

## **Playaways offer a way to read on the go**

With Playaway audiobooks, users can listen while they work, exercise or whatever

By Mary Gail Hare

June 7, 2009

Baltimore County's newest library branch is offering the public the newest way to read on the go.

Playaway, a self-contained audiobook that allows readers to listen while tackling many other tasks, is available at the Perry Hall Library. The branch, one of 17 in the county's system, is circulating 340 Playaway titles and lending out all a reader needs to listen. The entire book, regardless of length, is housed in a pocket-size black box that resembles a cassette tape.

"It is great for all ages, and it can be a wonderful distraction," said Darcy Cahill, Perry Hall's manager. "People say they listen while doing the dishes, dusting or exercising. Talk about multitasking! Now you can read while planting the garden."

In less than three months since Perry Hall opened, circulation for these audiobooks has reached nearly 1,050, with more than half the titles currently on loan.

"This was our opportunity to feature a new format," said Cahill. "We have a relatively small collection with a broad range selected to appeal to various ages and tastes."

Harford, Howard and Carroll counties are all circulating Playaways. Harford originally launched the format two years ago on its Silver Reader, a mobile library for seniors. An instant popularity prompted the purchase of 2,350 titles for its 11 branches, said Janine Lis, Harford library spokeswoman. Circulation has reached nearly 10,000 since June.

Lori Holecheck, who works in Carroll County's library reference center, has checked out one of the 214 Playaways just delivered from the company's headquarters in Cleveland.

"The instructions are easy and these devices are so easy to use," she said. "This is a great replacement for books on cassette. We are providing rechargeable batteries and the branches will have ear buds available for \$1."

Playaway, manufactured by Findaway World in Cleveland, debuted in Chicago public libraries three years ago and is now available nationwide at more than 20,000 libraries and schools, said Caroline Barni, company spokeswoman. It is also popular with the military, particularly those serving in remote areas of the world, she said.

Automatic book marking remembers where the reader stopped and a small window shows the time remaining in the chapter playing. Its appeal extends to the techno-challenged, said Bob Hughes, Baltimore County library

spokesman.

“If you know you have two more minutes of audio, you might stay on the treadmill two more minutes,” said Hughes. “Or you might have time for that second piece of pizza.”

Commuters have found Playaway helps pass time in traffic. It is an ideal tool for the elderly, those with vision impairments and for children learning to read. Parents often borrow a Playaway and the companion book to allow the child to read along with the audio version. The reader can control the volume and speed of the speaker, too.

Patrons are often initially skeptical about the simplicity of the device, Cahill said, but most figure out the built-in controls within minutes.

“People are nervous but intrigued,” Cahill said. “But they take to it. They bring one Playaway back and take out three, which is the max.”

Each Playaway comes with pre-loaded content. “No other device is needed, not an iPod or CD player,” Cahill said. “The user does not have to load in anything.”

And the library does not have to deal with scratched or missing CDs or tangled tapes.

All that is required to listen are a AAA battery and headphones for its universal jack. The reader can plug into external speakers or the car adapter. Cahill first tested Playaway at a library conference a few years ago and was immediately taken with its possibilities.

Although Playaway is only available at Perry Hall, Baltimore County library patrons can reserve a title from other branches and have the audiobook sent to them there. The initial investment in Baltimore County was about \$3,500, Hughes said. If the popularity continues, library officials will likely add Playaways to other branches, Hughes said.

“We are in a pilot program at Perry Hall, gathering information to make a decision on whether to introduce this at other branches,” said Hughes.

The audiobooks will only increase circulation at the county’s libraries, which should reach a record 10 million by the end of the fiscal year on June 30, the highest rate in the metropolitan area, he said.