

PICKY PICKY

by Fred Hobbs

Throughout my work career I always sought extra things to do. One such part-time endeavor was recording for the blind. Talking Books Publishing Company in Denver is in the business to do just that. It is not the familiar Recording for the Blind *volunteer* service, which is a very worthy pursuit, but doesn't pay its narrators. Talking Books is one of just a few sound studios across the nation that holds contracts with the Federal government to provide recordings of books and periodicals free of charge to qualified legally blind recipients.

Narrators, for the most part, are selected from a group of local radio announcers and news personnel who, by virtue of years of experience or natural talent, are able to read material on first sight with a minimum of mistakes. At Talking Books, the more skill the narrator possesses in that task, the more money he or she makes.

In order to fulfill the requirements of the government contract, the recordings must be produced as close to perfection as possible. Every word has to be pronounced correctly. Pace and clarity are important. The narrators are cautioned not to pretend to be actors, but to "shade" the material in such a way that it enhances the drama, humor or meaning of the narrative, even if it includes dialogue, such as in a novel.

Creating meaningful communication between talker and the sight-impaired listener is paramount.

To ensure that each recording attains the quality demanded, the narrators work in a soundproof booth on one side of a glass partition. A "monitor" sits on the other side, operating the recording device and listening on earphones to every word the narrator speaks. If a mistake is made, the recording is stopped, the narrator is informed and the sentence or phrase containing the mispronunciation or other problem is re-recorded on the spot.

Narrators and monitors sometimes disagree, but the monitor has the final word.

Many of the monitors are college graduate students or recent grads who have studied English and foreign languages and maybe world history. They are in the unique and sometimes awkward position of correcting radio performers with years of experience and well-honed egos.

Those of us who have performed in this atmosphere often tend to be a bit officious when it comes to pronunciation. Sometimes it works the other way.

One monitor who had studied German insisted that the name of the popular children's book writer, Dr. Seuss, should be pronounced "Soys" (like Joyce.)

Theodor Geisel quite likely was of German extraction, but the poetry and art of his famous works for kids sure comes off as decidedly American. "Soos" sounds just right.

One of my best friends was a full-time narrator at Talking Books. He tends to be super-critical of

mispronunciations in the media or among his friends. He chided me for a couple of common mistakes. The trophy given to the top college football player each year is pronounced as in ice, "Hyssman," not "Hyzman." The *Stars and Stripes Forever* composer is "Soosa", not "Sooza."

My friend is correct apparently, but all I can say is "Picky Picky."