

AUDIOBOOKS

From a Death Investigator to Elliot Page, Memoirists Reading Their Own Words

Three recent audiobooks feature authors narrating their own personal stories, directly into your ear.



By Sebastian Modak

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In all the audiobooks I've listened to at this point, I've decided that a narration generally falls into one of three categories. There's the star-power option, when someone like Benedict Cumberbatch is brought in to lend weight to a production. Whole casts of voice actors might be hired to take on individual voices in nonfiction collections, like "The 1619 Project," or expansive fiction like George Saunders's "Lincoln in the Bardo" (which includes a staggering 166 narrators). But when it comes to an autobiography, or a personal essay collection, there really is only one best option: Hand the microphone to the author. True, not every voice is cut out to hold an audience for 10 hours, but even when untrained cadences run flat, a self-narrated memoir carries an emotional authenticity that is impossible to replicate. Here are three new memoirs skillfully narrated by their authors, only one of whom happens to be an actor.

Within the first hour or so of **WHAT THE DEAD KNOW: Learning About Life as a New York City Death Investigator (Simon & Schuster Audio, 9 hours, 47 minutes)**, the author and narrator Barbara Butcher makes clear that there's no escaping the parallels between her real life and the crime dramas that have fascinated audiences for generations. Her biography feels lifted from a noir film: Before becoming "only the second female death investigator in Manhattan" ("the first had quit after little more than a month"), she had been "a disgraced alcoholic," she says, "living in a shabby little studio, working off the books in a button store off Madison Avenue. It was all I felt I deserved."

Early in the audiobook, Butcher chronicles her career path and her journey to sobriety in unflinching detail, while her voice remains deliberate and measured, occasionally slipping into what sounds like a half-smirk when cracking a joke about the morbid appropriateness of her name. She has a way with words, telling stories that are at turns hilarious, thought-provoking and, as might be expected, disturbing: "Once you know the smell of death, you can pick it out in a flower shop." This is a story of trauma, yes, but it's also a glimpse into the dark side of a city that most never see up close. Butcher is called to the scene in Bowery flophouses, Upper West Side apartments that double as art museums and in the rubble of the World Trade Center, where the guiding principle is always the same: "Dead men do tell tales. You just have to listen."

The journalist Monica Potts did a good amount of listening of her own while researching **THE FORGOTTEN GIRLS: A Memoir of Friendship and Lost Promise in Rural America (Random House Audio, 7 hours, 40 minutes)**, which she reads with barely restrained heartbreak. In 2015 she returned to her hometown of Clinton, Ark., on a quest to better understand why the life expectancy of white, working-class women in the region has been steadily declining for so long — and how she managed to escape the forces that are dragging so many others down.

Potts investigates what economists have termed "deaths of despair" — those caused by substance abuse and suicide — with nuance and context, examining her own upbringing and that of her childhood best friend, Darci, who became caught in a cycle of addiction and homelessness as Potts found stability and success far from home. To help Potts trace "the fault lines that led from there to here," Darci sat for hourslong interviews and granted Potts access to her diary. As deeply reported as this audiobook is — providing an important sociological survey of an often-neglected demographic in the United States — there are also moments when, understandably, it sounds as if Potts is about to cry. The end result is a story as moving as it is educational.

In the author's note to **PAGEBOY: A Memoir (Macmillan Audio, 8 hours, 23 minutes)**, the actor Elliot Page makes the stakes of his forthcoming story explicit: "At last, I can sit with myself, in this body, present," he says. "This previously unimaginable contentment wouldn't have arrived without the health care I've received." There are very few moments of levity as he recalls starring in "Juno" (2007) and the breakout success that followed, coming out as gay in 2014 and as transgender in 2020. This is an often distressing story of someone striving to exist on his own terms — and being sidelined by the relentless pressures of society over and over again.

Listening to Page's memoir in his invariably understated, almost deadpan delivery can be disorienting. One minute, there are childhood recollections of days spent lost in his own imagination, where "a bunk bed was a kingdom, I was a boy"; and the next we hear the internal monologues of a mind consumed by an eating disorder, a first date as an openly trans person and repeated encounters with the vitriol of hateful strangers. The order in which these reflections appear might seem arbitrary at first, but the longer you listen the less chronology matters to the overall portrait that emerges: of a lifelong fighter who still, thanks to stubborn prejudices and reactionary policy decisions, has much to fight for.

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