



A Sound Sensation For the Book Business

with
Michele Cobb, Audio Publishers Association
&
Robin Whitten, Audiofile Magazine

For podcast release
Monday, July 1, 2019

KENNEALLY: What are the chances you've listened to an audiobook lately?
According to a new survey, about 50/50.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series, I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

The *Infinite Dial* report from Edison Research and Triton Digital examines consumer usage of media and technology. For the first time since the annual survey began in 1998, 50% of Americans over the age of 12 said they listened to an audiobook in 2018. And for the first time, more listening is taking place in automobiles than in homes. The mainstreaming of audiobooks means important new business growth for book publishers. Indeed, newly released data from the Audio Publishers Association shows 2018 enjoying double digit growth in audiobook sales for the seventh year in a row.

Michele Cobb, APA Executive Director joins me now to discuss this sound sensation in the book business. Welcome back to Beyond the Book, Michele.

COBB: Thanks for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Well, people are going to think we are starting to repeat ourselves. We have done this now – I believe this is the third time we have taken a annual survey on Beyond the Book of the audiobook world. And it's the same story every year, but a story that brings a smile to everyone's face on audio publisher side and the book publisher side, and that is double digit growth.

COBB: Yes, we have really been in this realm of amazing growth, amazing pickup of the format for such a long time that it's very exciting. And we spent so long really fighting for our place in publishing, it's been a nice change that we are being recognized for the amount of growth and the amount of excitement that we are generating.



KENNEALLY: And the excitement is of two kinds. One is the growth in sales and the other is the growth in dollars, and they are keeping parallel tracks. But that's very important to distinguish.

COBB: Absolutely true. And what's been great is to see that the increase in dollars sometimes outstrips the increase in units so that we know that the market is very healthy and that our price points are strong and we're doing well.

KENNEALLY: Of course a lot of this is driven by technology. Everyone today has audiobooks in their pocket, along with podcasts and movies and everything else because of their smartphones. But the other piece that did come out on this latest survey on the *Infinite Dial* is that people are listening in their cars.

COBB: Yeah. What's interesting – and we did, ourselves, the APA, did a consumer survey that really dug in on what was happening with audiobooks and where people were listening. We've seen, for the last few years that the home has been the number one spot which everyone says that they're listening in. That's been followed very closely by the car. But when we first really grew as an industry, the car was what drove a lot of that growth – people having long commutes, people going on family vacations. And in 2010, we actually did a focus group and we heard from people that they liked to listen to relax. We didn't really get it because we are all multitaskers in the industry, so we think about running or driving or doing laundry as you listen. What we found is that people are actually listening at home without doing anything else, and that's been a really interesting thing for us to realize as an industry. We've started to see some of this growth in the home coming from smart speakers. So you can travel from room to room and listen or you can have your hands free and your eyes free while you listen.

But what flipped here between 2018 and 2019, our two consumer surveys, was that we saw the car come back up on top this year. The main reason for that seems to be that there's an increase in those in-dash entertainment systems in cars, which make it really seamless to listen to your audiobook, so it's a really easy technology to use, and that has bumped us back up in the direction of the car being the number one spot for listening in terms of all the different places people are listening.

KENNEALLY: When it comes to audiobooks, we really should emphasize that we are talking about the digital format. CDs still account for some sales. I see that the revenue is just about 8% last year, but 91%, so 9 out of 10 dollars is spent in digital. What's interesting to the experience you were describing listening at home and just listening is this immersive quality. Contrary to what one thinks of as digital as synonymous with distracted listening, distracted reading, distracted everything, it



sounds like people may be turning to audiobooks for a chance to turn off everything else.

COBB: It's true. You think about how much time we all spend on the computer and on the phone when we're working, so it's really nice to be able to come home and rest your eyes. As we all age and we have to get the little reading glasses and everything else to be able to see the screens, we do have that kind of digital eyestrain fatigue, so we might as well take in our entertainment in a way that we don't have to look at anything. It's a really nice experience.

KENNEALLY: And while we're listening in cars, we do have to keep our eye on the road (overlapping conversation; inaudible) screen.

COBB: You really, really should unless you're the passenger, yeah.

KENNEALLY: That's right. Well, we want to bring in now to the conversation Robin Whitten. She is the founder and editor of *AudioFile Magazine*. Robin, welcome back to Beyond the Book.

WHITTEN: Thanks, Chris. Glad to be talking about audiobooks again.

KENNEALLY: Indeed, so are we because this gets us a chance to share with listeners some interesting excerpts from a few books that you've picked for us – audiobooks, I should say, that you've picked for us that illustrate some of the trends that we are seeing in the audiobook world. I suppose we ought to start by telling people about the recently concluded Audie Awards that took place in New York in March. The host of the program was *Queer Eye* fashion expert Tan France, himself a memoirist and audiobook narrator.

WHITTEN: Right, and it was a great thing to have Tan as our host. It gave the ceremony a lot of glamor, and he is a big audiobook fan and also had, fairly recently, completed his own audiobook, *Naturally Tan*, which is very fun as a listen. Really he gets his personality across and he talks about his life in the candid and very engaging way that he is on the *Queer Eye* show. It's a great listen.

KENNEALLY: Indeed, Tan France grew up in England as a South Asian, where he encountered, sadly, racism and other challenges. Here's an excerpt from that book, which is called *Naturally Tan*.

(break in audio)



KENNEALLY: Memoirs certainly seem to hold their own in sales year over year, Robin. Are they one of the more popular categories?

WHITTEN: They are. I think oftentimes you get a memoir by someone that people are already interested in, a personality, whether it's an entertainment celebrity or a politician or someone who already has an active fan base. So when you find out that that person is actually going to deliver their memoir in the audiobook version, that makes a very compelling story, and you get a lot of personality that way.

KENNEALLY: You've been listening to audiobooks for a number of years, Robin Whitten, and this year's Audiobook of the Year – received the Audie Award for Audiobook of the Year was *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyem. (sic) I'm going to try that again, and maybe Robin, help me out. Is it Adeyem? Adeyemi.

WHITTEN: Adeyemi.

KENNEALLY: You've been listening to audiobooks for a number of years, Robin Whitten, and this year's Audiobook of the Year was *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi. How does it stand out in 2018 as a very special book?

WHITTEN: Well, I think the most spectacular thing about this Afro-futurism fantasy is the performance by Bahni Turpin, who is an extraordinary audiobook narrator and to immerse herself in this fantasy and then to bring it alive to listeners in a way that was just the best – the best it could ever be. The book has been nominated for other awards and also other Audie awards, but it came up as the winner of the Best Audiobook of the Year.

KENNEALLY: And by contrast we have a book we'll give an excerpt from, called *With the Fire on High*, and it is a novel, but very much grounded in experience by the author Elizabeth Acevedo. She tells the story of her main character, Emoni, a very likable high school senior with a two year old daughter and a gift for cooking. I suppose this particular book is an example of how audiobooks are reaching a young audience, and that's very important to publishing.

WHITTEN: It is, and Michele can back me up, but the big growth in audiobook listeners in the younger demographics in under 45. So having this young adult title by Elizabeth Acevedo is really exciting. This is her second – well, I'm not sure. I think it's her second audiobook. This one is new and it's really a novel. But also as we talk about the Audie Awards, her *Poet X*, which was her previous book, was a finalist in two categories for the Audies, one as narration by the author, as well as young adult, going right up against *Children of Blood and Bone*. And also *Poet X*



was a National Book Award winner for young people's literature. So Elizabeth Acevedo is definitely in people's consciousness, and this new young adult novel is great, and she's a great narrator of her own work.

KENNEALLY: I was just going to say that this is really a terrific way for the author to connect with her audience.

WHITTEN: Absolutely. She's a poet as well as an author, and so she has a presentation style that is terrific.

KENNEALLY: Let's hear her now.

(break in audio)

KENNEALLY: And three, two, one. And another – one more time.

Three, two, one. And another category that has consistently strong sales, Robin Whitten, is in historical nonfiction, and a very recent arrival in the audiobook world is *The Pioneers* by David McCullough, narrated by John Bedford Lloyd. I suppose this is one of those audiobooks that really does seem like something that's timeless.

WHITTEN: It absolutely is, and of course the arrival of any new book by David McCullough is welcomed. He has made such a mark with his popular histories and across the board for listeners of all ages and exploring different aspects of American history, including the Wright Brothers and the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, the Panama Canal, and now the exploration of the Ohio Valley just after the Revolutionary War.

KENNEALLY: It's a piece of American history not very well known, at least until now, but I'm sure David McCullough's book will help make it much better known for American audiences. It features in this particular excerpt a character whose name will be familiar.

(break in audio)

KENNEALLY: And Michele, we'll come back to you in just a second now. So we'll come back.

And three, two, one. I wonder, Robin Whitten, finally, if you can tell us about any new trends in the audiobook world. Are you seeing different types of titles appearing 2018, 2019 than you might have seen five years ago, even?



WHITTEN: Well, I think there's quite an interest in multiple narrators in audiobooks, and sometimes that's an ensemble of narrators who each take a character role if the story is told from several points of view, but it also may be a little bit more like a dramatic cast. Having these multiple voices seems to be – this is not exactly new, but I think that there is a growing interest in having multiple voices in audiobooks, and not just the single voice.

KENNEALLY: And Michele Cobb, Executive Director at the Audio Publishers Association, does that trend mean that there's a greater investment being made in audiobooks? It's not simply a microphone and a single narrator anymore, it's a full-fledged production.

COBB: Yeah, there are a number of companies that have been doing these full-fledged productions for a while, whether it be with plays or dramatizations, and there's different ways to use multiple narrators. So in some cases each narrator is reading a chapter, and they're not really interacting. And in some cases they're all in the studio together, talking over each other and creating this experience and going back and forth. So each experience is different, and generally yes, I would say it's more expensive when you're trying to put people all together and there's a lot more to edit with different voices in the mix in the same place. But it's a very exciting process to be there and have the energy of other narrators in the room with you, as opposed to being alone with your microphone.

KENNEALLY: The interesting growth in all these different varieties of audiobook narrations is one that means that the whole field is starting to grow and expand, and all types of books are now being seen as audiobooks, as well. I guess that results in some potential for confusion, Michele Cobb. We were chatting with Robin Whitten about the kinds of audiobook titles that remain popular through the years, memoirs and historical narratives and young adult fiction. But there does seem to be a bit of a dichotomy between what the listeners say they like and what the surveys say they buy.

COBB: Yeah, it's funny because mystery/suspense/thriller, it's always up there in the top, whether it be in sales units or in what consumers say is their favorite. For some reason we all like to hear people get knifed and kidnapped and generally maimed on audio, which cracks me up. But it's funny, when we ask the consumers, what are your favorite genres, they say mystery/suspense/thriller. They say history/biography/memoir, which is very popular, but not as many titles are recorded in those genres, maybe as a mystery, and the unit sales don't quite match what we see in mystery.



And then there's the category of humor. We were all interested to see that people self-selected humor as being a big category because what a publisher thinks of humor, being a book about jokes and things like this, is very different than what a consumer thinks of as humor. A consumer might think of Tina Fey's *Bossypants* as humor when it's really, from the publisher perspective, a memoir. So sometimes the consumers' self-selection doesn't match what our unit sales are. But the good news is, it's all going well from all walks of life and all different genres. So we're happy to let people self-select whatever they think is best for them.

KENNEALLY: But Robin Whitten, I wonder what you think about that problem because as editor-founder of AudioFile, you're trying to help listeners find the titles they want to hear. If there's this confusion around what it is to call it, that must make your job a little more difficult.

WHITTEN: Well, it's interesting because I think that one of the reasons that the sales and the interest don't match up is because there are not a lot of really great humor books, no matter whether you think of that as a humorous memoir or a book of jokes, there's just not very much of it being published. So when you have a *Bossypants* that everybody loves and is a great success and they think about how much they enjoyed that as humor, then what next? Has there been – there have been – since Tina Fey's memoir there have been some humorous memoirs, also. David Sedaris has always got a new book, that's good, but there isn't as much as you would say, oh, there are dozens of new mysteries and suspense audiobooks just in the last month. So there's less in the stream, I guess.

KENNEALLY: That's a tip out there to any literary agents listening, go and sign up some humor books.

We have been chatting today with Michele Cobb, she's the Executive Director of the Audio Publishers Association. Michele, thanks for joining us.

COBB: Thanks for having me, it's been a lot of fun.

KENNEALLY: And also on the line, Robin Whitten, founder and Editor of *AudioFile Magazine*. Always a pleasure to talk with you about the audiobook world, Robin.

WHITTEN: Great, thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and follow us on Twitter and



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I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC's Beyond the Book.

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