



Speaking parts: left, Lennon has voiced several audio books; below, the format has become increasingly popular



More than meets the ear

Audio books are making people sit up and listen, thanks to narrators who work just as hard as the writers. By Pavel Barter

A soundproof room, a chair and a microphone. It wasn't the most intimidating of environments, but when Caroline Lennon entered the recording booth with a copy of *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (1996), Roddy Doyle's harrowing novel, she was prepared for the worst. The Wicklow actress narrated the story of an abused wife for hours at a time, and days on end. After each recording session, she emerged from the booth emotionally drained.

"I found the descriptions of domestic violence quite disturbing," says Lennon. "That was one of the most emotionally difficult books I've ever done. As the narrator, there was no getting away from the awful things [Paula Spencer] was going through. We recorded over such long periods — when you're recording, there's no escape. Technically, it wasn't difficult because it was so well written, but it would be wrong to say that it was enjoyable. You enjoy it as an artist, but the other side of you thinks, 'Some women have to go through this.'"

Lennon played Siobhan Hathaway in BBC Radio 4's *The Archers* for eight years, until the character died of cancer. Yet narrating audio books is a different challenge.

She has read novels by Sheila O'Flanagan, Marian Keyes and Patricia Scanlan, and narrates Deirdre Purcell's new audio book, *Pearl*, a story of three sisters that spans the 1920s to the 1960s. This work isn't for the faint-hearted either, she insists.

"You've got to really enjoy it. A lot of people record a book and then say, 'I'm never doing that again.' There is that breaking point where you think, 'Dear God, I've got 400 more pages to go.' The joy of it is that, unlike other areas of acting, it's all you. There's no sitting around waiting for your bit. It's the toughest work you do as an actor. Over an eight-hour day, you'll probably be recording solidly for six hours. Film and television tend to be short bursts. Theatre is middle distance. Audio books are a marathon."

Once considered a second-best substitute for print, audio books are growing in popularity, largely due to digital downloads and lower prices. Traditionally, they were released months after print versions; now they're often released simultaneously. Publishers such as Whole Story Audio-books, which released an audio version of Sebastian Barry's *On Canaan's Side*, have entirely unabridged catalogues.

Celebrity actors are keen to get in on the gig, but for every impressive performance such as Jeremy Irons's take on *Brideshead Revisited*, there is a flop. Matt Dillon and Sean Penn appear to run out of steam, for example, while respectively reading Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Bob Dylan's *Chronicles*. Robin F Whitten, the editor of *AudioFile*, an American magazine, agrees that some narrators lose interest. "To some

extent, these wonderful actors are only accustomed to playing one role at a time. When they're in a story that has many characters, suddenly they don't just have to be the narrator; they have to portray all these small bit parts," he says. "Stage-trained actors are often better prepared than actors who may have grown up in front of the monitor and have not had the rigorous training of theatre."

Newry-born Susan Lynch, meanwhile, who starred in films such as *Nora* (2000), says there's a lot of information to process. In Martina Cole's *Dangerous Lady*, a London gangster story, she portrayed cockney hard men and a 17-year-old protagonist. "I'd acted in that on television," says Lynch. "They called me up and asked me to do the audio book — it was one of the most difficult things I've ever done. When you're acting — be it theatre, film or television — you're just part of the narrative. When you're doing an audio book, you are the book. You are the narrative."

Gerry O'Brien, who narrated Patrick McCabe's *Winterwood* and Tara French's latest novel, *Faithful Place*, is the voice of Ken Bruen's *Jack Taylor* series. Bruen's Galway cop is riddled with addiction, despair and self-loathing; O'Brien believes his performance should reflect this. "You have to feel that pain, that confusion and get it into your voice. There has to be a performance element. You have to create empathy for the characters. Jack Taylor brings a hung-over, world-weary cynicism to the story — finding hope, falling in love, then losing it again because of his dependency on drugs.

You have to perform that on the microphone."

Novelists and publishers occasionally add something new to the format. Nick Cave narrated and co-wrote the soundtrack for his last novel, *The Death of Bunny Munro*. Joe Stretch, a Manchester author, collaborated with the band Hurts and the actress Anna Friel to create an interactive audio novel for Spotify, the music-streaming service.

For the most part, however, the medium's greatest asset is its simplicity. "There's something, in the best sense, old-school about it," says Lennon. "It's simple and direct. There's you, the words, and the listener. There's nothing else getting in the way: no bells and whistles. In the books I do, there's no underscoring of music, no sound effects. I think listeners like that. A lot of our experience these days is noisy and clamorous. There's a simplicity to the audio-book listening experience that seems to resonate."

For the performers, there's no experience quite like it. "You become a one-man show," says O'Brien. "A lot of actors don't like it because you're on your own from nine to five, but I feel you're creating wonderful atmospheres." He smirks. "The cast parties are terrible though." □

Pearl by Deirdre Purcell, read by Caroline Lennon, is out now on ISIS Audio Books