Dickens by ear' (Potter, 2012, 591).

## Reading opens the mind

In our everyday lives the representation of diversity is of crucial importance. However, many children's books are still dominated by 'white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, nominally Christian characters' (Epstein, 2017).

Children understand more that they're given credit for. A child of a racial minority is familiar with several issues which originate by the color of its skin. Nowadays, more than ever, political topics that affect adults are infiltrating children's worlds (Anderson, 2018). Parents and teachers more often now demand books that will help them explain such events as the recent wave of refugees throughout Europe (Anderson, 2018).

If we wish to live in a more sustained and united society, we have to learn about the underlying histories that were never told (Schlax, xx). We need to give the opportunity to people to write their stories and we need publishers to produce them but also bookstores, libraries, and schools to put them on display (Epstein, 2017).

Diversity has become a major trend in lots of markets and the book industry is trying to keep up. Many publishers around the world are releasing books to appreciate diversity featuring strong female characters, books that encourage tolerance, kindness, and the acceptance of others (Anderson, 2018; Lane, 2018). Does this stand for a real interest or are publishers actually using diversity as a marketing tool 'rather than a force for change?' (Hawthorne, 2016). As Hawthorne believes, diversity seems to have become a fashionable publishing commodity, and the interest that publishers are showing is a hidden marketing tool until they will be able to move 'to the next publishing fad' (Hawthorne, 2016). Either way, it seems the right time to ensure that the fiction we teach matches the world in which we live (The Room 241 Team, 2018).

Aside from the general interest and demand, there are other parts that have to accept the changes to come: publishers and booksellers. Like Anderson puts it clearly (Anderson, 2017):

if publishers have needed any evidence to support a readership's interest in more diverse character sets, look no farther than Toronto where they could see more than 300 million reading minutes monthly going into tags including #DiverseLit, #Diversity, and #LGBTQ+.

Teachers, school administrators and librarians are other pieces of the puzzle which play a crucial role concerning the books that find their way to children's hands: 'it's important to have advocates at every stage, from editing to marketing, from librarians to authors, so it's an industry-wide effort' (Abrams, 2014).

To move a bit further, Paszkiewicz believes that, ideally, books can and should be published that readers wouldn't necessarily think of as diverse, but which simply feature characters and instances of experience that just weigh in organically in the world of a particular story. Rather than thinking in terms of division inclusion should be the goal. Inclusion conveys acknowledgement and acceptance (Burnett, 2014).

### **Listening opens the mind too**

Audiobooks can be the medium to push away our biases and allow different perspectives into our minds (Burkey, 2009, 25). Listening to literature can expand our horizons across different cultures. To embrace diversity will lead to acceptance and equality (Burkey, 2016, 138). To listen those who don't sound like us can help us build our empathy muscles (Goldsmith, 2017).

It is not only important to start developing audiobooks that represent and value diversity. It is also essential to do it in the right way, such as by getting the recording to show respect to your audience. That means when recording audiobooks that represent different cultures and ethnicities to do it authentically, 'read by a narrator to the culture or by someone who provides an accurate reading' (Burkey, 2009, 25) but also choose the right music to enhance the story in order to give children a true and rich listening experience.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to Cahill and Richey (2015, 372) 'narration occurs in one of four styles: fully voices, in which each character is represented by a different voice; in partially voiced narration, the narrator uses

Background music can establish the mood or set the level of intensity of a scene, and it can emphasize the cultural significance of a text (Cahill et Richey, 2015, 373).

Right recording gives the opportunity to hear voices from all cultures but also introduces all voices: for the narration of *George* by Alex Gino, Scholastic US worked with Jamie Clayton, a transgender American actress.<sup>4</sup>

### Search and Find

Nowadays, the use of metadata or meta-information (Van Der Weel, 2015, 21) is a great way to match supply with demand.<sup>5</sup> We can consider metadata as an add-on: the act of adding information about information makes metadata a part of the text (verbal, visual, oral) to which they pertain, thus metadata becomes an epitextual element, an element outside the book.

In a digital environment the balance has changed as the agents have also changed. The internet is now established as the most popular medium of textual transmission changing radically the communication circuit and for some making the procedure more democratic (Markou, 2018, 9; Van Der Weel, 2000, 13). In this procedure of transmission all printed forms should be included, all 'textual ephemera as a record of cultural change, whether in mass civilisation or minority culture' (Mckenzie, 1999, 13).

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distinguishable voices for the primary characters, whereas the secondary characters typically share a common voice in the background; multivoiced reading utilize multiple narrators, with each represent a different character and unvoiced are straight readings of the text without distinguishable voices'.

<sup>4</sup> *George* by Alex Gino is a book for children 8+ where the main character is a boy that knows she is a girl. An audio sample here: [https://www.amazon.co.uk/George-Scholastic-Gold-Alex-Gino/dp/0545812577/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?keywords=george&qid=1563123527&s=books&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/George-Scholastic-Gold-Alex-Gino/dp/0545812577/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=george&qid=1563123527&s=books&sr=1-1)

<sup>5</sup> Basic metadata: isbn, title, product form, main BIC subject category, imprint name, publication date, cover image, at least one supplier name, availability status, GBP retail price including VAT, statement of rights relating to the UK, source

<https://www.slideshare.net/Kib4slideshare/metadata-challenges-to-discoverability-in-childrens-picture-book-publishing-the-diverse-bookfinder-intervention>

According to Genette the paratext of the book, those elements that function as devices between the text and the reader, make sure that the text is presented to be consumed in a form of a book (Genette, 1999, 1). The ways and means of the paratext don't remain stable but are under constant change, depending on period, culture, genre, author, work, and edition. This is particularly the case with texts in the digital age. Audiobooks as ebooks have an ephemeral nature and their dependence on paratextual productions is essential as without them they don't exist. The analysis of the paratext to peritext (inside elements) and epitext (outside elements) offers a methodology, the tools of discovery: the author writes a book and wants the reader to find it and read it. In this short-cut version of the traditional circuit *find* is the key word.

Searching for audiobooks for children on diverse themes is research which needs the use of sociological categories and not the traditional marketing terms usually applied by the editorial and marketing departments of publishing houses. Even if the only goal is to add commercial value to a product, here the audiobook, discoverability should be an added value.

For the purpose of this article we are using as an example the book *George* by Alex Gino, narrated by Jamie Clayton.<sup>6</sup>

ALEX GINO

Read by JAMIE CLAYTON

In the following audiobook platforms the search of the specific title appeared under the following metadata information:

#### AUDIBLE

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<sup>6</sup> Image source: <https://www.amazon.com/George/dp/B01183T7CY>

One can locate the book by searching if she/he knows the title and the author. No, further information is given.

### AMAZON

On the other hand, searching in AMAZON every format will be followed by different information:

AMAZON → Audiobook → Audiobooks for Children / Children's Fiction / Children's Bullies Issues Books<sup>7</sup>

AMAZON → Audio+CD → Children's Bullies Issues Books / Teen and Young Adult Bullying Fiction / Teen and Young Adult Gay and Lesbian Fiction<sup>8</sup>

AMAZON → Hardcover and Paperback → LGBT books / Children's Bullies Issues Books / Children's friendship books<sup>9</sup>

Amazon gives the possibility to search under general or specific categories by theme and not by / and format.<sup>10</sup>

### KOBO AUDIOBOOKS - kids<sup>11</sup>

KOBO → Kids → Teen → Social Issues and

KOBO → Kids → Fiction

More specifically, in KOBO the general fields to locate children's books are:

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/George/dp/B01183T7CY>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.amazon.com/George-Alex-Gino/dp/0545880068/ref=tmm\\_abk\\_swatch\\_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=](https://www.amazon.com/George-Alex-Gino/dp/0545880068/ref=tmm_abk_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.amazon.com/George-Scholastic-Gold-Alex-Gino/dp/0545812577/ref=tmm\\_pap\\_swatch\\_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=](https://www.amazon.com/George-Scholastic-Gold-Alex-Gino/dp/0545812577/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

<sup>10</sup> Best Sellers in Fiction About LGBT Issues for Children:  
[https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/bestsellers/books/15512226031/ref=pd\\_zg\\_hrsr\\_books](https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/bestsellers/books/15512226031/ref=pd_zg_hrsr_books)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.kobo.com/be/en/audiobook/george-27>



KOBO → Audiobooks → Kids → general sub-categories

### **NOOK AUDIO BOOKS**

Searching for children's audiobooks in the library one can find two categories: Kids 0-7 and kids 8-12. The specific audiobook was found without any specific information or under a certain category.<sup>12</sup>

### **GOOGLE PLAY BOOKS**

In general search in Audiobooks one can find the sub-category Books for Young Adults. By searching by title and name of the author the book is under the following:

Google play books → Juvenile Fiction → Social Themes → Friendship<sup>13</sup>

As the need to discover diverse books more easily becomes more and more evident many different organisations, blogs, and sites come to fill in the gap. They are the middlemen between the consumer (families, libraries, educators, bookshops) and the publisher:<sup>14</sup>

Read Proud Listen Proud: recommends audiobooks, books and resources for LGBTQ teens.<sup>15</sup>

Hear Diversity: recommends titles for a wider age range featuring authors and characters of different abilities, genders, and sexual orientations as well as diverse racial, economic, and religious backgrounds (Burkey, 2016, 138).<sup>16</sup>

One interesting example of good use of metadata is the application Ourstory, a tool for everyone who is interested in discovering diverse books.<sup>17</sup> When downloading the app a

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nookaudiobooks.com/audiobook/105005/george>

<sup>13</sup> [https://play.google.com/store/audiobooks/details/Alex\\_Gino\\_George?id=AQAAAACb\\_mb-7M](https://play.google.com/store/audiobooks/details/Alex_Gino_George?id=AQAAAACb_mb-7M)

<sup>14</sup> More on books on diversity / different sites and organisations in Appendix 4.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.booksontape.com/read-proud-listen-proud/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.booksontape.com/hear-diversity/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.diversebooks.org/ourstory/>

series of 5 questions/filters will help one find not one title, but a group of relevant titles to her/his research.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Even if the research was limited to only one title the results remain very interesting. The possibility to find a book searching within the most popular audiobook platforms by a specific theme (sexual orientation) is not very easy. One has to know the author and/or the title. There seems that there is a lot to be done concerning the metadata information given by the publisher to accompany an audiobook for a potential listener. And even if right now there is a demand for diverse titles of all kinds, and publishers try to profit from this new opportunity, they lack the know-how of using metadata information in the most lucrative way.

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<sup>18</sup> Please refer to Appendix 5 to see the final 2 stages of a research on LGBT books; OurStory gives the opportunity to choose among many different categories before the proposed list of books appears on the screen.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

A brief history of Audio<sup>19</sup>

1877: Thomas Edison invents the phonograph making spoken word recording possible. First recorded verse was Edison reciting Mary Had a Little Lamb.

1930: Close-grooved records make longer narrative possible by increasing storage to 20 minutes.

1931: The American Foundation for the Blind and the Library of Congress Book for the Blind Project establish the Talking Book Program.

1934: First talking books are posted to blind people in America and the delivery includes The Bible, The Declaration of Independence, and Shakespeare. Also, some fiction like Rudyard Kipling's *The Brushwood Boy*, E.M. Delafield's *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* and P.G. Wodehouse's *Very Good Jeeves*.

1935: The first talking books sent to the blind in Britain include Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon*.

1938: The Reading for the Blind (later renamed Learning Ally) is founded.

1950: First audiobooks become available to the wider public.

1952: Caedom Records is formed in New York, a pioneer in the audiobook industry.

1955: Listening Library is founded and it is the first to distribute audiobooks to libraries and schools.

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<sup>19</sup> Information taken from Audio Publishers Association, Ciccarelli, Newson, Mrjoian, Rubery and Thoet.

1960: A light and compact cassette player was launched. The production and distribution of audiocassettes started widely.

1963: The cassette tape is invented.

1970: Libraries start carrying audiobooks.

1982: The compact disc (CD) was launched.

1985: Publishers Weekly identifies 21 audiobook publishers including Caedmon, Recorded Books, Books on Tape, Harper and Row, and Random House.

1986: The Audio Publishers Association is created, a professional non-profit trade association established by a group of publishers to promote awareness of spoken word audio and provide industry statistics to the public and its members (Ciccarelli, 2017)

1992: Audiofile Magazine is launched.

1994: APA establishes the term 'audiobook' as the industry standard.

1995: Audible, a digital audiobook download platform, was founded.

1996: The first Audie Awards ceremony for audiobooks takes place as well as the first Audio Publishers Association Convention (APAC).

1997: The first mass market digital media player was released by Audible.

2003: Audible's deal with Apple marks an increase in public awareness as audiobooks became available on iTunes.

2003-2004: CDs replace cassettes.

2005: Preloaded Digital Players, an all-in-one audiobook format, are created.

2008: CDs reach 78% of audiobook sales.



2013: The New York Times Book Review begins their twice yearly audiobook issues.

2015: 3.88 million audiobooks were downloaded.

## Appendix 2

AUDIOBOOK FACT SHEET - Audio Publishers Association<sup>20</sup>

Estimated audiobook sales in 2017 totaled more than \$2.5 billion, up 22.7% over 2016

46,089 audiobooks were published in 2017 - an increase of 7% over 2016

54% of audiobook listeners are under the age of 45

Smart speakers are increasingly impacting the audiobook world

53% of listeners most often listen at home and 36% in their car

most popular genres: mysteries, thrillers/suspense, science fiction/fantasy and romance

top three activities while listening to audiobooks: driving (65%), relaxing before going to sleep (52%), and doing housework/chores (45%)

## Appendix 3

World scale development (Anderson, 2019):

- Three 'macro-areas' of key importance:

The United States (with an estimated 2017 consumers spent of US\$2.5 billion)

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<sup>20</sup> Audio Publishers Association fact sheet: <https://www.audiopub.org/uploads/pdf/APA-FACT-SHEET-2018.pdf>

Europe (with an estimated 2017 publisher data coming to \$500 million)

China (with an estimated 2017 publisher data of US\$470 million)

➤ 'Key-areas' of growth are identified as:

The United States (46.000 titles in annual production, 375.000 now available)

China (7.000 new audio titles annually, 25.000 available)

Nordic countries (5.800 titles annually, 32.000 available)

➤ 'Audio strongholds' are a classification comprising:

The UK (some 14 million units sold in a year, 18 percent of them for children)

Germany (about 16 million units sold in a year)

➤ 'Developing markets' identified include:

France (1500 titles annually, 4.000 available)

Russia (1.800 titles annually, 16.000 available)

➤ 'Emerging markets' include:

Spain (roughly US\$1.5 million in audiobook revenue)

India (some \$13 million in audiobook revenue)

Italy (about \$7 million in audiobook revenue)

#### Appendix 4

✓ BookTrust

<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/>

✓ CBC's Diversity Goodreads Bookshelf

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<https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/7947376-cbc-diversity>

✓ Children's Book Council

<http://www.cbcdiversity.com/>

✓ CLPE: Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

<https://clpe.org.uk/>

✓ Just Us Books: Black-owned book publishers dedicated to producing Black children's books:

<http://www.justusbooksonlinestore.com/>

✓ Kokila Publishing House

<http://www.penguin.com/publishers/kokila/>

✓ Lee and Low Books: books about and for everyone

<https://www.leeandlow.com/>

✓ OWN IT! : a storytelling lifestyle brand, telling stories across books, music, fashion and film

<https://ownit.london/>

✓ Qlovi: creators of digital reading experiences aimed at boosting literacy among multi-ethnic children.

<http://www.qlovi.com/>

✓ The BookCon: The event where storytelling and pop culture collide

<http://www.thebookcon.com/About/FAQs/>

✓ We Need Diverse Books: a non-profit organization of children's book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people.

<https://diversebooks.org/>

Appendix 5



