



**Interview with
Michelle Cobb, Audio Publishers Association
Robin Whitten, *AudioFile Magazine***

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GAIMAN: (recording) Before the beginning, there was nothing – no earth, no heavens, no stars, no sky. Only the mist world, formless and shapeless, and the fire world, always burning.

KENNEALLY: In 2017, British novelist Neil Gaiman helped pay a literary debt to the gods and goddesses of pre-Christian Scandinavia in *Norse Mythology*, his retelling of the ancient Asgard legends. As we can hear, the author's affection for Thor, Odin, Loki, and Skadi shines through in his own narration of the work.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. At a gala evening in the New York Historical Society palatial headquarters recently, the Audio Publishers Association announced the winners of the 2018 Audie Awards, the Oscars of spoken-word entertainment. Neil Gaiman won an Audie for narration by author. Other winners included Bruce Springsteen, Trevor Noah, and Ann Leckie.

No wonder, really, that the publishing world has rolled out the red carpet for audiobooks. Revenue from audiobook sales has more than doubled since 2012, yielding a welcome digitally driven boost to publishers' bottom lines in an otherwise tight book market. The Audio Publishers Association has just released data on 2017 audiobook sales, and Michele Cobb, APA executive director, joins me to go over those numbers. Welcome back to Beyond the Book, Michele.

COBB: Hey, thanks for having me.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to chatting with you. We first did so about a year ago, and we made a point of telling our audience about the tremendous success – the phenomenon, really – of audiobooks. That phenomenon shows no signs of abating. In 2017, 46,000 audiobook titles landed on the market, waiting to download into our smartphones and our other devices. Indeed, I think before we get into some of the numbers, Michele, this really is a wholly digital success story, as in fact the figures on physical product show that CDs are continuing their vanishing act.



COBB: It's interesting, because CDs are having kind of a slow slide down. They're still a big part of what people do, and there are still a lot of people that like to listen on them. But digital is where the growth is. As you mentioned, the smartphone – we've all got one, we've all got audiobooks on them, and we're starting to see a lot of activity around the smart speaker, like your Google Home device. A lot of people are listening in the evenings, listening to children's stories, listening to audiobooks. This was the holiday for the smart speaker. So we're expecting to see a lot of growth in that particular area.

KENNEALLY: It's interesting you mention the smart speaker, because I can imagine children get involved there, too. If they want to hear a story, they can just ask Alexa to do it.

COBB: Absolutely. Edison Research does a survey about smart speakers, and they showed that one of the top three activities from 7:00 to 9:00 PM was listening to children's stories.

KENNEALLY: That's really a neat figure. You've got some other really interesting numbers here that we should take a look at quickly. The dominance of fiction over nonfiction slipped a bit from 2016 to 2017, from about 72% down to just under 70% – not a tremendous shift, but I wonder whether it has something to do with what's going on in the world.

COBB: Oh, yes. We've seen political books – we've seen some very big political books, too – and we've certainly seen people turning to self-help books, meditation books. So the nonfiction is definitely on the rise, plus a lot of great history and celebrity memoirs are helping boost that nonfiction number.

KENNEALLY: But it really is a market that's about entertainment, and fiction drives that.

COBB: Yes. Mystery/suspense/thriller – everyone loves to listen to a good bloody murder story. (laughter)

KENNEALLY: (laughter) Well, at least they're listening in their cars and on their phones, in the subways, wherever they go. It is a story that, as I said at the introduction, should warm the hearts – even if it's a bloody mystery, it should warm the hearts of book publishers. Tell us about the relationship that book publishers have to the audiobook world.



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COBB: Many book publishers also publish audiobooks, and we're seeing a rise in that, where people who have not traditionally had their own audio division, they're starting to do some of their own audiobooks. Additionally, there are a lot of independent audio publishers that are out there buying rights and creating original audio product, and they are all putting this great stuff into the market. And with a wide range of titles, we see a lot of excitement about the format, and it gets a lot of new listeners to try audiobooks.

KENNEALLY: One of the great books of the year has also been awarded the top audiobook of the year from the APA, and that is *Lincoln in the Bardo*. You mentioned publishers getting into the act. This was a production of Random House Audio, which has quite a reputation going into the market, and it was a dazzling, record-breaking cast of 166 voices, including celebrities like Nick Offerman, David Sedaris, and George Saunders himself, the author, as well as a variety of other narrators. You can tell us about it, but is that kind of really Broadway-level production becoming more common?

COBB: We are seeing more of these full cast productions. I was on stage at the moment where they received that Audie Award, and the stage was literally flooded by the number of people who had worked on the production as a narrator, as an editor. So it was great to have all that energy and excitement around this full cast production. We loved it.

KENNEALLY: I'm sure you did, and someone else who must have loved it, too, joins me now – Robin Whitten. She's the founder and editor of *AudioFile Magazine*, the leading source of reviews and features on audiobooks and related programs. Robin, welcome back to Beyond the Book.

WHITTEN: Hi, Chris. Glad to be here again.

KENNEALLY: So when you first heard *Lincoln at the Bardo* in audiobook form, did you think this is a real winner? Did it stand out obviously?

WHITTEN: Oh, it really did. I mean, all the voices and the variety – it just lent itself to the book, enlivened the book in a way that I think many readers felt that the audio was just a fantastic experience.

KENNEALLY: *AudioFile* itself gives readers a sense of the entire range of audiobooks and related programs. We have some excerpts of some of the winners of Audies, and I think that begins to tell the story even further. We'll hear and talk about them. The first one is from Stephen Fry of a book collection, I should say, of the works of Sherlock Holmes. He introduces the various books and reads them, as



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well. I think it's fair to say, Robin, that this kind of audiobook – the sonorous, English-accented reader – that's something that people sort of imagine as kind of the audiobook of their dreams, isn't it?

WHITTEN: Well, it is, but it is Sherlock Holmes, too, and he's a Victorian. So you have to realize that's what's being reflected there. (laughter)

KENNEALLY: Absolutely. Yet the acting portion of Stephen Fry – he's an author, he's a raconteur, he's an actor as well, and one trained in Great Britain – that sense of almost Shakespearean authority comes through.

WHITTEN: Oh, absolutely. And he does such an interesting program with the stories of Sherlock Holmes, because his own reflections and his personal commentary and thoughts are – he introduces each story with a little bit of his own sort of personal essay. So it's very different – there have been many collections and recordings of Sherlock Holmes, but this one has a very personal feel, and then you get this wonderful, dramatic presentation of each of the stories themselves.

KENNEALLY: Let's hear that now.

FRY: (recording) Like so many energetic and inexhaustible Victorians, Doyle interested himself in everything. That all-consuming curiosity reveals itself straightaway in A Study in Scarlet, which was published in Mrs. Beeton's Christmas Annual in 1887.

Without giving away too much of what is to come, I can say that the story deals with as part of its background the internal affairs of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons.

KENNEALLY: So that's the kind of classic audiobook, something that someone who was a listener of the The Lone Ranger or radio drama from the Golden Age might find just to their taste. But of course, this is 2018, Robin Whitten, and we are seeing a great many more types of books and range of narrators in the marketplace.

One of the other Audie winners this year was for *The Hate U Give*, a book by Angie Thomas, and it was read by actress Bahni Turpin. That won for best female narrator, and that was in the young adult category. This book gives us a sense of just how important to the marketplace that young reader is, as well as to growing the audience, to making it a more diverse one.

WHITTEN: Yes, and I think there's a lot of growth in younger listeners. What you hear in this – we really understand that Starr, the young girl, is a teen. There's no question about that in her voice. It's amazing as I revisited this and listened to



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Bahni again – I’m like, that’s a teenager. (laughter) And then you hear her parents and you hear the different characters from different cultures within the story – very engaging for young people and issues around which they’re very interested.

KENNEALLY: Indeed, as you say, it is very engaging. The perspective of the young girl narrator, Starr, just comes through. Let’s hear a bit of that, as well.

TURNER: (recording) I feel eyes on me from all around. The grip tightens around my lungs. Uncle Carlos hands me a sweating bottle of water. Momma puts it up to my lips. I take slow sips and look around Uncle Carlos’s desk to avoid the curious eyes of the officers. He has almost as many pictures of me and Sekani on display as he has of his own kids.

KENNEALLY: So, Robin, do we see this growth of the diverse audience really making an impact? Are you able to point to other examples where this is going beyond the classics of the Sherlock Holmes and giving us contemporary heroes and heroines and perspectives that are really very relevant to the listener’s experience?

WHITTEN: Oh, I think so very much, Chris. *AudioFile* runs a summer program called Audiobook SYNC where we are dedicated to developing this teen audience, and we have the publishers help us give away free audiobooks each week, a pair of them, and we contrast cultures, voices, authors, and world experiences, and they have been hugely popular – done it now for eight years and is going on right now.

KENNEALLY: Right. And summertime, of course, a great time for a family to listen in the car as they’re headed off for their vacation. Let’s close with an excerpt from a book that I think might be entertaining a number of families on a long car ride this summer. That’s *Trombone Shorty*, read to us by Dion Graham. It won in the young listeners category. Tee it up for us. There’s a critical voice here, but there’s so much more than the voice. There’s the music, too.

WHITTEN: Yes. *Trombone Shorty* is a fabulous choice for families. The story is wonderful. The music adds to it. The production is exceptional. And I think you can listen to it over and over again. I have a two-year-old grandson, and I’m telling you he has a little trombone that he goes to sleep with, because in the story, Trombone Shorty slept with his first trombone. So it’s engaging for all ages, and the music and the story – it’s a great audio experience and one that I don’t think families – you can listen again and again, and you won’t get tired of.

GRAHAM: (recording) There’s one time every year that’s more exciting than any other – Mardi Gras. Parades fill the streets, and beaded necklaces are thrown through the air to the crowd. I love the brass bands with their own trumpets, trombones,



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saxophones, and the biggest brass instrument of them all, the tuba, which rested over the musician's head like an elephant's trunk.

KENNEALLY: Michele Cobb, I want to bring you in for just a last word, because I'd like to ask you – if you're going on any summer drives, what kind of audiobooks might you be bringing?

COBB: Ooh. I have a lot of celebrity biographies just piled up and waiting for me to listen to. I'm in the middle of Anna Kendrick's biography, which I listen to whenever I drive up to Maine, because she's from Portland, Maine. So it feels very apropos.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. Well, it's certainly apropos to speak with you both on the occasion of the release of the latest sales numbers for audiobooks. Sales in 2017 continue to show important growth, and we appreciate hearing about that, as well as about the Audie winners just recently announced in New York at the New York Historical Society.

We have been speaking today with Michele Cobb, executive director at the Audio Publishers Association. Michele, thanks for joining us.

COBB: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: And also on the line, Robin Whitten, founder and editor of *AudioFile Magazine*. Thanks for being on the program, too, Robin.

WHITTEN: Great. Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global leader in content management, discovery, and document delivery solutions. Through its relationships with those who use and create content, CCC and its subsidiaries RightsDirect and Ixxus drive market-based solutions that accelerate knowledge, power publishing, and advance copyright.

Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

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