

Imagine reading your most beloved book. You have almost reached the denouement and then suddenly, everything around you goes black. This is the experience for many who have gone blind. Those who were avid readers as children or adults no longer have the ability to see the images they once connected with through sight. So how does a lover of books reconnect with the written word?

Empish Thomas, a blind reader and freelance writer, has been blind for more than six years. "I started losing my vision in November of 1995 at twenty-five years old," she shares. "My sight was destroyed due to an autoimmune disease. My vision went pretty quickly."

She eventually learned Braille, which allows sightless readers to enjoy literature that may not be available in audio. In addition to Braille, books on tape are invaluable for blind readers who long for books that are sometimes not available in Braille.

According to the American Foundation for the Blind, there are approximately 10 million blind and visually impaired people in the United States. Of that, approximately 55,200 of them are children and 5.5 million are elderly (65 years or older). Among the 10 million, 18% percent are African American. With numbers like these, it is not surprising that books on tape have become more pervasive in mainstream society.

Thomas recalls her experience when she realized she could no longer read a book herself. "It was devastating," she says. "I felt like my power was taken away. I was forced to listen to someone else reading to me and adding inflections in places I may not have if I were reading the story."

Thomas is not the only blind reader who experienced the challenges of not being able to sight read. Lorraine Logan is the president and co-founder of a book club, EYES (Every Year Every Story), for visually impaired and blind readers. "We meet every week," she says. "We've been meeting for about four years now. We have a connection with a library and are able to get books on tape for all the members. When we get together, we have a discussion about the books we've read." Logan is legally blind and able to see some forms, but unable to see any words. She has been impaired for about twenty years, but in the last four years has been unable to read text.

For over four decades, Logan was an avid reader.

Although she loves to read and would enjoy reading books hearing only her voice in her mind, she has made the decision not to learn Braille, opting instead to stick with books on tape. "I think it is wonderful that folks learn Braille. But it drives me nuts. I don't think I have the patience to sit down and learn dots at this point in my life," she laughs. Interestingly, Logan has something those who are born blind will never experience as readers. "I have visual memory. If someone says, blue, I know, what that is," she recalls.

Erick "Ricky" McKinnie is the drummer and road manager for the Blind Boys of Alabama. He lost his sight in 1975 due to glaucoma; but being blind has not stopped him from living a full and successful life. Although he has a busy schedule, he finds moments to get a little bit of reading done. McKinnie tends to read mostly books on tape, but he can read Braille. "I enjoy reading. Books take you places that you've never been," he shares. "As a business manager, I read numerous itineraries and correspondence by email daily. I also enjoy reading westerns." McKinnie has discovered that learning to read blind did not affect his ability to read effectively.

Thomas recognizes that reading blind is far more complex, whether with Braille or audio books. "When you go blind, you really start using your brain muscle more. I am forced to process the information only through my mind, because I don't have any visual reference," says Thomas.

Likewise, Thomas has found very few audio book readers who read in a way that engage her in the book. "Not everyone does a good job with audio books," says Thomas. "Some of them read flat, or can't capture the nuances of the story well."

Although blind readers have access to a wealth of information, specifically books on tape, many books either do not find their way onto tape, or it sometimes takes more than two years before they are transferred. Logan feels that blind readers get the shaft when it comes to new books that are published. "The books that are available on tape at the library are usually pretty old," she shares. "But I try to supplement my reading with certain magazines that are on tape. I get Ebony and several other magazines, although in that area, we are limited only to those that keep up with transferring the information. It is especially difficult to get good African-American literature on tape." Logan explains that some black writers don't have their books on tape at all. "Elizabeth Nunez and Bernice McFadden gave us copies of their books on tape, which is not typical. We usually have to wait for the library to provide us with the recordings," adds Logan. "They have also been guests at our book club where we read exclusively African-American, African and Caribbean writers, including Latinos."

More books are being transferred to audio everyday. But the process is slow and tedious for those who want to provide this service to the disabled. The library of Congress' National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) produces between 2,000 to 3,000 audio books per year. That is a fraction of the 40,000 to 50,000 books printed each year and registered through the Library of Congress. Other organizations such as the National Library Service's Talking Books program is "a free library service available to U.S. residents and citizens living abroad whose low vision, blindness, or physical handicap makes it difficult to read a standard printed page." Within each state, The Library of Congress also has information and resources for those who are blind or physically disabled. Individual publishing houses will typically have an audio department as well. Blind or physically disabled readers can reach out to virtually any publisher for more information on audio books.

Blind readers have less access to resources than the average sighted reader, but it is clear that the blind community makes tremendous efforts to maximize technological advances to their advantage. There should no longer be an excuse for society in general, particularly the literary community, to keep blind readers out of important discussions in the mainstream. After all, it is not their mind that is disabled, it is their eyes. Reading in the dark doesn't mean that blind readers are in the dark.