

Interview with Dr. Emma Rodero

Professor, Department of Communication at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain,

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Welcome to the stories2music podcast. I'm your host, Kathy Matthes.

Think back to the last time you read a good story. More than likely, at some point, you stopped reading every word consciously and started experiencing the story in your imagination. The real world faded into the background and, sometime later, you returned to it. This phenomenon is called story immersion.

When we read stories, we aren't seeing the actual letters and words in our mind's eye. We see the images of what the words represent. One difference in hearing a story versus reading a story is that we don't have to go through the process of decoding every word on the page to see the images in our minds. Since humans have been listening to stories longer than they have been reading them, listening impacts the imagination and the emotions more directly. According to Dr. [Emma Rodero](#), audio is "one of the most intimate forms of media because you are constantly building your own images of the story in your mind."

That is one reason why audiobooks are a multi-billion dollar industry. This is also why the big audiobook publishers are making the move from single-narrator audiobooks to audio dramas with full cast actors, music and sound effects.

The key difference between audiobooks and audio dramas is how the listeners use their imaginations. In a narration-only book, the narrator is reading from a published book that was written to be read. The words tell the listeners what to see in their imaginations.

In an audio drama, the story is told only through dialogue, sound effects and music, so the written books often have to be rewritten into audio drama format. This format is similar to radio dramas, where the dialogue, music and sound effects create intense story immersion in the listener called theater of the mind.

In this podcast, we are fortunate to have Dr. Emma Rodero share her insights about audio dramas.

Dr. Rodero is a professor and researcher in the Department of Communication at Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona, Spain) where she teaches Communication Skills, Public Speaking, Media Psychology, and Sound Advertising. She is the director of the CCLab (for improving communication skills) at the Barcelona School of Management and Director of the Media Psychology Lab (UPF). With over a decade of experience in the radio industry, she is a speaker at international conferences, a voice-over artist and an author of more than ten books and seventy scientific papers. Her current research is on sound design for audiobooks.

Welcome, Dr. Rodero!

Dr. Rodero: Hi Kathy.

Kathy: Radio drama scripts use a specific format that cues the listener about the environment, which characters are speaking and what actions are being done (sound effects also help with these cues). Novels are not written to cue the listener in this way.

- **Should the full-cast audiobooks be rewritten as radio scripts to provide these cues? If not, is it harder for listeners to understand what is happening in the novel if it is read verbatim?**

Dr. Rodero: For me, absolutely yes, it's a positive response because, well, it's sound, and we know that when you are listening to an audio, regardless of the type of audio you are listening to, you need some cues, you need some strategies to understand well the content. It's not the same to read something or to listen to it. Of course, one of the main problems that we have when the voiceovers read audiobooks is that they don't have these cues. They don't have these elements which are especially oral language. It's not oral language, and meaning that in many cases it's very complicated to read something in this written language with no cues, with no rhetorical devices, with long, long, long, long sentences that are very complicated to process, so we need elements, different elements, when we are listening to a story and when we are reading the story, so for me, it's absolutely important.

That's the idea--to adapt, or to produce or to write the stories in a different way--to write the stories to be listened to, not to be read, which is what you find in a book. So for me, of course, the answer is yes. We need to change that.

It's something that is not new because the story it's repeating again the same ideas and the same initiatives. When radio was born, the stories or the programs, in many cases, were adaptations. For example, the most typical example is Orson Wells and the "War of the Worlds." It was a book, so it's an adaptation. Orson Welles didn't read the book. Orson Wells made a script especially for the representation for sound, so it's the main idea, but it's not a new idea. It's something that radio is making for I don't know how many years, so same idea.

Kathy: Yes, *War of the Worlds* is a great example of an adaptation of a book to a radio drama. It was so real that it supposedly caused a mass panic because it was presented as a news broadcast, so listeners believed it. It's interesting that you said it is not a new thing. Radio dramas (both the original ones and new ones) are experiencing a renaissance through podcasting, and audiobook publishers are doing full-cast audiobooks, so it seems like a new trend.

Kathy: Also, the strong emotional response to War of the Words is an example of “Theater of the Mind.” In Bob Leighton’s 2015 article, “Theater of the Mind Makes for Great Radio, Ads and Broadcasts,” he states: “theater of the mind is a powerful thing With radio, the listener imagines . . . and by imagining, participates And their imagination isn’t limited to visuals or images – but rather extends far beyond into feelings, emotions and all other senses.” The radio drama format enables listeners to experience immersion and transportation more thoroughly.

- **Do full-cast audiobooks create more immersion and transportation into the story than one-author narrated books?**

Dr. Rodero: Absolutely, yes. Well, as you know, we are now conducting in these days an experiment about that. We are going to test how the different elements work--how the music works, how the sound effects work, but I have a research about that previous in audio stories, but in this paper I tested what was the most important narrative that you use in an audio fiction, if the characters acting or a narrator--especially for creating more mental images and for involvement in these cases. It was these two variables that I studied. And, of course, we know—or the conclusion was very clear--when you want to create more mental images and to get the listener fully involved in the story, you have to use the characters—the characters acting--and not a narrator. To create more immersion and transportation into the story, it’s better to use characters, different voices. Well, we know that.

Kathy: Your current research is on sound design for audiobooks. In the AudioShaper’s 2014 article “What is Sound Design?”, they stated: “Sound design is the process of recording, acquiring, manipulating or generating audio elements Sound Designers understand the tremendous power of sound to aid the storytelling process, to transport an audience directly into the vortex of the performance and to make that performance a truly unforgettable experience.”

- **How can full-cast audiobooks use sound design to improve the quality of the work?**

Dr. Rodero: In a few months, I'm going to answer this question with an experiment that we are now conducting/running, but my hypotheses are that, of course, use of sound design, the use of sound effects, and the use of music in audiobooks is going to improve all the variables that we are studying. We are studying the creation of mental images. We are studying the engagement. We are studying the likes, dislikes and especially attention to the stories. My hypotheses are that if you use music and you use sound effects, along with different voices or different characters, you are going to increase all the variables, to approve the experience. It’s evident. It's logical.

Imagine you are listening to a book that sometimes is more than 8 hours or 10 hours, and when you are listening to something for a long period of time, you need some kind of elements to regain the attention of the listeners. We know that these kinds of elements to get the attention are always changes in the sound, and these changes in the sound, variations in the sound, that the listeners is listening could be a piece of music, a sound effect. Also, it could be a different shot, a different distance. For example, now I'm in the first shot talking to you; now I'm far away. You

can use these differences in sound and these contrasts. It's going to produce more attention, so I think that the result should be in this vein, in this line.

Kathy: In your article, "See It on a Radio Story: Sound Effects and Shots to Evoked Imagery and Attention on Audio Fiction," you state: "The main function of sound effects in a fictional story . . . is precisely to create an audio reconstruction of reality, imitating reality's actual sounds so as to create in the listener's mind a specific image of the phenomenon that it is intended to represent."

- **How can the use of sound effects affect the listener's ability to imagine the environment, the characters and the actions in the audiobook story?**

Dr. Rodero: Well, the sound effects, and music as well, I always differentiate the different functions that sound effects and music can have. Sound effects can have what I call an objective function, which is, for example, imagine that a character runs rapidly, and you can, for example, hear a sound like fermmmm! So this is a sound effective used with an objective function.

You can use a sound effect with an expressive or subjective function. For example, to create a sad mood or emotion or a mood. For example, if you want to induce "sad" to the listeners, you can use sound effects of raining or maybe something nostalgic. For example, raining is the typical sound effect to produce "sad."

The third function in which you can use sound effects is descriptive. All my studies are analyzing descriptive function. Sound effects are very important to identify the space in which the action is developing. For example, if I am in a parking lot, the sound of the cars. If I'm in the street, the sound of the traffic or whatever, so this is the most typical, and it is very important to identify what I call the "space dimension."

The space dimension is the space in which the characters are moving and also the objects that you have in this space. For example, on the beach, and the space is the beach, I can listen to the sea, the waves, but also I can, for example, I have in this scene, in this environment, I have objects. For example, a character talking to me, saying something, or a bar—whatever you have inside, so sound effects are very important to define the space dimension. Also music because you can identify space. For example, a bar with the music in the bar, but the most typical way to do it is with sound effects.

And the last function of sound effects are narrative, what I call narrative, which is the function to structure the narration. For example, using sound effects to link different parts of the narration or to differentiate the beginning, the development, and the end. For example, imagine that I finished my story with the sound of the train far away—too too too too too too—and this is the closing sound. So you can use the sound effects in these four functions: objective, subjective, descriptive and narrative. All the functions are very important because we know that when you use sound effects to create all the perceptions of the listeners are more life-like, and this is important to be transported to the scene. If I don't consider that or I'm not perceiving that the

story is real or is life-like for me, I'm not going to feel inside. I'm not going to get this immersion, so it's important to get this feeling with sound effects.

Kathy: Thanks for explaining your four functions of sound effects. I've read that sounds effects are used to move the story along and/or to provide background ambience. Your functions provide more specific purposes.

Earlier, you mentioned that the sound needs to change to keep the listener's attention. The voice actors would seem to play a big part in creating changes through the delivery of the dialog. In your 2017 presentation on Video & Audio Tell a Vision, you explain how intonation, speech rate, high/low pitch and clear/rough voice, word accent and rhythm all affect the listeners' attention and comprehension.

- **Why should voice actors in full-cast audiobooks learn the above principles and techniques?**

Dr. Rodero: Audiobooks are the most difficult product that voice-over artists have to make. Why? Because they have to be a lot of hours in front of the microphone because audiobooks are very long, and in many cases, 8 hours or 10 hours, so we need a very accurate vocal technique to support all these hours talking. So, if you are not very professional, and you don't have good vocal techniques, you are not able to do it because, in the second week, probably you don't have voice. It's very demanding task.

And the second thing—and this is voiceovers--from the point of view of the listener, it's very important that voice actors or voiceovers make a good job because there are a lot of hours, so the listener is hearing for hours and hours and hours, so it's very important to know how to narrate. There are not many voice-overs that master this ability to narrate in a good way, in a natural way—without using these kind of repetitive techniques or be monotonous. There are many voiceovers that read the book in a very monotonous way and repeating the same patterns during all the book. It's very hard for the listeners to get the attention to this way to do it, so it's very important to train voiceovers in intonation, in speech rate--of course especially intonation, word accent and rhythm--to get the listener's attention and comprehension—very important—especially attention.

There is a debate here in Spain. There are a lot of people that think—especially inside the industry of the audio books—saying that you cannot modify the book, in the sense that using music or changing the text or adapting something because it's going against the way in which the writer write this book. You have to read exactly word by word what the writer wrote, and you cannot do anything else because if not, it's kind of sacrilege to touch the original creation of the writer, and especially if you use music and sound effects. Well, there are many people saying, first, that if you change the voice and try to be natural and to give sense of what you are saying when you are reading, you are also changing the original work of the writer because you are interpreting that, and you don't have to interpretate anything.

Of course, I don't agree with this idea, but there are many people saying, “No! you have to read the text word by word in a very monotonous way because, in this manner, you are respecting the

original work of the writer.” And the same with music and sound effects. There are many people are saying that, or defending that, if you use music or sound effects, you are modifying the original work of the writer, and you cannot do that.

Of course, I don't agree with all these opinions, but there are many people that are thinking that, so now there is a debate about that. Audiobooks are audiobooks, and you just have to read the book and that's it or audio books, because they are audio, they have to adapt to the rules and to the strategies that you need to get the listener's attention.

Well, I hope this helps you.

Kathy: Yes, it does. This has been an interesting discussion. Thanks for taking the time to share your expertise on this topic. I look forward to seeing the results of your current research.

Dr. Rodero: Well, not I'm doing this research, and I'm going to share the results with you when I finish.

Kathy: Thank you, Dr. Rodero! Well, I hope you enjoyed this interview with Dr. Rodero. If you are interested in learning more about Dr. Rodero, you can visit her website at <http://emmarodero.com/>

Don't forget to visit the stories2music website for more podcasts, blog posts and to listen to the audio stories at www.stories2music.com. See you next time!

Credits

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