Hadley

National Library Service and Free Talking Books

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts.

In this episode, reader advisor, Tonia Bickford, joins us to discuss the National Library Service commonly referred to as, NLS. Welcome to the show, Tonia.

**Tonia Bickford:** Hi Ricky. Thank you for having me.

**Ricky Enger:** Thank you for joining us. And spoiler alert, one of my favorite things is reading, and I suspect we're going to be talking about that just a little bit today. So I am really excited to chat with you and to ask you to share with our listeners all about the NLS. But before we do that, why don't you just give us a quick intro, tell us a bit about yourself.

**Tonia Bickford:** Sure. Thank you. My name is Tonia. I live in Marquette, Michigan, and I work for Great Lakes Talking Books, which is an outreach and advisory center in the upper peninsula of Michigan. We serve 15 counties in the Upper peninsula and two counties in Michigan's Lower Peninsula with talking books and magazines.

I've been a reader advisor for Great Lakes Talking Books since 2020.

**Ricky Enger:** Awesome. And we keep hearing this term reader advisor, and you've mentioned that you work for a library. So I think perhaps if you're listening, you might be putting two and two together about what NLS is. But I'd love to just get your take on this, Tonia, because I know that for people who are new to vision loss, there are all these acronyms that keep getting thrown around. And you might hear NLS, NLS and people are always so excited when they say it. But you as a person who's new to all of this may have no idea what NLS actually means, or maybe more importantly why you should care. So what is NLS?

**Tonia Bickford:** Well, NLS to me is a network of people who want to help connect readers with books. The NLS was established in 1931 by the Pratt-Smoot Act, with the purpose of connecting the Library of Congress with libraries all over the country to provide books to blind adults. Well, since that time, the service has grown greatly to provide audio and braille books and magazines and music appreciation materials to folks of all ages, not just blind adults, but to anyone who is unable to read standard print, which includes people who have low vision or a reading or physical disability.

**Ricky Enger:** That's perfect because that's a question that we get a lot. People think that because we have this word blind as a part of the name for NLS, it means that you shouldn't be able to see anything in order to qualify for services from NLS. So could you just go through again, let's say you can read with magnification but you're kind of struggling still, would you be able to qualify for services for NLS?

**Tonia Bickford:** Yes. The service is available for people who are unable to read standard print, which means if you require large print in order to read the book, then you're eligible for our services. If you require a magnifying class to read a book, then you're eligible for our services. So yes, that is something that people think and we work really hard, and thank you by the way, for having us on your program today as one more effort to get the word out to the community that it's for anyone unable to read standard print, whether they can fix that problem or not using a magnifying glass.

**Ricky Enger:** That's so important to know because again, that's one of the questions we get most often at Hadley. So I imagine you do as well. Now once somebody gets signed up for services because you do have an application that you fill out...

And by the way, we can help you with that process at Hadley, but once someone does go through that application process, the next step is to do the fun stuff to start enjoying those books and magazines. So what are the ways that people can do that? Because I know everybody is at a different point in their journey with technology or how familiar they are with various things. So yeah, just curious, what are the ways people can access these books and magazines?

**Tonia Bickford:** I like to call people and talk with them. If they're unable to speak with me, I love to talk to their caregivers or their family members that support them because I want to know what are they reading or what were they at the time that they experienced some vision loss or disability that's preventing them to read like they used to? What's their passion? Is it science fiction? What is it? And then we talk about the kinds of situations that they have and where they're reading and what they're using to read and the internet access and technology access they have. Whatever they're comfortable with is what we do.

So if they think, oh yes, I have wireless, yes, I have a phone, or yes, I have a tablet, but I don't want to do any of that, I really just want to listen to some books. Well then the by mail service is perfect for them. We send them a digital talking book machine and it has a user guide built into it. What that means is that when they turn it on, any button they press describes itself to them and it tells you how to use the button and what it does in response. So it's kind of neat.

And then we talk about the kinds of books they like to read and how the service works with cartridges working on a turnaround service, which means you never run out of books to read, the books are automatically mailed to you, and then when you return them, we say, oh, this is a cartridge from so and so. We're going to look at their account, see their favorite subjects, their favorite authors. And by the way, if their favorite author has just released a new book and it's available that's going to be on the cartridge, it's going to be a high priority on their list, and we'll make a new cartridge for them and send it to them in the mail.

For other patrons who have internet access and have a device, they may be interested to either listen to audiobooks on the BARD Mobile app. If they have a refreshable braille display, they may want to download electronic braille onto their braille display. Or if they don't have a refreshable braille display and have been looking for one, the National Library Service also has a refreshable braille display to share with that individual. So we talk about what they're comfortable with first and foremost, and then we decide what's the best plan. You don't have to choose just one. You can use the BARD Mobile app to download books and magazines on demand when you want them, or you can use the by mail service right along with it, and some people do that. So there's lots of options and we start with what you're comfortable with.

**Ricky Enger:** That's wonderful. And I have such great memories of growing up and looking forward to hearing the mail truck outside because at that time it was cassettes, but now things arrive on cartridges or in braille or there is BARD Mobile, which is amazing. Just getting people connected with that reading material.

By the way, yet another plug for Hadley. I love when I can do this. We do have workshops on how to use that NLS talking book player. We also have workshops on how to check out the BARD website, so a lot of great stuff there. But as I'm thinking about what it was like when I was younger, I always had the assistance of a reader advisor showing me what books might be available, what things I might be interested in. But for a lot of people, they are accustomed to strolling into the bookstore and seeing something that catches their eye on the shelf, or maybe they were not a reader traditionally before vision loss and they're looking to get into that. But the act of discovering books is something that people might be struggling with.

So how do you do that as a reader advisor and just connect with people to let them know what's available and make sure that they don't end up getting something that they really just don't like much?

**Tonia Bickford:** Right. Well, we set expectations that we might have to weed through some things till we get it right. If they're using Barb Mobile and downloading books, it's really intimidating because when you go to search your mind blanks and you think, what do I want? Who do I like? What do I want to read? I'm tired of the authors I love. So we can help connect people to books by, if they're using BARD Mobile, we have some tips and tricks and we can say, hey, by the way, I know you loved Tom Lake by Ann Patchett, why don't you click on the dot, dot, dot button in your BARD Mobile app to see what other books are available for download by Ann or other books in that same subject area? So the read alike is something that we often help with.

New patrons we talk about what they like. Sometimes you're right, the answer is, well, I haven't been reading because I couldn't see, so I don't know what I want to read anymore. And so I talk about, well, this is what other patrons are reading right now. A gentleman just asked for Jonas Jonasson, The 100-Year-Old Man Who Jumped Out the Window. And we talked about that book and about how much he liked it, and he said, this is a laugh out loud book. I suggest it to anyone. Well, then I do. So I share not only things that I've learned about, but I share tips from other patrons. If it's made someone happy, that's what I start with. Hey, this is something that might make you laugh, might help pass the time.

Other times we talk about some of the features of our service is that, for example, if someone says, well, I usually like the books that Oprah recommends, do you have those? Well, we do. We have series of books. So if you say, I want an Oprah book, well, I can look at the long list of Oprah books. When we talk we can talk about things that they're worried about or the things that are on their mind. And more recently, I've had many people ask me for the United States Constitution, I've had people ask me for the Bible.

So it's just kind of a starting point and letting them know that there are resources. If they're comfortable using the internet, there is an online catalog where they can browse the books. We can also talk about the newsletter that comes out from our regional library and it comes through email, and they also include the information in they're printed circulation twice a year, but it's called Book Buzz and they recommend books, and they also include staff and patron recommendations, which is really neat.

So we just go to the resources that seem right for the individual, but we also try to equip them with the tools if they're open to the idea of how they can discover and find books that are interesting to them on their own. BARD Mobile has that great Recently Added list of books that have just, they're hot off the press. They're recently added to BARD. BARD also has the What's Popular list. Now I've had some people say I never like what everybody else is reading. Well, we can talk about that and how we can find some books.

It seems like patrons are in three categories. I have the patron that knows exactly what they want and they call me or they email me and they give me a list of books that they want to read. I have patrons that ask me to send them those books on cartridges. I also sometimes can add wishlist items to patrons using BARD, so I can remote in and I can just fill up their wishlist. So it makes it easy for them to find the book because it's simply in their wishlist and they just click to download. The third group of patrons. They're open to just trying everything I have in mystery, short stories, and then we'll go from there.

**Ricky Enger:** What I like about all of this, I think if you were to sum it up, it's essentially you're meeting people where they are. So if they are very tech-savvy, then here are your tools, go enjoy finding things on your own and of course you can call us if you have questions about what to read next. And then I love kind of the community aspect too, where you are taking information from other people and that informs what you may recommend to someone else who calls.

One question that we get a lot, it's a subject that comes up over and over again, is that reading, using audio is such an unfamiliar thing for many people. They're not accustomed to listening in order to get their information. And then on top of that, you have the technology to access some of this maybe brand new as well, whether it's the app or the talking book player. And people get just a little bit overwhelmed by finding this new way to read and then trying to figure out the technology too. Do you have tips for someone who is making that transition from reading in print to this other method?

**Tonia Bickford:** I do. Not everybody's an auditory learner, and right off the bat I do mention that they're not alone. And I think it helps to set expectations about the fact that it may not be easy to transition to listening to books. But here's where we can equip people with the tools they need to have success. First of all, some people prefer a male voice or they prefer a female voice with the tone changed and the players allow you to do that, and so does the app and mobile.

So there's some things we can do. Sometimes we suggest wearing headphones. I'm in a assisted living center and I have a roommate and I'm not tracking my book because there's so much activity with people walking in and out of my room and my roommate talking to me and the TV going. So we talk about using headphones at times. And then reducing the stress about the whole process by saying, well, you know, you can reverse 15 seconds, a minute, five minutes and start again. If you've lost the pace of the book and the storyline, you can go back.

But just knowing, I think just telling people, yeah, this is natural. You're not alone. A lot of people struggle with this because they're just not auditory learners. They were visual learners, and it takes time to adjust to auditory. What my example is, when you asked for directions, when someone told you what you needed to do, did you walk away from that person thinking I have no idea what they just said to me? Or did you go back and say, we need to write this down because I'll never remember this if we don't write this down? Well, there's a tip for you that you're a visual person. It's going to take you some time to adjust to listening to the audiobook and focusing on the words that are being said and the storyline. And some people find a very happy balance between cooking and listening or between crocheting and listening or sewing and listening or whatever it is that they're doing. They are actively listening while also not necessarily shutting out the world around them, but they find a balance.

I think a lot of people are afraid to admit that the audiobooks are hard for them to listen to. We have the way to exclude accents. So if someone says, well, I loved that mystery series but I had a really hard time understanding the narrator. Well, we can work to make sure that the narrators that narrate the books they want to read do not have an accent. If they say to us that they were really upset by something they heard in a book, well then we can switch and only provide them with rated books. The National Library Service has unrated and rated books, and it's just what's happening, but a lot of commercial publishers are providing audiobooks that are not rated. And so we don't really know what's in them. Sometimes you can guess what's in them based on the author who's written the book, but if someone is really sensitive to what they hear in the books, then we can just limit the list of books that we send them to rated books, and we can then exclude books with strong language or strong violence in that kind of content. So that they know when they receive the books that it's something they want to listen to.

Another strategy to help with folks who are new to listening to books is not to send them War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy, but to send them something shorter, like perhaps a series of short stories. And then some people when they don't know what to read, sometimes we talk about what they liked to read when they were young. And a lot of times people say, yeah, I would really love to reread Island of the Blue Dolphins or The Red Pony by John Steinbeck, you name it. Sometimes we just start with something they know and that really helps them sort of adjust because they have a timeline and they have a visual in their mind for that story already. So that's a really good way to acclimate someone to audiobooks.

**Ricky Enger:** Wow, that's such a great tip for transitioning. To take something that you're already familiar with or to just break it into chunks. I find that I do this when I'm traveling and the world is a little bit frenetic and I know that I am going to keep getting interrupted with, I have to change planes or whatever, short stories are great because you can come back to them and you haven't lost a lot of time, or it's a little easier to pick up than like you said, something like War and Peace. So it really does sound like there are so many options for people to jump back into reading if it's something that they are missing.

It's so heartbreaking when we hear people say, I am losing my vision and I loved to read, but I guess this is something that I just am not going to be able to do anymore. Thankfully, we can tell them, no, that is not something you have to give up. If you didn't read before and you want to, now you can. So I think it's evident that both of us are so very thankful and passionate about NLS and what it can provide to people.

I feel like we've just really scratched the surface though, about what NLS does have to offer, so I'm wondering if you have any final thoughts, any things that you want to leave people with that they should know about this service?

**Tonia Bickford:** You have a person you can call and talk to at your advisory and Outreach Center, but you also have NLS directly has programs with patrons and they have a quarterly and monthly program and LISTSERV that are available for their patrons. The quarterly program is called The Patron Corner, and it's a virtual meeting and it's an opportunity for patrons to ask NLS staff directly questions and listen to other questions other people have. They also have the monthly Many Faces of BARD meeting that allows folks to learn about BARD topics in BARD, the future of BARD, and ask questions directly from the NLS staff.

As a referral institution the public libraries across the country should be thanked. We appreciate them so much. They are the primary referring agencies for people who walk up to the circulation desk at their local library because that's where they used to read and say, where's your large print? Or where are your audiobooks? And the public libraries, they often mention their collections of audiobooks, which are usually on CD, and they usually mention their large print books, but most times they suggest their Libby app. All across the country there might be a variety of ebook and audiobook providers working with your local public library, but they mention, we've got this. So they've got some great tools themselves. But the public libraries, I don't know what we would do without them because they are the ones that connect us to people who are struggling.

And you asked earlier about people who are unable to read like they used to and think, well, I can read with a magnifying glass, I don't need the service. But if you ask that person the question of, can you read as long as you used to read? Are you able to get as far as you used to read? And usually I get the answer of no. I used to read all night long and now, oh, I can only read for an hour. But that's okay, I can still read. But the key point is can you read like you used to? Even if you have a magnifying glass, and even if you're using large print, can you really read like you used to read? If the answer's no, well then please call us.

**Ricky Enger:** I love that. Just putting people in touch with that material in a way that again, becomes comfortable. You don't want reading to be a struggle. Reading is a joy. And anything that we can do to put people in touch with resources that let them do that, we are all about that.

Tonia, thank you so much for sharing about NLS and what you do to help your patrons and just the things that are available. Hadley does have a monthly discussion group called Book Nook where bookworms get together and talk about various topics related to reading, and if you have questions about NLS or if you'd like help filling out that application, please do call us at Hadley. We're happy to help. And if you happen to be in Tonia's neck of the woods in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, then contact that library. If not, we'll help you get in touch with your local branch.

Thank you again, Tonia, for stopping by. It's been such a pleasure and so informative.

**Tonia Bickford:** Thank you for having me, Ricky. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk about this service.

**Ricky Enger:** Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents, or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadleyhelps.org. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadleyhelps.O-R-G or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.