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## Learning To Listen: Children's Books That Guide The Way

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**Author: Gary Ferrington**

Do you remember the special sounds of childhood? Perhaps in your mind's ear, you've recalled 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, rain on the roof, a distant voice, or the rustle of leaves. The acoustic environment in which we grow up can leave a lifetime impression on us. Sometimes these impressions are positive and others are not, unfortunately.

I always conduct a sound memory inventory in my university course on audio recording . Most students recall the pleasurable sound of the ocean, or the quiet of nature as acoustic memories from their childhood. One student, who seemed to be quite bitter, wrote about her aural memories of an abusive father and mother. So powerful were these sound remembrances that they continued to influence her life today.

Though most everyone has the ability to hear, few know how to effectively listen. Our ears are always open to sound events. Even while we sleep. But we need to learn to give meaning to the sounds we hear.

Childhood is a time for discovery and learning . It's especially a good time to learn effective listening skills.

Listening, when taught in school, it is usually included in a unit on listening comprehension. Little effort is made to teach children about listening to the sounds beyond those of speech communication.

There are so many natural and human made sounds that have potential meaning for us if learn to listen. The beeping of a backing truck signals caution. The ringing of a church bell calls the faithful to worship. There are whispering sounds such as the wind blowing across dried grasses. There are sounds which annoy us with their loudness, rhythm, or constant excess. All these sounds are part of the acoustic fabric of daily life.

Learning effective listening skills is something educators and parents can facilitate for children and youth. The following books encourage exploration and understanding of the soundscape. The list is in two parts. The first suggest books for children. The second is for parents, teachers, and youth who would like more information about the soundscape and how to develop listening skills.

### Books for Children

Showers, Paul. *The Listening Walk*. 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, illustrated by Alike Brandenberg, 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.

Morris, Winifred. *Just Listen*. New York: Atheneum, 1990

Tara is an urban child surround 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 a long walks to listen to the natural world. Grandma frequently whisper to Tara, " Now what do you hear?"

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

Brown, Margaret Wise. *The Noisy Book*. 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 acoustical 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 it is Muffin might be hearing and the answer is finally revealed at the end of the story.

Beech, Linda. *The Magic School Bus, In The Haunted Museum: A Book About Sound*. 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 echo's can be made. The children learn much about new sounds and how sounds are made. The next day the class performs its concert and Carlos, who had been chided for his invented instrument that makes only strange sounds, learns that the instrument will only play properly if he modifies it so it can vibrate the way it is suppose to.

Stafford, William. *The Animal That Drank Up Sound*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1992.

This story, illustrated by Debra Frasier, 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 that has come as the snowy white animal that brings a special quiet to the land.

Calaora, Lorraine, Karcovski-Bagen, Christopher. *Noisy and Quiet*, 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 quiet of a desolate beech and 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 which children can do to learn about the making of sound and quiet.

### Books for Teachers, Parents, and Adolescents

Hull, John M. *Touching The Rock: An Experience of Blindness*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

John Hull could once see the world around him. But an illness gradually took his sight away. His story is told in an illuminating book about listening to the soundscape. He effectively describes having to learn to listen and through listening discovers the unique qualities of the soundscape in which we all live.

Schafer, R. Murray. *A Sound Education*, Indian River, Ontario: Arcana Editions, 1992.

Schafer was the director of the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in the 1970's and is recognized not only as an exceptional Canadian composer, but one of the principle authors on sound and environment. In this book he provides teachers with 100 listening projects to do with students. All of these ear training exercises enhance the ability to listen to sound with an ever more critical ear.

Schafer, R. Murray. *Voices of Tyranny Temples of Silence*, Indian River, Ontario: Arcana Editions, 1993.

In this follow-up book to his classic 1977 book, *The Tuning Of The World*, Schafer continues to explore acoustic space. Of particular interest is his discussion about the "Glazed Soundscape". He notes in this section of the book that we live most of our lives in houses and buildings and look out through glazed windows at the world beyond. It is a world we can see, but not hear unless we throw open the window and let the sound inside. Unfortunately, we have permitted a noise based environment to be created beyond those windows. It is one few would want to let inside their home or workplace.

Schafer, R. Murray. *The Tuning Of The World: The Soundscape*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977. Recently re-published by Arcana Editions, Indian River, Ontario.

The classic book on acoustic ecology. Schafer explores and documents the work of the World Soundscape Project which lasted several years at Simon Fraser University. What once began as a research effort related to noise abatement, it soon turned into a study of the ecology of sound. How sound effects all living organisms, the history of sound in culture, and how we might give consideration to orchestrating our world environment is explored in this book of interest to sociologists, scientists, and artists. Educators must read this book in order to fully understand the potential for studying the acoustical ecology in which we all live.

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### About the author:

Gary Ferrington is a Senior Instructor in media literacy and technology at the University of Oregon's College of Education. He is currently a member of the WFAE restructuring committee and serves as the webmaster for the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology.

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