

Turning Your Novel into an Audiobook

Elizabeth Bell's Zoom talk to the Historical Novel Society's Chesapeake Bay Area Chapter, January 2023

Firstly, where I'm coming from: I'm not only an author but also an avid listener. I discovered audiobooks several years ago, and I am an addict. I listen to about two audiobooks per week, well over 100 per year. I listen while I'm commuting or doing housework. I am not alone: for the last decade, audiobooks have been exploding in popularity. I'm a member of a Facebook group called [Audiobook Addicts](#). That's a great place to hang out and learn what listeners love.

As I was writing my own series, The Lazare Family Saga, I always knew I wanted my novels to be audiobooks. There are numerous ways to accomplish this. If you're selected by a traditional publisher, when you sign a contract with them, you're probably signing away your audio rights. Your publisher becomes the Rights Holder of that work, so it's their decision whether to make an audiobook version. For clarity, this talk is for authors who still have the audio rights to the book in question.

The first step in preparing your book for audio is creating an audition script, an excerpt or excerpts from your novel for your potential narrator to read for you. This may not be the opening pages. For me, it wasn't. You want a representative sample: which character voices are most important? Include a dialogue scene where the narrator has to play multiple people, especially people with different accents and genders. You also want to hear how well the narrator reads non-dialogue text like description. Is it dry and boring, or do they keep the listener engaged? Do you have any pet peeves as a listener? For me, it was the annoying falsetto some narrators use for children, so I was sure to include a little boy amongst the characters in my audition script. I also wanted to hear how the narrator would handle a love scene.

The audition script should be about three pages of text, and it shouldn't take the narrator more than 5 minutes to read. I did go over that length, but then I was actually auditioning my narrator for my whole series. I wanted snippets from multiple scenes to really understand the person's range and how well they handled the major character accents. If you can't decide and need more info, you can ask for a "callback"—a second audition asking your top two or so picks to read new snippets and break the tie. I used that to hear how well my narrator could sing!

When you're selecting your audition script, it's also a good idea to reread your whole manuscript with the audio format in mind. You'll probably want to make a few tweaks. Are there sentences that sound awkward when read aloud? Are there homophones that could be misinterpreted? Are there places where it isn't clear which character is speaking? Place names, personal names, or obscure words you know because of your research that would be difficult for a narrator to find? Make note of those. It's also typical for audiobooks to omit the "front matter" like a dedication and the "back matter" from a novel—decide if you want your narrator to read those. As we know, in historical fiction, the Author's Note is important. But is there a long list of names or a web address that would be tedious for your narrator to read and your listeners to hear? You might want to edit those out for the audio format.

Now if you have a lot of money and not a lot of time, you can hire an audiobook production company who will do almost all of the work for you. They'll find a small pool of narrators who are a good fit for your work and let you choose amongst them. I believe this is what Margaret Rodenberg did with *Finding Napoleon*, which is a fabulous audiobook. If you're certain you want two narrators like she had, an audiobook production company is probably the way to go—but as I said, it's the most expensive option. You're paying not only the narrator but also the people who find and manage the narrator. It's a matchmaking service and they hold your hand through the production process.

If you want to keep your costs down, choose a single independent narrator who will work with you directly. They're probably recording your book in a home studio. There's less overhead cost because there's no middleman like there is with a production company. This also means there's no one keeping your narrator on task but you. Fabulous as he is, my narrator interpreted deadlines creatively, shall we say—and apparently that's not uncommon. So working with a production company is going to be lower-stress, but again, higher cost—probably double the cost, and you'll be paying that before you get the final audio files.

If you find a narrator yourself, there are two main payment paths: Per Finished Hour (PFH) and Royalty Share (RS). In PFH, you pay the narrator for their time, full stop, just like you do with a production company. The narrator delivers the final files and you pay them so much Per Finished Hour of audio. Each narrator has their own PFH rate, but many narrators are members of the acting union SAG-AFTRA. Last I checked, SAG-AFTRA rates start at \$250 PFH. So that's a good metric to keep in mind. The average number of words a narrator can read Per Finished Hour is 9,000. So if you've got a novel that's 100,000 words, divide that by 9,000: your audiobook will be about 11 hours long. Multiply that by \$250, and your narrator costs are about \$2,750.

Now, the narrator's Per Finished Hour rate usually isn't the final audiobook cost. That's the *narrator's* fee, but you're probably going to have additional costs for editing, mastering, and/or proofing, just as you would with a production company—every audiobook needs those. Nobody sits down in their recording booth and reads an entire chapter or even an entire page perfectly every time. Maybe they misread a word. Maybe their stomach rumbles. Maybe they read a line with the wrong accent. This is why narrators are paid Per Finished Hour—every final hour takes a narrator multiple hours to produce. Then the recordings have to be stitched together. The sound has to be mastered to meet the qualifications of a distributor like ACX. Someone also has to listen to the recording and follow along in the text of the novel to make sure no words were skipped or

misread, that no repeat takes were left in, and that everything is pronounced properly—that's called proofing, just like proofreading a text.

Some indie narrators will do the audio editing and mastering themselves, or they have someone they work with regularly. There are software programs that can do proofing, but humans are better. My narrator let me proof my books myself, so I was the one listening along and marking errors. That was very time-consuming, but it saved me money on proofing and I felt I could do the best job at it, especially with pronunciations of unusual words.

So when you factor in those post-production costs, editing, mastering, and proofing, you probably want to budget \$300 Per Finished Hour or about \$3,300 for a 100,000-word novel. Some narrators charge higher rates than that, but some charge less—my super-talented narrator charged me \$200 Per Finished Hour including editing and mastering. For each book, he asked for half of the estimated total cost upfront and the rest when he delivered the final files—that's pretty typical.

However, Per Finished Hour, the author paying the full amount before the audiobook is published, that's only one method. The other major method of paying an indie narrator is called Royalty Share. With RS, the author pays nothing upfront. The narrator works for free and eats the post-production costs. The narrator only gets paid when the book sells, and the author and the narrator split the royalties, usually 50/50 for seven years. After that, all royalties go to the author.

Royalty Share is great for the author obviously and less popular with narrators. Narrators willing to do Royalty Share are probably new to the business and building their portfolios. Even then, they probably don't want to work with a new author who doesn't have a proven sales record and a marketing plan. The narrator wants to know they're investing in a project that will reimburse them. It's entirely possible that over seven years, they'll earn only \$200 or so total in royalties. In addition, the narrator might commit to Per Finished Hour projects around the same time, and they'll

want to prioritize those because of the guaranteed payday. So you might have to wait longer for your audio files.

If you want to do Royalty Share, you'll probably have a smaller pool of narrators to choose from, and they might not have the acting range of more experienced narrators. But I do know a couple of indie author friends who've used Royalty Share and found great narrators—a stage actor who's branching out into audiobooks, for example. They could be an experienced actor who's just not experienced with audiobooks or voiceover. Royalty Share is a viable option, especially if your book is short or most of the characters come from a similar cultural background and the narrator can stick to a small number of accents. In addition, if your Royalty Share narrator has a social media presence, they may help you with marketing because they want the book to sell as much as you do.

There's also a middle ground: the narrator works for free, but they pass on their post-production costs to the author, maybe \$50 or \$100 Per Finished Hour. Author and narrator still split the royalties, but the author may get a bigger slice of the pie. That model is called Royalty Share Plus.

You'll want to decide which payment method or methods you're comfortable with before seeking out your narrator. If you're unsure about audio, you might publish the ebook and print versions of your novel first and see how they sell. Indie authors on a budget might wait to produce audio till they can pay for it out of their earnings from the other formats. I think that's sensible, and it's essentially what I did. I released my audio about two years after the text versions. I did not go with a production company; I chose to find a narrator myself and pay Per Finished Hour.

There are many different ways to find voice talent. If you have a favorite narrator, look them up. They might be willing to work with you. But keep in mind that anyone who's narrated bestselling, traditionally published books—someone like Saskia Maarleveld who narrates most of Kate Quinn's novels—those narrators are going to be in high demand. They'll be booked several months in advance, and they're probably going to be asking

top dollar for their work, like \$500 Per Finished Hour. You're better off asking your indie author friends who narrated *their* books and where they found that voice actor.

The answer is most likely to be ACX, [acx.com](https://www.acx.com). That's an acronym for Audiobook Creation eXchange, the back end of Audible, which is the largest audiobook distributor in the world. Audible is owned by Amazon. ACX remains the place to find the largest pool of narrators—but I hate it. For one thing, the interface looks like something from the 1990s. Apparently, it's not actually that old, but it sure feels like it. ACX is extremely clunky and cumbersome. For example, I had claimed my books on ACX, saying I had the audio rights, when I had different covers—and there was literally no way for myself or ACX to input the new cover during the audition phase when narrators were judging me by that cover. When you type text into ACX, it goes in in a single blob without paragraph breaks. The formatting is just awful. It's also super difficult for an author to search for narrators who meet their qualifications—the system is mostly set up for authors to post an audition call and wait for narrators to come to them. That probably means you'll be listening to a few bad auditions or even spam, because anybody with an ACX account can respond.

I wanted to be proactive. I wanted to put out an audition call but also find several good narrators myself and invite them to audition. I put up my audition call in three places: on ACX, on a site called [NarratorList.com](https://www.narratorlist.com), and in a Facebook group for narrators, which is called “[Indie \(ACX And Others\) Audiobook Narrators and Producers](#).” You can hear in that title how large ACX looms in the industry. Now I was conducting my narrator search in January of 2022. The platform I'm going to recommend for finding your narrator went live the following month, just too late for me—at least for *Necessary Sins*, Book One of my series. That platform is called [Findaway Voices Marketplace](#), and I did use it to work with my narrator on the majority of my series. More on that in a bit.

When you put out an audition call, you have a lot of choices to make with regards to what you're asking of the potential narrators, on top of the script

they're reading. How long do they have to audition? I left my audition window open for two weeks. That might even have been too long—one week is probably enough. It depends on how eager you are and how many auditions you want to listen to. Let the potential narrators know when you'd want the finished audio files if they're selected. Are you wanting to launch the audiobook at the same time as the ebook and print versions of your book? Even if the narrator is immediately available, which is unlikely, you'll want to give them at least a month to record, edit, master, and proof the files.

Also keep in mind that to be on the safe side, you'll need to add about four weeks to allow for approval and distribution on whatever audiobook platform or platforms you choose. With ACX, the author cannot choose a release date; the audiobook goes live whenever they approve it. ACX used to be infamous for taking months to approve audiobooks, but they have improved their turnaround time in the last year or so; now the wait is usually about 14 business days. Which still feels like forever when you're waiting for your book baby to go live! So if you want to release all your formats at about the same time, plan ahead.

In your audition call, explain how you're willing to pay: only Royalty Share? Royalty Share Plus? Per Finished Hour? How much per hour? Tell the narrator your genre, the word count, and a little about the content. Are there violent scenes? Sex scenes? Cursing? Some narrators only want to read PG material. What major accents will they need to perform? If you know you're looking for a male or female narrator or a narrator of a particular ethnicity, say that. Since you're asking them to read excerpts, explain the characters in the scene: their accents, ages, and backgrounds in a couple of sentences. What emotions are you looking for? Is it a tragic scene? A sexy one? If your book is already published, link to it so the narrators can read the reviews and get a sense of the book.

So I put out my audition call in that Facebook group, on ACX, and on NarratorList.com. It's a lot easier to sort for certain qualifications, such as narrators who can do an Irish accent, on NarratorList. An even better

search system is Findaway Voices Marketplace. As I mentioned earlier, that's about a year old now. Findaway has been around a lot longer than that as a distributor and production company, but the Marketplace where an author can find narrators on their own with no overhead cost, that's new.

I just really like the Findaway interface. It's easy on the eyes and specific in all the right ways. When you've filtered your search and found a few good candidates, the narrators have customized profiles where they have a photo, a header image, an introductory voice recording, samples of their work, what genres they've done, lists of the accents and age ranges they can do, whether they'll narrate explicit content—it gives you a much better idea whether this person will be a great fit for your work than ACX does. Findaway even gives you an estimate of how soon the person will be available to record your book.

On ACX, there are “dead” profiles of narrators who are no longer available—they've left the business or they're under contract with audio publishers. However, there's no reason you can't cast your net wide and search for narrators in all these places: Findaway Voices Marketplace, ACX, NarratorList.com, and the Facebook group. On the last three, you can put out your audition call and wait for the narrators to come to you. On Findaway Voices Marketplace, you do have to invite specific narrators yourself. It all depends on how complex your project is, how thorough you want to be, and how much time you have—but it's all free.

I did a mix of open audition calls and inviting narrators, and I got 34 auditions to choose from. If my audition script hadn't gone over the recommended 5 minutes, I probably would have had more. I put the auditioning narrators in a spreadsheet, and I noted their strengths and weaknesses. What was most important to me in a performance and how did each narrator handle those elements?

Another important factor in your choice is to consider the narrator's working style and how it fits your desires and expectations. In a play or a film, as you know, there are not only actors but a director. An audiobook narrator

typically has to play all the roles themselves—and if they're an indie narrator, most of them want to direct themselves. It's standard for the narrator to record the first fifteen minutes of the audiobook and maybe snippets of any important character voices that occur later in the book for your approval. After you approve those opening minutes, you hand off the book and trust the narrator with the rest of the performance. Most narrators don't want to be micromanaged, and the only changes you can make later on are minor edits like skipped or mispronounced words—obvious errors.

However, some narrators are open to more collaboration with the author and letting the author do some directing. I have always been a perfectionist. You may know it took me three decades to research, revise, and publish my series. My writing is challenging for a narrator. It has a lot of unique words, from non-English languages like French, Latin and Cheyenne or just weird words from the 19th century. I also have songs and a smorgasbord of character accents. My work has subtext beyond what's actually written on the page. I wanted the ability to listen along as my narrator recorded and ask for changes beyond the first fifteen minutes, so I was very happy to find a voice actor who was not only open to that—that's how he always works.

But I did have to take a step back and give my narrator some creative freedom, too. Does it really matter if a minor character's voice sounds different than he did in my head? A good narrator knows more about what makes a good audiobook than most authors do. Make sure your working style and personality are a good fit for your chosen narrator, make your expectations clear, and keep the lines of communication open. You might start with a Zoom call or a phone call to discuss specifics. Definitely exchange emails and don't try to communicate solely through ACX's horrible messaging system.

After you choose a narrator and understand how production is going to work, you'll want to sign a contract so you're both legally protected. ACX has a contract template, and so does Findaway. “Author X will pay Narrator Y to deliver the full audio files for Book Z by this date. The author will pay

so much Per Finished Hour, or author and narrator will share royalties for this number of years, etc.” Both ACX and Findaway Marketplace have the ability to take you through the whole production and publication process—but again, I like Findaway's interface much better. Even if you find your narrator on ACX, if they're also on Findaway or they're willing to set up an account there, you can use Findaway for the production part—and I recommend you do.

Before Marketplace was available, my narrator and I used a shared Google drive. I uploaded a whole bunch of information useful to his prep work. I sent character descriptions, the details that affected how their voices should sound: age, general temperament, accents or dialects, things like that. I sent pronunciations of local words that would be difficult to look up, like street names in Charleston that do not sound at all like they're spelled. Proper names can be tricky. Until you get into audiobook production, you do not realize how many words you're unsure how to pronounce. Even English words! For example, my narrator and I debated about the word r-i-b-a-l-d, which can be pronounced RIB-ald or RYE-bald. Fortunately, there are free online dictionaries that have sound files. My favorite is [Merriam-Webster](#). There's also [Youghlish](#), which finds real people pronouncing unusual words on YouTube.

On our second book, my narrator and I started using Findaway, which has a very helpful interface that notifies you each time the narrator sends a message or uploads a file. The author can pause the individual sound files and make comments at certain time stamps. That was much less tedious than my plugging time stamps into a shared Excel spreadsheet like we did with the first book. If you're working with an indie narrator, audiobooks *can* be a lot of work for the author, especially if the author is proofing the audiobook—but it is 100% worth it. There is nothing in the world like hearing a skilled actor literally breathe life into *your* characters.

Once you have a completed audiobook, you'll need to publish it! The simplest way to do that is by staying "ACX exclusive." This means your audiobook is available for purchase only through Audible, Amazon (who

owns Audible), and Apple Books—ACX has a partnership with Apple. Frankly, this is easiest and often makes the most sense financially, because most listeners buy audiobooks through Audible. If you're ACX exclusive, your royalty rate is higher. If you've done the production through ACX, you don't have to worry about uploading all your audio files to another platform. Every audiobook is made up of separate audio files for each chapter. Every one of those has to be labelled properly and put in the right order.

Now my ebooks are exclusive to Amazon and always have been. You can buy my paperbacks and hardcovers anywhere, but you can buy my ebooks exclusively on Amazon. I do this, and a lot of indie author do this, so I can enroll my ebooks in Kindle Unlimited. KU subscribers pay \$10 a month and they can borrow as many ebooks as they want. When they borrow mine, I get paid a little bit per page read. It's a great way to reach readers who don't want to or can't afford to pay full price for an unknown author. About 60% of my income as an author is from KU reads.

But audiobooks work differently. I don't think Audible ever includes indie authors in their "free with subscription" titles, and we can't nominate ourselves. Listeners have to pay full price or a full credit for our audiobooks, which is about \$15. Authors have no control over their prices on Audible. You can't run a sale, and you can't choose to join Audible sales. You're stuck with whatever price they assign to your book. If you're a voracious audiobook listener like me who wants to enjoy 100 plus titles per year, maybe you can't afford to pay \$2,000 for those audiobooks. I wanted to reach listeners of all budgets, listeners who borrow their audiobooks from libraries, so I chose to go "wide" through Findaway.

In addition to a full-service production company and a marketplace for authors to find their own narrators, Findaway is an audiobook distributor. You upload all your audio files to Findaway—or if you've used them for your production process, the files are already on Findaway. You add the description and the behind-the-scenes metadata, just like on ACX. You choose a price and upload an audiobook cover—those have to be square. Then Findaway approves everything and sends that information as well as

your audiobook files to as many places as you want: places like the library apps Libby and Hoopla, the subscription platform Scribd, sales platforms like Chirp, Kobo, Google Books, and Spotify. Findaway distributes to 40 different platforms. Findaway approves audiobooks pretty quickly; mine got approved within 48 hours. But then you have to wait for the information and files to trickle through to the individual platforms, which is another two weeks or so.

To be honest, I don't sell many audiobooks off Audible. But I'm still learning how to market on those other platforms. I get paid a tiny bit, about 45 cents, when someone borrows my audiobook through a library. I keep applying for a [Chirp](#) deal. That's the BookBub of audiobooks—it really gets the word out and raises your profile. You can't get a Chirp deal if you're ACX exclusive. On Findaway, you can set your own price and discount your audiobook whenever you want. Coming at it from the perspective of a voracious listener, I wanted my own audiobooks to be accessible to as many people as possible—that's why I chose "wide" instead of "exclusive."

Now with Kindle Unlimited, you can enroll or un-enroll your ebook every 90 days. With ACX exclusivity, unfortunately it's a one-way street. You can start out exclusive and later withdraw, but you can do that only once; that book can never be exclusive again.

A couple of final notes: If you might want to turn your novels into audiobooks and you're not already an audiobook listener, start listening! You can do that with a library app and not pay a penny. You'll learn different narration styles: what you love and what your pet peeves are so you can better choose the voice of *your* books. You might even find a great narrator who's open to working with indie authors.

Finally, please for the love of eardrums, do not even consider AI-narrated audiobooks. Believe me, I understand the temptation for authors: AI is quicker and cheaper than a human narrator. But you get what you pay for. All the audiobook *listeners* I know hate AI "narrators"—and those listeners are your audience. An AI *can* relay information—but it doesn't understand

what it's saying. An AI cannot do character voices, it cannot act, and it cannot sing. An AI cannot grieve. It cannot sound shy or delighted or terrifying. It cannot sound vulnerable or yearning or deliciously growly in a love scene. The human element is priceless. My narrator found nuances in my work even *I* didn't realize were there! If you consider yourself an artist, then hire a fellow artist to bring your work to life. You might have to save up before you can afford a human narrator—but it's 100% worth it!

Oh, and if anyone wants to listen to one of my audiobooks, I now have free Spotify codes. I'm happy to give you one!

Now, what didn't I cover that you'd like to know about audiobooks?

– Elizabeth Bell, Author of The Lazare Family Saga

Audible US: <https://adbl.co/3C9Xv7x>

Scribd: <https://bit.ly/LazareScribd>

Chirp: <https://bit.ly/LazareChirp>

Kobo: <https://bit.ly/LazareKobo>

Audiobooks.com: <https://bit.ly/3r7pgr3>