



## **Audiobooks 2020: The Year-in-Review**

*with*

**Michele Cobb, Audio Publishers Association  
Robin Whitten, AudioFile Magazine**

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KENNEALLY: When President John Kennedy spoke in 1962 of his challenge to the nation to land on the moon, he stood on the frontier not only of space, but also of technology. In 2020, over a half-century later, we have ventured far into both.

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

*American Moonshot: John F. Kennedy and the Great Space Race*, by historian Douglas Brinkley, chronicled the effort to land on the moon in 1969 and was published in 2019. The audiobook for *Moonshot*, narrated by actor Stephen Graybill, received a 2020 Audie award for best in history and biography. Very likely, many listeners heard the story of Armstrong and Aldrin played on smartphones with more computing power than what NASA had to run the Apollo missions. Indeed, smart devices, including smart speakers, have launched an entire new category of business growth in publishing, the audiobook.

And again this year, CCC's Beyond the Book takes a look at the latest and greatest in audio with two leaders in the field. Michele Cobb is the executive director of the Audio Publishers Association, publisher of *AudioFile* magazine, and executive director of the recently launched Podcast Academy. Welcome back to Beyond the Book, Michelle.

COBB: Great to be here.

KENNEALLY: And Robin Whitten is editor/founder at *AudioFile* magazine. Welcome back to you as well, Robin Whitten.

WHITTEN: Thanks, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Michelle, we'd like to start with you, because as is the case every year, the APA conducts a survey of sales and consumer habits, and the results have recently been released. We find that in 2019, US audiobooks sales climbed 16%



from the previous year to a total of \$1.2 billion. This represents really a remarkable achievement.

COBB: Yeah, we're really happy. This is the eighth year of double-digit revenue growth. That's very much hard to beat. So it's a really exciting time to be in audio.

KENNEALLY: Indeed, it must be, because we are seeing not only a growth in those sales, but also in the number of books that publishers and others are producing for listeners. The other growth area is the time that people make for listening.

COBB: Absolutely. They are saying to us through the consumer survey that we do with Edison Research that they are spending more time listening to audiobooks. You would think that that would definitely follow, because the sales are up, but it's a different type of survey, and we're talking direct to consumers with that. And to have them verify that fact is super-exciting.

KENNEALLY: And they're making new time. So this is something that they really enjoy, and that's important, obviously, for the potential here. The other important change is the age of listeners. You're seeing growth in the under-45 category.

COBB: Yeah, that's really – 57% of the frequent audiobook listeners are under the age of 45. That's up from 51% in 2019. So we know that people who are younger are doing more listening, and they are passing the torch on to the people that they know and encouraging them to listen, whether it be friends or children or family or colleagues. So they're doing a good job on the word of mouth as well.

KENNEALLY: We are talking about audiobooks, Michele Cobb, but audio is audio for most listeners, and I think they perhaps are beginning to see less of a distinction between the full-length audiobooks, which can be many, many hours, and the kind of listening they do in podcasts. So they have told you that they would be interested in audiobooks at somewhat shorter length than typical.

COBB: Yes, and we're seeing members actually create original works, whether it be plays or dramatizations or shorter biographies, things like that. So our members are responding to what people are buying and what people are saying that they would like more of. And we thank podcasts for getting people into more audio listening. We know there's a lot of crossover. So we go hand in hand together in many ways.

KENNEALLY: Now, the survey was conducted in January and February, so pre-COVID-19 crisis. Obviously, that is going to have a dramatic impact this year on the kind of listening that's done, on the amount of listening that's done. The car at



that point was the number one place for listening to take place, but the home is important and probably going to be increasingly important for audiobook listeners.

COBB: Yeah, it's funny. For the last few years, we've seen that the car is very important, and the home is very important, and they've kind of been neck-and-neck in some ways. Home for a long time has been that number one place. We ask people, where's the number one place you listen? It has been home for a bit. That is no doubt going to be reinforced by COVID-19. We've heard from a number of our members, our retailers or people that are in the library market, that they saw shifts in when people were listening, so not as much listening during that commute time, but then they were listening at different times of the day. So we feel confident that people have continued to listen, but most of it, I would say, has probably not been in the car. I know personally, I'm doing a lot more walking outdoors and listening, so I'm sure others are as well.

KENNEALLY: Yeah, it's a different kind of commute on that walk. It's a mental commute, a virtual commute that we take.

COBB: (laughter) Exactly.

KENNEALLY: The number of titles produced has risen. There's a great amount of choice out there for listeners – some 60,000 new titles produced in 2019. Tell us about the most popular category.

COBB: Mysteries have long been something that everybody goes to. When you ask a consumer what their number one genre is, it's that mystery/suspense/thriller. For some reason, we all like to hear people get murdered, evidently. (laughter)

KENNEALLY: Robin Whitten, that obviously got a laugh out of you. We want to bring you into this discussion. Robin, you're the editor and founder of *AudioFile* magazine. An area of the APA survey that you could address is what consumers prefer in narration. They place a high priority on the quality of narration. Tell us about that.

WHITTEN: Absolutely. I think that listeners – the more that listeners listen, the more they listen to, the more discriminating they are with the quality of the performance. They really want to have the narrator become a part of the story for them, so that there's not the recognition that I'm listening to someone tell me this story. They are the story. And I think that that's something that we hear in reviews and from listeners that that's what they want – sort of a seamless delivery, if you will.



KENNEALLY: Narration, the performance, is what you focus on particularly at *AudioFile*. It's the quality of the audio experience, not so much the literary experience that you're focused on. The Audie awards this year were given for a variety of categories. We want to take a look a few of them, because they help to highlight the real sophistication that we are seeing in audiobook production these days.

The audiobook of the year and winner for multi-voice performance was *The Only Plane in the Sky*. It tells the story of 9/11, and it is, I think, just very emotional even to consider that these voices are articulating something that was just an unprecedented experience. And it helps give us a new understanding of what it meant for everyone that day.

WHITTEN: Yes, I think it was an extraordinary production – the amount of research that went into it and then the way it was recorded. I think there was the potential for – well, there were lots of artistic choices, I think, that were extremely well made, between having some professional narrators and also using the voices from recorded phone lines of real messages in real time to 9/11 and also having some of those people in subsequent interviews. It's such an interesting mix. And so many choices were made, and it was produced so brilliantly.

KENNEALLY: We will hear a brief excerpt from *The Only Plane in the Sky* now.

*(non-interview material)*

An interesting award for the young adult Audie this year, Robin Whitten, was for a graphic novel memoir, *Hey, Kiddo*, by Jarrett Krosoczka. It's read by Jarrett, the author, along with Jeanne Birdsall, Richard Ferrone, Jenna Lamia – another full cast, multi-voice cast, that seemed to be particularly popular.

WHITTEN: I think this is something that we're seeing quite a bit of. The whole concept of taking a graphic novel and making it an audiobook is sometimes hard to even wrap your head around, yet it makes a lot of sense when you think about the sequential art of a graphic novel. Some of the art is replaced by the soundscape. So if you have someone walking down the street or on a city bus, in the artwork, it doesn't say I'm on a bus. You can see that someone is on a bus. And in the audio version, you hear the sound that creates the sound of what it would be like if you were riding a bus or with a group of people with a lot of chatter going on in the background. The soundscape takes the place of a lot of extra words, if you would – of descriptive words.

KENNEALLY: Let's hear an example of such a soundscape now.



*(non-interview material)*

But you know, Robin Whitten, it isn't necessary to have an entire cast of voices if you have a narrator who is skilled at voicing character. And in best female narrator Audie award winner this year, for the book *Nothing to See Here*, Marin Ireland does just that.

WHITTEN: She absolutely does. I have to just give this over to Michele, because I know this was one of her absolute favorite books, and she can give us some wonderful little bit about what Marin Ireland did here.

KENNEALLY: Michele Cobb, what was it about this book that really excited you?

COBB: First of all, Marin Ireland does an amazing job of voicing all the different characters and really getting into the head of the main character. Now, when you hear the plot, you're going to think it's wacky. She plays a woman who becomes sort of a nanny to two children that spontaneously combust. And you think about –

KENNEALLY: OK, that is wacky.

COBB: Yeah. First of all, Kevin Wilson, where do you get this idea from? That's incredible. And just the emotion behind this book was not something I expected when I read the little blurb and said, OK, yeah, sure, I'll listen to this. I was riveted, because the events are weird, but the emotions and the characters and her narration just bring everything together so that I felt like I was kind of in the kitchen with them, hoping that these kids didn't spontaneously combust, if one might –

WHITTEN: She won the award. She was well deserved there.

COBB: Absolutely, yeah.

KENNEALLY: Robin Whitten, I guess that's something – you've been listening to audiobooks for more than 25 years. It's that engagement that Marin Ireland is capable of that really is important for listeners.

WHITTEN: Absolutely, and that all the different characters that she takes on, she's able to become each one and convince you that you're hearing that character or feeling that emotion. That's what makes a brilliant audio performance.

KENNEALLY: Let's hear one of those characters now.



*(non-interview material)*

Robin Whitten, the listeners who engage with fiction, they allow their imagination to help them tell the story. But in the case of nonfiction, of course, it's an understanding that these are events, so they have to fill in the picture that they might be aware of from film or from other books. And in the case of *American Moonshot*, we all know the famous words of Armstrong landing on the moon, but we don't know the backstory – how he got there, what it took technology-wise, and the courage that it took to get there.

WHITTEN: Yes, I think that's what's interesting about nonfiction. In terms of an audio performance, what the narrator has to do is quite different in nonfiction, because while you want to maintain the excitement of something like the American space race, you also want to give the details and not bore the listener with the details. So you keep them engaged while you're giving the details and the backstory and also the excitement of the big launch and what you're building up to. But that takes a different kind of approach from the narrator, and Stephen Graybill did just a fantastic job here.

KENNEALLY: Let's share with listeners a little bit of *American Moonshot*.

*(non-interview material)*

Finally, Robin Whitten at *AudioFile* magazine, telling us about the Audies for 2020, there is a collection of short stories that really focus on the supernatural and suspense, *Full Throttle* by Joe Hill. This is read by a series of authors and actors. Tell us about this book, *Full Throttle*.

WHITTEN: It's interesting when we talk about how listeners are interested in full casts and different voices within the same program. This is sort of a different variation on that, because these are short stories, as we said, by Joe Hill, but each of the stories is read by a single narrator. So you have Neil Gaiman who reads one of Joe Hill's stories. You have Wil Wheaton, another narrator. And each one of them – first of all, they will all keep you up at night. So if you're not sleeping anyway, you might as well listen to one of these stories, (laughter) because Joe Hill takes after his famous father, Stephen King, with his ability to create suspense and real intensity in these supernatural and fantastical stories.

KENNEALLY: Let's wake up listeners with a little taste, then, of *Full Throttle*.

*(non-interview material)*



It is always a pleasure to have a look at the world of audiobooks with our two special guests. Each year, we join them to learn about the latest and greatest in the audiobook world. We've been speaking today to Michele Cobb, executive director of the Audio Publishers Association, publisher of *AudioFile* magazine, and executive director of the recently launched Podcast Academy. Michele Cobb, thank you for joining me.

COBB: It was a pleasure to be here as always, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And Robin Whitten is editor/founder at *AudioFile* magazine. Thank you as well for joining us on Beyond the Book.

WHITTEN: Thanks. Always love to talk about audiobooks.

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