Interview with Ashleigh Gardner, Wattpad Books

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KENNEALLY: When a publishing imprint announces its launch, any excitement is usually linked to the founder's literary reputation. The rule holds true in the recent of case of Wattpad Books, the first direct publishing division for a company that calls itself a global multiplatform entertainment company for original stories. The web-based publisher, largely of genre fiction, has nurtured the careers of hundreds of authors and shepherded nearly 1,000 titles into print and on screen.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Until now, novels born on Wattpad grew into hits online and later found homes at traditional publishers, such as Random House, Simon & Schuster, and Macmillan. Launched this winter, Wattpad Books will now fish for bestsellers from the online pool it works so hard to stock and where other publishers have also cast their lines. With machine learning technology and data analytics to supplement their editorial team, though, Wattpad Books expect to pull in the next hit stories sooner than anyone.

Ashleigh Gardner, deputy general manager at Wattpad Studios, will lead the new Wattpad Books division. She joins me now from Toronto. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Ashleigh Gardner.

GARDNER: Hi. Thanks so much for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: We were very interested to read about the launch of Wattpad Books, Ashleigh. It combines a very traditional approach to publishing – you have a list you've already published of six titles that will come out this fall, print and ebooks. You've got a distribution partner in the US and in Canada. And I understand the advances to be paid to authors are relatively comparable to those at other major publishing houses.

But what Wattpad brings to this story is what it's brought to so much of what you've already done, and that is some new technologies and some insights into publishing that you have garnered through various types of analytics and machine learning. That's the piece of the story I hope you'll tell us more about. Human expertise is there, of course. You probably want to stress that. But it really comes

down to what Wattpad calls the Story DNA. Tell us what Story DNA is there at Wattpad.

GARDNER: Yeah, so here at Wattpad, we have over 70 million people coming to Wattpad to read each month, and they're reading over 500 million – half a billion – stories each month. We have a huge pool of content that we could never read ourselves as human editors, so we really lean on machine learning to help us understand what those stories are about before we even open the page. We can use machine learning to understand the context. What are tags used around this story? What are the themes likely to be based on phrasing and stuff included in that?

We're able to see not only information about the content, though, but information on how audiences are reacting to it. I'm able to see what readers in Canada are enjoying. What are the stories that people under the age of 18 just can't put down once they start reading? So all of those different stats help give us a picture that helps inform what we publish when we actually go to read those stories. There are, of course, still human readers that are looking at things and reading and evaluating those stories to make sure they're ones that fit with our list and that we think will work for readers outside of Wattpad.

But what I think is so interesting is that publishers are really trying to understand what readers want, and every book they acquire is a guess towards what they think that will be. At Wattpad, we already have this massive audience of people that are reading. We understand what readers want. We're just looking for the best way to get that to them. And as you mentioned, we're quite format-agnostic. We're publishing books. We're helping turn stories into TV series. Really, we're just looking to find the best stories to entertain users and people that might not be joining Wattpad.

KENNEALLY: Tell us a little bit more, Ashleigh Gardner, about the way you analyze the content. You're looking for the storyline, the plot, the characters, the settings, I suppose. But I understand that you really drill down. You can deconstruct the writing by sentence, even perhaps by word, certainly the types of grammar that are used. Tell us a little bit more about the ways you are looking at under the microscope the content that's been submitted.

GARDNER: Yeah. You know, I think we're looking always at several different reports, seeing what's turning up in different ways, and combining that lens. One of my favorite reports that really helps surface really interesting stories of quality, and also helps bring to the top stories that might be less popular, is looking at that average reading time session. To me, that kind of is how we measure what is

unputdownable as a story. That's something that's kind of genre and plot and character-agnostic. It's just, what are those stories that people can't put down?

Then we can start to filter that by demographics. If we know that we're looking for a YA story in North America, what are some of the key markets, and what are the stories they can't put down? That really helps us blend both what our Wattpad users are looking for and what we think is going to work out in the market, too.

It's always an evolving process, too. The more books that we publish – not only ourselves, but with other partners – the more we're learning about what Wattpad indicators end up leading to success off-platform. That's helping inform future data, too.

KENNEALLY: Right. And you have an advantage over traditional publishers at Wattpad, because this is your own data. You don't need to ask anybody for permission to see it. And of course, in many cases, the publishers who have worked with online partners aren't allowed to get at this kind of data, at least in the detail that you're describing here. That really puts you a big step ahead of the others.

GARDNER: Yeah. You know, I think that even just being within Wattpad, we understand Wattpad's success better than anyone else. I think we still see publishers look to Wattpad stories to acquire both domestically and internationally, and we're thrilled whenever any Wattpad author gets success off-platform. We want to see as many books published as possible. But I think the leg up that we have is that full understanding of that picture. Nobody's reading more Wattpad stories. Nobody understands our data better than us.

And not only that, at the end of the day, when we're bringing those projects out after we've acquired them, we also have that audience. We're not only a publisher. We're not only holding rights. We're a massive platform, and we're able to market those titles back to the audience of people that's likely to read and enjoy them.

KENNEALLY: And that audience – let's talk about who they are, because we are at a moment in publishing when the diversity of the audience and the diversity of the titles available have been looked at, and there's a concern that perhaps there's a development of a monoculture – I've seen that word used – when it comes to publishing, publishing that is Manhattan-centric very often. You're there in Toronto. But it's more important that Wattpad is really a collection of fascinating writers with takes on genres that are very new and exciting. There has been a great many authors published on Wattpad who come from otherwise marginalized

communities – marginalized, at least, by traditional publishing. Tell us why that's important, that you have this very diverse set of writers.

GARDNER: Yeah, I think that's so important, not just for Wattpad, but for the industry as a whole. I've spent my whole career working in publishing, and it's very similar here in Toronto. Toronto is the most expensive city in Canada to live, similar to Manhattan. And you also have to be able to afford to work for free or close to that as you go through internships to get into publishing. I think that very much affects the culture of those of us that are choosing stories for everybody to read. We are not most people. I say that about the entire publishing industry.

I think that what we're able to see on Wattpad is what readers are reading and what's resonating to them. And we're lucky at Wattpad that we have a massive international audience that's extremely diverse. What's interesting to me is to see the very high percentage of our users in the US that read primarily in Spanish, or to understand that in Canada, we're seeing a lot of Muslim romance. We're able to see trends like that all over the world internationally that really let us understand that what people are reading and writing on Wattpad and what's being so successful is often what's being ignored by the traditional publishing industry. I think the fact that our audience is so diverse and our writers are so diverse is what's making our list so diverse, because we're not just looking at what we want to read. We're looking at what millions of people on Wattpad are reading.

KENNEALLY: That's what makes the list potentially very different from other imprints, like Wattpad Books. Some imprints, as I was alluding to in my introduction, are kind of stamped by the founder's literary tastes and success publishing in the past. Here, though, the shape of the Wattpad Books list is almost going to be led by the audience rather than by the editors.

GARDNER: Yeah, I think that's a great way to put it. We're not out to say that one is better than the other. We really need both of those things. And I think we also have something that's never been seen before. We've never had this much access to data, of reader analytics and what people are reading. We've never had this amount of works. There's no barrier of entry. Anyone can join and start writing on Wattpad without having to figure out how to navigate finding an agent and going through all of that to actually reach the editors at the end. All they had to do is post their story on Wattpad, start writing it, and as our users find it and react to it, that helps us find and recognize it. Our users, in a lot of ways, are our book scouts.

KENNEALLY: It's fascinating. I have to ask you a question, though, from the author's perspective. Does the launch of Wattpad Books change the arrangement that you have with authors? Is there a right of first refusal that Wattpad Books gets when

somebody submits to Wattpad online? Or are you going to be competing with the traditional book houses that have published Wattpad authors in the past, like Random House and Macmillan and others?

GARDNER: Everything remains completely up to the author. It's absolutely opt-in. Anyone that posts on Wattpad fully owns their work. In fact, I've talked to lots of writers through the years at Wattpad that that's been their goal is to just be popular on Wattpad. Some of them don't want anyone in their own life to know that they write. Some of them are pursuing other things and have no interest in publishing a book. I'm sure you would probably not be surprised to know that for many young people today, being famous on the internet or getting sponsored, or they're doing it as a way to get a Netflix series or a YouTube series is more the goal, rather than the book. But there are also so many people as authors that would love to be published, and we're very much involved with those, too.

But it's really absolutely up to the writer. So if someone wants to go with us, I think our offers are very competitive, and I think we understand not only what Wattpad readers want, but also how best to market back to them at the end of the day to really leverage the success that writers are having on the platform. But we absolutely hope to see more publishers acquiring from Wattpad in the future, too.

KENNEALLY: Lastly, Ashleigh Gardner, tell us about the opportunity you may find through the algorithm, not only to identify books that are already popular and make sure they get in front of readers, but to maybe find those hidden successes, the ones that you weren't looking for, but as you have searched through them, some patterns begin to emerge that are entirely unexpected.

GARDNER: Yeah. I mentioned before how reading time really is one of those indicators that often will bring up those stories. Also, when we're looking for different tags or different genres, we're able to see what's more at the top of those or what's emerging. On Wattpad, we're not just seeing what's the top and what's most popular.   We're able to see what's having high trajectories, or what are those things that have an interesting pickup, or stories that maybe have a much smaller audience, but everyone that picks it up is spending over 30 minutes reading it. To me, those are all indicators that this is something that's going to be big and successful and something that we should look at more.

KENNEALLY: Well, Ashleigh Gardner, thank you for telling us all about Wattpad and its story DNA. We've been speaking today with Ashleigh Gardner. She is deputy general manager at Wattpad Studios and will lead the company's new Wattpad Books division. Ashleigh, thank you again for speaking with us on Beyond the Book.

GARDNER: Thanks so much.

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