

King of Audio-Book Narrators Makes 'Readers' Swoon

By RODNEY HO

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LOS ANGELES—For the past seven years, Frank Muller's voice has held Doris Esposito hostage.

His commanding, mellifluous baritone followed her first in the car, then while she was cooking, then as a diversion during bouts of insomnia. "Friends were teasing me because I was listening to him so much," says Ms. Esposito, a 71-year-old retiree in Fairfield, Conn. "Sometimes I say, 'I took Frank Muller to bed last night.'"

Mr. Muller is emerging as the first superstar voice in the burgeoning world of audio books. A 46-year-old actor with flowing gray locks and a recently sprouted beard, he has recorded more than 140 books, including works by Pat Conroy, Larry McMurtry and several other bestsellers.

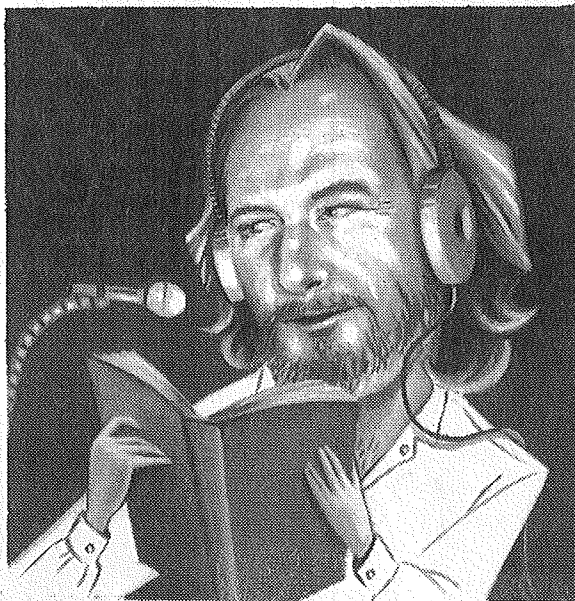
Mention his name to Susan Erickson, a San Bernardino, Calif., librarian and she swoons. "Oh, my hero," she sighs. "Ask any woman about him, especially his performance on 'The Horse Whisperer' by Nicholas Evans . . . His style, his voice, that story."

Even famed horror writer Stephen King now asks Mr. Muller to be his primary reader. When Mr. Muller's deep timbre resonates, "the blind will see, the lame will walk, and the deaf will hear," Mr. King once said.

The popularity of Mr. Muller and an elite group of other well-known narrators have helped make audio books a bright spot in the otherwise stagnant publishing world. Though they were once decried as a lazy way out of reading, sales of audio books exceeded \$2 billion last year, double the level five years ago, according to the Audio Publishers Association. Nearly one in five households own audio books, it estimates. In fact, the number of tapes sold for audio books now exceed those of music cassettes, which have been overtaken by compact disks.

The relatively young genre also has created new opportunities for struggling actors, with the most popular narrators in ever-greater demand. Michael Prichard, who has read more than 500 books since 1976 for Books on Tape Inc., receives cookies and cakes from fans at Christmas. Martin Jarvis, a British stage actor who had a small part in the film "Titanic," was cornered for 20 minutes during a 1995 cocktail party by Prince Charles, who praised him for his reading of Shakespeare.

For many narrators, recording is a labor of love for the written word. The pay is modest—typically \$100 to \$150 per



Michelle Chang

Frank Muller's 140-plus book readings include:

The Shawshank Redemption, Stephen King

The Street Lawyer, John Grisham

1984, George Orwell

Billy Budd, Herman Melville

Interview With the Vampire, Anne Rice

The Old Man and the Sea, Ernest Hemingway

The Hunt for Red October, Tom Clancy

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald

A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens

The Call of the Wild, Jack London

finished recorded hour. And recording can be so intense that few can do it for more than three hours a day. Many readers maintain day jobs. George Guidall ("Snow Falling on Cedars" and "The Iliad") has a small psychotherapy practice. Mr. Prichard ("Patriot Games" and "Fahrenheit 451,") is a theater accountant.

Mr. Muller doesn't need a day job. He has found audio books so rewarding that he built his own \$20,000 recording studio in his Upper Bel Air, Calif., home four years ago. He says he makes an annual income in the low six-figures, commanding well more than the average rate, and occasionally small royalties as well.

He says he loves the work: "I get to play all the parts. As an actor, it's an indulgence." Jokes his wife Erika, "He sits in a padded room and talks to himself."

It can feel that way. The recording studio, featuring a non-squeaking white plastic-molded chair, can become claustrophobic. There, Mr. Muller places a small pillow on his stomach to muffle noises. "It's amazing how many sounds come out of the human body," he notes.

Carol Stewart, who has done several hundred books from Louisville, Ky., explains that studios tend to be stuffy because air circulation is kept to a minimum to reduce background noise. "And sitting in a chair for four hours isn't fun," she says. "I can't even cross my legs because it changes the quality of my voice."

Frequently, she meets people who think narration is easy. "That drives me crazy," Ms. Stewart says. "They say, 'Oh, I read out loud to my kids.' I tell them, 'I balance my checkbook, but that doesn't make me a banker.'"

Finding good narrators is difficult, says Henry Trentman, owner of Recorded Books Inc., Prince Frederick, Md., who discovered Mr. Muller in 1979 when he was a no-name theater actor. "Maybe one in a 100 passes muster," he says.

Nearly all good readers have strong stage backgrounds, providing them with discipline, stamina and technique, Mr. Muller says. Even then, "some actors find reading incredibly frustrating," says veteran reader Barbara Rosenblat ("Terms of Endearment," "The House Next Door"). "They can't lift their eyebrow to show a wry expression. You have to do that purely with your voice. It's your only tool."

Many publishers woo big-name stars such as Brad Pitt and Kelsey Grammer to read audio books, in part to boost

Please Turn to Page B8, Column 6

Mellifluous Muller, Audio-Book Narrator, Makes Fans Swoon

Continued From Page B1

sales. Some authors such as Toni Morrison are successful readers of their own books and in cases of autobiographies, it is preferable. But most authors should leave it to professionals, listeners say. "It's grueling listening to Stephen King read his own books" because of his mispronunciations, mild lisp and monotone delivery, says Ric Johnson, an audio-book fan who maintains a Frank Muller Web site. Mr. King in fact recently commissioned Mr. Muller to re-record his Dark Tower series, which he had originally read himself.

In his studio recently, Mr. Muller methodically reads his way through "The Waste Lands," the third saga in the four-part Dark Tower series. A perfectionist, he rarely goes more than two sentences without retaping a line. He switches easily between Susannah, an African-American female character, and Eddie, a fast-talking Brooklynite.

"Ahead, a vast grilled barrier like a castle barbican swam out of the gloom. . . and beyond it, they caught the first glimpse of Blaine the Mono," Mr. Muller reads in deep, resonant tones from page 343. But he isn't satisfied until he repeats the sentence six times. He often edits the tape himself while he is recording, reversing and repeating, phrase by phrase.

Mr. Muller prides himself on accuracy. He will call reference libraries around the country to ensure he has a place pronounced correctly. While recording an Elmore Leonard crime novel, "Freaky Deaky," he says he had trouble with a street name. Since it was 10 p.m., he called the Detroit police department. "The cop even helped me get the accent right," he says.