

Audiobooks for Young Adults: More than Watered-Down Versions

Smiljana Komar divides listeners of audiobooks into two categories: “the ones who have never liked reading, and those who are simply too busy to spend time sitting and reading.” These categories reflect a common stigma against audiobooks, which are treated as inferior substitutes, remedial educational tools, or trivial road-trip distractions. As Pamela Varley explains, we resist admitting that listening could be “as good as reading” in part because we recognize that “the *experience* of reading is different from that of listening” on a cognitive and interpretive level. However, this paper will argue that recent audiobooks for young adults provide extra opportunities for critical thinking and interpretation. The audiobooks of M.T. Andersen’s *Feed* (2002) and John Green and David Levithan’s *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (2010) employ full casts, sound effects, and voice inflections to offer cultural critiques that build on, but are different from those posed by their sources.

David Aaron Baker’s recording of *Feed* renders listeners complicit in the acts of mindless consumerism that Anderson’s text critiques. Unlike the print book, which uses italics to interrupt the narrative with a stream of advertisements, the audiobook replicates the sounds of commercials. The reader’s familiarity with these sounds makes it difficult to focus on the content of the ads—a problem that doesn’t occur in the printed text. For example, Anderson writes a public service-announcement from the President of this dystopic United States that contains implicit ecocriticism and examples of the degradation of language. However, the audiobook deemphasizes this content and instead uses inflection to accentuate words like “American” and “freedom,” thus recasting this statement as an expression of patriotism. Desensitized by daily exposure to similar soundbites, listeners participate in the same uncritical experience with the media that Anderson ultimately exposes. Alternatively, MacLeod Andrews’s vocalization of instant messages and texts in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* generates a critique of the limitations of text-based communication that isn’t as present in the print book. By including singing and emotional inflections in communications that even within the diegetic world would not have contained them, Andrews emphasizes the importance of face-to-face communication.