Matthew Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 384 pp. US \$29.95 (cloth) ISBN 9780674545441

Matthew Rubery's *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* examines the history of the audio book from Edison's invention of the phonograph in 1877 to the present day. A central claim of Rubery's study is that audio books or "talking books" belong as much to book history as they do to oral or media history, and he convincingly supports this claim through print-culture and book-history approaches to his subject matter. Rubery investigates the authors, readers, publishers, and broader reception of audio books through a vast audio-visual archive, which includes the sound recordings themselves, as well as photographs, periodicals, letters, first-person interviews, and government records. *The Untold Story* also draws on a varied body of critical scholarship from the fields of neuroscience, disability studies, and media studies to demonstrate how listening to audio texts has historically been aligned with the practice of reading — particularly for readers who struggle with print literacy.

The Untold Story sets out to establish the audio book's relationship to book history within three main contexts, which form the book's three roughly chronological parts. Rubery starts by examining Edison's intentions for, and his public's reception of, the original phonograph in 1877 America. He draws on archival sources to show how, from the beginning, the history of recorded sound was intertwined with the history of books. Not only did Edison himself imagine that his phonograph could one day capture Dickens's novels, but journalists also speculated in the *New York Times*, *Punch*, *Scientific American*, the *Daily Graphic*, and *Scribner's Magazine* about the implications of his new technology for reading. Rubery's use of illustrations from *Scribner's Magazine* in 1894, which anticipate modern-day headsets and "canned literature" libraries, is particularly convincing in demonstrating the early link between audio recording and books (49–51).

The Untold Story's second part picks up this thread some fifty years later, in the 1930s and 1940s, when the technology for recording longer-form texts contributed to the first real audio libraries for the blind. The early chapters of this section focus on how the American Library of Congress and the American Federation for the Blind developed a lending library of audio books for the blind, which were playable on purpose-built turntables known as "talking-book machines." Rubery

draws on an array of letters written to the American Printing House for the Blind, and mines the pages of journals such as *Outlook for the Blind* and *Talking Book Topics*, to explore the early reception of the audio books among the proponents and critics of braille. These documents appear to provide first-hand testimony that, for many blind individuals who struggled with braille, listening often defined their experience of reading. Rubery's examinations of the archives of the American Federation for the Blind and of the Library of Congress are perhaps most interesting for demonstrating the myriad ways in which publishers, authors, and readers worked to align audio narration with the conventional reading experience. Publishers restricted overdramatizations, for instance, or selected narrators based on readers' preferences for certain racial, gendered, ethnic, or regional dialects — whether or not they were true to the characters being narrated. This section's focus on publishing for blind readers also addresses the conditions under which books were selected for audio publication, ranging from financial and copyright restrictions to attitudes about indecency, suitable subject matter, and modern fiction. The last two chapters of this section focus on talking-book libraries for the blind within a British context. Rubery names "recovery" as his motivation here, since "Britain's talking books have received less attention from historians than those in the United States despite their parallel trajectories" (131). However, these chapters seem somewhat out of place within a study that focuses predominantly on American audio-book history. Furthermore, the repetition of the 1930s and 1940s timeframe within the British context seems to disrupt the flow of the book's advancing chronology, without adding anything significant to the reception history already examined in the American context.

The book's third part addresses the marketing of audio books for popular readers, beginning with Caedmon's spoken word LPs in the early 1950s, then with Books on Tape for commuters in the 1970s, and concluding with the rise of Audible's online books narrated by celebrities in recent decades. This section also deals with the very timely question of adaptation — that is, with how the contemporary audiobook format navigates the challenges of post-modern publishing forms, which often push the boundaries of traditional print media, text, and narration. This chapter provides an apt segue into Rubery's afterword, in which he brings to light current experiments with text-to-voice software in the digital age of audio-book recording.

Rubery's book-history approach to this topic is an especially valuable one for its expansion upon traditional notions of literacy.

His study of talking books moves beyond the rather exclusionary notion of reading as using one's eyes to access the word, and shows how audio "reading" engages diverse reading experiences and abilities, at the same time as it resists many print conventions. By examining audio books within book history, however, this study is also necessarily somewhat uneven. The book's first part on Edison's phonograph consists of just thirty pages, and is immediately followed by a 120-page second part, examining audio books in the 1930s. This focus on book history also necessarily elides turn-of-the-century experiments with shorter spoken word recordings, which may have contributed to later discussions about voice, narration, and reading. Bridging this gap for readers may have helped to clarify the audio book's chronology within American history, its link to other literary technologies, and perhaps also any connections to Caedmon's full-length spoken-word recordings of the 1950s.

Matthew Rubery's *The Untold Story of the Talking Book* is a well-researched and thoughtful study, with many applications for print, book, and media historians, as well as for collecting institutions. Ironically, however, this study's focus on talking books within the framework of book history, and within a print volume, potentially draws attention to its own limitations in addressing an audio form. Indeed, while reading the print version of this book, I often found myself wishing that I could hear the audio books and narrations under examination. I later learned that *The Untold Story* was available for free download from Audible, and look forward to finding out whether this audio version includes any excerpts from archival recordings. While Rubery's gesture towards a broader, more inclusive definition of reading was wholly convincing, and will prove useful to scholars of literature, book history, and print culture, his study provides less insight into the problems of accessing the audio archive that he draws upon, and into the practical applications and implications of audio reading within current pedagogy.

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