

Hybrid books. Merged audiovisual literature for children

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Abstract

The production and consumption of audiobooks for children have risen, bringing all sorts of related audio publications into the spotlight. The article defines and discusses hybrid books, i.e. audiobooks published jointly with a visual text either in print or in digital format. In the article I argue that hybrid books have developed both as a format in their own right and as constantly changing transmedial products. Hybrid books have not only ceaselessly interacted with book publishing but also with movies, TV shows, comic magazines, radio, drama, and music. Hybrid books for children are historically, as well as in the present, deeply embedded in the media industry rather than solely in book publishing. The article emphasizes that hybrid books have multisensorial qualities which include listening, reading, looking at pictures, and tactility. Several media concepts are brought in to address different aspects of hybrid books: remediation, multimodality, transmedial storytelling, and adaptation, all of which are highly relevant. The development of digital hybrid books has emphasized the medial character of contemporary literature for children.

Keywords

Audiobooks, children's book history, digital publishing, hybrid books

Introduction

In the last decade the book market in Sweden has seen a rapidly growing production of audiobooks, a plethora of new subscribers to book-streaming services, and audio has become the business' new black (Tattersall Wallin 2021; Berglund & Steiner 2021; Wikberg 2022). The shift has created quite a stir in the trade and public discourse, but there is one segment where audiobooks have been in continuous production and popularity – audio for children. Children's literary audio goes back to the advent of recording and, throughout the twentieth century, has adapted to technology and material formats and succeeded in remaining relevant (Paulsson 2006; Steiner & Berglund 2022). Within

the large variety of audio formats, one has been a combination of audio and print – a hybrid audiobook – published as a merged audio-visual, and often multisensorial, literature. This article discusses this particular blend of media for children in Sweden and I argue that hybrid books represent both historically as well as in the present a node for a particular children's media culture mashing audio with literature as well as print. With a book-historical and publishing studies perspective I will address aspects of children's book publishing in Sweden, its links to other media, as well as media formats of hybrid books.

Just before Christmas 2017, Nextory, a Swedish book-streaming service, officially

launched a “Read & Listen” section for children. The Read & Listen books were e-picture books with an audio track to be consumed in a digital environment. Nextory’s press release emphasized the newness of the product: “A better and more vivid reading experience for children” (Nextory, 2017). Nextory also suggested that their hybrids could help adults in the reading aloud to children and bring back the moment of listening to literature to everyday family life. There are many aspects of these statements to unpick; the newness of hybrid books, the idea of an extended e-book with other media elements, and can these books solve a general lack of parents reading aloud? First of all, children’s books as a combination of text, audio and illustrations are not a new thing but are merely presented as such. Secondly, the hybrid digital book is not only a “vivid” experience but a complex multimedial and multisensorial one to be understood in its own form. Thirdly, audiobooks can hardly replace parental reading, which provides physical presence, intimacy, and talking about literature.

Nonetheless, there are many aspects of hybrid books for children historically as well as in the present that elicit analysis and the digital format has made the concept yet again modern, bringing all sorts of media questions into the spotlight.

Definition and background

A hybrid book is a concept used in this article to encapsulate a publishing phenomenon of books for children that is both an audio recording and a physical print book or a digital visual version. Technology, materiality, and media formats have changed over time, but certain traits have remained constant. I define the hybrid book as an audio-recorded story published and sold commercially, fused with a visual text version. The particular “visual/aural alignment” brings the audio and the visual versions together into a unity (St. Claire 2022). In order to historically track the many different tech-

nological formats and shapes in which hybrid books have been produced, it is useful to differ between essential and possible components. The *essential* elements of a hybrid audiobook are by my definition an audio recording as well as a visual text. These necessary elements can be accompanied with *possible* features, or additions, that are either aural (sound effects and music) or visual (illustrations, photos, maps, moving images). It is the convergence of two sensory modalities – the aural and the visual – that make up the hybrid book. Furthermore, the aural and the visual is packaged together as a joint work in a physical or a digital format. As long as hybrid books were only physical, the audio and text were separated on vinyl, cassette, or CD together with a printed book or booklet. With digital versions, hybrid books have fused into one unit that is experienced both by ear and by eye.

Hybrid books can, as above definition suggest, be all sorts of items; a book, a vinyl record, a CD. Justin St. Claire argues for a differentiation between hybrid audiobooks and readalong media according to which the hybrid is a more advanced product created specifically for the format, while the readalong, according to him, is a print book that has been recorded without any additions or changes (2020, p. 673–674). There are differences between qualities and ambitions among published hybrids; however, it is not possible to draw distinct dividing lines based on a relation to a print original. Many hybrid books are readalongs, though they often contain material that are additions to the original text, for example music or illustrations. What is more, the material and practical differences between audio and visual versions are explicit on so many levels. Thus, while the term readalong is used commonly both commercially and for didactic purposes, it is not useful as a concept to understand the particularities of the format.

In order to grasp the complex relationship between audio recordings and literature, *remediation*, in Jay David Bolter and Ri-

chard Grusin's terminology (1999), is a useful way to address how new media is introduced by linking it to older, pre-established media. The audiobook is a textbook example of such a process as it was early on linked to the printed book. Using the concept of remediation as a way to fathom a tangled history of relations between children's literature, audio formats such as radio and records, print book publishing, print technology, media industry developments, and children's culture. This places hybrid books for children at the centre of a long media shift. It is also a book-historical approach to children's literature, one that has been shown by Hannah Field in *Playing with the Book* (2019) to be a productive slant to appreciate children's literature as both material objects and literary content. Book history perspectives offer a way to comprehend how the hybrid books combine media and technology, literature and illustrations, audio, and physical objects.

The fusion of print book and audio recording can be traced back to the introduction of the phonograph and an aspiration to establish and recognize the new medium in the early twentieth century. At its commercial outset, the phonographic record was a new technology and in order to become familiar and put to use, producers had to create an interest. This was done by linking it to the established media – the book, naming the recordings “talking books”. Books were respectable and brought audio recordings into a realm of education, knowledge, and reading. In his overview of audiobooks, Matthew Rubery has pointed out that “the discourse of recorded sound developed in relation to print media” (2013, p. 215). In this sense, the early recorded literary texts were seen as books rather than records. The point is that at the advent of the recorded sound there was already a strong link to literature. The hybrid book – including both audio and print – was thus a rather given mix in the early phase. Justin St. Claire has argued that in the early twentieth century the rela-

tion between print book, literature and phonographic recordings can “be understood as occasioning a dynamic state of media co-incidence” (2018, p. 357). In the core of media mix was children's literature being transformed into a combination of audio and print.

The first large-scale production of hybrid books was the Victor Phonograph Company's series of 78 rpm records Bubble Books from 1917 in the United States and the United Kingdom (Burkey, 2013). At the outset, the company name was the Victor Talking Machine Company, which elucidates that their production was recordings of speech rather than of music (Kenney, 1999, p. 45). Bubble Books bore the slogan “The books that sing” and introduced a paper booklet with text and pictures and an audio track of the story and additional songs. Bubble Books was a success as it sold millions of copies between 1917 and 1930 (Smith, 2010, p. 91). That the record industry included more than music has been thoroughly analysed by Jacob Smith in his book *Spoken Word* (2011), where he observes that “[t]he Bubble Books were the first book and record hybrids marketed to children and thus represent a pioneering instance of cross-media synergy between book publishing and the record industry.” (Smith, 2011, p. 19) Bubble books set the standard for hybrid books as records with a short (later longer) audio story published together with a booklet or fold-out cover with text and pictures.

The history of hybrid books for children in Sweden

Audiobooks for children in Sweden is a wider topic than this article with a focus on hybrid books can accommodate (audiobook history and contemporary market and consumption are covered in Paulsson 2006; Steiner 2021; Steiner & Berglund 2022). The hybrid book production for children in twentieth-century Sweden has had two main parallel strands; one was made up of transla-

tions produced mainly by Walt Disney Company, while the other is domestic Swedish production of a larger variety.

The first single example of a hybrid book in Sweden was published in 1933 by the organisation for teachers in Swedish (Modermållslärarnas förening) in their influential book series, *Barnbiblioteket Saga* (1899–1954). It was an adapted version of an 1895 children's story *Sagan om Pomperipossa med den långa näsan* [The Story of Pomperipossa with the long nose] by pseudonym Falstaff Fakir (Axel Wallengren). The 78 rpm record was published with a fold-out cover of six pages with multicolour print and whereas it was unique, the publication validates how early the hybrids were introduced (Paulsson, 2006, p. 57). After this specific publication there has been a continuous, albeit small, stream of hybrid books being produced.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Sagoton published a series called *Den talande sagaboken* [The Talking Book of Tales], a mix of folk tales and newly written and illustrated works. Among the latter was for example Greta Hellqvist's *Trollet Luffendrul* (1947) which is an original story published on 78 rpm with a four-page cover with illustrations by Einar Norelius. Sagoton mostly used folktales and nursery rhymes for their records, e.g. *Rödluvan* [Little Red Riding Hood] (1945) and *Snövit* [Snow White] (1945) that were also illustrated by Einar Norelius. Ever since this 1940s Sagoton series the use of oral traditional tales, music, and nursery rhymes has become a staple in hybrid publishing. It has been a lively tradition with later examples such as the series *Barnkammarboken* [The Nursery Book] from 1989 and *Min skattkammare* [My Treasure Chest] from 1997. In a more recent version, *Den sjungande barnkammarboken* [The Singing Nursery Book] (2016) featured a built-in audio player in the print book.

Between 1960 and 1980 the primary producer of hybrid books in Sweden was the Walt Disney company. Their Readalongs

were common already in the 1930s in the United States and were introduced in Sweden in the 1960s. The Disney Readalongs were largely a combination of edited audio tracks from their movies and TV series published on vinyl records and cassettes (later also on CD) together with a booklet with the same text and with illustrations. In the 1960s Disney began producing Readalongs for the Swedish market, e.g. *The Jungle Book* (LP, 1967) and *Lady and the Tramp* (LP, 1967). Initially the series was called Lill-LP [Mini-LP] and had a cover text urging children to look, listen, read, and sing (Paulsson, 2006, p. 183; Steiner & Berglund 2022, p. 4). These imperatives used more or less in the same manner for decades implicating a complex audio-visual interactive experience engaging a child reader. Until the year 2000 Walt Disney produced so-called Musiksaga [music stories] on record, cassette and eventually CD. Likewise, these originated from movies or TV shows, e.g. *The Fox and the Hound* (LP, 1981) and *The Great Mouse Detective* (LP, 1986). The concept name Musiksaga became a label adhered to all Disney audiobooks whether the products included music or not (the concept was later licensed to the publisher Egmont). The latter company published and marketed material from several different producers and applied the term Musiksaga to film and TV adaptations regardless of music elements and/or original publisher. The Musiksaga were almost always adaptations of audio-visual media and it can thus be questioned whether they are to be defined as books or not. The proposed definition of a hybrid book – a combination of audio with a visual format, in this case a booklet – gives them a place in a book market context.

The Walt Disney company's domination of the hybrid book market is no revelation as it was an inexpensive way to create a broader range of products from their already strong children's brands. The multimedia and multichannel character of the Walt Disney company made spin offs and adaptations

into hybrid books an attractive proposition.¹ As a commercially leading producer of children's culture in North America and Europe, their influence was also strong in the publishing sector. With the growth of LP production in the 1970s, what was called "book-and-audio sets" become common (Jones, 2020, p. 254) and hybrid books soon morphed into cassettes, CDs, and eventually e-books.

As the above examples have shown, hybrid books have been published in Swedish ever since the 1940s. These have varied in technology from vinyl, cassettes, and CDs with text on the album cover (often fold-out) or a leaflet in a CD. In all these cases, however, the printed version was subordinate to the recording, but in the 2000s new kinds of hybrids were published that had a print book as the main item with an included CD. The publisher Rabén & Sjögren made a number of "Read and Listen" books of mostly well-known classics by for example Astrid Lindgren, but also of newer popular titles such as Pija Lindenbaum, *Bridget and the Grey Wolves* (print 2000, print + CD 2006). The position and cultural status of Rabén & Sjögren in combination with the high-quality titles placed the series in a new league and in certain ways projected the coming development of a more varied hybrid production.

The digital hybrid book and its media implications

With digital production of audiobooks, hybrids have become more common. In 2014, the above-mentioned publishing house Rabén & Sjögren launched a series of e-picture-books with audio, which was the beginning of a new kind of hybrid books adapted to streaming services, smartphones and tablets available both for domestic and educational use (Steiner & Berglund 2022). The digital hybrid books have mostly been adaptations of either a print book or of another media such as film or TV. Some researchers

(e.g. Have & Stougaard Pedersen, 2019, p. 2) claim that an audiobook is defined by its relation to a prior print version, which would exclude adaptations from other media. In the case of the hybrid book, however, I would argue that the definition of an aural and visual alignment distributed in a book-market channel, whether bookstore or streaming service, supersedes the question of whether the original version was a book or not.

Literary adaptations, says Margret Mackey, come in many shapes and children move comfortably between different formats. Whereas a spin-off, an audio track, and different versions of a children's story might be a commercialization of children's culture, it is also a way for children to immerse themselves (Mackey, 2010a; Taxel, 2010). The effortless moving between media that children display is underpinned in adaptation theory. For example, Linda Hutcheon argues that one of the main pleasures of adaptations "comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 4). Many children enjoy listening to the same story over and over again. If that story is adapted to a film or an audiobook, it only offers more options. A hybrid book proffers immersive qualities as it can be read, listened to as well as visually and physically experienced. In a context where children easily move between book, film, music, websites, apps, etc. they are often unaware of media differences and affordances at the same time as they are competent users of different media. As Margret Mackey notes, it is important to observe "the highly intertextual and intermedial nature of contemporary children's literary attention" (2017, p. 451).

On the other hand, hybrid books have mostly been based on a print original and are adaptations of older titles – what in the book business is termed backlist. Copyright holders, whether they are authors or publishing houses, will use characters, concepts

and previous production in a variety of media products, where the hybrid book is one of several formats. Content has become the most sought-after asset in the modern media world, placing literature in the front row of the contemporary media industry. Children's books are no exception and Margaret Mackey has emphasized the corporate ownership of copyright and licensing that are central to the merchandizing of picturebook texts (Mackey, 1998).

Copyright is obviously imperative in terms of what gets published by whom, but the system feeds readers and culture consumers wanting what is already known. That means that reader recognition is essential to create interest in books or characters. As research on audiobooks published in series has shown, characters, storyline and popular titles will attract readers to other titles in a series or by a particular author (Berglund & Steiner, 2021). In publishing hybrid books, it is the well-known that is chosen – established book series, popular characters, and familiar authors. That is the case whether it is a Disney film or strong Swedish brands such as the comic character Bamse.

All hybrid book examples I have been able to identify have included illustrations. One explanation might be simply that the target group, young children, will to a lesser degree be able to read for themselves. Furthermore, picturebooks are most often inclusive in a use of narrative techniques and elements such as sound, music, or moving images. As Ghada Al-Yaqout and Maria Nikolajeva has noted: “[t]he multimodal nature of picturebooks, that so far has predominantly implied a combination of the verbal and the visual modes, is expanding to include auditory, tactile, and performative dimensions.” (Al-Yaqout & Nikolajeva, 2015) The digital books that they are referring to, have come to include audio with performative features not the least through the usage of actors, sound effects, and music.

Hybrid books for children are historically, as well as in the present, deeply embedded

in the media industry rather than solely in book publishing. At the same time, publishing for children as a business has been developed by traditional book publishers, music producers, and large media conglomerates alike. That children's books have become part of the larger transmedia world is no surprise. Henry Jenkins defines a ‘transmedia story’ as one that “unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins, 2006: pp. 95–96). Particularly Walt Disney's hybrid books and contemporary digital audio picturebooks fit in as examples of transmedia performance.

Among the hybrid books published in Sweden, Disney's production in particular belongs to an increasing merchandizing of children's culture. According to Naomi Hamer the nature of picturebook merchandizing changed after 2000, “with the increased influence of digital technologies and multimedia franchising practices” (Hamer, 2017, p. 505). Picturebooks, says Hamer, may be the basis of a franchise when there are popular brand characters or be a merchandise within another franchise. Almost all hybrid books belong to the latter as they are a part of a larger franchise, and are rarely original (Hamer, 2017, p. 505).

Merging voice, sound, text, and illustrations

Voice and orality, as Walter Ong has shown, is the origin of literature, whether as a mode of performing text, as a metaphor, or as consumption. Ong argues that orality has been underestimated regardless of it being an essential part of our literary tradition (Ong, 1982). There is, however, a long-standing opposition between literature/literacy and orality (Havelock 1986) which has been stirred up yet again by the recent audiobook boom. Researchers such as Naomi Baron (2021) argue that audiobooks are not even to be regarded as part of reading and book culture. A division between literature and oral

storytelling can be set up on a practical empirical level as acts of consumption differ. Yet it requires a rigid definition as production and even consumption will merge voice, sound, text, and illustrations. The oral and the visual are mutually dependent. In 2003, the Canadian researcher Margaret Mackey deliberated the future of digital literature for children: “what happens when print and audio are married? Does one extend, contradict, or nuance the other, as words and pictures may do?” (Mackey, 2003, p. 10) The questions are charged with a potent multimodality of text and images in children’s literature. Digital publishing has evidently changed hybrid books and, as predicted by Mackey, audio, words and images often extend, contradict and nuance one another. The multimodal dimensions of digital hybrids also complement, challenge and in extension have created new forms of children’s literature.

Noticeably, most hybrid books include illustrations that emanate either from an original print picturebook or from a film and TV show. Within picturebook research the multimodal and intermedial character of the printed picturebook has long been observed as a characteristic trait. It has been argued that the printed picturebook is a form of text-illustrations-sound as it implicitly includes someone reading aloud to the child. The combination of all three elements is both present in individual works and in dialogue with other media. Nina Christensen makes the case, in an article on the transformation of picturebooks, that the dual character of multimedia communications within a work and with other media has been brought to the fore by digital technology (2014, p. 7).

The human sensory components of reading are emphasized in hybrid books – whether in physical or digital format – as a child listens, reads and looks at the pictures at the same time. Linking reading, literacy, play to learn and education to audiobooks and children’s book publishing is not a new

phenomenon. As early as the 1910s Bubble Books used ideas of education in the home in their marketing strategy (Smith, 2011, p. 25). The suggestion was then, as also was visible in the 2017 ad from Nextory, to promote playtime as a way to learn. The unique multisensorial qualities of hybrid books merge the aural and the visual and thus negate a strong differentiation between reading and listening.

Conclusion

In the article I have proposed a definition of the hybrid book as an audio-recorded story integrated with a text version that is published and sold commercially. Furthermore, the audio track and the visual text are to be regarded as essential elements of the hybrid books, but these can be supplemented by possible features, e.g. music, sound effects, illustrations, and moving images. Hybrid books for children follow technological innovations and have been palatably adaptable – 78 rpm shellac, 45 and 33 rpm vinyl, cassette, CD, and Epub3. In a recent article discussing definitions of a book the authors argue that “[l]istening to an audiobook is (strictly) not reading as you are not using the part of your brain that decodes the meaning residing in the graphic signs that make up the text.” (Kovac et al, 2019, p. 323) I would argue that hybrid books indicate that there is a more complex media production than either print or audio. For example, a child listening to an audio version while following pictures and text will most likely engage in the graphic signs at the same time. Another example are digital hybrid books that conflate e-books, audiobooks, and picturebooks. Kovac et al. draw the conclusion that an audiobook in “the hierarchy of the book” is far from a print book but, as I have shown in this article, that would be to oversimplify matters. Instead, there is reason to regard print/audio/digital as interdependent. Other researchers have emphasized “differing affordances” (Mackey 2010b, p. 116) as

a possible approach to audiobooks, and another method is to pinpoint alignments, how the visual and the aural reflect or deflect one another.

Following the history of hybrid books conjures book-historical perspectives on children's literature in which books are a part of a broader landscape of media and cultural production and consumption. Within publishing studies, it has long been clear that books cannot be understood as solitary objects, but rather have to be recognized in a larger context of culture and media. The paratexts of hybrid books – physical copies of vinyl records, leaflets with illustrations, voices and sounds – are a fascinating source for studying children's literature. As objects they are linked to literature, music, theatre, radio, and even toys which all need to be brought into the analysis of particular publications.

The article has emphasized that hybrid books have multisensorial qualities which include listening, reading, looking at pictures, and tactility. Several media concepts have been brought up to address different aspects of hybrid books: remediation, multimodality, transmedia storytelling, and adaptation, which are all highly relevant. The development of digital hybrid books has emphasized the media character of contemporary literature for children. Seen in a wider perspective, hybrid books are a part of what has been termed “the digital reading condition”, which is multisensory and multimodal (Stougaard Pedersen, 2021, p. 287). One conclusion that can be drawn from studying hybrid books is that aural/visual alignment has long been a feature of children's literature, but it is a trait elevated in contemporary digital culture.

Note

- 1 Criticism towards the commercialization of the children's book market since the 1960s has been ample and clearly formulated in Diane Carver Sekeres, “The market child and branded fiction. A synergism of children's literature, consumer culture, and new literacies”, *Reading Research Quarterly*, (44:4) 2009, pp. 399–414.

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