



## **Interview with Porter Anderson, *Publishing Perspectives***

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KENNEALLY: For what seems like forever, book authors and their publishers have treated Hollywood as a glorified cash machine. In the long-gone days of the silver screen, Ernest Hemingway once summed up the relationship in his trademark way. “You throw them your book, they throw you the money,” he said, “then you jump into your car and drive like hell back the way you came.” In the digital age, movie and television producers surely deserve better treatment than that.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series. I’m Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. As book sales languish, especially adult fiction, authors and publishers must wonder where the next generation of readers will come from. Streaming services like Netflix and Hulu may provide the answer.

Porter Anderson, editor in chief at *Publishing Perspectives*, has recently noted several important ways that the exchange between page and screen is evolving. He joins me now with a take on the difficult choices facing content creators and content consumers. Porter Anderson, welcome to Beyond the Book.

ANDERSON: Thanks so much, Chris. It’s great to be here.

KENNEALLY: We’re looking forward to chatting with you, because a recent essay that you published on *Publishing Perspectives* caught our eye and sort of continued a thread that we began almost a year ago in a discussion at BookExpo. That is the evolving role, the evolving relationship, that page and screen have – the book publishers and authors on the one hand and the screen producers of all types – movies, TV, and of course the services like Hulu and Netflix – on the other side. It all derives from this need that publishers today have for, as you put it, to bring more digital life and profit to their content.

ANDERSON: Yeah, exactly. I think the message for this year to our publishers is first, get yourself a producer. Find somebody that you like, somebody whose work you like, get very close, and keep that person really close and be really nice to that person. Because as we know, it’s a production company that takes a property into a studio. Unless you’re in a very strong position, you don’t just walk right into 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox and tell them I’ve got what you need. You actually get to Ridley Scott, and his production company walks it in, because he knows what they need.



This is the relationship that I'm trying to encourage for our publishers. Because as you say, the need to move more deeply into the digital space is growing very fast, and it also is basically a train that we don't want to see leave the station without the book publishing industry right on board.

KENNEALLY: It raises some important questions for publishers, though, because in a traditional publishing house, they're accustomed to looking for certain things from a submission – good story, characters, plot development, and all that kind of attractive points. For the screen producers, they want that, but they want more, I think.

ANDERSON: They do. They need a lot of range. And for one thing, they want to take it away from you immediately. As our good friend Josh Malerman, who is the author of *Bird Box*, has told me recently, one of the lucky great traits he's discovered in himself is that he's happy to have his book taken away from him by the screenwriters so that they can work their magic on it. He's not one of the authors who lies awake all night thinking, what are they doing to my book?

But this is actually one of the stages of the process that I think many publishers are going to need to come to terms with more quickly than perhaps in the past – and many authors are going to – in that what Hollywood is looking for is going to be guided so abruptly at times by trends and is going to need so much adjustment in many points in order to match those trends.

What's happening with the streaming platforms – with the streamers, as we call them – Netflix and Amazon Prime and the others, is that they are following the audience, as you know, through great data research and their algorithmic ability to tell what people want. They are following their audience's interest very closely, at a much faster rate of production and reaction than Hollywood has been able to make in the past. That will mean, I think at times, that a property coming out of a great publishing house that at one point in our history would have been made as almost an iconic treasure and very carefully and respectfully guarded, may get pulled out of shape more than it might have in the past, simply because Hollywood is that responsive to its audiences today.

KENNEALLY: That's fascinating, Porter, the importance of data that you mentioned. But the idea that the producers are following their audience rather than leading their audience – I think book publishers in a traditional way have thought of doing just that, of leading the audience to great works, to great new authors. Here, they have to sort of find themselves in a very different position.



ANDERSON: Very true. This is an adjustment that began years ago, of course, and didn't necessarily have to do with film or television or the other electronic media. It is, however, the case that throughout the media universe today, it is the consumer driving the car. That's hard for a lot of – all of us to accept.

We learned this in journalism years ago, when suddenly we were getting data inputs as to what we were moving out in terms of our news and what we had to choose, because the readers wanted more of this or the viewers wanted more of that. (laughter) This was anathema. In the old days, it was called setting the agenda. And in journalism, we did it. In publishing, we did it. Today, in fact, the consumer is doing it.

That person has become so important that this is why so many of our best publishers are working with a lot of direct access to their readership, to their consumer base, to research and learn, what do you want? How do we move next? It does hurt. At times, it does feel like a backseat position. But it is the way of the future.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's interesting. Rather than setting the agenda, readers, consumers, viewers are now choosing their own adventure – a very different way of consuming content. The latest example of that, a fascinating one, is *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, which premiered on Netflix to great interest and acclaim and was promoted as a new advance in storytelling. But you point out that really this is old wine in new bottles when it comes to choosing your own adventure.

ANDERSON: It actually is. First, let me complement you, Chris. That was an immaculate segue, beautifully done, (laughter) getting us into choose-your-own-adventure, which it turns out one company thinks is a phrase it owns. That's going to be an interesting little court battle to watch. But the game book goes back a long way, many decades, and is the source of this whole concept of you choosing a path for the character to take, and that means that certain things happen and follow through, and you could have chosen a different path, and different things happened and followed through. Young people's books in many parts of our publishing history have had this as a kind of side sector in YA, perhaps, and maybe even middle grade books at a certain point.

What's being developed now by the people at Netflix in particular, who have this wonderful new engine that creates a magnificent array of choices for people to make, is a very on steroids edition of that – a very beautiful Hollywood rendition of a choose-your-own-adventure experience, in which you're using your remote – in my case, the Roku remote – to make choices all the way through the piece.



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The entry of the new *Bandersnatch* piece from *Black Mirror* and its producers was not welcomed by everybody. Of course, what you heard in the literary community primarily was, well, it wasn't a very good story. I've tried to communicate to people, it's a bit like the talking dog. It's not what he says. It's the fact he can talk at all. The ability for Netflix to make such a smooth, wonderful, technically accomplished rendition of this process and this product is really what this particular show is about. *Bandersnatch* is developed as a demo, if you will. And it's quite impressive. Somebody has written – I'm not sure that this is correct – but that there over a trillion unique permutations in the story depending on what you choose at which point and where you go back and forth. It's a fascinating exercise, I think, for anyone to watch, just to come up to speed on what's there.

This does, however, now give our publishers a new option, and at some points a new worry. I think they can look at a lot of their material and say, you know, this might actually work in development of that kind. This may be a property – this book, this story, this novella – that could be developed in this direction with a choose-your-own-adventure approach, which can be wonderful. And in that case, that's when you're in touch with your producer who likes to work with Netflix, and you're talking to them very fast to see if they'd like to look into trying to develop a piece you've got.

Anything at this point, I guess is the message, really, for publishers – anything that catches their fancy and makes them want to go to Hollywood with something, particularly something they may not have thought of otherwise, I'm all for. And when we talk of gamification – publishers looking for gaming opportunities – I would say look at this kind of cinematic narrative opportunity, a choose-your-own-adventure approach. Because in my mind – now, you may want to disagree with me, Chris – but I think that the story is more central to a choose-your-own-adventure product than necessarily it is in a game. A game can go off into so many other levels of technological development that I'm thinking publishers may feel a little more comfortable in many cases with a choose-your-own-adventure development.

**KENNEALLY:** It's a fascinating question. The integrity of the story is always at the heart of these debates, and there are different views of that. It's all what you intend to achieve, as well. But there are interesting benefits to this approach, this choose-your-own-adventure approach. It's been pointed out that these types of programs are more difficult to pirate than typical linear films or TV episodes. It's also true that this is a way for the producers to harvest data of all kinds from their viewers, from their audiences, from their subscribers, data that they can then use not only to create new programs, but also to monetize those programs they are making.



ANDERSON: Yeah, exactly. I really believe it's one of the good pieces that we were sharing. I think you found this one for us from Jesse Damiani over at *The Verge*. One of the nice points being made in this piece from early January is that there is an opportunity also for product placement as far as revenue streams go. Building into the choices that are being made in a choose-your-own-adventure some product choices could be very attractive to advertisers. Again, where this is not the way publishers normally think, it may be where they need to start thinking, because look at the revenue opportunities that that could start to bring forward, too.

I've seen an interesting case of choose-your-own-adventure that did not work, too. This was late in 2018. I think it represents something of the bump that many publishers have to go over when they start approaching this kind of material. There's a very gifted game book writer – designer, I think, is how they think of themselves, these folks who do these amazing books – named Dave Morris in London. Dave created a book. The name of it is *Can You Brexit? Without Breaking Britain* – nice, huh? It is a game book in which you try to decide all the different options that you think the UK should take in approaching the EU and vice versa. It came out – let's see – in fact, all the way back to March it was out last year.

What happened was Dave could not find a trade publisher to take this. He ended up putting it out himself. Did a very good job with it as far as self-publishing goes, but this was a man who once was an original writer on the *Ninja Turtles*, of all things. Very experienced, very well known, huge credentials, but he couldn't move this property.

What appears to have been the problem is the Brexit theme. You were looking at a nation that's going through great agonies, as we know, with the Brexit debate and struggling to try to find its way forward – terrible political moment. And it didn't seem that the publishers felt that they were going to be able to take this, if you will, more lighthearted game book approach into that terrain, which was a very serious political landscape at the time. So this is interesting, in that I think what we're seeing there is a case in which publishers have to think very carefully how the tone of a property is going to match this kind of technique if they're considering it.

KENNEALLY: This is a fundamental question – where are they going to go with their content? Then there's a flip to that, which is that producers like Netflix and Amazon and others may just decide, who needs a book anymore?

ANDERSON: This is one of my big fears. Writers in Hollywood are so fantastic, and they are so beautifully trained to know exactly what works on these audiences – again, thanks to data which is telling them at Netflix and telling them at Amazon



and telling them at the studios exactly what you're reacting to and how you liked it and how you didn't – that they can produce what a production company knows that Universal wants or that Netflix wants and get it right the first time – well, not the first time, I don't think anything ever comes out on the first draft right in Hollywood – but get it right quickly. They can throw a team of writers at something and develop it very, very fast.

Whereas finding the right property is an entirely different proposition, and that's what happens when they look at the publishing industry, in which case the publishing industry needs to get, I think, quite savvy in terms of displaying its wares, saying this is what we have ready to offer right now, perhaps in developing even a step toward its own screenwriting. There may be houses that want to look at pre-preparing treatments. Probably not much beyond the initial treatment stage, because who knows which way a producer's going to want to take it. But to get it as close as possible, if you will, to the language of Hollywood I think is going to become increasingly important, because you want to limit the time between its existence as a book and its existence as something that's being developed for the screen.

KENNEALLY: We have been speaking today with Porter Anderson, editor in chief at *Publishing Perspectives*. Really appreciate your reflections on the next path for storytelling, Porter.

ANDERSON: Thank you so much, Chris. It was a pleasure.

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 Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at [beyondthebook.com](http://beyondthebook.com). I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC's Beyond the Book.

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