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Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

The Boom In Audiobooks

With

Michele Cobb, Audio Publishers Association

&

Chris Howard, author, *The Seawater Witch*

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KENNEALLY: Can you hear that? It's in the background everywhere you go in the book world, and it's definitely growing louder. Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. The sound I'm talking about comes from audiobooks, the fastest growing segment of the trade book publishing market. OverDrive, a leading provider of digital publishing to public libraries, has recently reported a 34% rise in 2016 audiobook borrowing numbers over 2015, with *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins the most popular title.

To accommodate consumer and reader demand, audiobook production has flourished. The US-based Audio Publishers Association says available titles grew from about 7,000 in 2011 to more than 35,000 in 2015. Michele Cobb, APA's executive director, joins me now with more on the boom in audiobooks. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Michele.

COBB: Thanks. Fabulous to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, we look forward to chatting with you. It's a really interesting area and one that anyone who follows the business knows is the real growth part of the book world. You've done an annual sales survey at APA. The results are – you're probably now gathering now for your 2016 year review. We can look, though, at the 2015 sales numbers. And they show total sales of audiobooks, a fairly broad category – you can tell us a bit more about it – at \$1.77 billion. That's quite a significant number – billion with a B – and of course that is also rising rapidly, up about 20% over the previous year. So tell us a little bit more about those numbers.

COBB: Sure. Well, that's just in North America, so worldwide audiobooks are continuing to grow. As you said, we have a nearly 21% increase over 2014. And it's just an exciting time to be in our industry, because so many more people are listening and so many more books are being published. I think that's really what is helping to drive the growth. More people have more books available to them. They realize that audio is out there. They try it. And then they are excited to listen to something else.



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KENNEALLY: Right. I would imagine technology is playing a role, and perhaps this in tandem with the recent renaissance in podcasting, because everyone has a smartphone in their pocket, so they have access to audiobooks right there, wherever they go – waiting at the doctor’s office, driving in the car, they could be listening to a book rather than playing Candy Crush.

COBB: Absolutely. There’s so much that’s coming at us today in terms of entertainment. But we all have to be doing things. So when we’re driving, as you mentioned, when we are folding laundry, if we can be taking in material – book material, it could be a play, a wide variety of things are available in audio – we can really be using our time wisely and entertaining ourselves and educating ourselves as well, which is what a lot of people do when they’re listening to audiobooks.

KENNEALLY: So that’s important. I mentioned that *The Girl on the Train* was, not surprisingly, the most popular title borrowed by public library patrons last year. But audiobooks are much more than just fiction and narrative. They can be self-help manuals, if you will. They can be books about health. All kinds of subjects are open to audiobooks.

COBB: Absolutely. And in the digital world, no one knows what you’re listening to. So we’ve certainly seen a rise in such genres as erotica. I know salespeople who for years have been learning sales techniques and honing their skills as they’re driving around. But as you say, everyone has a smartphone, and so we can be sort of masking exactly what we’re listening to and really expand our own horizons with the number of offerings that are out there today.

KENNEALLY: The Audio Publishers Association isn’t new. It’s been around now since 1987, so 30 years this year. And your membership is an interesting collection of those who record and make audiobooks, but also the distributors and the retailers. Tell us about the APA.

COBB: Sure. Well, as you say, publishers are our main type of member. They’re the voting members. They’re who we are thinking about when we’re making decisions on how to spend our money. But we are surrounded by a number of different types of people who belong to the organization and who participate with us. That does include the retailers, both on the library side and on the consumer side. It includes people who produce audiobooks, studios. And a large segment of our population are the narrators. We could not do this without them. They are literally the voice behind each audiobook. So we have a wide variety of members and constituents to think about and to plan programming for, to do educational stuff for.

But a lot of our time is spent on these surveys, so that we know what’s happening in the market, and then marketing the format itself. We did a huge video campaign



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this last fall with such authors as Chelsea Clinton and James Patterson talking about why they loved audiobooks.

KENNEALLY: That's really interesting. Today, 2017, we are hearing a great deal about audiobooks, but I took a look at some of the materials on the audiopub.org website, and I was really struck that Thomas Edison invents the phonograph in 1877, but the following year, he predicts that recorded sound is going to be used for reading books aloud – for blind people, for hospital patients, and as you were telling us, for people who are just too busy to be able to sit down to read. So all of this seems very new, yet it really is as old as the phonograph itself. It's a fascinating history here. So what we are seeing is kind of circling back to a format that has been with us for quite some time.

COBB: Absolutely. And we've been on the forefront of the digital revolution for a while. When the iPod came out and Audible was growing, we started to see this huge surge of interest in audiobooks and listening to audiobooks. What's nice about the digital format – you know, when we started in the industry and there were phonographs and records and all of that, you could only put so much material onto each record or onto each cassette or onto each CD. In a digital world, really the file can be as large as you want, so you don't need to worry about abridging any of the materials, and you can carry an entire book with you on a small stick or on a phone or on your computer. So you have access to a larger amount of materials in a very easy-to-use format.

KENNEALLY: You mentioned narrators are an important part of this, and many famous actors and others are very well known as narrators for these audiobooks. I believe Stephen Fry particularly is very successful at all of this. But what we are seeing, too, are the authors getting into the game, particularly self-published authors. There is the Audiobook Creation Exchange and others, including something called Authors Republic from Audiobooks.com, that work with authors to help them produce their own audiobooks. I wonder if we can talk a bit about self-published audiobooks. What does the APA see as the challenges and the opportunities for self-published authors with audiobooks?

COBB: Well, you can't just step into a booth and record an audiobook easily and expect it to be top-notch. It's really quite a skill. While authors are more able to read their own materials, oftentimes they don't understand the rigors of how hard it is to do the recording. It takes a lot of stamina and it takes a lot of practice, and you'd be surprised how many mistakes you make reading one page. So I think that always shocks people – is it's not that easy to actually record even your own stuff.

Then, of course, when you're self-publishing anything, whether it be an e-book or an audiobook, just putting it out there doesn't necessarily make anyone buy it. So you have to find ways to market it. What's nice about this growing industry of



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distribution is that people can get their titles available in libraries, into international venues, all these different places, so that it can be exposed to more listeners and then more people can discover them as an author.

What's really changed in the industry with the rise of e-books is that now people look for a title, and they aren't necessarily thinking specifically I want a hard copy book or I want an audiobook. There all the options are in front of them, and they can pick the one that's going to work for them best at that time.

KENNEALLY: It's really interesting, because as you say, they could start with an audiobook because that's convenient – they're waiting for their plane to take off at the airport – and if they get drawn into the story, they could then get off the airplane and buy the book at the airport bookstore or they could download it on their Kindle app. So really it's not siloed. You can go from audiobooks to e-books to print books and back and forth.

COBB: Absolutely. There are certainly things where you can have the e-book and the audiobook kind of merge together through an app or through Amazon's Whispersync, and you can go back and forth seamlessly, really. So technology not only in the distribution but also in how you imbibe the materials has really made a fun difference for us.

KENNEALLY: Well, we'll be speaking in just a moment with a self-published author who has created his own audiobooks, and I wonder whether self-published authors can join the APA or what they can learn from by interacting with the APA.

COBB: Absolutely. We certainly have a number of authors who are members. And what's nice about our organization is that we're pretty small. So when we all get together, you can actually sit down and have conversations with people. One of the great things to do is become a member, come to one of our networking socials, and actually have a chance to meet narrators. Because when you meet narrators, you might meet one that you want to hire to do your next audiobook. So those really – even though it's just a fun cocktail party, it's really an opportunity for producers, for publishers, and for authors to meet people who could actually be the voice of their title.

KENNEALLY: Well, we appreciate having you join us today. Michele Cobb – she's the voice of the Audio Publishers Association, executive director of APA. Michele Cobb, thank you for joining us on Beyond the Book.

COBB: Thanks. It was a pleasure to be here.

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KENNEALLY: The opening passages of *Saltwater Witch*, book one in the Seaborn Trilogy – the author Chris Howard joins me now. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Chris.

HOWARD: Thanks, Chris. Glad to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, we're happy you could join us, and we're looking forward to talking about your experience as a self-published author with a self-produced audiobook. The Seaborn Trilogy – it's hard to sum up in just a few words, but it concerns an army of the drowned dead, family betrayal, an exiled witch who doesn't know she has power or that enemies are lurking all around her spying on her. Your main character is Cassandra, and you follow her as she discovers who and what she is in what one reviewer at least called a mix of the Little Mermaid story tossed with a limb or two of zombies – quite a combination.

We need to tell people too, Chris, that, apart from sharing a couple of microphones here today, we also share an employer. You work with me at Copyright Clearance Center as a senior technical product manager. But otherwise, in your very busy life, you're just a creative guy with a pen and a paintbrush. Apart from being author of the Seaborn Trilogy, which was first published by Juno Books in 2008, you've written a shelf full of other books and short stories and essays as well. You're a past winner of the Robert Heinlein Centennial Short Fiction Contest. And a lot more about you and your books is online at saltwaterwitch.com.

But most recently, among all of those very interesting jobs you've given yourself, you've been the producer and narrator of an audiobook edition for *Saltwater Witch*, and we wanted to talk to you about that experience. But I think it is a good place to start by asking you about your role as a fan of the audiobook form.

HOWARD: Yeah, that is a good place to start. I've listening to audiobooks for a long time. I lived in California for a long time, and now I live out here in the Northeast. I've always had 40, 50 or hour, hour and a half long commutes, depending on where I was. So I've been an Audible subscriber, I think, since 1999 or 2000. And for me it's primarily listen in the car. You have a captive audience. And I –

KENNEALLY: You are the captive. (laughter)

HOWARD: Yeah, and I'm the captive. Yeah, and I think I've always loved the – you know, I love the dramatic readings of these books. And the thing is I'm not one of these – I don't typically – I have fans and I get e-mails from people who say, oh, I would read this in a heartbeat if it was an audiobook. For me, it really is – audiobooks have always been an in-the-car thing. What would happen is Friday evening would come along, and I was well into a book – into the audiobook version



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– I would go buy the e-book and just continue reading over the weekend. So it just became that –

KENNEALLY: So it was part of your reading habit, even though you really weren't reading for that period.

HOWARD: Yeah.

KENNEALLY: We just spoke with Michele Cobb, who's the executive director of the Audio Publishers Association. She told us that really the audiobook – while the renaissance in the audiobook form is happening in 2017, the audiobook, if you will, goes back to the very first days of sound recording. Thomas Edison even realized that people would want to hear books because they were just too busy to read. And that's very true today. Of course, now with smartphone technology, we're all able to access an audiobook when we're waiting for the train or waiting for the plane, or as you were telling us, sitting in the car driving to work. It's really interesting.

Yet for an author, the words came first. They did come first for you. Why did you choose now, 10 years nearly into the book's life, to create your own audiobook for it?

HOWARD: That's a great question, because I think part of it is – you know, I do have people who want the audiobooks. I've always thought it was fun. I'm going to say going back maybe eight or 10 years – because these books were published a long time ago. Rights reverted a long time ago. I can do with them what I want at this point. And to me part of it is, I think, it seemed more difficult. I love audiobooks. I love the technology. I love listening to books. But it seemed more difficult than –

KENNEALLY: Than it turned out to be.

HOWARD: – than it turned out to be. But it also turned out to be more fun, and so now I've continued on with it.

KENNEALLY: Well, that's interesting, because of course you're not someone who's put off by technology. You're a techie kind of a guy. So you were initially put off by the technology, but you've discovered that really, for someone like yourself, an author, putting together an audiobook really isn't that much work. I mean, it takes some effort.

HOWARD: Yeah, because my background is in software engineering. That's what I did. I'm in the product group here at CCC, working with Chris and others. But I loved the idea of podcasting when that became a big thing in 2007-2008. The other thing, too, is I think I've always – you know, I listen to these audiobooks and I love

these dramatic readings, and I think the way they capture these characters' voices is just so compelling. If anyone knows the voice of any particular character, it's going to be the author. Whether you can pull that off – and I think that has been the most difficult thing is to actually fit – there's a narration voice, there's a character voice when you change characters.

And I think the way books are written, the way I write books – I don't always said – he said, she said, a character said this. So when I go and when I'm reading this script for an e-book, that's part of the difficulty, too, is actually – I modify it, because it's my book, to say things to make it clear to the listener who's speaking in cases where that may not be clear.

KENNEALLY: Right. Well, we'll talk about, shall we say, the artistic part of this in just a minute, but first let's tell listeners who may be thinking themselves – there may be authors, too, who listen to the podcast – thinking about whether I ought to try to get into this, too. So there's some equipment that's necessary as kind of basics. Tell us briefly what you had to invest in.

HOWARD: Well, I didn't have to invest in a lot. Mainly a microphone – a good microphone. I would say there's – you can Google audiobooks narration. There's just a million things out there you can find – really helpful people, pro narrators talking about what they do, how they do it. I don't actually think it takes a lot to get into it. I would say a decent \$70 to \$100 mic is probably the minimum you'd want, but that'll get you so far that you can do a lot of post-processing in free applications like Audacity and others. Most people have a computer. All you really need is a computer running Windows, Linux, Mac, and a decent mic, and you're good to go.

KENNEALLY: Right. But there were some techniques you picked up along the way that assisted you in the post-recording piece of this, because obviously no one – even Stephen Fry, one of the most successful narrators of audiobooks – he's not going to everything on the first take. There are going to be moments when he has to clear his throat or get a glass of water or the phone rings, for crying out loud. So you've learned a lot about editing, too, and about how to mark your recording so that the editing part is a little easier and goes a little faster.

HOWARD: Yeah. And I think that's – again, a lot of this stuff I picked up online. I Googled for stuff. There's just so many YouTube videos out there by narrators talking about their profession. One of the things I do is, you know, you read a line. You don't say it in the right voice. You mispronounce something. I would just snap into the microphone and then go back to the start of the sentence and just start on and just keep going.

KENNEALLY: Snap – as in you'd snap your fingers?



HOWARD: Yeah.

KENNEALLY: Now, what does that do?

HOWARD: And so what happens is when you go back and look at the wave form of – that’s the graph of what the audio looks like in an application like Audacity – you’re going to see a vertical bar that’s there, and that’s going to tell you, ah, there’s a mistake there. So you can quickly scroll through in the post-processing phase and remove that mistaken section of audio. It makes it very easy.

KENNEALLY: That’s great. It’s a long way from the days that I was just recalling – 1980s and early ’90s, when we were working with cassettes and reel-to-reel tape and razor blades and all of that. So things today – really for anyone listening, they can tackle it, come up with their own techniques for recording and for editing it and be comfortable in their own home studio.

HOWARD: Yeah. I think part of it is people have a laptop computer and a microphone, like a boom stand and a microphone. You can go sit in your walk-in closet with all the clothes. You’re going to get better sound. You’re going to get less voice bouncing off of hard surfaces like walls. There are a lot of things you can do. But even if you can’t do that, there are still just a lot of plugins, a lot of algorithms in these applications that allow you to really clean up. Like that floor noise, all that stuff – there are just things you run and make it so easy in these apps.

KENNEALLY: All right. So that’s what you have to do. You have to get a good microphone, you have to get some apps that help you clean things up once you’ve recorded it. Then comes the distribution. For your experimentation with audiobooks for *Saltwater Witch*, you’ve released them on YouTube. Why did you choose YouTube?

HOWARD: Well, I’ve put the first five chapters up. I think part of it was this is – part of it is me just having fun. There are readers who have e-mailed me. I have friends who have talked to me and said, you know, if you had an audiobook, I would gladly listen to it.

Just to make a point about what we were talking about earlier, you know, I have a good friend who – she comes home from work, she’s exhausted. If she picked up a book, she said I’d be two chapters in and I would fall asleep on the couch. But an audiobook, because of the dramatic reading, because of the way you’re listening to it, I think that changes the way you receive it as a listener. So that’s what she really is interested in. For people like that, I thought, OK, I’m just going to start putting it out there. And I’ve had, what, a few hundred listens to it on YouTube. I really



haven't done any promotion about it. So at this point it's more of my beta readers are – listeners are involved.

That said, I am looking at things like ACX, which is Audible's audiobook creative exchange. To me, that's fascinating from several points of view. I like recording the books, but I have author friends and publisher friends who use ACX to get a narrator, to go through the whole – to find a producer – all of those required steps in the audiobook publishing workflow.

KENNEALLY: Including distribution, including the publishing part?

HOWARD: Right, because then you're talking about Audible.com, and that's going to be distributed through Amazon and Audible and iTunes and other places.

KENNEALLY: Right. So after all, how do you think things have turned out so far?

HOWARD: Oh, you know what? There's a great – and I don't know whose name is – because it's one of many hundreds of videos I've seen from audiobook narrators online. But one of the things he said – you know, people come up to him all the time and say, oh, you narrate audiobooks? I would love to do that. One of the things he tells them to do is go find one of your favorite books and go and for the next two weeks, just read it aloud. Just sit in – and if after two weeks you still like doing that, come back to me.

I think that was an interesting thing. And I think that was the takeaway I had. My first takeaway was I'm, whatever, 26 out of 34, 35 chapters – I just started this with *Saltwater Witch* – and I'm having a blast. So I'm now looking forward to the next book. And I think it'll only get better from here is the thing, too. I think part of this, from my perspective, is just to increase my skills. You know, narrating an audiobook is an art. My favorite narrators, like Simon Vance, who did Tim Powers, *The Stress of Her Regard*, or Peter Kenny, who does the Iain M. Banks Culture novels, are some of my favorite narrators. Half of my attention is just on how – the technique – their technique now, because I've listened to these books several times. That's kind of what I'm building toward.

So part of this is also getting the books out there. I put five chapters up on YouTube. The other side is I want to continue doing this and build up those skills to make this a quality piece of work. I think that's –

KENNEALLY: Well, we certainly think it is. We're going to end now with an excerpt from *Saltwater Witch* where you get to do a few voices. You can set it up further for us, but we have the main character, Cassandra, who's having a kind of a telepathic conversation that frightens her a bit and frightens her friends. Tell us more.



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HOWARD: So there's this king – this very old king, 2,000-year-old king – wakes in her head and is just talking to her. She has what is essentially a voice in her head. That's sort of the setup for this. And she's not too happy about it, because she already has these – you know, people already don't think very highly of her at any rate, so having a voice in her head of a 2,000-year-old king is only going to make things worse.

KENNEALLY: It's going to make things a lot more difficult for her. Well, we want to thank you, Chris Howard. We'll take a listen to *The Saltwater Witch* by Chris Howard – and the author joining us today on Beyond the Book. Thanks for being here.

HOWARD: Thank you, Chris.

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