**The Rewrite: Season 2**

**Episode 3: Bookselling in a Digital World**

OPENING MUSIC SEGMENT (8–10 seconds)

**ROLAND GULLIVER [TEASER]**

Hello, my name is Rolland Gulliver, Director of the Toronto International Festival of Authors, and you are listening to the second season of *The ReWrite* podcast. What began as a limited eight-episode series has now expanded, as we revisit our initial thoughts about the COVID-19 pandemic, as the world continues to shift and adapt from its effects.

From conversations with authors, literary award organizers, booksellers and publishing professionals, plus an inside look at the Toronto International Festival of Authors, Canada's largest and longest-running literary festival, these new episodes will explore the different experiences as each adapted during a difficult year of lockdowns and uncertainty.

Through these challenges emerge incredible stories of resilience, the power of community and bold innovation. We don’t know what the future looks like just yet, but by exploring these perspectives, we hope you feel optimistic about what it will bring.

Now here is your host, Stephanie Fraser.

MUSIC TRANSITION (5–6 SECONDS)

**STEPHANIE FRASER [INTRO]**

From an unexpected lockdown in March 2020 to changing rules about how and when retail stores could open, had a drastic effect on the way consumers shopped for books. Bookstores rushed to adapt to selling in a digital place and found new ways to connect with their community. In this episode, I spoke with staff members at Queen Books, University of Toronto Bookstore and Kobo about their experiences selling books in this digital space.

Hear from Alex Snider, co-owner of Queen Books in Toronto, about how things have changed since her visit on the first season of *The ReWrite* podcast, while Hannah White at the University of Toronto Bookstore shares her experience as they strived to find ways to connect with students and the general public for all their reading needs. At Kobo, President & CEO Michael Tamblyn sat down with us to talk about the changing landscape of ebooks and audiobooks, and how they kept readers entertained around the world.

Before we hear what is new with Alex Snider, let’s check out a clip from her visit with us last year:

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**Alex Snider (AS)**

We've been really fortunate our community has supported us kind of from day one and I think that as an indie bookstore you know like you really need that core community in order to make it. So, our community has continued to support us through this, and we have a lot of families and people with children who shop at the store so books ended up being almost an essential item…[Laughs] throughout the lockdown. So, we've sold a lot of kids books, workbooks and activities. We've continued to see that support from our community. But what's really has been kind of nice to see is that now that we're doing delivery and we’re doing like a citywide delivery. We're branching out beyond Leslieville, so we've done deliveries to Mississauga and Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough. So, it's been really amazing to see people supporting Indies all over the city.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**Stephanie Fraser (SF)**

That clip was from August 2020. Let’s see what’s happening at Queen Books now:

Welcome back to *The ReWrite* podcast! Last year you sat down virtually with us to discuss Queen Books and the sudden shift to being a digital bookshop when Toronto shutdown for the first lockdown. It's been a year since, what has that year looked like for Queen Books?

**AS**

Well, it's been interesting. We were able to get an online store up pretty quickly, which has been fantastic. But of course, along with that, it came with learning a whole new system, and you know, kind of transitioning the bookstore itself into more of a warehouse type space, so it definitely didn't feel the same.

And it was you know…like we're both myself and my partner and all of our colleagues were in it to sell books and to talk to people and have that face-to-face connection over books, so without that, it wasn't quite as, you know, special. [Laughs] But we, you know, pulled it together and…we have a fantastic team we were able to kind of get through it.

Christmas was very, very intense just because you…with the actual in store you can control the volume, whereas with online it would…kind of went out of control very quickly. Which is great. Good thing people are buying books, but also [Laughs] a lot of you know issues to kind of overcome there, and now we're opening again. So, it's uh, kind of easing back normal.

**SF**

That's very exciting, you guys opened on June 12th? How has that been?

**AS**

Uh it's been great. I think that everyone, both in the store and customers coming in, are just so happy to have that little bit of normalcy back. And our customers generally…like I've worked in a number of retail stores and in the service industry for years and I've never had such lovely customers before and such an amazing community. So, everybody's been very excited and patient, you know, waiting in line to come in because of reduced capacity, but it's been really, really nice so far.

**SF**

That’s awesome! Last year, you talked a little bit in the episode about how Queen Books community rallied around you since the beginning and you kind of touched on this here.

Did you see more of a boost from kind of that “shop local” that happened later last year, then you might have previously before that?

**AS**

Yeah. I mean, I think we're very fortunate 'cause. We're in a neighborhood that just genuinely values its independent books or independent bookstore, but also independent businesses in general so, so much, so we've always had like a really strong community support system.

But we did find that a lot of… we got a lot of you know online orders from people outside of even the East End and we were continuing to kind of deliver all across the city.

You know definitely that was like part of this like…let's, you know, make sure that we keep the businesses going that we love and yeah. And you know, not only support you know the big stores that are able to be open and yeah, so we are…we really saw that a lot, which was fantastic.

**SF**

For summer last year Toronto kind of went into this extended lockdown for…pretty much since November on. Was it really difficult to look forward to 2021 and kind of figure out where Queen Books is moving towards, with kind of the shifting of the schedules?

**AS**

A little bit. I mean, the added complication for us, all of last year, is that my business partner had a baby in May, at the end of May, and then I found out I was pregnant a week into the lockdown the first time. [Laughs] So, we had these two…like we had I think one day where we were both back in the…like back working before I went off on mat-leave. So that kind of you know that really impacted kind of how we were looking at, both staffing and making sure that we were…since neither of us were in store for a lot, like actually physically in store for a lot of last year, how we could best protect our staff.

And so, we actually ended up going into lockdown I think a week before it was like we had to go just because we had a kind of close call where a customer let us know that they had tested positive for COVID-19 and we just realized that because of the online store, we could just go to that just because we you know, we had to protect our team and they do such an amazing job and have worked so hard and it just didn't seem right to keep them keep them coming into contact with so many people.

So that's kind of been our…I think probably our biggest challenge is making sure that we're being really accessible to our customers and protecting them as well. Then trying to kind of still give them the experience of shopping with an independent bookstore making sure that they get everything that they ordered you know…as soon as we can. And then also balance the needs of our of our team.

But because of all the like opening and closing last year, we were pretty prepared this time. We started getting ready, kind of once we saw the numbers start to go down and the vaccination numbers go up so we definitely learned to be more proactive…[laughs] and actually like have plans in place for when we open. So, I think that that's helped with smooth transition.

**SF**

That's good, I'm glad.

Did you notice any changes in the way readers consumed books during the pandemic? Were there changes to the genres people were reading?

**AS**

I've definitely noticed that kind of with all that's happening in the world, so for instance, right now with the discovery in Kamloops. We're selling a lot of books by Indigenous authors, both fiction and non-fiction, and for kids as well. Which is fantastic, because we generally do sell a fair amount anyway and we…you know it's an area that we think it's important to stock lots of Indigenous authors, so we definitely noticed that.

And then with like Black Lives Matter in the states, especially last summer, we sold a ton and ton of non-fiction. But we have seen that has carried on as well, which is really exciting. And then we've just kind of have sold a lot more…just a big variety of books, I think.

So sometimes a bit more commercial, which is kind of fun to like have you know...I think that people are looking for sometimes lighter reads than normal. Which of course, we've been living through some pretty intense times, so a lot of humor and even you know like romance, and I think that also what people are watching on TV or streaming is influencing that a little bit, too, which is really fun to see how that impacts people reading.

**SF**

Yeah, definitely with the recent like…*Bridgerton*, that there's suddenly like historical romance…

**AS**

Yeah, it's awesome and yeah, I think it's just really gratifying to see people reading, both to like enrich their knowledge of like social issues, and to fight for what's right and then also to read for just pure entertainment. I think that's you know…that sometimes can get lost in the shuffle and especially with…you know indie bookstores can be seen as a you know…as for a particular kind of like you know really, really you know high literature and I love that…I love that people are just wanting to read fun stuff, whatever that that is for them.

**SF**

We talked a little bit about the increase in children 's books. With the challenges faced during the school year, did you find that parents or teachers reached out for resources to help keep kids entertained?

**AS**

I mean, definitely we've seen a lot of…a huge increase in like activity books and puzzles, as I think everyone who can sell puzzles is selling puzzles right now. But have so many young kids that regularly come into the store, that we have noticed that they're all growing up, which is like really beautiful. [Laughs] Just to you know, especially to not see them face to face for almost a year and a half, and you know you see the same names come up and they've gone from reading early chapter books to middle grade. It's been really exciting [Laughs] and kind of sad to miss that but yeah. We have…definitely, we always have a lot of teachers reach out and ask for you know us to put together a list of books on a certain topic and we're always excited to help people find that.

MUSIC TRANSITION (5–6 SECONDS)

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**SF**

Be sure to check out Queen Books online or in person. You can find out more information at qweenbooks.ca and on Instagram @QueenBooksTo.

Our next guest is Hannah White, the Marketing Manager at the University of Toronto Bookstore. If you have visited the Toronto International Festival of Authors in person, you’ve probably stopped by the bookstore’s pop-up shop to browse Festival titles, meet authors and talk to fellow book lovers. With the sudden shift to selling books online, Hannah shares some of the lessons they learned and how they navigated connecting with readers through delivery and curbside pickup.

MUSIC TRANSITION (5–6 SECONDS)

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**SF**

Last year was a bit of a wild year. In March 2020 businesses and nonessential services were closed to the public for our first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. 

What was that time like for the University of Toronto Bookstore (UofT Bookstore)?

**Hannah White (HW)**

Well, it was certainly an interesting one. I know it's been thrown around a lot, but unprecedented is probably the most fitting word for that. The UofT Bookstore has been serving the UofT community for a very, very long time now, but this year was truly one of a kind, with students shifting to online learning, also with retail closing we were kind of at the intersection of a lot of change.

So, our first concern was really just everyone’s safety. Both our staff and our customers, we wanted to keep everyone safe. So, we, we really had to adapt our operations significantly. Even when the stores were briefly open at times, we had to operate completely differently at a reduced capacity, ensuring we had all the necessary protocols in place.

But for the bulk of the last year and a half now we've been operating entirely online. We have multiple locations, ones at UofT Saint George campus, ones at UofT Mississauga, ones at UofT Scarborough. We've been able to reopen our Saint George location now, which is our flagship store. We're very excited about it, but we're still going to be operating online for our UTM and UTSC stores for quite some time now, so we really are going through the gambit now [Laughs].

**SF**

As it became clearer last year that the situation wasn't going to resolve as quickly as kind of everyone assumed at the beginning, what were some of the concerns that the bookstore faced as in-store shopping was closed for an extended period of time?

**HW**

We did have an e-commerce presence prior to the pandemic. We were very fortunate in that regard, but it was always more of like a supplementary service rather than our core service and that very much had to change. We had to pivot from being almost entirely in-person, with like that online element on top of it, to entirely online. So, we really had to refine our website and make it easier to navigate. And our biggest priority again is just safety, but also ensuring that we're giving a good customer experience, even if it's in a bit of a strange situation. So we really enhanced our website but then we also learned how to do things like contactless pickups, so people could buy their stuff online and then if they didn't want to pay for shipping, or if they were just in the area, they could book a pick up appointment, which has been hugely successful for us.

I think a unique challenge for us, in particular, is that we're seen first and foremost as a campus bookstore which makes sense, that is what we are, but we actually have a lot of other services that many of our customers, even students don't really realize until they come shop with us in person. So, students will come in and get their textbooks then see, oh, they've also got clothing here and, oh, they've also got trade books like I can buy something fun to read instead of just things that I'm going to have to read for my studies. And with the inability to have people in store we've lost a lot of that. Obviously shopping online you can still see all the different things we offer, but someone might not stumble across products in the same way that they would if they were just navigating our store.

So that's definitely been a loss of shifting to online. But we've been able to figure out ways to kind of make our website more like your in-store experience would be. So having like featured items on our homepage, having really exciting sales and promotions and making sure we get the word out about those. So that definitely helped us to navigate it, but there are certain things in store that are challenging to create online.

**SF**

The bookstore also…you kind of touched on other services, in particular for students, like buybacks and textbooks rentals. Were those also affected by no in-store shopping?

**HW**

Yeah, it was a very interesting year, so there’s always going to be a little bit of an evolution in the course materials business. Over the last few years, there has been a shift towards digital course materials. But in this last year, it was accelerated far faster than any of us could have anticipated it.

It just made sense, especially at UofT, we have a lot of international students. So if you've got students who are spread all over the world a digital option is very helpful so they don't have to rely on shipping delays. Especially at the beginning of the year when the Postal offices were definitely going through it, as were we all, but them especially. It was challenging to ensure students got stuff on time, so a lot of directors were turning towards digital options for their students, so that really changed faster than we could have anticipated but we've been able to catch up to it pretty quickly.

We have offered digital course materials for quite some time now, but we've really been able to kind of enhance our digital material offerings and we've been working with, not just students, but with the faculty to help them understand kind of what they can offer to their students, how we can help them and just make it as easy as possible to go from buying a print textbook to going and buying digital materials instead. So we've really been creating some kind of informational resources to help ease that transition.

But on that note, one thing that has been interesting is in our student survey – we do a couple of student surveys every year – we found that even though more people bought digital course materials this year, they still stated, well, at least a lot of them still stated that they have a preference for print materials. So it was kind of necessitated by the circumstances rather than necessarily a full shift in preference. So, it will be very interesting to see what happens there, once students are back on campus and able to shop in the store.

And the other thing that we have pivoted a little bit is we used to have a textbook rental program. But obviously there was a bit of a perception of, oh no, there might be like a safety element to renting a textbook, oh, what, if I'm not able to bring it back at the end of the semester, so there's a lot of uncertainty around that. So we've actually changed and we've launched a new pilot program recently, which is guaranteed textbook sellback prices. So for select titles a student can buy their textbook at the beginning of the semester – just a new textbook and we'll tell them when they purchase it, what we will give them at minimum to buy back their book at the end of the semester. So, it's almost like a rental program and that you're ultimately not paying full price for the textbook but it comes with a bit more peace of mind, whereas we do still have our standard textbook sellback program as well, but in this case with this new program you know exactly what you're getting back at the end of the semester.

A really big priority of ours is making textbooks more affordable for students and we really want to give them that peace of mind and do whatever we can. Especially in this past year, where it's been more difficult than ever to be a student. We really just want to do whatever we can to give them great quality service and also save them money.

**SF**

That’s great. Last year, the book industry itself went under a lot of changes. Were there any specific challenges that you faced that were because of the challenges that the book industry itself was facing?

**HW**

There was certainly difficult to get stock at points with the supply chain being slowed. We've been quite fortunate in that we haven't had any huge setbacks. We have some very good relationships with publishers and they really came through for us, which was much appreciated.

I would say the bigger challenge for us, in terms of like our non-academic trade offering, is that people don't necessarily see us as like an independent bookstore, they just see us as a campus store, which is no fault of their own. We are quite literally called the UofT Bookstore so I get it. But in reality, we have a huge selection of general interest books that you and I would read, anyone would read, but with our doors closed, a lot of people aren't going to think oh, I'm going to shop for trade books online at the UofT bookstore, they're going to turn elsewhere. So unlike a lot of independent bookstores, which have a little bit more visibility, especially during the pandemic when people are trying to shop locally, we weren't really seen in that way so that was certainly a challenge for us.

But challenge creates opportunities, so we were really able to kind of hone in on how we could better present our trade offering online, and eventually in store now that we're reopening.

**SF**

What are some things you learned in the last year and how will they impact the bookstore as Canada and Toronto starts to open up again?

**HW**

Well, we've definitely learned that e-commerce is an incredible tool and it's not going away anytime soon. As I mentioned before, it used to be kind of a supplementary tool for us, but now it's very much part of our core business. It's great, students seem to really like it. They love having things delivered but they also love being able to just order in advance and come pick stuff up. So, we're going to keep our pickup service going for sure, as well as our shipping. And I think it's also…it's specifically…in the area of trade it's just given us an opportunity to kind of take a step back and think about okay, how can we enhance our trade business not just during the pandemic, but after it? What do people want to read? How can we offer a great experience for readers? So, we spend a lot of time thinking about our assortment, thinking about how books are displayed and kind of how we can show people that we are an independent store and we are…we're actually a part of a not-for-profit at the University of Toronto Press, which not a lot of people know. So, we're not actually part of the University, we are an independent store. So, we're just kind of getting in touch with our roots on that side, if you will, and just like trying to figure out how we can show people that that's who we are.

So, we've really refined our assortment. It's never been better. Obviously, I think so, but I think anyone who comes into our store would agree as well. And we focused on not just getting like a collection of like hot titles and best sellers, which we do, we have a great collection of those, but we've also sourced a huge collection of like lower priced books, or bargain books some people would call them, just to make reading more accessible because a lot of new books are kind of prohibitively priced for a lot of people, which might be a barrier to reading and we don't want there to be barriers to reading. So we've found these great titles. Some of them are as cheap as like $2.49. So if you're if you're looking for a cheap read feel free to come check us out. They might be affordable, but we swear they're great quality as well. I've read a few of them and they're wonderful.

And furthering like our trade offering, we also started a book club. Initially it was kind of just to give people an idea of things they could read while they're at home during the pandemic, but we're going to keep it going moving forward, absolutely, because it's been very popular, which has been great. And it's also a really great opportunity for us to kind of get in touch with our customers in a very value focused way. And we're looking forward to hosting book club events in our store and other events in our stores soon. Our flagship store is in the Koffler Building in downtown Toronto, and the upper level, we call it the Great Hall, it's absolutely beautiful and we certainly won't be taking it for granted once we reopen. We're looking forward to welcoming people back for sure and hosting some events.

And I think another really big takeaway of this last year in a bit now it's just the importance of us collaborating with the university community to give value back to the students and improve their experience at UofT and beyond. So, we've been partnering with a lot of offices at the university on initiatives to kind of give back on campus. We were a mass distribution hub earlier in the year. We've partnered with them on some mental health awareness initiatives, some giveaways, lots of fun stuff just to really give back to students during the tough year that they've had. And we're absolutely going to keep that partnership going.

**SF**

The bookstore has opened the St. George location for in-store shopping. What has that transition been like? Have many people returned to the store or is online shopping still where people feel more comfortable?

**HW**

It's definitely a big mix. It's been a shockingly seamless transition. We had no idea what to expect with things opening back up, but our team has been really fantastic, operationally, just making sure that anyone who comes into our store feels safe, and that's both our customers and our staff members. So, we've been able to welcome quite a lot of people back, which has been wonderful. We've seen a steady stream of people coming in. But we've also seen a very steady stream of orders coming in online. So, I think it does point to the fact that it's very much going to be a hybrid model moving forward. We're still going to have that online piece even when we are fully reopened and we're happy with that. Honestly, it's a way for us to get in touch with more people. Lots of alumni of UofT are all over the world so we can reach them in ways we couldn't before and it just allows us to build up our community.

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MUSIC TRANSITION (5–6 SECONDS)

**SF**

You can find out more about the University of Toronto Bookstore and their different locations at UofTbookstore.com. Be sure to connect with them on social media @UofTBookstores. Our last guest is Rakuten Kobo’s President & CEO Michael Tamblyn. When independent bookstores were working hard to adapt to selling books online, Kobo was already there focusing on ebooks and audiobooks.

MUSIC TRANSITION (5–6 SECONDS)

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**SF**

Based in Toronto, Kobo is a digital bookstore where you can get ebooks and audiobooks. With over 5 million titles available, Kobo has transformed the digital book space. December 2019 marked Kobo's 10th anniversary. There were many changes during Kobo's first decade, including the introduction of e-readers, important partnerships and Kobo's launch into many international markets.

There have been many monumental shifts in the book industry in the ten years Kobo has operated. Many of which have been prompted by society’s increased dependency on technology. With Kobo's focus in the digital sphere, how have these market changes affected your operations?

**Michael Tamblyn (MT)**

They certainly have I mean, I think when we started Kobo, we believed that there was…we were at the beginning of kind of a 25 year transformation from print to digital and that, while we didn't think this was going to be an all or nothing one way shift, we did think that if you know if you project yourself forward in 25 years, well, we didn't really believe that you would still be doing most of your reading by, you know, by pressing ink into dead trees. So, we thought that there was a reasonable chance that there would be a different possibility for that and we thought that ebooks and e-reading was one of them.

All of the work that we've done since has really been to try and take the best of reading experiences, the best that you know…all of the reasons why people love to read and see how we could make that better through technology. Could we make it easier to get access to books? Could we make it so that you could bring all of your books with you all the time? Could we make it, so you'd have instant access to millions and millions of books from around the world? All of those were things that we wanted to do as soon as we said, okay, how could technology can make reading better?

**SF**

With digital consumption being part of our daily lives for a while now, and with such a large scale increase in 2020 and 2021 to work and consume media online, has digital fatigue been a concern?

**MT**

Not based on what we've seen. So I think what this last year, especially with the pandemic, with people being at home, has really shown us is that in the last year, people quite radically changed their media habits. So, where they went to get various kinds of media, the time and focus that they would spend on it, has been pretty consistently increasing over time. And some of that is that I think this last year gave people a chance to re-evaluate some things, like E books, that they may have looked at 3 or 4 or 5 years ago and gone that’s maybe not for me and then realized oh it's actually great that I don't have to go to a store and it's great that I can get access to a book instantly without leaving my home and kind of the same sort of process that people were going through reevaluating going to movie theaters or you know, reevaluating you know where they listen to music. All of that kind of coalesced back to what's the thing that gives me the most amount of choice and the greatest amount of access, the greatest amount of reach when I'm at home?

**SF**

So, you've definitely seen a change in the way consumers are enjoying books during the pandemic.

**MT**

We were quite fortunate in a way, and though it's in some ways, something you want to talk about quite carefully, because this you know this is all on the back of a pandemic and a lot of tragedy. There are some businesses through the course of the last the last year and a half that have suffered a great deal. There are some that have kind of had to make their way through and just sort of survive knowing that they could come out the other side. And then there were some that were providing products and goods and services that people really needed during the pandemic and we happen to be one of them.

But we also…we were able to take some lessons early on when the pandemic began because we are an international…we are an international company, because we operate a lot of different countries, we first got a hint of what was coming our way when we were having trouble with our…the people that were working in our factories in China and Taiwan were struggling to leave their cities and towns because those cities and towns were under lockdown.  And that was like the first set of quarantines that we saw go into place so that was the first hint we had that something was coming our way well before it reached Europe or North America.

And then similarly we have a significant business in Italy. And so I was in Milan, a couple of days before the first lockdown took place there, that first one that happened North of… in Lombardy, north of Milan and so that's you know, we had our first staff and full lockdown there and so we were getting an early indication of how this was likely to play out in many other places. And the good thing that came from that was that we were approached by a branch of the Italian government that we had never heard of before that was called the Ministry of Innovation and Digitization and they were reaching out to every company that could deliver a digital good to put together a package of benefits for people that were going to be locked in at home. And their idea, which made an immense amount of sense was you go to a website, you declare that you and your family are isolating and in exchange for providing the government with that data, to let them know who's you know who's gotten the news and who knows what they're supposed to do, you then got free movies and free books and all of this, you know all of these really interesting services that had come from all of the companies that they contacted and we were one of them.

We worked with our publishers in Italy. We got them to provide a whole bunch of books for free. And that allowed us to then at least start reminding people in lockdown that ebooks were something that they could use. And that even if they couldn't get to their bookstore, even if their bookstore was closed or their library was closed there were ebooks available to them in that time. And that felt really good for us, because we wanted to be there for people at a time when they really needed some, you know, some distraction and it's sometimes I think a little hard for us to remember just how uncertain and anxious those first couple of months were, and it was also a time when we certainly weren't going to be advertising and we weren't going to be doing marketing. Like you didn't…nobody really had the mental space for that and nobody wanted to hear an ad and no one certainly wanted to feel like they were trying to sell life jackets on a you know on a ship that was sinking.

Instead, we got to do it through giving books away and we took that model and then walked it to each country as they started to experience their own lockdown. So, it went from there to France and then to Netherlands into Spain and then we kind of took similar things to North America, as well. And over the course of the first 6 months of the pandemic, we gave away almost 20,000,000 books. Yeah, and it was just because we knew that people would be reevaluating how they spent their time. And we wanted to make sure that books and reading were one of the things they remembered that they could do. We didn't want to kind of lose everyone to streaming video and doom scrolling on social media. We wanted them to spend some time away from that and to escape into a good story or to spend some time learning something new or just get that sort of quiet and focus that a book can give you at a time when everything else seemed to be spinning around.

And it worked out really well, it worked out, both in terms of I think a lot of people got a lot of reading done that they wouldn't have otherwise done. We saw usage of ebooks jump anywhere between 50% and 300%, depending on the country that we were in and we found specific countries like each specific country had its own jump, both of sales and of time spent reading. So you know the year over year difference for March and June 2020 versus the year before in 2019, was something like 93%. Like people were spending a lot of time, reading, which makes sense because everyone was at home. But even now, fast forward another year after that into 2021, we still see a 43% increase, and so that's both more people…more people have tried digital but also just people spending more time reading ebooks than they had before. And so that's been a great thing for us to see. I think we did our jobs well.

**SF**

Yeah, no, definitely that sounds like a really cool initiative and definitely a good incentive for people to be honest about where they were, and how they were affected. So that is really cool. Did you see any shifts in top genres that people were reading over the course of the pandemic?

**MT**

Not really, I think there…we did kind of muddy the waters a little bit because at the same time we also launched a new service in Canada called Kobo Plus, which is an all you can read service. So you can pay $9.99 and you get access to hundreds of thousands of books, you can read as many as you want. And so we had added that in at the same time that we were that all of these other things were going on and that certainly has shifted some of the kinds of books that people read. We're seeing more people reading more nonfiction than before, we think there is probably also a bit of a pandemic surge with that because people were doing a lot of sourdough recipes and couldn't buy cookbooks and things like that. So, there were certainly people kind of moving categories around a little bit, but that focus on fiction, on giving a story that can allow people to just spend some time in a different place, in a you know in a different narrative than the one that they were in was as strong as it ever has been. And then that's been very similar for audiobooks as well. So, both in the books and the audiobook side, we saw more or less the same things being read just more of it and for longer.

**SF**

Was there a difference between the audiobooks and the ebooks, like did one grow more over the course of the pandemic than the other?

**MT**

Interestingly, we saw ebooks grow more than audiobooks in this time, and I think it had a lot to do with audiobooks involve a lot of scenarios where people are on their way somewhere. You know people, listen to audiobooks a lot in their commute to and from work, when they're at the gym, when they're, you know, when they're out for a walk in the park, or when they're walking the dog, and all of those are things that people were just doing less of. So we saw audiobooks grow but not grow as strongly as they normally would, and we saw ebooks surge a lot compared to audiobooks. Which was kind of the reverse of a trend from a couple of years ago, where ebooks were growing more slowly and audio was really spiking.

So it'll be interesting to see how that all settles out once we come out the other side of this. Because then we have people emerging from this with a new set of media habits and we have people going back to some of the same kind of routines that they had before, but probably not in the same way. So, it's going to be interesting to watch.

**SF**

Compared to, and you could sort of touch on this a little bit earlier, compared to traditional printed books ebooks and audiobooks offer immediacy as you can purchase, download and start to enjoy them within minutes. They also offer the ability to listen to stories, increase the font size and use fonts like Open Dyslexic to make books more adaptable to each person needs. How important are accessibility tools like these to Kobo?

**MT**

I think one of the most wonderful surprises about the work at Kobo is how often accessibility comes up in terms of allowing people to either get back into reading that they lost the ability to do, or in some cases have access to reading that was just previously unavailable to them, and some of the examples you pulled are exactly right. When we look at the dyslexic community for example, we have the Open Dyslexic font that's loaded into our ereaders, and that certainly helps people with certain kinds of reading difficulties. But audiobooks have really become the game changer for the community of people with reading disabilities. Because then, as a you know, especially as a child, you can not just fight your way through the books that you have to read in school, but you can actually keep up with all the same books that your friends are reading and you can be a part of those conversations and you could know exactly what it is and it it's not a fight to get through a book using accommodating technologies. It's…you're getting those same stories and you're able to enjoy them the same way, so that's been something that we've been working on a fair bit and is really exciting.

At the same time, the ability of ebooks to especially change font size has been an absolute game changer for people as they get older and you know, let's remember like reading glasses. Start showing up in your 40s so we're not just talking about people that are…[Laughs] that are in their 70s, 80s or 90s. But even so, one of the biggest groups of adopters of ebooks are people in their sixties, 70s and 80s, and it's kind of neat as one of the first digital transformations in a media category that's taken place that hasn't really been powered by 18 to 25 years old. It's been the kind of people that you see showing up in a regular bookstore who are often as not in their 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s and who definitely don't want the relatively thin selection of large print books that are available to them, don’t want to always have to be finding their reading glasses and putting them on, and let's be clear like you want to get those fonts getting larger earlier than you think.

The text in my books is now suspiciously larger than [Laughs] it was when I started with Kobo 10 years ago. So, we have talked to people who maybe had to stop reading in their 70s and we're able to start reading again in their 80s, because we could create type that was big enough for them to see. And to be able to give somebody back the ability to read again, especially somebody who has had books as a central part of their life, it's just kind of magic.

So, lots of stories like that in a lot of different ways, and so whether it's on the accessibility of content, now any book can be a large print book and the print can be as large as you want it to be, or stepping out of print altogether and into audio and being able to just make hundreds of thousands of books available in in audiobook format, but also from a selection standpoint. So, we're doing we're doing work with communities in the north right now where there really aren't access to books and it's really hard to get books. So, to be able to say, hey, here are…here's a device where there's 7 million books just sitting behind the scenes is a really nice thing to do when deliveries are very few and far between, and FedEx doesn't really want to come to your tiny town in the north.

**SF**

In 2020, there is more of a push to shop local has Kobo seen effects of that push? Are readers choosing to read more Canadian authors and storytellers?

**MT**

I think the push to local has more been in the retail world than it has been in the content space, and I wish that weren't the case because I think one of the one of the missed opportunities of especially of the last year was to spend this time when we had a lot of people reading to introduce more people to…in the in the case of your Canadian listeners to Canadian stories, and we certainly did our part and we spend a lot of time trying to make Canadian authors and Canadian voices available. But it would have been neat to see some of the kinds of government programs that we saw in other countries where there was this, recognizing that there was kind of a window to introduce people to books that they've never tried before. And there are so many great Canadian authors, there are so many amazing stories that people just don't get put in front of them.

Interestingly, one of the places that we have seen a lot of that is through Kobo Plus, the subscription service. And partly because we had some great Canadian publishers who jumped into that program early and said, yeah, let's like, let's get as many of our books and our authors in front of people as we can, but it also showed how a lot of what holds people back is just that they're like…they're worried about making a choice on a book that they won't like. And so it's like, well do…you know, do I want to gamble? You know, $7 or $10 or $12, and then find out that this book isn’t any good. And so, to be able to say, what if that didn't matter? What if you could pick it up and you know, read a bit of it and if you like it keep reading it, and if you didn't put it down and try something else, and that's okay.

All of a sudden people started exploring more widely and so that's gotten people really looking at, both the front and the back lists of some of these Canadian publishers, who've chosen to take part. Because all of a sudden, it's not a gamble anymore, you're just like roaming through these hundreds of thousands of books until you find something that you like and then, you know that happy surprise of realizing, oh wait, there's…you know there's another by this author right after that, another one right after that. And that's yeah. That's kind of when, as a reader, you just feel like you've hit gold, because now you know your next 10 books are sewn up. It's going to be great.

**SF**

As Canada starts to open up, what does the future of Kobo look like?

**MT**

It's, uh, it's fortunately not very, very tied to how everything else opens up. It's mostly on our ability to keep earning people time. And if we're good at being booksellers, if we're good at helping people find great stories and great authors and help them find that next…that next book that gets them really excited, then we've earned some more of their time, and we get to stay with them. So, it's in a lot of ways our job is just to keep kind of packaging up the passion for books and reading that is inside Kobo, from all the people that work there, and this is a…it's a company of people who love books and love authors and they're doing this work instead of something else because they want to try to make people reading lives better. So, we just keep packaging that up and putting it out there and it seems to it seems to catch people in the right way.

As people…as things open up, you know, as we hopefully get a summer…summer is always a great time for us people, you know, I think they're really looking forward to taking some vacations somewhere other than their own homes for once, if that's at all possible. And when they do, they will want something to read while they're sitting on a chair somewhere else, and we're going to be right there for them. And in the meantime, having stores open again a lot of our devices, you know, are sold through Chapters and Indigo and Best Buy and other places in Canada. You know, having stores open is in a great way for people to find Kobo e-readers if they aren't getting them delivered online already. But I think there's going to be a bit of a rush on them as we go through the summer. So, if you want one, you better get one early.

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**SF [OUTRO]**

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