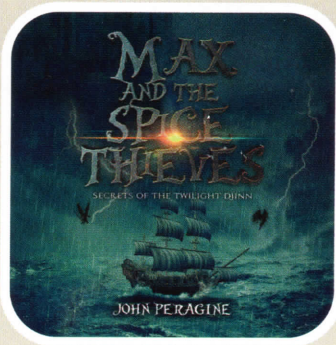




6 Successful Audiobook Collaborations

Six IBPA Benjamin Franklin Award recipients in the audiobook category discuss their process and offer advice.

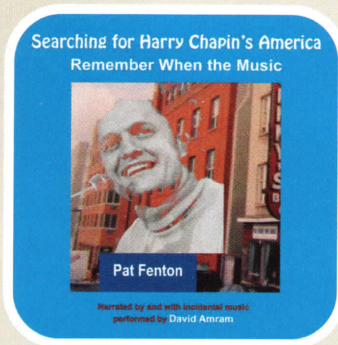
compiled by Alexa Schlosser



Katherine Peragine

Crumblebee Books
Silver Award Winner

Audiobook: Children's/Young Adult



Naomi Rosenblatt

Heliotrope Books
Silver Award Winner
Audiobook: Nonfiction



Tricia Copeland Brzostowicz

Author
Silver Award Winner
Audiobook: Children's/Young Adult



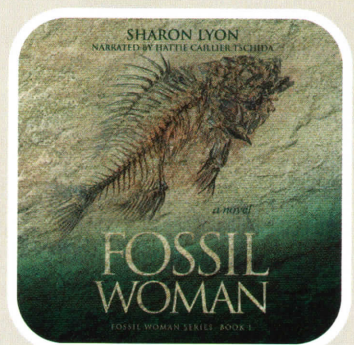
Natasha Lance Rogoff

Author
Silver Award Winner
Audiobook: Nonfiction



Fred Gracely

Bisket Press LLC
Gold Award Winner
Audiobook: Children's/Young Adult



Sharon Lyon

Author
Silver Award Winner
Audiobook: Fiction

How long have you been an independent publisher?

Katherine Peragine (KP): We have been an independent publisher since 2021. Crumblebee Books was born during the pandemic.

Naomi Rosenblatt (NR): Since 2008—for 15 years.

Tricia Copeland Brzostowicz (TCB): I have been publishing since 2015 and in audiobooks since 2020.

Natasha Lance Rogoff (NLR): I became an independent publisher in 2022 out of necessity. Rowman & Littlefield, a fabulous committed indie publisher, published my nonfiction memoir, *Muppets in Moscow: The Unexpected Crazy True Story of Making Sesame Street in Russia* in October 2022. The book received starred reviews from *Publisher's Weekly* and *Library Journal* and rave reviews in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Newsweek*. The publisher had planned to produce the audiobook but ran into some complications trying to find a narrator who could correctly pronounce the many Russian names and words in my book. I offered to take over the audiobook production and produce the book as I figured, as a Russian speaker, I could possibly do a good job. And this started my career as an indie audiobook publisher.

Fred Gracely (FG): This is all very new for us. We started Bisket Press LLC in the summer of 2022. We love the name, but it wasn't fun when the banker we worked with filed it all under Brisket Press, and we had to unravel a lot of accounts/cards. It took weeks and many phone calls. It still gets mixed up occasionally and, in fact, the announcer at the award ceremony said that he had almost read it as Brisket Press, too.

Sharon Lyon (SL): *Fossil Woman* is my first novel. I began writing in 2020 after I retired from full-time teaching and self-published the novel in 2022. I am a paleontologist and was a geology professor for many years. I wanted to write a story about a strong woman struggling to compete in a man's world, incorporating my knowledge of fossils and earth history. The story takes place in the 1950s, when few women entered the field of paleontology.

Tell me about the audiobook for which you received the Ben Franklin Award.

KP: This was the second title we published, but the first in a series. John Peragine wrote *Max and the*

Spice Thieves as a bedtime story for our son. We decided to publish it, with guarded optimism. Once we got positive reviews, feedback, and requests for an audio version, we decided to make the investment.

NR: *Searching for Harry Chapin's America: Remember When the Music* by Pat Fenton is a journalist's account of how Harry Chapin came to write some of his most renowned songs like "Taxi," "Mr. Tanner," and "A Better Place to Be." With the support of the Chapin family, we licensed cuts of these songs to accompany the narrative. It's a book about the creative process and a highly creative musician and songwriter who lost his life at a tragically young age.

TCB: The audiobook for which I was nominated for the Benjamin Franklin Award is *To Be a Fae Guardian*. *To Be a Fae Guardian* is the second book in the young adult Realm Chronicles series that begins with *To Be a Fae Queen*. The series revolves around a fae (fairy) princess who is handed her kingdom's rule at age 15 because all four of her older brothers were killed in battle. The book is set in Middle Earth, the Fae Realm, which lies under our human, Upper Earth realm. As queen, Titania, faces many challenges to ruling her kingdom, not the least of which are those who do not believe a young female should rule and a very old witch who is out to end her.

NLR: It is such a great honor to receive silver awards for Best New Voice and Best Nonfiction Audiobook from IBPA and to be included with so many other incredible authors. *Muppets in Moscow: The Unexpected Crazy True Story of Making Sesame Street in Russia* is a debut memoir about my experience as an American TV producer creating *Sesame Street* in Russia. The idea was that the Muppets could be ideal ambassadors, modeling open values for millions of children living in post-Soviet society.

I wanted to write a story about a strong woman struggling to compete in a man's world, incorporating my knowledge of fossils and earth history."

—Sharon Lyon



Our goal was to create a show that would reflect Russian culture, values, and educational objectives. However, even though I had already lived in Russia for nearly a decade and spoke Russian fluently, the challenges proved more overwhelming than I had anticipated. At first, the Russians hated the Muppets, insisting they had a long and revered puppetry tradition dating back to the 16th century, and they preferred their own wooden puppets to the Muppets. And cultural clashes touched nearly every aspect of the production—from the scriptwriting to the educational content and even to the design of the Muppets themselves. And as if that wasn't enough, I and my team of over 400 Moscow artists faced the assassinations of our Russian broadcast partners, the near murder of our first sponsor in a car bombing, and the takeover of our show production office by Russian soldiers with AK-47s. I don't need to emphasize how clearly this story requires an actor who can express intense emotion while pushing the story forward.

The themes throughout this unusual personal and intimate story surprisingly foreshadow many of the issues that continue to haunt Russia's relations with the West today. The audiobook is widely downloaded, as listeners resonate with this powerful story of overcoming challenges and finding hope. And hope is what we need more than ever, in light of the horrific war in Ukraine.

FG: *Misfit's Magic: The Last Halloween* is the first book we've published, and it's a story of a boy who is accidentally turned into a wizard and then must save the town he's been desperately trying to escape. It's pure whimsical, spooky, fun escapism with a positive message about friendship and how a kind heart has its own special kind of magic. That suited our intent well. The world has a lot of confusing, dark aspects to it right now, so we wanted to publish a book that would take the reader away and leave them feeling more hopeful than when they started.

SL: I am so excited and honored to have won the Benjamin Franklin Silver Award for *Fossil Woman*. The novel is a young woman's story of transformation. The protagonist, Henrietta Ballantine, changes from a withdrawn, shy child into a confident college graduate who digs at the famous site of Olduvai Gorge in Africa. In addition, there is a story of a Paleolithic woman interwoven in the book. My narrator needed to portray Henrietta's voice, the voices of men and women of different ages, a Russian tutor, African accents, British accents, and a primitive language of early humans. I gave my narrator quite a challenge!

I had pitched the concept of this audiobook to Audible Originals and Hachette Audio—but no dice. So, I decided to bring it out myself. I had to find an audiobook distributor and a team that could put together high-quality MP3s.”

—Naomi Rosenblatt

Who was involved in the process of creating the audiobook? How did it go?

KP: John Peragine handled most of the process. He set up a job on Audiobook Creation Exchange (ACX), and the auditions came rolling in. That process was exciting because there are some great voiceover actors working with ACX. When we heard Guy Barnes' voice, we knew he was the one. He nailed Captain Cinn, the pirate, and he did a phenomenal job with the large cast of unique characters. Working with him was an easy process because he was a seasoned professional. The book took no time at all to record and produce. Guy made the recordings and sent them to us for approval.

NR: I had pitched the concept of this audiobook to Audible Originals and Hachette Audio—but no dice. So, I decided to bring it out myself. I had to find an audiobook distributor and a team that could put together high-quality MP3s. The project got stalled many times, as narrators declined our budget and then the author himself passed away in January 2022. It was sheer coincidence that one of my other author's sweethearts happened to know David Amram, our narrator, and introduced me to him in February 2022. This terrific woman also found a sound studio and engineer, and, excited by the project, she directed Amram's reading and performed short female roles in the recording. A friend of hers became my co-producer and sponsored much of the recording and post-production. It was a lot of work and a lot of fun for all of us, and I believe I have new friends for life.

TCB: My narrator, Jillian Yetter, narrated the first book of the series, so it became an easy choice to have her narrate the second book. Her voice fit perfectly with the character. To begin, I send the narrator a copy of the manuscript and a character list with descriptions so she can craft a voice for each character. She then sends me a description of the voices she will use and questions about the manuscript. Once recorded, I review the recording for errors, and she makes amendments. If you have a good narrator with a good audio technician, this is a smooth process. I had a great experience with it.

NLR: As the author, I was lucky to find a professional recording studio to engage and handle the technical recording, editing, and audio processing. Ken Carberry and Jordan Rich, owners of Chart Productions in Boston, are experienced producers of audiobooks as well as on-air voice talent with decades of experience. They helped out with casting, scheduling, and professionally recording our narrator over several studio sessions. They then did several rounds of editing to deliver the final master recordings. Their professionalism, high quality, and relentless drive to get the recording just right and the results proved phenomenally successful as the *Muppets in Moscow* audiobook continues to be widely downloaded.

FG: We were lucky to have found Colin Watts! He was a dream to work with. We created a DropBox folder with three subfolders: beta, alpha, and final. He would drop the files there, and when we listened to them, we would move them forward, ask for rework, or declare them final. A lot of the "beta" files were terrific but needed one or two corrections or deepening of Harkland Mather's voice. Once we had the entire book in audio form, Colin added the intro and music, adjusted the levels to ACX standards and gave us final files. We pushed it up to ACX for distribution to Audible and used FindawayVoices to distribute it to every other platform. As with all formats of a book, this takes time and patience, and you'll make mistakes. Be warned that ACX can sit on a book for a long time before finishing their quality checks and making it available. We missed the Halloween season by several months due to that. Oh, and don't forget you will need a 1:1 cover image (this was a scramble for us at the end).

SL: I used ACX, which is part of Audible and a subsidiary of Amazon for the audiobook, and it was easy and straightforward. I made an account and uploaded a two-page script. About a dozen actors

tried out for me. I listened to the uploads and picked the stand-out voice of Hattie Caillier Tschida.

What were the main things you had to consider when creating the audiobook?

KP: We had to decide on the audience. This had to be a book that attracted adults and kids. Adults buy the books, especially audiobooks, but kids like to listen at bedtime and on trips. The other thing to consider was the business part of it. We decided on paying for the recording, and Guy also receives royalties. We are freelancers ourselves, and we wanted him to be invested in the project while also recognizing that he is a freelancer. It was a win-win for both of us.

NR: The biggest challenges were finding the right narrator, the right sound studio, and licensing the music in an affordable way. Post-production also became critical, as we had to correct a number of vocal errors. Then I had to find a good indie distributor, and I settled upon Author's Republic. They work with many audio platforms, including Spotify and Audible, and are helpful to novice audiobook producers.

TCB: The main issues for me to consider in creating an audiobook were price and voice for my characters. I love working with indie-author-friendly narrators.

NLR: Most important to the project was the selection of the narrator, who was born in Russia and knew the Russian language and culture. She is someone who had experience as a voice actor, took direction very well, and worked tirelessly to find the right tone and accent for each character in the book. The tone was key, matching the tone set by the writer. Additionally, I had to find the best possible production partner who would be affordable and also willing to work with me on ensuring that the quality of the Russian-accented performances would be pitch-perfect and not exaggerated or offensive in any way.

FG: Since the main character is a young boy, we wanted a male narrator who could create a likable young character. There is also a lot of humor, so we needed a narrator with good comic timing. It turns out that US and British audiobook narrators prefer British-accented narrators three-to-one, so we decided to seek



someone with a British accent. One of the most critical aspects of creating an audiobook is ensuring all the characters come to life. This is very tricky. *Misfit's Magic: The Last Halloween* has dozens of characters of all types, genders, shapes, and sizes. Expect to spend a lot of time working with your narrator up front to ensure they portray the characters how you want. I created a few audio files of how I heard them speaking and shared them with our narrator. One of the characters, the antagonist (Harkland Mathers XIII), has a very deep voice, so this required some audio post-production work to isolate his dialogue and drop the tempo to 80%. That did the trick nicely but took a lot of time.

SL: Of course, the main thing to consider is selecting the voice that you want. When I heard Hattie's voice, I knew immediately that she would be perfect for *Fossil Woman*. Also, I needed to decide how and what to pay the narrator. Through ACX, I could either pay the narrator outright, and select a rate that I was willing to pay, or I could offer the narrator a percentage of the sales. Since I was a new author, I offered to pay Hattie at a certain rate.

Who was the narrator, and how did you decide on them?

KP: Guy Barnes lives in Europe, and he has a British accent. He sounded like John had imagined the voices in his head. In addition, Guy is a bit of a pirate himself. He is a motorcycle riding singer/songwriter and even looks like a pirate. He has helped market the audiobook by dressing up as a pirate and reading excerpts.

NR: David Amram is a multi-instrumentalist and avant garde composer, now age 92. He composed scores for "Splendor in the Grass" and "The Manchurian Candidate," among other films and performances. During the course of his illustrious career, he worked with Aaron Copland, Thelonius Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, Janis Ian, and many others. He had been acquainted with both Harry Chapin and the author of this book, Pat Fenton. Before he passed away, Pat had mentioned Amram to me as a kind of "dream narrator." Hence, meeting David Amram through someone else—after Pat's death—had felt so poignant. David was overjoyed to work on the book as a tribute to Pat. All fell into place, and it was right.

TCB: The Audio Flow audiobook production company produced the first book in the series with Jillian Yetter as narrator, and she was a perfect choice for this second book in the series, too. For the other audiobooks I've produced, I met my narrator at a reader/author event. I didn't have much success finding a narrator on the ACX service and was frustrated. The female narrator for the Kingdom Journals series introduced herself to me at an event. I researched her, and she produced a sample for me to listen to. She had a great voice for my character, and we produced *Kingdom of Embers* and *Kingdom of Darkness* together.

NLR: We selected Emily Lahey-Shoov, an extremely talented narrator who had not previously narrated an audiobook. Emily emigrated to America from Russia when she was 1 year old. Chart Productions had worked with Emily in their talent pool for a few years and knew of her Russian upbringing and introduced her to the author. Emily was also uniquely gifted in her ability to deliver consistent dialects and tone for myriad Russian characters with varying accents in the book. *Muppets in Moscow* showcases Emily's phenomenal talent and versatility. Her voice is melodious and voice and a pleasure to listen to. Her interpretation, which includes Russian and British accents, is done with enormous nuance and perfection. In fact, Emily broke down the entire book with sticky notes of various colors and estimated the number of pages from one Russian character to another in order to make sure that the voices were varied enough so as not to be confusing for the listener. Lahey-Shoov is also a pleasure to work with: organized, professional, and takes direction as though she's been doing this for years. She went above and beyond, and from the reviews online, her efforts paid off. I am so grateful to her.

FG: We used UpWork to find our narrator and got 16 narrators to audition. We extracted a snippet of the book for them to read, one that was a good sampling of the characters and style of the book. We heard it all. Very talented narrators with accents so heavy (Australian in this case) most people wouldn't be able to understand. And, some not-so-talented narrators. One of them read every sentence with the same cadence. It was so odd; it could have been an SNL skit. Colin Watts is the narrator we chose in the end, and it was a pretty easy choice. His voice is both engaging and friendly, and he was wonderful to work with.

We spent many hours early morning and late at night (there's a six-hour time difference) hacking around with character voices and talking about how different lines should be read. Being British, he didn't always immediately "get" some of the quips in the book. We also had to go back and forth about some of the female characters to get them right. Two of them, Lydia and Pam, are very atypical girls with strong personalities. Pam starts out as a bully but becomes a friend, which was tricky to manage vocally. She had to be believable as both. It wasn't part of our original deal, but we gave Colin a 10% royalty of the audiobook revenue since we were so impressed with how he poured himself into the project. He also loved the book, which made it all that much easier.

SL: Hattie Caillier Tschida is my narrator and producer. I wanted a young woman to narrate the book and knew immediately upon hearing her voice that she would be perfect. Hattie was actually a high school senior when she voiced *Fossil Woman*.

What were the biggest challenges you faced during the process?

KP: We know, like other indie books, it can take time to recoup our investment. This was hard because producing a great book isn't cheap. We went all in. While we haven't quite broken even, we feel confident over time that we will and then some.

NR: Post-production became intensive and costly. Necessary! Worthwhile! And well-executed. But I would not have been able to do it without my team. There was also the matter of creating a contract for the narrator and director. Since the format is so new, we could not easily find boilerplate wording, and our attorney had to draft a lot from scratch.

TCB: The biggest challenge as an indie author in producing my first audiobook was finding a narrator. The ACX system of matching authors and narrators was challenging for me to find a good narrator.

NLR: The greatest challenge with any long-form audiobook is consistency: in the character voices, narrator's tone, and overall audio quality. With inserts and re-edits, one has to make sure everything appeared seamless in the final version/"the going to press" presentation. I was extremely lucky Emily was a perfectionist, as were Ken and Jordan at Chart Productions.

FG: Basically, be prepared to be the producer, creative director, talent manager, and auto-engineer. An 11-hour audiobook takes a lot of time to review, so allow sufficient time. You must listen to it multiple times to ensure it all comes together correctly. We had one file mix-up that left an entire scene out, and we only caught that in a final listen at 1.5x speed just before we were about to publish.

SL: I guess the biggest challenge was that the production took longer than the original contract, but I wasn't in a hurry and wanted Hattie to take the time she needed to make the audiobook correctly.



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What advice do you have for other indies looking to create audiobooks?

KP: Take your time finding the right voice actor. Decide not only are they the right voice, but do they have experience, and are they someone you can work with for the long haul? We really lucked out with Guy Barnes, but that is not always the case. Also, do your research and understand the process, the commitment, and the investment it takes before jumping in. We waited until we knew that the print book was something people enjoyed and we began to get inquiries about the audiobook. We didn't start the process until a year after the release of the print book.

NR: It's an involved process with a lot of phases and moving parts, so:

- Listen to the author and what they want from an audiobook adaptation.
- Have a good idea of your timeline and budget before you begin.
- Assemble a production team and delegate responsibilities.
- Set up distribution.
- Research local sound studios or build your own.
- Find the right narrator.
- Expect post-production, and plan for it. Don't let it take you by surprise.
- Understand your terms of contract.
- Learn about audiobook marketing, which is evolving as this new sector of book publishing evolves.
- Enjoy the fun of it, and do not get lost in the weeds!

TCB: The best advice I would give other indies about creating audiobooks is to ask other authors to recommend narrators. Having a good narrator with a solid background in narration, good audio tech team, and business system in place is key.

NLR: Recording any audiobook is akin to running a marathon. For the number of hours it takes to record (in this case, nearly 40 hours), it is likely to take twice as much time to complete proper editing and audio finalization to meet industry standards. As a first-

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—Natasha Lance Rogoff

timer, I was shocked at how long it took to get it right. So, plan the time accordingly. Also, it is important when recording foreign accents to make sure to replay the voiceover recordings of the characters prior to recording the next chunk of text to make sure the accents are consistent. Also, make sure your narrator has time to rest and recharge and has enough healthy food to eat during the sessions. And always provide at least three copies of the printed manuscript (preferably double-spaced) so the narrator and producers can read more easily and mark up the book with edit notes.

FG: One of the mistakes we made was jumping right into audiobook distribution with our very first book. As many of you know, it takes a lot of time and effort to generate interest in a book. We now feel it might have been wiser to grow the platform a bit more, build a following, and then create an audiobook. It's not cheap. Expect to shell out thousands of dollars, so it's hard to earn back what you spend on creating it. That said, it's a fun, creative challenge, and a very rewarding experience.

SS: I would advise other independent authors to use ACX unless they have someone in mind to voice their audiobook. Also, there is a lot of back-and-forth with the narrator, listening to the chapter uploads and sending corrections and amendments. Don't be in a rush. Take your time so you will be proud of the finished product. ●