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Bedtime storytelling revisited : *Le Père Castor* and children's audiobooks

While audiobooks in England and United States have been popular for a very long time, they are late or even newcomers in France, developing in the last decade of the XXth century with Livraphone (number one publisher with more than 2000 titles), Livrior, Audible and Gallimard being the majors in the field. As in their English counterparts, production consists in classical or contemporary texts being recorded by their authors or by actors, in order to be listened to at home, in cars or public transportation. A quick overview of the public targeted shows that, in France, it was firstly and for a long time intended for children and young people, then developed for languages learning methods for a mixed public and visually impaired people who accounted for 3 millions - so 4,7 % of French population- in 2000. The latest target is now women who represent 75% of paper books readers.

Primary audiobooks were recorded on tapes, then CD's, but the tendency since four or five years is, as elsewhere, to download the book from the publisher's website or online booksellers and to run it on multiple portable devices, Ipods, PDA, Pocket PC or MP3. Despite the wildly popular use of MP3 among high school and college students- (it took only three years for the MP3 in France to equal sales record that the previous walkman had taken ten years to reach), there aren't many educational audiobooks in this format. Publishers see it as a potential, as suggested by the development of recorded versions of human sciences titles (major classics and today's thinkers), or by a 2005 agreement between Audible and France Loisirs, through which French auditors have access to French audio translations of bestselling thrillers and affiliated such as Sherlock Holmes narratives or Da Vinci Code...

Yet, so far in a country that propounds its "cultural exception" and where literature is a landmark, the global number of existing audiobooks hardly matches one tenth -or less?- of the US titles. It is still linked with the tradition of

children's narratives: significantly the collection "Ecouter un livre" (Listen to a book) is published by Gallimard, a major literature publisher with a strong children's department; going back to Charles Perrault's *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* (in *Contes de ma mère Loye*) first published in 1695, one also finds in the margin of the manuscript an indication of the intended oral voicing of the tale for young people : " On prononce ces mots d'une voix forte pour faire peur à l'enfant comme si le loup l'allait manger. ¹" (These words are to be spoken in a loud voice in order to scare the child as if the wolf was about to eat him).

These basic features about the status of French audiobooks today tell enough how innovative, or even revolutionary, *Père Castor* audiobook collection was, when it came out in the late 70ies, almost sixty years after the same leading titles of *Albums du Père Castor* were released on paper. Let us briefly retrace its course of events : *Les Albums du Père Castor* first came out in 1931, based on the innovative educational movement "Education nouvelle" introduced in France by Paul Faucher after his encounter with the Czech pedagogue Frantisek Bakulé. The first hundred titles were conceived, created, tested and published by a team called Les Ateliers du Père Castor which Faucher had founded. It was soon followed and implemented by Le Centre de recherche biblio-pédagogique de l'Atelier du Père Castor in 1946 and L'Ecole du Père Castor in 1947. After Paul Faucher's death in 1967, his son François Faucher took over, following his father's steps and dedicated approach. It implied sticking to his intellectual legacy and educational values while inventing new forms to enhance it; also, François Faucher had an interest in popular cultures : the pocket book then audiobook versions of the Père Castor's classics were launched, allowing infamous stories – many of them had been translated in several languages, like *Michka*, with 250.000 copies by 1951 - to reach a third generation of readers in audible versions. François Faucher retired in 1996 and

¹ SORIANO Marc, *Les contes de Perrault, culture savante et traditions populaires*, Gallimard, Collection Tel, 1968, 1977, p. 153.

the publishing house, commercially hosted and distributed by Flammarion, is now under the direction of H el ene Wadoswki, a former editor from Nathan, major Publishing house for educational books. New reprints of the classical *Albums du P ere Castor*, in the same original format –a soft cover brochure to ensure easy handling by the child and affordable price to the parents-, are periodically released along with new collections of albums, short stories and novels in paperback (pocket books).

The audible versions of nineteen titles² from Les Classiques du P ere Castor all originate from the collection conceived by Paul Faucher and the P ere Castor collective workshop. Recorded on tapes upon Fran ois Faucher’s initiative, they were then progressively and even recently released on CDs. They are currently marketed by Livraphone and other online specialized bookshops such as “Le livre qui parle” (The book that talks); periodically out of print and reprinted (paperbooks and CDs as well), several are obviously continuous bestsellers: *La Sieste des mamans*³ (*Mummies ’nap*), *Epaminondas*, *Les trois petits cochons* (*Three little pigs*), *La grande Panth ere noire* (*The big black panther*). The most famous of them, pledged by one generation after the other, are *Marlaguette*, *LaVache orange* (*The orange cow*)⁴, *Michka*⁵ and *Roule Galette* (*Roll pie/cookie*)⁶. Some are adapted in english versions as language learning

² Full list of titles available on livraphone online bookshop.

³ *La Sieste des mamans*, by Bertron : exhausted by their youngsters, their meals, naps, and cries, mother crocodile, mother elephant and mother monkey protest and claim for themselves the right to have a nap. When they wake up, worried about what may have happened, it turns out the kids have dealt and taken care of themselves.

⁴ *The orange cow*, a story by Nathan Hale, told by Catherine Le Bars et Olivier Foy: the gentle and kind fox brings to his home an orange cow that feels really sick. But is not easy to take care of a capricious cow who won’t take her medicine..

⁵ *Michka*, told by Paul Faucher et S ebastien, the teddy bear, leaves on his own into the woods. What a bliss to be free! He hears geese mentioning it is christmas night and everyone should do something good. So when he arrives with the christmas XXX at a sick and poor little boy’s house, and there are no toys left, Michka sighs deeply, enters and sit in the empty shoe, awaiting for the child to wake up.

⁶ *Roule Galette*, by Natha Caputo, told by C. Le Bars et S. Benmerzoug. The word “galette” refers to a pie-size thick cookie or bread cake, and also to traditional oatmeal savoury pancakes from Brittany. The formula” Roule Galette” has even become a trade mark as it recently inspired the name of a new fastfood type chain of restaurants serving savoury pancakes... a story of a cookie itself free, encountering several predators (bear, wolf..) and escaping them until the fox is wiser. At each encounter it shows of with a little song or rhymes :”Je suis la galette, Je suis faite avec le bl e Ramass e dans le grenier. On m'a mise   refroidir, Mais j'ai mieux aim e

tools, such as *Les Bons amis* translated as *Good friends*⁷, and *Petit chat perdu* translated as *Little lost kitten*⁸.



Publishing Les Classiques du Père Castor and new Père Castor titles in pocketbook was a major step and change in the editorial policy. It reflected a perception of new economic and reading practices which several children's literature publishers had in common and that is still accurate today.

As for Père Castor's audiobooks, the move was more daring : other publishers had started producing tapes, but the production was scattered among various producers, some of them aiming at entertainment rather than literary or educational fiction. No specific editorial concept seemed to sustain it, nor was the equilibrium between narratives and music clearly identified and thought after. So Père Castor's audiobooks was the first recognised and valid book collection to be, as a whole, transferred into audible versions. While pocket books also implied reformatting Père Castor's classics, it mainly led to new authors, thematics and titles, with more text and less pictures.

Audiobooks initially responded to a different approach, technically motivated; square shaped albums, in Italian format, were altered into smaller, rectangular booklets, French format, encased with the matching tape in a plastic cover : it looked like a book, as current DVD's do; the text remained identical, unaltered, but the number of pictures was reduced, their size altered to captions or restricted to only one page, rather than the original spreading of pictures on

courir !..." (I am the cookie/pie, the cookie/pie, I was made out of seeds picked from the attic. I was left until I cool but I'd rather run afool."

⁷ *Les Bons amis*, by Paul François, told by Yves Barsacq, Marco Perrin, Franca Di Rienzo, Amélie Morin and Mathilde.

⁸ *Petit chat perdu*, by Natacha, told by Caroline Rivière and Félix Le Bars.

the double-page. Moreover, in several cases, new illustrations were felt needed to adjust to the new product. A new set of illustrations was requested from a different illustrator, so the format and appeal of the booklet in the setting of taped audiobooks likened that of the contemporaneous pocket book. The “notebook” touch of original albums on thick off white paper that made classics unpretending, simple, familiar thus attractive to children⁹ was lost : the booklet inside was smaller, thinner, cheap looking with its glossy white paper.

But as technics evolved, and tapes were outdated, Père Castor audiobooks restored the original album exactly as it was first released, with its very shape, format, paper, illustrations, only slitting a CD (duplicated from the tape or identically re-recorded without any change in style or settings) in the inside part of the back cover. So, even when some of the narrative experience and pleasure of reading was temporarily affected by the cheap format and materiality of the booklet in audiotape series, what was lost on one side got supplemented by the materiality of the sound, voice and music, added.

*

Thus, transferring albums into audiobooks was not meant as new editorial line open to future unreleased titles nor to titles directly composed and conceived of as audible or “talking books”. Rather, it was meant as a process of adaptation and revival of previous titles on paper yet a process wherein the acoustic profile, or audiograph¹⁰, is strictly consistent with the narrative pattern of the printed version.

The same voice, usually adult and female, tells the whole story and slightly varies in tone and pitch for the different characters. The voice carefully follows the text, it is distinct, clear, rather slow, expressive yet only as the voice

⁹ One should keep in mind that before P. Faucher’s albums, most books and albums for children were Prize books or New Year’s books or livres d’étérennes, which were big, heavy, with a hard cover and thick binding that made them hard to open and handle.

¹⁰ P. Schweighauser, *The Noises of American literature, 1890-1985*, University press of Florida, 2006, p. 71: “I define an audiograph as a characterization technique that endows fictional bodies with a set of distinctive acoustic properties designed to position characters with regard to the ensemble of social facts and practices that constitute the fictional world they inhabit.”

of a narrator, of a distant reader, not of an actor or comedian playing out a part. Unlike Perrault's suggestion, Père Castor's audiobooks are not meant to give auditors a full sense of reality and live, but to convey a vague, metaphorical realism, an imaginary illusion of reality that sets the story at a distance, as the primary book does.

Stories include an encounter between a central character, a child (Marlaguette, Epaminondas, Zohio), a childlike animal (a mouse, a cow), childlike vegetal (lilies), childlike natural object (a water drop), or even a non living object (toy, pie), and other figures, situations or reality that can be considered adult because it is either big, or unusual, or powerful (bear, wolf, crocodile, wind, sun, mountain, independence, solitude...). Thus, the main narrative voice may eventually be relayed by alternate voices representing various characters, simulating animals or natural objects speaking human language, and delivering their words.

Such secondary voices, adult male voices or children's voices, match the various pitches of fictitious voices, yet it is restricted to non threatening, non frightening characters. The storytelling must not impress young listeners and all voices convey a sense of reassurance. So variations depend on the characters depicted and the indications given in the text about their way of speaking or intonation¹¹.

The character's tone or way of saying may be indicated by the narrator in the narration – “Maintenant, Marlaguette le regardait et sa colère tombait. - Pauvre petit loup! dit-elle. Il est bien blessé!¹² » It can be specified as a stage direction in the clause following a reply : - “Bonne nuit, répondit la Vache de sa belle voix grave¹³”; it can be stylistically suggested by the wording, a naïve set of expression : “Oh !la !la, s'écria le Renard, tu as mangé beaucoup trop

¹¹ For obvious practical reasons, references of following quotations will indicate page number in the printed book, rather than minutes in the audiobook. Although both versions are identical.

¹² Marlaguette, p. 11 : “Now, Marlaguette was looking at the wolf and her anger was soon over. – Poor little wolf! She said. He is really injured!”

¹³ *La Vache orange*, p. 5 “Good night said the Cow with a deep low voice”

d'herbe ! Il faut changer un peu¹⁴. » Or altogether as in Marlaguette's easy, childish playground talk : “Bien fait! Bien fait! Cria-t-elle en faisant la nique au loup.¹⁵”

Animal's talk ” can also be mimicked through onomatopoeia and alliterations and assonances acting as onomatopoeia : -“Si, Si, Si, cria l'Oiseau-Moqueur ¹⁶..” ; -“Hou là! Hou! Cria-t-il en tombant de côté¹⁷” ; -“ Cra !Cra! Cria le geai, il te croquera, Marlaguette¹⁸”. Or, the animal's cry requires no specific code or alteration from conventional transcriptions: - « La Vache s'assit et répondit : “Meu..meu.., je suis bien malade...”¹⁹ » or « Et la pauvre vache se mit à pleurer. -Meu...eu... Meu...u.²⁰» In all cases, dialogues alternate between simulation of animal's talk or cries and illusory human language, both translating the hybrid childlike-animalike speech and thoughts. The audiobook version conveys textual suggestions by selecting an adapted voice for the replies : the capricious Cow in *La Vache orange*, the loyal wolf in *Marlaguette*, are voiced out by a masculine voice, while the good helping Fox in *La vache orange* is voiced out by a child.

Yet, there is no further interpretation, the mere pitch of the voice is enough to distinguish characters. and the audible version does not overcharacterize nor emphasize the narrative pattern nor dialogues : the audible version does not erase the introduction or conclusion of the reply: although character's separate identities are easily deciphered through the intervention of a secondary voice pronouncing talks in direct style, the main narrative voice does not suppress interpolated clauses reporting and describing speech such “s'écria

¹⁴ *Ibid*: “oh!oh! oh! cried the Fox! You have eaten far too much grass! You must change a little “.

¹⁵ *Marlaguette*, p. 11: “Well done! Too bad for you! Marlaguette shouted while mocking, jeering at the the wolf”

¹⁶ « If, If, If ’, whistled the mocking-Bird, *Histoire de Zohio*. The bird repeats after the child hesitations between different routes or actions “If I take this way, I'll meet the buffalo, If I take that way...”

¹⁷ A wolf knocks his head against a rock at the entrance of his den while holding Marlaguette by the skirt in between his teeth. But the comic, wailing sound “hou là! Hou” suggesting he hurt himself, as in the interjection “ouille/ouch” is a slight and mild distortion of the conventional longish, frightening howling of the wolf “houuuu...” (*Marlaguette*, p. 10)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19. The “croaking” jay warns Marlaguette that her friend the wolf will ultimately « crunch » her.

¹⁹ The cow sat and answered : Moo.. moo.. I feel really sick.. *La Vache orange*, p. 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 20: “And the poor cow started crying: -Moo.. oo.. Moo.. oo.”

le Renard; répondit la Vache²¹”. The narrator’s voice is a reader’s voice that doesn’t derail from the original score, just as one would do in reading aloud a story to a child after the printed book. So in the audiobook voices recorded and the general narrative tone do not assume extraliterary significance.

Throughout each story, a short musical line, generally a simple combination of a few instruments at a time among which flute, xylophone, guitar, trumpet, drums, clavichord, -, is being identically repeated. It instantly punctuates the storytelling, as when an oral storyteller takes a breath, and replaces the setting of the page: music discreetly marks blank transitions between actions, indicate the child when to turn the page, and give him the time to do so. During narrative phases, melodies either stop or accompanies the voice as a musical backing, still barely audible in the background. Although tunes are simple, and rhythm binary as in circus music or brass band march, it is not easily graspable as a refrain or chorus, so it works as a jingle not as a musical speech per se. Melodies or jingles vary from one audiobook to another in Père Castor’s Classiques, equally easing the storytelling and listening process like a beatbox.

Finally, there are a few “noises” in Père Castor’s audible versions. Obviously, as in any careful and professional recordings, noises are intentionally part of the sound track. They do comply with Schweighauser’s introduction to a communicational approach of noise that instead of conceptualizing it as a disturbance impending, masking communication, presents it as a signal that increases information²². Indeed, noises in Père Castor’s audiobooks are sound effects added to the audible version, knock knock or rat-tat-tat to suggest footsteps, rustling noise of crumpling fabric to suggest a fall... The narrative being clear and self-sufficient, sound effects are not necessary to complete it, nor to supplement its meaning. Then one can

²¹ “The fox shouted; The cow answered.”

²² Referring to Claude E. Shannon, and Shannon and Weaver, in *The Noises of american literature*, op. cit., introduction, pp. 6-8.

wonder what the purpose of such sounds can be, as they mimic or echo the character's actions?

In *La Vache orange* for example, the central scene between the big sick orange cow and the little grey fox who nurses him is rhythmically punctuated by such sounds : Plastic chewing when the cow sucks a baby bottle to check his fever; huffing and puffing to suggest cow's sickness; running water when the fox fills the hot water bottle to soothe the cow's stomach; "atishoo" when the cow sneezes after drinking champagne; rumbling and whistling for the train in the cow's dream; birds singing and cookelandoo next morning; crunch crunch for the toasted bread etc.

Sounds follow and duplicate the actions narrated, yet one cannot speak of redundancy. As sound effects use a different language or communicative system, acoustic versus verbal, they appear as part of a special language brought up by the audible version to implement the original story. Rather than repeating narrated replies and facts, they function as resonances introducing another level of communication as in live narration. The effect is playful : Indeed, indexical recognizable sounds do not introduce a conflict or counterpoint to the narrative as they are neither simultaneous nor as loud as the voice. They echo the narrative on a low key and seem to confirm the tale with an undisputable or at least fair proof, albeit comical. Studies on reader's response to Père Castor's audiobooks, or to more recent, popular yet low-brow Marlène Jobert²³'s audiobooks show that children insist on a strict respect of the written sentences, specially its punctuation. A proper narrative tone, in the young listener's idea, is one that follows the ups and downs of the sentence, marks the dots, commas, exclamation points or question marks. The child's pleasure, in listening to an audiobook such as Père Castor's, where a genuine book is attached to the CD, relies on respect for the written narrative and strict

²³ A former movie actress, Marlène Jobert has recorded numerous stories for Hachette audiobook series. Quite popular among children, her recordings are less favored by parents who find the style of her narratives closer to popular and low brow entertainment than to quality literature.

conveyance of its intended meaning. It is also a combination of watching, reading words and pictures and listening. It relies on duplicating the written story by the narrative voice.

As opposed to noises in the “simultaneous poem” described by Douglas Kahn²⁴ and which “represent the background-the inarticulate, the disastrous, the decisive, [showing] in a typically compressed way [...] the conflict of the *vox humana* with a world that threatens, ensnares, and destroys it”, noises in Père Castor’s audiobooks are reassuring means of a reconstruction: superfluous, they slow the narrative process, assess its verbal statements as gestures acting out speech, thus empowering the three dimensional audiobook, giving weight and thickness to the third, acoustic dimension of the album.

Yet, Père Castor’s audiobooks take only limited advantage of the possibilities presented by phonography and acoustic tools. Obviously and deliberately, rather than for a lack of know-how or for economical reasons, they resort to sound perceptions and sound effects to emphasize narration and to the extent that it doesn’t interfere with the storytelling. In this line of thinking, sound effects are utterly intended and distinct on the blank band both from the voice they accompany and from musical lines; as such their effect is to set the listener within a specific frame of mediation. Through artificial, almost theatrical sound effects, the process of storytelling is underlined and catches the attention of the listener. Cries and noises are obvious imitations, unrealistic mimicks that stage the representation process itself. In freely adding unwritten yet non verbal lines, the audiobook emphasizes the communication process and the acoustic tools on which it relies. While its goal is theatrical and may induce listeners to laugh or add credibility to the scene, it also creates an attractive acoustic presence that seduces the child. As a real adult reading to a child draws and keeps the child’s attention by the power of one’s actual, real, physical body

²⁴ *Noise Water Meat*, An history of sounds in the Arts, MIT Press, 2001, p. 49.

and voice, sound effects, noises act along with alternate voices and music to sensually embed the narrative.

Let's assume that Père Castor's audiobooks, as other children's audiobooks, induce young listeners attention and contribute to their pleasure, if not by creating or recreating bedtime storytelling, at least by creating an aural, vocal setting reflecting previous experiences of stories, picture or illustrated books being passed on to the child through the mediation of an adult voice.

*

True to the inheritance of his father (P. Faucher) and godfather (F. Bakulé), François Faucher considered how to adapt to changing times, after 68 and the start of modern era in children's literature. In 1975 he declared :

“Sur le fond, je reste fidèle à la pensée de Bakulé et de mon père, pensée fondée sur l'observation, le sens de l'humain, l'éducation de l'imagination, du caractère et du jugement, l'invitation à la création, plutôt que sur l'acquisition de connaissances par trop éloignées des besoins immédiats²⁵.”

So what? which specific, intrinsic aspects of Les classiques du Père Castor made it possible, worthwhile, logical – or even necessary- to turn these 1931's to 1950's albums into audiobooks? Secondly, which “immediate needs” of the child do Père Castor's classics audible versions answer?

Père Castor's classics whether as a single book on paper or as book plus CD, are “albums”, a word designating books where pictures equally share the space of pages with the written texts, or take over words as defined by the English “picture book”. The word “album” has several meanings, (from the latin “albus”, white space for inscriptions and listings) and is used in French for

²⁵ Quoted by Marc Soriano in *Guide de la littérature de jeunesse*, Paris, Flammarion 1975, p. 241. « I remain true to the theory of Bakulé and my father, based on observation, sense of humankind, education of the imagination, of the attitude and judgment, on the incentive to create rather than the acquisition of notions way too far from immediate needs.”

multiple objects such as photography book, music book, songs book or record... In albums at the turn of XXth century, as in 1883 (*Vieilles chansons et rondes pour les petits enfants*) et 1884 (*Chansons de France pour les petits Français*), by the painter Maurice Boutet de Monvel (1851-1913), published by Plon, the graphism is linear, simplified, without perspective, colours are soft or pastel and flat as in japonsese etchings ?, to serve a clear, easily readable picture, to promote good taste and an idealized vision of childhoodness²⁶. Text is secondary while pictures and visual typography convey the essential part of the narrative. Paul Faucher may have inherited the notion of album from XIXth century attempts such as Louis Hachette 1861's "Albums Trim pour les enfants de trois à six ans", and Jules Hetzel's 1866 "Albums Stahl". But he is considered the founding father or pioneer of the type in France : he conducted a systematic study of the album and invented a radically innovative approach to its format, text and pictures interactions that refers to a deep understanding of the child's personal development along with the evolution of his reading practices. The album is seen as an "iconotext"²⁷ wherein meaningful effects rely on the interaction between text, pictures and their material support of transmission, format, paper, texture, weight, handiness.

Père Castor's classics are narratives, genuine stories, not fairy tales or legends originating from an oral tradition. They respond to a natural perception of events as a drama script, a theater play. Yet, they are also written to be spoken or sung or to be read aloud by parents to children. The sound track adds a new material aspect, yet as the child keeps looking at the album while listening to its story, the iconotext is not undermined but supplemented by the voice. Paul Faucher acknowledged this given from the start, publishing his *Classiques* under the pseudonym of "Père Castor", literally "Father Beaver",

²⁶ Annie Renonciat, BnF - Babar, Harry Potter et Cie. Livres d'enfants d'hier et d'aujourd'hui. Expositions.bnf.fr.

²⁷ I. Nières-Chevrel, *Introduction à la littérature de jeunesse*, Didier Jeunesse, coll. Passeurs d'Histoire, 2009, p. 118. « Il désigne l'ensemble des livres pour enfants dans lesquels l'image prime sur le texte, mais également – à l'intérieur de cette désignation éditoriale globale – ces livres dont les effets de sens reposent sur des interactions du texte, de l'image et du support, et ce qui sont ce que l'on appelle des « iconotextes. »

where the beaver, as in “Father Christmas” is a reading beaver or (as in later versions, DVD adaptations of the albums) an anthropomorphic spectacled figure, half animal, half grand father. As suggested by the “Father Beaver” brand name, pseudonym and logo, where the beaver alternately stands as the young reader/listener or the adult reading to him, les Classiques du Père Castor belong to a moral and educational approach favouring a positive, constructive approach to one’s life and the transmission to younger generation of a deeply rooted, unwritten wisdom based on the observation of nature, animals and countryside lifestyle. Père Castor’s primary albums for children’s activities, then tales, then documentaries on animals, were all meant to answer to the child’s narrative intelligence, as the american psychologist Jerome S. Bruner would later state it, that enables him to decipher other people’s intentions and state of mind, to put oneself at a distance, look at the world from another point of view and understand someone else behaviour as that of an alter ego, both similar and different. Before four years old, the child is not able to decenter himself in order to attribute people beliefs that would be different from his own. Yet developing this skill allows him to build himself and the others as characters. Thus narratives are a fundamental way through which we give meaning to both our life and that of others²⁸.

²⁸ Jean Molino and Raphaël Lafhail-Molino, *Le récit, un mécanisme universel*, in *Contes et récits : pourquoi aimons-nous les histoires?*, Mensuel N° 148 - Avril 2004.



In Paul and François Faucher's line of thinking, the Album is an open, not preformatted object, meant for multiple purposes, speak, play, discover, learn, imagine. It addresses young children with little or even no reading ability. It must be brief according to the child's concentration capacity. Stories must be simple, easily understandable, with pictures sustaining the understanding process. Both texts and pictures are thoughtfully conceived and produced: Paul Faucher carefully chooses writers and artists from the avant-garde and from Eastern Europe graphic school (Nathalie Parrain, Gerda Müller) to write and illustrate the stories. It takes about a year to publish a book less than 20 pages and the adjusting process is essentially collective : the project is discussed in team including the illustrators and writers, the graphic, publishing, and printing production group, along with pedagogues and children -young readers or pre-readers- whose reactions to the various drafts influence choices and decisions.

A similar process applies to audiobook versions. Consistently, as recurring authors and illustrators often sign several titles on paper (Paul François, Natacha, Gerda Müller..), the same voices or storytellers record several audio titles (Catherine Le Bars, Franca di Rienzo for female voices, Yves Barsacq, Marco Perrin for male voices); children, only mentioned by their

first name, are also often associated to narrate or play parts in the recorded versions of several stories (Sebastien, Mathilde, Chantal, Élodie, Fred, Julien, Kathy, Loïc, Marion, Natacha, Régine, Sylvia, François²⁹ ...) Pocket books and audiobooks thus result from a collective process and gathering of “book people”, educators, psychologists, all sharing the same interest in the child’s present and future being.

Secondly, Père Castor’s albums respond to an educational approach: the objective, as stated in an address to the adult mediator at the beginning of some specific albums, strictly “picture books” without text, is to induce the child in spontaneously and orally wording his reactions to the story. With the help of an adult, the child will “have the pleasure to recognize, and name objects he knows; identify and attach specifics to characters; analyse and explain, picture by picture, actions, movements and gestures; interpret expressions, looks; compare pictures and establish by deduction the chain of events. Once he has appropriated the various elements of a story, he will build it, add to it as he wishes and will tell it in his own way with the ease he will have acquired during your common “walks” through these pictures³⁰. ”

An analogous educational objective is assigned to the “illustrated” book, meant as “Secondes lectures³¹”, following the child’s physical and mental development. When the child masters the three first phases of picture reading, enumerating or naming, describing and interpreting, then the fourth where he differentiates and compares, he is ready to learn how to read. Thus, Paul

²⁹ In the audioversion of Anne-Marie Chapouton, *Les lettres de Biscotte Mulotte*, Marie Colmont, *Marlaguette*, and other titles.

³⁰ « Il prendra plaisir à : **reconnaître et à nommer** les objets qu’il connaît ; **identifier et caractériser** les personnages [...] ; **analyser et expliquer**, image par image, les actions, mouvements et gestes [...] ; **interpréter** les expressions, les regards [...] ; **comparer** les quatre images, rétablir, par déduction, les actions intermédiaires et l’enchaînement des faits. [...] Quand il aura pris possession de tous les éléments d’une « histoire », il la reconstruira, l’enrichira, à son gré et la racontera à sa manière, avec l’aisance d’élocution qu’il aura acquise au cours de vos « promenades » à travers ces images. »

³¹ Second readings.

Faucher states, while a more elaborated and focused type of reading appears, illustration becomes a substitute for pictures, it conveys the general context, describes the atmosphere, announces an action to come, completes the written narrative, but the main part of the story is narrated by the text³². Whatever the age of the child considered, the album, whether it is a picture book or an illustrated book is the means to answer children's needs, to connect children because its conception relies on mixed considerations, psychology, applied pedagogy, literature, graphic art and editorial techniques.

In this line of thinking, Père Castor's audiobooks, albeit with additional techniques, must answer similar needs and concerns. Père Castor's albums on paper were meant as the basis of a verbal and oral narration, a verbalisation of pictures initiated by the adult, possibly imitated and rehearsed with him, then ultimately carried out by the child on his own: while induced to read aloud to himself a book open in front of him, the child reader stands as both the listener and independent producer, "voicer" of a home made, free style and unrecorded audiobook.

Books altogether are the means of mental representations transmitted by an author to a reader through a set of signs. As shown by Reader's response theory, a text gains meaning by the purposeful act of a reader reading and interpreting it. The relationship between reader and text is highly valued. It isn't just that texts do not exist without readers; it also implies that reading is not a one-way, bottom-up process, from the book and implied author to the reader; it is also a top-down process, as the reader himself produces mental representations of his own, based on his experiences or personal context, thus imposing or superimposing his response to the author's message: reading can be viewed as an individual reconstruction process within the constraint of a written text, a process that affects the text.

³² As stated in Paul Faucher's book, *A l'enseigne du Père Castor*, Paris, Flammarion, 1982, p. 34.

This is specially true for children's reading, not because we may see it as an interpretative community, but merely because of the child's cognitive way of reading : a physical, practical, functional, unconventional gesture of handling, relating to a book, that implies deciphering, decoding words and pictures, but also many other operations like touching, laughing, jumping, imagining, extrapolating, identifying to the characters, playing a part in the narrative ... Reading for a child is the means of self-construction, of building one's identity through a variety of methods among which consciously focusing to understand a specific story, an author's message or a book's meaning is a secondary issue. On the other hand, repetition, re-reading is a typical pattern and method of a satisfactory self-construction process which Père Castor's audiobooks respond to.

As Italo Calvino states in *Pourquoi lire les classiques*³³, "classics are those books about which one always says : I am re-reading it.. and never: I am reading it, those that constitute a valuable for those who have read and loved them as much as for those who postpone the pleasure to discover them fir the first time in better conditions; a classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say³⁴". Père Castor classics are classics according to Calvino's definition because they shape children's future experiences, providing examples, role-models, terms of comparison³⁵ and many other elements which remain active and influential for a long time, even when adults have forgotten a book read during childhood. Also because they are never just read for once and for good but always read, told, narrated, leafed, thumbed, flicked, glanced through again and again and transmitted from one generation to the other. Reading a favorite story for a child is repetitive process of re-reading it or, before reading skills are mastered, a process of re-hearing it again and again

³³ Italo Calvino, *Perchè leggere i classici*, Mondadori, 1991, french translation *Pourquoi lire les classiques?*, Ed. du Seuil, 1984, 1995, p. 7-14.

³⁴ Our translation. *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

from a familiar voice which Père Castor's audiobooks indulge. The most obvious proof of it being the fact that at *L'heure joyeuse*, copies of Père Castor audiobooks are out of use and have to be renewed after being borrowed by only ten readers at the most: each reader or hearer must have listened to it extensively. Just as one likes playing again a favorite tune, young audiobook listeners like to play again a favorite story. Each hearing adds to the previous in order to build not just the child's general literacy but rather an "imaginary text"³⁶ that has become an intrinsic part of the child living and educational experience: it consists in the basic story itself progressively supplemented, superseded, enriched and transformed by the diversity of private or personal hearing sessions to which it has been submitted.

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Altogether audiobooks comply with the interest in developing the child's linguistic skills and his need for security, both emotional or affective and factual or concrete ; they are also meant to enhance his ability to think freely and by himself, to express tastes and judgment of his own. Thus, they also comply with a communicational approach of books for children, that is to say an approach that is not only based on a practical subject to object relationship, but on a pragmatic subject to subject relationship³⁷.

Moreover, the subject to subject, pragmatic relationship offered by the book is duplicated in the case of child's reading, by the adult's intervention or mediation : to non reading infants, books are identified as objects voiced out by their parents or surrounding adults; they first learn how to read by imitation, hold the book upright, even if upside down, follow black lines with their fingers

³⁶ A term proposed by Deborah Vlock quoted in M. Rubery's "Play it again Sam Weller", op. cit., p. 61.

³⁷ As defined by Daniel Bounoux in *Introduction aux Sciences de la communication*, La Découverte, Coll. Repères « Culture-communication », 1998, 2001, p. 9.

and produce accompanying sounds, from burble to phrases³⁸. More than that, they attach the book to the voice that propels it, sometimes touching the adult's throat as an intrinsic part of the device, and were it not for pictures, the album would appear as a record which requires a human player to be listened to.

Oddly enough, as Daniel Bounoux³⁹ notices, while the longlasting era of printed books, or "graphosphere"⁴⁰ is being replaced with the new order of videosphere, many fear the separation of culture from print and print culture. Yet, the printed book, inky-black on white, with its regular, justified lines of type-settings and Block letters, is among the most severe, stern, ways of representation, one that retains little of the sensory aspects of oral speech. The reader is isolated and as *less is more*⁴¹ the sensorial soustraction and typographic austerity of the book is the means of a mental, if not spiritual liberation: his consciousness focuses on the inner message of the book, enticing him to develop an individual analysis, a critical approach of knowledge, an ability to imagine, extract and recompose a world from the black and white symbols.

Obviously, children's books tend to alleviate this sense of isolation and lack of outside seduction: attractive, colourful covers and pictures break the linear, rigid succession of words to be read and allow a free, random, multidirectional circulation of the eye on the visible space of the page. Texts and pictures congregate and combine each other in children's picture and illustrated books to sustain the child mental representations. Pictures and illustrations also compensate for the relative dryness of the printed text and as the impact of images is stronger, its potential danger or affect greater for a young sensitive mind, they also tend to represent situations and characters in a milder or metaphoric way. While the third meaning thus created may be specific to each individual reader, the general purpose is to convey a sense of security, to relate

³⁸ *L'enfant lecteur*, Rolande Causse (dir.), Ed. Autrement, 1988, p. 71.

³⁹ « L'explosion communicationnelle », *Ibid.*, p. 92-93.

⁴⁰ As defined by Régis Debray in *Cours de médiologie générale*, Gallimard, coll. Textes essentiels, Paris, 1991.

⁴¹ As Nicholas Negroponte, after Mies Van der Rohe, used to say.

the child to a circumscribed world wherein one feels at home and where reality only enters drop by drop.

Children audiobooks operates accordingly. While one could take for granted that a decrease in reading abilities, time or taste rates one among specific conditions attached to the success of contemporary audiobooks, children's reading studied through the consideration of its real or imaginary environment and goal, bring forward unexpected findings about how and when young readers resort to audiobooks rather than to print, or to both audiobooks and print.

First, children's audiobooks, as other new technology of transmission operate as a filter: they create an intermediary reality, neither inside nor outside⁴². Second, they relay and supplement traditional print works: the voice is an indicator of the transmitter's body that pilots the message and counteracts abstraction ; the illusion of a presence, of direct, albeit deferred oral speech, adds to the seductive, soothing effect of the pictures on the attached booklet.

Third, audiobooks exercise the auditory imagination⁴³ because they restore or replicate a communicational and relational experience that is intrinsic to the child's primary narrative experience or to an acquired experience wherein knowledge, culture, imagination are linked, relayed and transmitted by way of the book. One could object that, as a matter of fact, while this must have been the primary motive for the audiobook series, social studies tend to show that the practice of reading aloud a book to children or vocally narrate a story is not so much in use as before; one of the reasons involved being children's early access to a diversity of listening, watching, interactive playful devices. Yet, technics and technical objects remain social connections, albeit as surrogate, and social

⁴² Daniel Bounoux, *Introduction aux Sciences de la communication, op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁴³ The expression is borrowed from a presentation by Dr Joy Alexander, Queen's University, Belfast, "Audio books and young people: exercising the auditory imagination", The Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature, 2010 Conference: 'Sound Image Text', 5th & 6th March 2010, Arts Block, Trinity College, Dublin 2.

relationships are shaped and conducted by technical devices⁴⁴: indeed, as we have seen with examples from Père Castor's Classiques albums in audible versions, audiobooks enhance the relational function and purpose of the album rather than diminish it, despite the lack of a real body voicing out the story. As suggested by Matthew Rubery⁴⁵, hearing a book through an audiobook has to do with the "Perpetual immediacy" recommended by actor Barbara Rosenblat "to recreate as far as possible the childhood experience of hearing stories read aloud⁴⁶" and it "has been described in synaesthetic terms through an aphorism formulated by Murray Schafer; "hearing is a way of touching at a distance"⁴⁷".

Fourth, resorting to audiobooks is not the way in which "our age translates itself back into the oral and auditory modes because of the electronic pressure of simultaneity⁴⁸." On the contrary, it is precisely the electronic pressure of simultaneity that sustains the resort to audiobooks for children: reading a printed book is an activity of its own that excludes doing something (except listening to music in the background); listening to an audiobook can be done along many other tasks or endeavours, from travelling, walking, drawing, cooking, playing to... reading another book or printed material! Although this takes us afar from Père Castor Classiques, which are short, "minutes" album (from 5 to 8 minutes at the most) for younger children dedicated to story time and intense listening, a study led by a leading french documentation center and children's literature library⁴⁹ with a consistent children's audiobook section, reveals that many heavy

⁴⁴ Daniel Bounoux, "Contenir le réel", *Introduction aux sciences de la communication*, La Découverte, Paris, 2001, p. 70.

⁴⁵ M. Rubery, "Play it again, Sam Weller", *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁴⁶ Quoted by M. Rubery, *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Quoted by M. Rubery, *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ McLuhan, M (1962) *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 72.

⁴⁹ *La Joie par les livres*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, is now a section in the Art and Literature department of la Bibliothèque nationale de France. It was founded in 1964 by a private sponsor. Its goal is to promote a quality children's literature; to provide documentation, information, resources and support for professionals in education and various branches of book trade and culture; to encourage children's access to books and reading; to develop children's libraries in France and outside, including developing countries. *L'Heure Joyeuse*, Paris (5^e) is the first french library devoted to Children's library. It was founded in 1924 after an american model by Mrs John L. Griffiths, then chair of the *Book Committee on Children's Libraries (founded in 1918)*. In 1925, it became a regional french library and retains rich archives, among which the archives

audiobook consumers tend to read a print book or rather a comics while simultaneously listening to an unrelated story on audiobook.

Fifth, as Joy Alexander⁵⁰ finds in her own survey of pupil's response to audiobooks, 39% of 120 1st and 2nd years, 12% of 65 3rd and 4th years, 22% of 125 sixth-formers said they currently listened to audiobooks, while respectively 38% and 48% of the two latter groups said they had been in the past and might prefer print. Asked about the merits and limits of specific titles (H. G. Wells' *The War of the worlds*, Steinberg's *Spoon face*, and what they liked or didn't like about the experience, their answers show a strong interest in the acoustic medium – “ it is *like other people reading for me.*”, *I liked the way it sounded so realistic.*”, “*I liked it because it sounded so believable.*”, “*I enjoyed it because it seemed very real and even though it was on the radio you could picture nearly everything.*”, “*I liked it very much. I thought it was very life-like and very interesting to listen to it.*”, “*It was fun to listen to.*” Yet they point to an equally and reverse preference for reading print because of negative aspects of the audible version: “*I don't really enjoy it because they don't sound the way I think they do.*”, “*I like to read in my mind and create my own voices for characters.*”, “*I would prefer reading a book at your own speed.*”, “*I listened to them in primary school and I found them boring. It is much better to read it yourself.*” While some answers illustrate hearing habits and practices of new generations – “*You can just concentrate on listening.*”-, or current sense that reading print requires an effort anybody is not likely to provide - “*I don't like reading – only if it's a good book. Listening was better.*”, it is intriguing to find

retracing the history of L'Education Nouvelle (1899-1939), movement which inspired Paul Faucher's Père Castor publishing work.

⁵⁰ Dr Joy Alexander, Queen's University, Belfast, “Audio books and young people: exercising the auditory imagination”, The Irish Society for the Study of Children's Literature, 2010 Conference: ‘Sound Image Text’, 5th & 6th March 2010, Arts Block, Trinity College, Dublin 2. The survey was conducted in 2009.

suggestion that something might be lost in the audiobook experience⁵¹; that what they call “listening” might in fact be solely “hearing”, and that it may impair children’s imaginary skills : “*I feel listening to a story you need a good imagination. I probably would like reading better.*”

So altogether audiobooks still exercise the auditory imagination by inducing the transient state of mind and distant approach to reality that was brought about before by the sole printed books.

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These findings finally point to a distinctive purpose of reading and specially child’s reading which both audiobooks and print books tend to : reading or hearing books as play.

For children reading is not just a leisure but a game. It may occupy from a small to the main part of their playing time. This is also true for many adults for whom it may replace playful activities such as playing cards, crosswords, handcrafts... It is a game with literary effect as suggested by several critics⁵², yet no one had really attempted a scientific approach of this game until Michel Picard’s book *La lecture comme jeu*⁵³. Picard observes that reading for children is often associated with writing and drawing, but his analysis goes beyond the case of children’s reading and resorts to various theories to present reading as a game obeying a set of rules and to outline the issue and effects of reading experiences considered as playing, playful experiences. Although it would decidedly be quite an interesting track to follow and apply to specific cases of

⁵¹ As one of the essay’s reviewer pointfully suggests “some important things about reading might be lost in the audiobook experience, whatever the gains in vividness and presence. One of the toughest issues is the question of the reader’s passivity in relation to recorded as opposed to printed texts. One contributor, David E. Beard, even intimates that “the process of listening to an audio book (rather than reading a printed book) actually makes us less able to grapple with the complexity of ideas possible in the text; we enter into those newly possible social relationships at a deficit.”

⁵² R. Barthes, *Plaisir du texte*, Seuil, 1973, rééd. Points 1982, p. 11 ; Holland, Norman, *The Dynamics of Literary response*, NY, Norton, Oxford University Press, 1968 ; « Game, play, literature », *Yale French Studies*, special issue, Yale University, New Haven Connecticut, 1968...

⁵³ M. Picard, *La Lecture comme jeu*, coll. « Critique », Minuit, 1986.

audiobooks and children's audiobooks in particular, it is an untimely purpose for this paper to enter at this stage. Let us simply lay out its first, basic guiding principles after Johan Huizinga's infamous essay on play⁵⁴. Trying to understand play as a cultural factor in life, Huizinga observes that "the great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start⁵⁵" (such as language which is playing with this wondrous nominative faculty, playing upon words); that "although it is a non materialistic activity it has no moral function⁵⁶" yet cannot altogether be included in the realms of the aesthetic, despite many and close links to beauty: So Huizinga leaves it at that "play is a function of the living, but is not susceptible of exact definition either logically, biologically or aesthetically⁵⁷".

Significantly enough for our understanding of book reading/hearing as play, Huizinga explains his tactful approach to the notion of play by stating that one should "take play as the player himself takes it: in its primary significance⁵⁸", and develops his statement with an example close to book and storytelling experiences: "If we find that play is based on the manipulation of certain images, on a certain "imagination" of reality (i.e. its conversion into images), then our main concern will be to grasp the value and significance of these images and their "imagination". Yet, while the latter example equally relates to both print and audiobook, it seems more accurate to apply to book hearing – rather than its elder book reading – and to children's audiobooks, Huizinga's definition and approach of play: – a free act, felt as "fictitious" and remote from daily life, yet able to fully absorb the player, orderly accomplished

⁵⁴ Picard himself recalls Huizinga as a starting point of his essay : Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens - Essai sur la fonction sociale du jeu* (1938), Gallimard, « Les Essais » 1951, rééd. 1976, trad. C. Sérésia, p.35. We will refer to the english version : *Homo ludens*, A study of the play element in culture, 1938, Routledge and Kegan, 1949, Routledge, London, 2002.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

in a circumscribed time and space, and obeying fixed rules, and inducing group relationships often surrounded with mystery.

Along Huizinga's line of reasoning, children's audiobooks as middle or low brow cultural objects (despite highbrow quality of texts and literature might convey) belong to the game-play category. They consist in a voluntary activity, done at leisure, during free time. Whether they are or not considered educational by parents and educators who provide them as part of a nurturing program to develop necessary faculties, audiobooks are not bound up with notions of obligations or duty. They imply "stepping out "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition of its own⁵⁹": as every child, says Huizinga, knows perfectly well that he is "only" pretending, the conjuring effect of technics emitting, receiving a recorded voice sustains the pretense. Yet, as for play, "that doesn't prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness with an absorption, a devotion, that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome "only" feeling.⁶⁰" Most of all they are enjoyable: "The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need⁶¹."

What then is the value of playing Père Castor's audiobooks? They remain special editions, as they are restricted to the Classiques Albums series. With time and social changes, they have become literary and also historical landmarks. In today's urban societies they relate to a rural life that children no longer know about. Seemingly oldfashioned they remain plausible; they exercise the reader's ability to imagine; they still provide a reassuring visual, narrative, acoustic context; eventually they convey a message of hope and a sense of responsibility for the child's life and endeavour. The maternal, somehow naïve

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

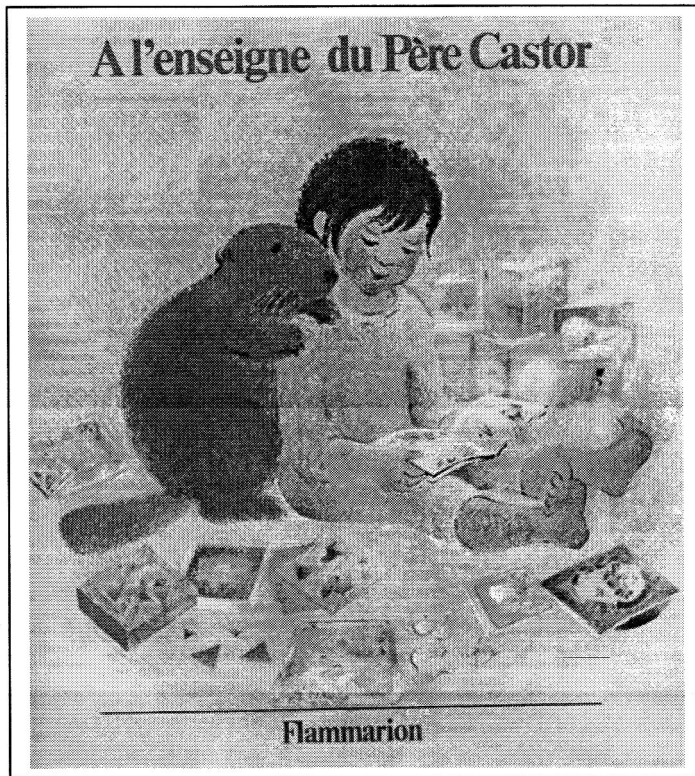
⁶¹ *Ibid.*

point of view they adopt strongly contrasts with present children's series wherein young readers are confronted with the same harsh contemporaneous issues themselves and adults are facing in real life. The idea that books should allow and help children to grow autonomous in a protected environment, adapted to their scale and size and needs is a distinctive feature of Père Castor's and one that distinguishes his editorial approach from other major contributors to quality literature for children; even from François Ruy-Vidal and Harlin Quist who appeared as distant and original followers of Père Castor's line of thinking in the 70ies and 80ies. Yet, it is remarkable to observe that despite or possibly because of the sense of affective security and the surraneous setting of fictions which contradict present narrative and living experiences of XXIst century children, Père Castor's fiction still offer a window to the world. How little its likeness to the current world heavily portrayed and documented in today's medias the world in Père Castor's audiobooks remains valid : it is an accurate understanding of children's lasting exposure, one generation after the other, to an adult surrounding, an unknown, sometimes disturbing or harsh reality; and retains a sound philosophical value in strengthening the child while suggesting both resistance and enthusiasm.

Père Castor audiobooks have inherited from educational theories which they now broadcast. They relay a conventional and affective ritual of bedtime storytelling. While the ritual is revisited by technical tools, it is not completely altered nor disembodied. An obvious proof being that the series's leading title *Michka* displays the founding father - Père Castor-Paul Faucher's very own voice⁶²! On the contrary, while pictures in print albums have aged, voices in audiobooks update and regenerate stories and a cultural phenomenon of

⁶² Probably recorded as part of the tests conducted in l'Atelier du Père Castor, before his death in 1967.

storyhearing or voicing over the child's shoulder which answers the needs and Habits of the Heart⁶³.



Brigitte Ouvry-Vial

⁶³ Borrowed on purpose from the title *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, U. of California Press, 1985.