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Listening to Children's Literature: Audiobooks and the Development of Reading Engagement

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Abstract

In recent years, audiobooks have gained increasing attention as an alternative format through which literary narratives can be accessed and experienced. Within the context of children's literature, audiobooks offer young audiences the opportunity to encounter stories through listening, emphasizing the auditory and performative dimensions of storytelling. This development reflects broader changes in contemporary reading environments, where digital media have expanded the ways in which children interact with literary texts. The present review article examines the role of audiobooks in children's literary experiences and explores their potential contribution to the development of reading engagement. The study adopts a narrative literature review approach and examines research related to children's literature, narrative experience, audiobook use and reading engagement. Relevant academic publications were identified through searches in major scholarly databases using keywords related to children's literature, audiobooks and reading practices. The selected literature was analyzed in

order to identify key themes concerning the relationship between listening to stories and children's engagement with literary narratives. The findings of the review suggest that audiobooks represent an important form of literary experience that can support children's interaction with stories. Listening to narrated texts may provide children with access to literary narratives, encourage imaginative involvement and support familiarity with narrative structures. In addition, audiobooks may contribute to the development of reading engagement by offering accessible and enjoyable encounters with stories, particularly in contemporary digital reading environments. Overall, the literature indicates that audiobooks should be understood as complementary to traditional reading practices rather than as substitutes for printed books. By expanding the ways in which children encounter literary narratives, audiobooks may play a meaningful role in supporting children's interest in literature and their participation in reading culture.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Audiobooks, Reading Engagement, Narrative Experience

Introduction

Children's literature has long been considered an important medium through which children encounter narratives, develop imagination and construct meanings about the world around them. Literary stories offer young readers opportunities to explore emotions, relationships and moral dilemmas while engaging with imaginative worlds that stimulate both cognitive and emotional development. Scholars of children's literature emphasize that literary texts invite readers to participate actively in the interpretation of narratives, encouraging personal responses and deeper engagement with story structures and characters (Nikolajeva, 2014; Nodelman, 2008) ^[14, 16]. In this sense, reading literature is not limited to the acquisition of linguistic skills but involves a complex interaction between reader, text and narrative experience.

In recent years, the ways in which children access literary narratives have changed significantly due to the rapid development of digital technologies and the expansion of multimedia environments. While printed books remain a central element of children's reading culture, alternative formats such as audiobooks have become increasingly popular. Audiobooks allow literary narratives to be experienced through listening, emphasizing the auditory dimension of storytelling and the role of voice in the interpretation of texts. This format reconnects contemporary reading practices with earlier traditions of oral storytelling, where stories were transmitted through spoken language, rhythm and narrative performance (Rubery, 2011) ^[19].

The growing popularity of audiobooks has attracted the attention of researchers interested in children's reading practices and literacy development. Previous studies have explored the potential benefits of audiobooks in supporting comprehension,

vocabulary development and narrative understanding. Listening to stories may allow children to engage with complex narratives even when their independent reading skills are still developing (Wolf, 2018) [23]. In addition, audiobooks have been discussed as resources that may support children who experience difficulties with traditional reading while still enabling them to access literary content and narrative experiences (Cahill & Moore, 2017) [4]. Research has also suggested that audiobooks may contribute to reading motivation and encourage children's interest in books, particularly when listening activities are combined with exposure to printed texts (Serafini & Youngs, 2013) [21].

Despite the increasing use of audiobooks in children's reading environments, their role within the broader field of children's literature remains relatively underexplored. Much of the existing literature approaches audiobooks primarily from the perspective of literacy instruction or educational technology, often focusing on their role in improving reading skills. However, audiobooks can also be understood as a distinct form of literary experience in which narrative meaning is shaped not only by the text itself but also by the voice, tone, pacing and performance of the narrator. From this perspective, audiobooks represent an alternative mode through which children encounter and interpret literary narratives.

An important concept in this discussion is reading engagement, which refers to children's interest in and motivation toward literary texts, as well as their emotional and cognitive involvement in the reading process. Developing such engagement is considered essential for fostering long-term reading habits and positive attitudes toward literature (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) [8]. The increasing presence of audiobooks therefore raises important questions regarding how listening to literary narratives may influence children's interest in stories and their broader relationship with reading.

The purpose of this review article is to examine the role of audiobooks within the field of children's literature and to explore their potential contribution to the development of reading engagement. By reviewing existing research on children's literary experiences, narrative engagement and audiobook use, this study aims to highlight how listening to stories may support children's interest in literature and contribute to the cultivation of reading engagement in contemporary digital reading environments.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a narrative literature review approach in order to explore the role of audiobooks in children's literature and their potential contribution to the development of reading engagement. The review focuses on scholarly publications that examine audiobooks, children's reading practices, narrative engagement and the relationship between listening and literary experience.

The literature search was conducted using major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus and ERIC. Keywords used in the search process included "children's literature", "audiobooks", "audio storytelling", "reading engagement", "reading motivation" and "digital reading". These keywords were used both individually and in combination in order to identify relevant studies related to the topic of children's audiobooks and reading practices.

The selection of sources was guided by specific inclusion criteria. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and academic chapters that address children's literature, audiobook use, narrative experience and reading engagement. Studies focusing on digital reading environments and the role of listening in literacy development were also considered relevant to the aims of this review. Publications written in English and published mainly within the last two decades were included in order to ensure that the review reflects recent developments in the field.

Following the initial search, the identified studies were examined and categorized according to their thematic relevance. Particular attention was given to research addressing three main areas: theoretical approaches to children's literature and narrative engagement, studies examining the emergence and characteristics of audiobooks and research exploring the relationship between audiobooks and children's reading practices. This process allowed for the identification of key themes and research trends related to the role of audiobooks in contemporary children's literary experiences.

Results and Discussion

Children's literature and narrative experience

Children's literature occupies a distinctive place within literary and educational studies because it introduces young readers to narrative structures that shape their understanding of the world. Through stories, children encounter fictional situations, characters and conflicts that allow them to explore emotional experiences and social relationships. Literary narratives provide opportunities for children to interpret events, imagine alternative perspectives and develop a deeper engagement with storytelling. As scholars of children's literature have emphasized, narratives addressed to young audiences play a crucial role in fostering imaginative thinking and supporting the development of interpretative abilities (Stephens, 1992) [22].

The narrative dimension of children's literature is closely connected with the ways in which readers respond to literary texts. According to reader-response theory, the meaning of a literary work does not exist solely within the text but emerges through the interaction between the reader and the narrative. In the case of children's literature, this interaction is particularly important because young readers actively construct meanings while engaging with characters, events and narrative worlds. This perspective highlights the importance of the reader's emotional and cognitive participation in the literary experience (Rosenblatt, 1978) [18].

Another important aspect of children's narrative engagement concerns the role of storytelling in shaping children's understanding of human experiences. Stories provide structured ways of representing actions, intentions and consequences, enabling readers to interpret complex situations through narrative forms. From a psychological perspective, narrative thinking allows individuals to organize experiences into meaningful sequences and to construct interpretations of events through stories. Such narrative structures are therefore central to the ways children comprehend both fictional and real-life experiences (Bruner, 1997) [2].

Research in children's literature has also emphasized the cognitive and emotional processes involved in reading literary texts. When children engage with stories, they are encouraged to infer characters' motivations, anticipate narrative developments and interpret symbolic meanings. These processes contribute to the development of narrative comprehension and empathy, which are considered key components of literary understanding. The interaction between narrative structure and reader interpretation therefore plays a central role in shaping children's literary experiences (Zunshine, 2006) ^[25].

In addition, scholars have noted that children's engagement with stories is influenced not only by textual elements but also by the broader cultural and communicative contexts in which narratives are encountered. Storytelling practices, whether through reading or listening, shape how narratives are experienced and understood by young audiences. Literary communication involves a dynamic relationship between narrator, text and audience, in which meaning emerges through shared narrative conventions and interpretative frameworks (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006) ^[15]. Understanding these narrative processes is essential for examining how different formats of literary presentation, including audiobooks, may influence children's experiences of literature.

For these reasons, the concept of narrative experience has become central to contemporary discussions of children's literature. Engaging with stories allows children to participate in imaginative worlds, develop interpretative skills and construct personal responses to literary texts. Examining the narrative dimension of children's literature therefore provides an important foundation for understanding how emerging formats such as audiobooks may reshape the ways in which children encounter and experience literary narratives.

Audiobooks as a form of literary experience

Audiobooks have emerged as an increasingly significant format through which literary narratives can be experienced. Unlike traditional print reading, audiobooks rely on auditory perception and performance, transforming the written text into a narrated experience mediated by voice, intonation and rhythm. This performative dimension emphasizes the role of sound in shaping how stories are perceived and interpreted by listeners. Research in sound studies has highlighted that audiobooks represent a hybrid form between literature and performance, where the narrator's voice becomes an important element of the storytelling process (Rubery, 2011) ^[19].

The development of audiobooks can also be understood within the broader historical context of storytelling and oral traditions. Long before the dominance of printed texts, stories were transmitted orally through spoken narratives, allowing listeners to engage with plots and characters through auditory imagination. Modern audiobooks reconnect contemporary audiences with these earlier narrative traditions while integrating them into digital media environments. From this perspective, audiobooks can be seen as a continuation of oral storytelling practices that have historically played a central role in the transmission of stories and cultural narratives (Ong, 1982) ^[17].

In recent years, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has contributed to the growing accessibility and popularity of audiobooks. Online platforms, mobile devices and

streaming services have made audio narratives widely available to audiences of different ages, including children. As a result, listening to books has become an increasingly common activity within contemporary reading cultures. Studies on digital reading environments suggest that the integration of audio formats can diversify the ways in which readers encounter literary texts and may broaden access to literature in new technological contexts (Mangen, Walgermo, & Brønnick, 2013) ^[13].

Audiobooks are also associated with particular forms of narrative engagement that differ from silent reading. Listening to a narrated story requires sustained attention to auditory cues, including pacing, emphasis and vocal interpretation. These elements can influence how listeners imagine characters, visualize narrative scenes and interpret emotional nuances within the story. Scholars have argued that auditory storytelling can enhance immersion in narrative worlds by activating listeners' imagination through sound-based cues and performative interpretation (Have & Pedersen, 2017) ^[10].

In educational contexts, audiobooks have increasingly been discussed as tools that can complement traditional reading practices. Listening to literary texts may allow children to engage with complex narratives even when their independent reading abilities are still developing. Educational research has suggested that audiobooks can support comprehension and narrative understanding, particularly when listening activities are combined with access to printed texts. This multimodal engagement with literature may encourage children to interact with stories in diverse ways and support their broader literary experiences (Serafini, 2013) ^[20].

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that audiobooks represent more than a technological adaptation of printed texts. Rather, they constitute a distinct mode of literary experience in which narrative meaning is shaped through auditory interpretation, performance and listener engagement. Understanding audiobooks in this way provides an important framework for examining how listening to literary narratives may influence children's encounters with stories and their developing relationship with literature.

Audiobooks and children's reading practices

In recent years, audiobooks have increasingly become part of children's everyday reading environments, particularly as digital media have expanded access to different forms of storytelling. The integration of audiobooks into children's reading practices reflects broader changes in the ways young audiences interact with texts across multiple formats. Rather than replacing printed books, audiobooks often function alongside traditional reading, allowing children to experience stories through both visual and auditory modes. Studies examining contemporary reading practices indicate that exposure to multiple formats of texts may contribute to children's familiarity with narratives and encourage their participation in literary culture (Clark & Rumbold, 2006) ^[5]. Audiobooks may also influence how children approach stories and develop reading habits. Listening to narratives can introduce children to literary texts even before they become confident independent readers. Through the auditory presentation of stories, children are able to follow narrative structures, recognize characters and engage with plot developments without the immediate demands of

decoding written language. Research on reading development has suggested that such listening experiences can support narrative comprehension and may help children become more comfortable with longer or more complex stories (Wolf & Barzillai, 2009) [24].

Another important dimension of audiobooks in children's reading practices concerns accessibility. For children who experience difficulties with conventional reading, audiobooks can provide an alternative pathway to literary engagement. By listening to narrated texts, these children are able to access the same stories as their peers, maintaining contact with literary narratives even when reading skills are still developing. Studies in literacy education indicate that providing access to multiple formats of texts can help reduce barriers to reading and support more inclusive reading environments (Allington, 2012) [1].

Audiobooks may also contribute to the development of children's motivation to engage with literature. Motivation is considered a crucial factor in the formation of reading habits, as children who develop positive experiences with stories are more likely to continue reading independently. Listening to narrated stories can generate interest in narrative worlds and may encourage children to explore additional books by the same authors or within similar genres. Research on reading motivation highlights that enjoyable and accessible encounters with stories are key elements in fostering long-term engagement with literature (Gambrell, 2011) [7].

At the same time, scholars have emphasized that the role of audiobooks in children's reading practices should be understood as complementary rather than substitutive. Audiobooks do not necessarily replace traditional reading but can enrich the overall literary experience by providing additional ways of interacting with narratives. Educational research has suggested that combining listening with reading activities may enhance children's familiarity with texts and support their broader engagement with literature across different media (Larson, 2011) [12].

Taken together, these perspectives indicate that audiobooks occupy a meaningful position within contemporary children's reading practices. By offering alternative pathways to narrative engagement, audiobooks may help children encounter stories, sustain their interest in literature and participate more actively in reading culture. Understanding how audiobooks function within these reading practices is therefore essential for examining their potential contribution to children's literary engagement and the development of reading interest.

Audiobooks and reading engagement

Reading engagement is widely recognized as a key factor in the development of children's long-term reading habits and their relationship with literature. Engagement involves a combination of motivation, interest and emotional involvement with texts, allowing readers to participate actively in narrative experiences. When children are engaged with stories, they are more likely to read frequently, explore different literary genres and develop sustained reading practices. Research in literacy studies has consistently highlighted that engagement with narratives plays a fundamental role in fostering positive attitudes toward reading and encouraging children to participate in literary culture (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012) [9].

Within this context, audiobooks have increasingly been discussed as a medium that can support children's engagement with literary narratives. Listening to stories may provide children with an accessible entry point into literature, particularly when independent reading skills are still developing. Through narrated texts, children can experience complex plots, rich vocabulary and expressive storytelling without the immediate challenges associated with decoding written language. Studies examining the use of audiobooks in educational settings suggest that listening to stories can stimulate interest in narrative worlds and encourage children to explore additional literary texts (Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010) [11].

Another factor that contributes to reading engagement through audiobooks is the performative nature of narration. The narrator's voice, pacing and emotional expression can influence how listeners interpret characters and events within a story. These auditory cues may help children imagine narrative scenes and develop emotional connections with literary characters. Research on audiobook listening experiences suggests that the expressive qualities of narration can enhance immersion in stories and deepen listeners' engagement with narrative content (Have & Pedersen, 2017) [10].

Audiobooks may also encourage reading engagement by supporting shared literary experiences between children and adults. Listening to stories together in educational or family settings can create opportunities for discussion, interpretation and reflection on narrative themes. Such shared experiences may strengthen children's interest in stories and promote a positive reading environment. Studies on literacy development emphasize that social interactions around texts play an important role in sustaining children's motivation to engage with literature (Bus, Van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995) [3].

At the same time, scholars emphasize that audiobooks should not be viewed as substitutes for traditional reading practices but rather as complementary forms of literary engagement. When combined with printed texts, audiobooks may support children's familiarity with narrative structures, vocabulary and storytelling conventions. This multimodal interaction with literature can broaden children's access to stories and provide diverse pathways for engaging with literary narratives (Dalton & Proctor, 2008) [6].

Overall, the existing literature suggests that audiobooks can contribute to the development of reading engagement by offering children alternative ways to encounter and experience stories. By facilitating access to narrative worlds, supporting imaginative involvement and encouraging positive interactions with literature, audiobooks may play a meaningful role in contemporary children's reading environments. Understanding this relationship between listening and engagement is therefore essential for examining how emerging formats of storytelling influence children's connections with literature.

Conclusion

The increasing presence of audiobooks in contemporary reading environments has introduced new ways through which children can encounter literary narratives. This review examined existing research on children's literature, narrative experience and audiobook use in order to explore how listening to stories may contribute to children's

engagement with literature. The literature indicates that narrative experiences remain central to children's encounters with literary texts, whether these texts are accessed through printed books or auditory formats.

Studies on children's reading practices suggest that audiobooks can function as an additional pathway through which children access stories and develop familiarity with narrative structures. Listening to narrated texts allows children to engage with literary content even when their independent reading abilities are still developing. In this sense, audiobooks may support children's exposure to complex narratives and contribute to the development of narrative understanding.

The literature further suggests that audiobooks may play a role in supporting reading engagement. The performative qualities of narration, including voice, tone and pacing, can influence how listeners interpret stories and imagine narrative worlds. These elements may enhance children's emotional involvement with literary texts and encourage sustained interest in stories. At the same time, most researchers emphasize that audiobooks should be understood as complementary to traditional reading rather than as replacements for printed texts.

Overall, audiobooks represent an important development in contemporary children's literary environments. As digital media continue to shape reading practices, understanding how children interact with different narrative formats becomes increasingly relevant. Further research may help clarify the ways in which listening to literary narratives influences children's engagement with literature and their participation in reading culture.

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