Learning to Listen

Children's Books that Guide the Way

By Gary Ferrington

Do you remember those special sounds of childhood? The sound of sleet against the window, birds singing in the tree above your favorite playground swing, or the echo of kids laughing in a vacant urban lot?

Memories from the soundscape of youth often come to us at the most unexpected times, stimulated by a gust of wind, the rustle of leaves, rain on the roof, a distant voice, or the sound of a car. The acoustic environment in which we grow up can leave a lifetime of impressions on us.

Childhood is a time for discovery and learning. It is a good time to sharpen the already eager ears of the young person and to develop a child's often remarkable listening skills in further depth. All sounds have meaning of which we can become conscious through listening. The beeping of a backing truck signals caution. The ringing of a church bell calls the faithful to worship. Someone may perceive whispering sounds in the wind blowing across dried grasses. Or there are sounds that annoy with their loudness, rhythm, or constant excess. All these sounds are part of the acoustic fabric of daily life that transmits meanings to us.

Listening is a skill. When it is learnt early, it can enrich a lifetime of experiences with the natural and urban soundscape environments. Unfortunately, when taught in school, it is usually included in a unit on listening comprehension. Little effort is made to go beyond speech communication into the world of sound when developing children's listening skills.

Enhancing listening skills is something educators and parents can facilitate in children and youth. The following library books encourage exploration and understanding of the soundscape. Check them out and explore listening with a child.

Books for Children

The Listening Walk, by Paul Showers, illustrated by Aliki Brandenberg (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992). The key to a successful listening walk is to avoid talking to others and to open one's ears to the world of sound. In this book, a young girl takes a listening walk with her father and her dog Major. The setting is urban and the soundscape is rich in sounds. Some sounds are not pleasant at all, such as the sound of cars, construction, and other human noise activities. Others, such as the tapping of Major's toenails on the side walk, a sprinkler, and birds in the park are enriching. The book concludes by asking the reader to close the book, close their eyes and just listen. There are always sounds to hear.

Just Listen, by Winifred Morris (New York: Atheneum, 1990). Tara is an urban child surrounded by the constant sounds of the city. Only when she goes to visit her Grandmother does she experience the unique silence of the country. Her grandmother always takes her out for long walks to listen to the natural world. Grandma frequently whispers to Tara, "Now what do you hear?"

One day Tara's grandmother asks her to listen very carefully. When she does, she hears a very special sound—the unique sound of self. Her grandmother encourages her to always remember that sound, as it is hers and no one else's.

The Magic School Bus, In The Haunted Museum: A Book About Sound, by Linda Beech (New York: Scholastic, 1995). Ms. Frizzle's music class sets out to perform a concert at a "Sound Museum." Along the way the Magic School Bus has a flat tire and the students find themselves in what looks like a haunted house. They explore the house hearing many sounds only to learn that they are in the Sound Museum itself. There are doors that lead to a jungle full of exotic sounds, another door leads to a mountain landscape where echoes can be made. The children learn much about new sounds and how sounds are made. The next day the class performs its concert with a better understanding of the basic principles of acoustics and sound making.

The Noisy Book, by Margaret Wise Brown (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993). Muffin, a very little dog, one day gets a cinder in his eye. The veterinarian puts a bandage around Muffin's eyes and he can no longer see. His ears now become his guide to the world around him. It is an acoustic world of often confusing sounds. When Muffin finally arrives home he hears a sound he cannot identify. It is both familiar and yet strange. He cannot determine what it is. Readers are asked to guess what Muffin might be hearing and the answer is finally revealed at the end of the story.

Noisy and Quiet, by Lorraine Calaora & Christopher Karcovski-Bagen (Grosset and Dunalp, Inc., 1977). In this book of opposites children learn about quiet and noise. It is a book designed for parents and children to use together. A mother and father can, for example, help a child understand the difference between the soundscape of a desolate beach and of one beaming with activity. The book encourages an awareness of sound in a variety of urban and rural environments. The inside title page is especially effective with a family of rabbits nibbling at the grass along an airport runway with a roaring jet lifting off in the background. There are activities at the end of the book for children to learn about the making of sound and quiet.

The Phantom Tollbooth, by Norton Juster (New York: Random House, 1961). Though not a book specifically about sound the chapter on Dischord and Dynne explores the acoustic soundscape. An excerpt: "Are you a doctor?" asked Milo, trying to feel as well as possible. "I am KAKOFONOUS A. DISCHORD, DOCTOR OF DISSONANCE," roared the man, and, as he spoke, several small explosions and a grinding crash were heard. "What does the 'A' stand for?" stammered the nervous bug, too frightened to move. "AS LOUD AS POSSIBLE," bellowed the doctor, and two screeches and a bump accompanied his response. "Now, step a little closer and stick out your tongues. Just as I suspected," he continued, opening a large dusty book and thumbing through the pages. "You're suffering from a severe lack of noise."

Owl Moon, by Jane Yolen, illustrated by John Schoenherr (New York: Philomel Books, 1987). When you go owling on a bright moonlit night with your father you have to be very quiet. And when you are quiet you listen very carefully to the sounds around you. Somewhere there is a distant train whistle blowing long and low "like a sad, sad

song." A farm dog answers the train joined by others and then their voices fade. This is a wonderful story of a young girl and her father going out to find owls one night and it suggests that one must be very, very quiet in order to really listen.

The Animal That Drank Up Sound, by William Stafford, illustrated by Debra Frasier, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1992). This story, tells the tale of an animal that needed sound. It moves slowly and silently from high on the mountain to the valley below. One day the animal finally drinks up all the sounds of a wonderful green summer. It takes " the croak of toads, and all the little, shiny noise grass blades make." It is, of course, winter in the guise of the snowy white animal that brings a special quiet to the land.

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Hildegard Westerkamp

Sound Journals (see also page 9)

The Train

by Rick Verwoerd

I remember once when I was about six years old. I was staying overnight with the rest of my family at my grandparents' home. A railway line passed the back of the house within a good one hundred metres behind a strip of forest. As I lay in bed, I could hear the deep regular breathing of sleep from my older brother's side of the room, and the soft murmuring of the adults' voices downstairs.

It was very relaxing and I was starting to fall asleep when I heard a low, eerie whistle in the distance. The sound filled me with a deep longing to experience the wonderful, far-off places from where the plaintive sound seemed to come. There was another whistle, closer than the first, and I could make out a low, far-off rumble. It seemed as if the train was coming to meet me and carry me off to some magical land beyond the night.

The adults continued to talk downstairs, oblivious to the energy that the approaching train infused into everything in its wake. Louder and louder the rumbling grew, and then the train proclaimed its presence with a mighty four-part blast from its whistle: two chords of medium length followed by a short toot and ending with a long drawn out blast that seemed to envelop me and soak into my very pores.

This great magical beast had travelled through many towns, casting its spell on anyone receptive to it. Now it was my turn. Once the train had come closest, its sound became a steady, thundering rhythm that coalesced into a mystical portal. With the power of the spell, I stepped through the portal into the train and was carried off to the mysterious world of dreams.

This journal entry was written in the context of an assignment for Acoustic Dimensions of Communication, CMNS 259 (the second year Distance Education version of the course—more information on page 34), through Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada. Rick's grandparents lived in Hammond, a town in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, Canada.

The Baby's Voice

by Richard Armstrong

Alice Misuka was born on January 1996 in New York. I met her for the first time on the 18th of April in the apartment of her parents in the East Village. While they busied themselves in the kitchen, Alice and I looked at one another, she reclining in a small chair placed upon the bed, me lying beside her, dazed from the twelve hour journey from Paris via Toronto. Then she began to converse with me with the wide range of sounds, to which I at first responded similarly, not the first time I have improvised baby sounds with a real baby. We had something of a conversation, but very soon it became clear that this little girl, who was seeing me, a close family friend, for the first time, wanted *me* to listen to *her.* A torrent of proverbial language ensued, to which I, and by then from the door to the kitchen, attracted by the authority in Alice's voice, her mother listened. A wonderfully complex story of vowels and exclamations crescendoed to some kind of conclusion, at which point Alice settled back, as if to say: "There, I've told you all my news for now."

Her mother and I marvelled for a moment at what had happened, delighted at being made to listen to a three-month old child by the child herself, and at hearing such meaning in the sounds; we were struck by how normal this felt to us, and not just because her parents and I had an intimate life connection to the voice. It felt normal because Alice's voice was free, connected and authoritative in the best sense of the word.

Reprinted with permission from *Voice Chronicles, an anti-text-book on the human voice*, by Richard Armstrong. (Soon to be published)

As a pioneer of the extension of the human voice, Richard Armstrong's unique abilities as a teacher, director and performer have taken him to over 20 countries, and inspired a whole generation of performers and their work. A founding member of the Roy Hart Theatre of France, he divides his time between France, Canada, and the U.S.