

## Press play for the latest page-turner

A new concept in audiobooks means that technophobes can join the digital revolution, writes **Maija Palmer**

The typical audiobook listener in the UK, the 50-something housewife, may find herself unexpectedly entering the digital age next week, as a new kind of audiobook goes on sale.

The Playaway is a handy-sized plastic gadget with headphones that contains a pre-loaded audiobook. It requires no downloads or separate items to be put in a player. Users simply press the play button and start listening. They can pause, rewind, fast-forward, and even change the speed at which the book is read.

Publishers hope the gadget will boost sales of audiobooks, which have remained a relatively small and stagnant market in the UK. Audiobooks account for about £70m of the UK's £2.5bn book market, with little growth over the past five years.

The arrival of audiobooks that can be downloaded to MP3 music players did cause some

excitement and brought more tech-savvy, younger people into the market. But much of the market for audiobooks – such as older people and young children – either does not have MP3 players, or cannot or will not download,

says Christopher Celeste, president and founder of Findaway World, the company behind Playaway. "A lot of the audience for audiobooks are not early adopters."

For them, this simpler gadget could be a stress-free way of trying out new digital books.

Mr Celeste says the hardest task has been keeping things simple. The computer company it is working with was told to remove all but the most basic functions from the microprocessor that runs the audiobook.

Mr Celeste says that while some people do download audiobooks to their iPods, that format is better suited to music. "A book is a one-time consumption event. You lis-

ten to it all the way through and then you are done. People don't necessarily want to create a digital library on their iPod."

Flonmula Duggan, interactive director at Random House UK, says: "Audiobooks have been the unloved child of the UK book market. It has never reached its full potential, but with new formats coming in, there is no reason we couldn't broaden the market."

Part of the problem has been that the UK market prefers unabridged versions, which take up several CDs or cassettes. A Playaway can put a 20-hour unabridged version on just one device.

Mr Celeste says the format also has appeal for publishers because the device is easy to brand and allows them to go digital without the risk of piracy.

The front of the slim device is about the size of a playing card and can be emblazoned with an image in a way that is impossible

with a downloaded podcast. Playaway has been on sale in the US for 18 months, where the audiobook market is much more vibrant than that of the UK. The company now offers 400 titles in the US, from the latest John Grisham thriller to yoga instructions and Spanish-language tuition. It shipped more than 100,000 units in its first year of operations, and expects to sell 500,000 this year.

In the US, most sales are either to travellers who pick up the Playaway at one of 110 US airports where it is sold, or are bought as a present.

In the UK, the Playaway will be priced at £19.99, in line with other audiobooks, but a hefty premium to the average paperback. Mr Celeste says he expects profits to fall, especially before Christmas.

As well as audiobooks, Mr Celeste says, the format could be used for recorded walking tours, workplace tutorials or to provide information to patients.

