**The Rewrite: Season 2**

**Episode 4: Book Events & The Digital Landscape**

OPENING MUSIC SEGMENT (8–10 seconds)

**ROLAND GULLIVER [TEASER]**

Hello, my name is Rolland Gulliver, Director of the Toronto International Festival of Authors (TIFA), 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]**

Every year, organizations spend months planning events, working with publishers and inviting guests to book events. Last year, within days, these organizations were faced with the impossible situation of determining how to proceed with their events.

While some were forced to cancel, I reached out to four organizations that took on the challenge and proceeded with their events in 2020. From taking risks to finding new audiences, we learned more about how the Toronto Public Library CBC Canada Reads, the Canadian Children’s Book Centre and the Scotiabank Giller Prize took on planning events in the digital space.

In this episode, we'll be hearing from Tara Mora, an executive producer at CBC Books; Amanda Halfpenny, an event and program coordinator at Canadian Children’s Book Centre; Daphna Rabinovitch, the submissions and marketing manager of the Scotiabank Giller Prize and our first guest will be Gregory McCormick, the manager of cultural and literary programming at the Toronto Public Library in 2020.

Gregory and his team at the Toronto Public Library quickly pivoted their planned author events from in person to online through Crowdcast. Over a year later, the library has broadcasted over 150 events, ranging from writing workshops to author interviews. Let's hear about their experiences.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**STEPHANIE FRASER (SF)**

Can you take us back to March of last year and talk a little bit about your experience as the effects of the pandemic started taking shape? What were your initial thoughts as news travelled about the virus?

**Gregory McCormick (GM)**

It's funny, it seems like a different world so long ago because so much has happened, but I guess you know, like everyone else, I was just kind of watching the news and not really sure what shape this was going to take. I had been travelling a few times, very early part of 2020, so I was watching things very closely and I remember saying to someone at the library, you know, ‘oh this, you think they're gonna close the library?’ and she said, ‘Oh no, they've never closed the library in its 140 years of history, except like one time when it snowed’ or I don't know, it was some storm and then literally the next day they closed the library for, I think, it was two weeks, and we were all sent home.

And yeah, we all had this idea it was just going to be a couple weeks and then it'll be over and we'll all go back to life, so you know it was more just this, it wasn't a surprise because it took a while for the realization to set in that things were really going to be significantly different for some time.

**SF**

While the Toronto libraries did spend a lot of time close to the public last year due to lockdowns and public health measures, it seemed that the Toronto Public Library team quickly jumped into doing digital events with the first Crowdcast event taking place on May 3rd last year. What was that pivot like for you and your team as you went from organizing in-person events to online in such a short time?

**GM**

Well, we had been doing some podcasts prior to that, but they were relatively new for the library, but we did have a–we were kind of halfway through a TIFA podcast that we were doing with TIFA, the *Writers Off the Page*, so that kind of continued, but the production side of it changed a little bit because obviously we all had to do it from our own homes instead of being able to do it in studio at the library.

In terms of our events, it's funny because the first probably 2–3 weeks after we were sent home at a library closed, there was some talk about maybe we should start doing some digital events and my first reaction and the reaction of my senior producer at the time was ‘no way, no, absolutely not,’ because pre-pandemic it wasn't really a significant thing. People didn't really watch them, they didn't really have much cachet, they weren't very innovative, et cetera, et cetera. For all those reasons and we had tried and tried in the past to do digital events or some component of digital events via Skype or whatever, and they never really worked very well.

So, it's funny that now to think about my first reaction, which was absolutely out of the question, but then I started thinking and talking to some other people and I started thinking you know what we should. We should really think about what this means to say no, and if this continues on for the next, you know, six months–God forbid–we could miss out on a lot of great content, so it was kind of–it happened, very quickly, especially for a big library like the Toronto Public Library with so many events and so much content that we produced.

So, you know I wasn't responsible for overseeing that shift or was very much involved with it, so it was trial by error, it was learning as we go. It was learning how to market it and talk about this kind of content. Learning how to produce it. Learning how to sell it to writers, learning how to sell it to hosts and to publishers, and to–luckily, we were all going through this at the same time, so I think most people understood that this was a thing that everyone was just going to have to get used to doing. So, the library really did a really fantastic job in kind of making that shift very quickly and carving out a niche for ourselves in this very, very crowded marketplace that is even more crowded now than it was, you know, when the pandemic started. So yeah, it was a really interesting process that I think all of us learned a ton about.

**SF**

With embracing the digital medium, did you find new opportunities to reach out to the community?

**GM**

There are pluses and minuses to digital content. The pluses are just the reach and it engages people who may not have the capability, physically or otherwise, to get in their car or get on the TTC or whatever, go downtown or wherever the branch is, and go into a room and find a seat in it. You know for able-bodied people or for people who don't have, you know like social anxiety or something. We take that for granted, but for a lot of people that that could be overwhelming. Just that kind of experience, or impossible physically.

So in that sense, I think it's really opened up our content to people who wouldn't have access to it as easily or at all prior to the pandemic. So in that sense, it's an opportunity.

I think it's also given us access. You know, we've never had trouble getting very big writers to come and do events at our downtown Appel Salon space, it's one of the things that we do quite often, but there are writers who don't like to travel. There are writers who just do not like to get on a plane, or they do two events per year anywhere in the world, and Toronto is often left off that list. So for us, it allowed us to get some writers that we didn't have access to as easily.

And it also allowed us to connect people around a topic where one expert might be in San Diego and one expert might be in London and we could bring them all together to talk about a topic that is far more complex to produce in an in-person situation.

**SF**

How important has it been to connect with the community through video during such a time of uncertainty and isolation?

**GM**

You know we're not like a support group or something like that. I think that kind of connection is–it's very, very different in this kind of digital sphere. It is very different to what we do in this digital sphere, but I think that we haven't been able–this is on the downsides of digital content–is we haven't been able to connect with people in the same way.

I think people are engaged. I've said this many, many times. I think people are–they engage with this kind of virtual content in a radically different way than in the way they engage with content that's on a stage in a room where I'm sitting and watching. I'm paying attention, I'm not cooking something at the same time, I'm not I'm texting with my friends, usually. I do think that kind of split attention, I think really cuts back on the way people connect to each other and to the library in this digital world. Because they can't walk up to someone and have a conversation. It's all done via chat text, and there's some nice bones, there's nice parts to that, but it's just not the same thing, and maybe I'm dating myself, but it's not the same thing as walking into a room and just seeing another human and connecting on that level, you know?

**SF**

That kind of brings up a conversation that's been happening over kind of the past year is Zoom fatigue and digital fatigue. Was that ever a concern for you?

**GM**

Oh yes, very much so, and I have Zoom fatigue. I do this as my job so I can imagine. And it's really it's not about the platform, it's just about that we just stare into computer screens or some kind of device all day long from the minute we get up to the minute we go to bed.

And you know, that's not significantly different from before, except it's all done in this little, tiny, often for most people, in this little, tiny geographic space where we don't have–you know, it's not broken up by going into a meeting with people face-to-face or you know chatting with the barista at your cafe or the Uber driver or whatever it was for that period of time. And I think punctuating our day with those kinds of real interactions is super important for the way humans evolved and the way we need to establish rapport with each other.

So, I think Zoom fatigue is there was just the mass realization that there is a limitation to this kind of communication, and it was something maybe we didn't realize before, we couldn't articulate it before, but I think it makes–it's underscored the importance of face-to-face communication and interaction.

**SF**

Are there lessons that you learned during the last year that will continue to influence future events in outreach, especially now that Toronto is re-opening?

**GM**

As someone who produces events as my job, it's very, it's a very abstract thing, but I've been talking about it, I mean, thinking about this for a year and a half now, that place is always embedded in everything you do that is done on a stage in a real in-person event. So, what I mean by that is, is if we do an event at the Appel Salon in downtown Toronto, Toronto is there whether we talk about Toronto as a subject, whether anyone raves about how much they love Toronto or rails on how much they hate Toronto, whatever it is, it's there in the background. Even if the subject never comes up, and somehow that grounds the event and it gives it a little bit more of a tangible kind of structure to it, but when there's no place attached to a conversation, even in the background, it just it lives somewhere in this ethereal world that's really hard to nail down.

What does it mean if you talk to a writer who's in London and the host is in Texas? And what does that mean for Toronto? Or that mean for Torontonians? I think to me the lesson is just how important place is in helping us frame in a conversation that's relevant to the audience and that feels pertinent to their lives. And that's a very abstract answer, I know. [Laughs]

Since what my team does are the big events, it may be 2022 before we're able to actually do a big salon event or big event in our atrium or whatever. But you know, we are watching the news and the updates very, very closely so that as soon as we are able to go back to in-person events and make sure that everyone feels safe and the borders are open. We will be right there doing it.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**SF**

You can learn more about the Toronto Public Library and their upcoming events at torontopubliclibrary.ca.

Our next guest is Tara Mora. As an executive producer for CBC Books and Literary Partnerships, Tara is responsible for the strategic, vision, editorial and digital direction on programs such as Canada Reads and the CBC literary prizes. In 2020, Canada Reads was scheduled to broadcast live during the week Toronto ultimately moved into the beginning of its first lockdown.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**SF**

Last year was challenging and not at all what anyone thought 2020 would be like at the beginning of the year as news travelled about the virus and businesses and nonessential services closed to the public for the first lockdown of the pandemic. In March 2020, CBC Canada Reads was in a difficult position as your team was preparing to go live during the third week of March for the annual event, can you talk about preparing for the 2020 event? What were your initial thoughts about the news of the virus and how it would affect the event?

**Tara Mora (TM)**

I can talk about that. It was definitely a curveball. It feels so long ago now, as you probably know, with Canada Reads, our goal is to bring the five panellists into a studio together with our host. And we have had one year in the past where we had one panelist remote due to a personal emergency, so that was a difficult year because it was unexpected, but I think it gave us confidence that we could handle remote guests if we had to. It was never something we wanted to do.

So as news of the pandemic was spreading, one of our panellists we knew had a chronic health condition and would be considered at high risk. So right away, quite early in March, I can't remember the exact dates, but as we approached the show we knew we weren't going to fly him. We weren't comfortable putting him on a plane, but as I had said, you know, we had experience having remote panellists, so that in itself wasn't a big panic.

I think that was the first decision though, where we were thinking, OK, you know, we do have to take this into account and we always want to exercise caution. And then we made a decision maybe a week and a half before the show, maybe about a week before the show, to pull the live audience. So I think that was the second big decision. Then after that we had to make was, are we comfortable bringing 225 people into the studio? And again, there wasn't, you know, a mandate for a lockdown at that point. We were just using our own best judgment to say, actually, this doesn't feel like a responsible decision, but again, you know we did have to pivot to accommodate no audience because there's things like applause cues for example that we weren't going to have, but it didn't feel like a huge transition.

It felt still quite manageable and then we had one other panelist I think who had to fly in. We had talked to her a couple of times to say are you comfortable flying? She kept saying ’yes I'm comfortable. Yes, I'm comfortable.’ And I think it was the Friday before the show, we realized that whether she was comfortable or not, it was unsafe to fly and everything was going to be shut down and we didn't want her to be trapped in Toronto. And that was, I think, the main consideration with not flying her. She was comfortable doing it, but we thought, well, what if we fly her here for Canada reads and she can't go home?

**SF**

Oh wow. Yeah.

**TM**

Who knows? For how long? And at that point, the news cycle shifted very quickly and we realized it didn't feel appropriate to have a book debate given just the seriousness of what was happening.

And thank goodness we did postpone the show because I think we would have been preempted every day, as Justin Trudeau’s news conferences were at the same time Canada Reads had been scheduled for. So even though that was a really difficult weekend and a difficult decision, we had no regrets about making the decision to postpone.

**SF**

That's good. In the postponed announcement there was talk about kind of waiting until a live audience could be brought in. At what point was the decision made to go forward even without the live audience?

**TM**

That was–I think we're all very attached to the live audience. It's part of our just engagement with the public, but also it changes the tone in the studio. There's just a different–I'll use the word warmth. It brings an energy and a warmth, and the panellists are very aware that there are people they're speaking to and without that audience, it has an intimacy, But it's just quite different.

So, I think at the time when we postponed the show, we felt very attached to the live audience, so it felt like if we're going to postpone it, let's wait until we can have an audience. And again, I don't remember the specific timeframe, but I think when we made that decision, there was a feeling that we'd be locked down for a matter of weeks. It didn't–you know, there wasn't this sense of the longevity of things. And then, that would have been in March, so I think it was in May at some point, kind of towards late May, we kept checking in with the panellists every couple of weeks just to say ‘hello, we're still not sure when we're going to make Canada Reads, but we sure hope you'll still do it,’ and they were all amazing. But they had read all the books and done all the preparations so there was kind of this tension between waiting and honouring the work they had put into the show because at some point they were just going to have to start all over again with reading all the books and preparing arguments.

And we felt like, at some point, it might open. It did seem like there's a glimmer of hope there that over the summer things were going to loosen up, and I think they did loosen up in the summer, in hindsight, summer 2020. So we decided it was more important to get the show in when we could still access the panellists because we felt like if things opened up too much they would have other projects and they wouldn't necessarily be able to commit to doing Canada Reads, and again they had invested so much time already in preparing for the show, it didn't feel right to kind of hold off indefinitely, so we just did it. Tore off the band-aid.

**SF**

How did your team navigate the changing public health constraints as you prepared to move forward with the July dates?

**TM**

That was a huge challenge, but again, that's where we were lucky that, yes, CBC Books is a small team, but within a large organization, and so the logistics and operations people we–I believe Canada Reads was the first production that was done in the building following the first lockdown. We were the first production back in the building and with that came the first kind of test of all these COVID guidelines. So we had many, many pages production guide with COVID protocols that had to be followed and to navigate those protocols we had to change a lot of things.

So you can imagine we've done Canada Reads–well, 2021 was our 20th edition–so in some ways, it's like clockwork in terms of managing the panellists. For example, in the morning routine of, you know, these panellists arrive at this time they have hair at this time, makeup at this time, soundcheck at this time, and so we couldn't actually do anything the way we had previously done it due to the protocols. So people–you couldn't have two people on an elevator at that point.

Right, so even something as simple as just getting everyone up to the 10th floor required this choreography of these people will arrive at this entrance and they'll go up this elevator at this time, and these people will go here. They need their individual PPE and that needs to be picked up from a certain place, but we don't want them congregating to do it. So it was really an exercise and very careful scheduling.

And then giving up all of just, I don't want to say perks like ‘ooh, we're so fancy,’ I don't mean it like that, but just you know, normally each panelist would have a wrangler who showed them around the building and could walk them where they needed to go. But of course, we were limiting the number of people, so the panellists were much more on their own than they would normally be when there was more signage in the hallways. And there is just kind of this domino effect of work that had to go on beforehand and very carefully choreographed every person in a specific place, this specific time. Even when you think about after the show, everyone would normally just leave, but they couldn't all be on the elevator together. So then you'd be like, ‘you can't leave yet you stay in your room. OK, you go, OK, now you go.’ So it was a lot of logistics, but nothing extraordinary for us because we're part of that larger team. And the other teams at CBC had done such extraordinary planning to ensure it was a safe production.

**SF**

Were there any ideas or plans that became challenging or just couldn't be done?

**TM**

So many, [laughs] it's all coming back to me. Now I'm laughing only because it feels like another lifetime. I swear to you, yeah, we had this–Jesse Thistle was in Newfoundland to do a regional event when the word came that we were going to be locked down. And so we had travelled him all the way to this area in Newfoundland, and then they cancelled the event. So he just sat in a hotel room and then flew home the next day.

There are a lot of plans that went awry in that initial period. By the time we got to the show in July, I think we knew we couldn't do anything, so we didn't really plan them. But yeah, when I mentioned before, like the types of perks like there was no catering. We couldn't even offer people coffee because there couldn't be any common or shared anything, so we had to say in advance what exactly would you like in your dressing room, like very specifically, would you like this type of granola bar? And then everything had to be pre-loaded before anybody got to the building because we can’t contaminate the dressing rooms once they've been sanitized.

So there was a lot of stuff like that. That's like not glamorous or exciting, but it is the work of the show producers that certainly added a lot to their plates.

**SF**

After the summer last year, there was still a lot of uncertainty about what events would look like in 2021, with plans changing and no clear idea about what this year would look like. Was it tough to look ahead and plan for the annual event this year or was a decision made early on how to approach it again?

**TM**

Yeah, a decision was made early. It..both? It was difficult because it forced us to make decisions earlier because of the time that's involved in chasing the panellists, and then the book selection can be a long process. It's hard to find that one book that someone feels passionate about and they want to tell the whole country to read, which is what we ask of them, so we couldn't push it too late. We don't have that much flexibility. We can't produce the show, you know, kind of super quickly, there is a lot of buildup required, so we decided, I think early last fall we made the decision.

Normally, we work very hard to represent different regions of the country in the panel and we do fly people in to participate, and we just made the decision that for 2021 we would only chase people who were either in the GTA or within driving distance because it was too uncertain. We didn't want to end up in a situation where we couldn't get people to the studio.

So that was one compromise we made. Having said that there are lots of people from across Canada who have moved into the GTA or nearby regions, so we were still able to have, you know, I would say great representation. For example, you know from Alberta, I think with Roger Mooking, Edmonton feels closeness to Roger from his time there, but he lives in the GTA so we did try to still balance that consideration, but that was definitely a place where we decided very early on.

And then the other really big shift for us was around the launch. So normally we do two days of production in the building when we do our announcement, the first day is photoshoots, video shoots, audio recording sessions. The authors and the panellists get to meet each other, and that's usually a big moment in the cycle. And so we knew that again, it was just too uncertain to expect that that would even be possible. So very early on we re-imagined what launch would look like, and most of it from the outside I don't think it changed significantly, but on our side, it changed a lot.

So for example, we couldn't do a photoshoot, but we still wanted a group photo, so the miracles of technology, but you know, directing panellists to take photos of themselves holding the book a certain way. And all of that work–again, we're part of this big organization, so we have an amazing creative team and they were able to step in and help us come up with these solutions so that we were still able to get the elements we needed. But certainly, things that normally are quite easy became kind of these snowballs of work and details.

And you know one of the authors lived alone and so they said, ‘well, I don't have anyone to take my picture.’ They're like, well, that's an interesting problem we hadn't considered. You're in lockdown all alone. Somehow we will solve this problem. And through technology, we did solve all of the problems, but it definitely made for some long, long days and we did miss that–there's a magic, there's a connection, I think, between panellists and authors, you know. We set up Zoom rooms and we ended up doing videos of Zoom calls that we, you know, designed around to make them more visually interesting. But it's not the preference.

**SF**

Yeah, no, definitely. Are there lessons you learned during the last year that will be brought forward to future Canada Reads events?

**TM**

There were a few things. One was our staging, so we've always had this Canada Reads poker table, and in hindsight, we all have a bizarre fixation on this idea of bringing people around the table. But then because of COVID and we didn't want people masked because we also shoot for TV while we record audio. So we distanced them and the way we did it was by creating these individual tables still in a circle and then we put a light, we lit the logo on the floor in the middle and it looked beautiful. And then we all laughed at ourselves. [Laughs] Change can be good! And we like this set better.

So like, are we ever gonna bring that poker table back? I don't know. But it certainly with media we in the past would have sent people to a studio, Even so, you know, let's say we had a panelist based in Vancouver and they are going to be a guest on *Q.* Then there was all this scheduling that would happen because we would insist they go to the CBC Vancouver studio to record that interview, but with the technology now it was so easy to get decent quality audio with people in their homes, and I can’t imagine we'll go back to inconveniencing all of everyone, ourselves to book it and schedule it, the panellists to physically go somewhere to record an audio interview. I can't see that changing. I think the new way is a good way and we're happy with the results.

Definitely, we really missed our regional events. Normally we have authors and panellists across the country. At events organized by local CBC branches or regions as we call them, so you know, for example, I mentioned Jesse Thistle being invited to Newfoundland, and those events, they're not huge attendance events. It's not like there are thousands of screaming fans at these Canada Reads events, but they really represent, I think the best of Canada Reads where we're in a community talking about books in a deeper way and connecting with readers, and so that was a big loss.

And that is where I would say I think digital fatigue would have played a part. We didn't attempt to create a whole bunch of digital events. We just did one big event the week before the show and it did well for us. We were pleased with how it went, but I feel like if we tried to do a series of events, it would have been heartbreak for us.

**SF**

Yeah, no, that was a good call.

**TM**

Yeah, it was. It worked out things. Things went our way this year. It isn't always the case. Things don't always go your way, but in 2021 we had a great Canada Reads and even with the challenges the pandemic presented, we were able to produce a show that we were proud of,

that found an audience, definitely that generated sales for the authors involved, and so you know the story ended happily for us. I think we got lucky. And we have an amazing big team around us at CBC of people with a lot of expertise who are very generous about lifting up our annual book debate.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**SF**

You can learn more about Canada Reads at CBC.ca/books.

Our 3rd guest is Amanda Halfpenny at the Canadian Children’s Book Centre. With Canadian Children’s Book Week and their annual awards ceremony later that fall, the organization pivoted quickly in order to connect with parents, teachers and kids online.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**SF**

Can you take us back to March of last year and talk a little bit about your experience as the effects of the pandemic started taking shape? What were your initial thoughts as news travelled about the virus?

**Amanda Halfpenny (AH)**

I think similarly to other people in Canada, we hadn't really started to see the impact yet, and we thought that things would get under control fairly quickly. And when we received news that schools would be closed for an additional two weeks after March break, we thought, ‘OK, that's a smart idea. We'll close the schools for two weeks and then we'll be back and ready to go in April.’ So I think that everyone, myself included, thought that it was going to be, you know, a huge change for a few weeks, but then the impact would be quickly remedied and we'd be back to normal in a short period of time. So I don't think we could have anticipated how long we were going to be dealing with this.

**SF**

The Canadian Children’s Book Centre organizes and runs the Canadian Children’s Book Week, taking place at the beginning of May. With the lockdown in March last year and in-person events being cancelled, what was the process for transitioning to celebrating it virtually on such short notice?

**AH**

In fact, what worked out well, in the case of the Canadian Children’s Book Centre, was that we had already planned to launch our own YouTube channel called Bibliovideo, and so with Bibliovideo in place, we were able to push forward to the launch date. And so those first videos that we included on the YouTube channel were actually featuring the authors and the illustrators who were going to participate in the book week tour. It did work out really well that we had those video recordings that we were able to use and then also provide access to them through our YouTube channel.

**SF**

Were there any learning curves? Did you guys have to learn any new technology or were there any situations that may not have happened if it was an in-person event?

**AH**

I think that what worked out really well was having people on our team who were experts. I, as the Events and Program Coordinator, have no technical knowledge at all. [Laughs] So no one, no one wants me editing video. No one wants me, you know, verifying the quality of audio, but luckily we have people on our team and we were able to create new partnerships with people who do have that technical know-how. And we were able to take advantage of those skills. The Canadian Children’s Book Centre is a fairly small team and so we were extremely lucky that we do have people with our Bibliovideo team specifically who have that technical know-how.

**SF**

Yes, that's great. Speaking of Bibliovideo, you post author interviews, readings, book trailers and virtual launches. How important has it been to connect with young readers, teachers and parents through video during such a time of uncertainty and isolation?

**AH**

I think that having video access to authors and illustrators has been huge, and I think that so many people are now understanding the benefits of it as well. People, authors, illustrators and book creators who prior to the pandemic would have been extremely hesitant either because they felt shy in front of a camera or they weren't comfortable with their own tech skills, they now have gained that confidence to reach a larger audience, and they're understanding that there might not be the same intimacy as meeting with people in person. You can just reach so many more people.

And in terms of promoting books, it's a fantastic exposure for authors and illustrators to be able to promote their books online through video. So it's actually, I think, provided people with a whole new kind of view of how to self-promote, and it's worked out for a lot of people.

**SF**

Were there any events or outreach opportunities that benefitted from being digital?

**AH**

I think so. I think that–if I think about our partnership with the Toronto International Festival of Authors, we definitely were able to provide access to our award ceremony. Prior to 2020, it had always been in person, and it had been by invitation. It was fairly limited in terms of the people who were able to attend, but by having the TIFA platform and being able to broadcast that live across the country and internationally on the web was a huge, huge benefit in terms of inclusivity, letting people feel part of something special, even if they couldn't be there in person. So I think that we're seeing a lot of benefits, in fact, to using virtual platforms in terms of providing better access to events and making sure that no one feels excluded and that we're all part of this together.

**SF**

What was the planning process like for putting together a ceremony digitally versus doing it in person?

**AH**

We were all learning as we went. I think that we had a lot of conversations in terms of people’s priorities. So what did people really want to see as part of this ceremony? What were the best parts of the in-person ceremony that we wanted to maintain? And I think that by focusing on those priorities we were able to, you know, plan out those details so that people felt included, the books that were shortlisted and the winners felt that they were receiving the exposure that they deserved.

And also because the in-person social component was always so important for our in-person ceremony, we also organized the post-awards virtual bar which people really enjoyed and it provided that opportunity for people across the country to connect in a more informal and social setting. After the awards so they could either, you know, gossip about the winners or just catch up with an old friend who they hadn't seen in a while.

**SF**

Were there any plans for the ceremony that were affected by the changing restrictions and public health constraints for the pandemic? Were there any ideas that couldn't be done?

**AH**

I think that we, with the team at TIFA, had looked at kind of a Plan A, and a Plan B, and a Plan C. And initially we thought that there would be a small in-person ceremony with a virtual component and so there was a lot of back and forth about ‘OK if there's only 25 people allowed together, who will those 25 people be?’ In the end, it actually worked out, I think, to the benefit of the event that it was virtual and so that no one was excluded because no one could be there. [Laughs]

But I think that also the fact that we were able to have our host Tony Kim from CBC Kids who was able to film live at the Harbourfront Centre with the incredible production team, we were then able to include all of those pre-recorded videos that we had produced prior to the event. I think that that kind of marriage of the live host with the pre-recorded videos worked out really well.

**SF**

The Canadian Children’s Book Centre has also organized grade one book giveaways. What was your experience like this year with the programme?

**AH**

Yes, the Grade One Book Giveaway programme is one of our cornerstone programmes with the Canadian Children’s Book Centre, and every year we distribute over 550,000 books to grade one students across the country. And this year because we were doing things virtually, we were able to organize the launch party with a grade one class in Hay River in the Northwest Territories.

And normally we never would have been able to do that. We wouldn't have been–we wouldn't have had the money to fly up to the Northwest Territories to put on this party, but it was so meaningful because Robert Munsch, who wrote our 2020 grade one book giveaway title *Moira's Birthday*, was in Hay River when he wrote that story. And it was actually, it was on a book tour as part of our Canadian Children’s Book Week. So it was quite full circle that that was the title this year and the grade one class in Hay River was able to participate, and we had a book reading, we had an art demo with Michael Martchenko, we collaborated with Annick Press so that we could have drawing suggestions from the kids beforehand, and then Michael Martchenko was able to pull some suggestions out of a hat and draw them for the kids and what was so exciting was that from, you know, I was based in Toronto, Tony Kim who did the book reading was in Toronto, the kids were in Hay River, but then we were able to meet virtually with the real-life Moira, who was the inspiration for this story.

So in the 80s when Robert Munsch was in Hay River on this book tour, he was billeted at her childhood home, and so she had a birthday party while he was there and he wrote this or he just made up on this spot this story about a birthday party and Moira now lives in Saskatchewan. So another person who we never would have been able to kind of bring into this to an in-person virtual launch. But because of the magic of the virtual format, we were all joined together.

And so that was a live party that we put on. And then because this is the title for grade one students across the country, we were able to put that as a private link on our Bibliovideo YouTube channel and we had over 1,000 different classes logged in and watched that, so it was a huge success and I think that it was because of the virtual format that it was just so inclusive for everyone across the country.

**SF**

Are there any lessons that you learned during the last year that will be brought forward to future award ceremonies and community outreach?

**AH**

We've learned so much from putting on virtual events, and I think that inclusivity and accessibility have been the biggest takeaways in our recent Canadian Children’s Book Week Tour, which was fully virtual in May 2021. We were able to reach people in the most far-fetched communities in Canada, and although it's always been our priority to reach remote communities who don't usually have opportunities to meet with authors and illustrators, this particular tour it was really amplified in terms of how far our reach could be. And we did also learn a lot in terms of providing access to communities who didn't have stable Internet connections, so also providing programme kits on USB keys, but that would still include them, so I think that accessibility was really the key. And it turns out that even on Grosse-Île in Quebec, which is like out in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, their Internet is still strong enough that they could participate in author visits, so it's really been exciting to see the connections across the country because of that.

**SF**

Yeah, 'cause there's definitely a big conversation happening within the event industry of how to make that balance between celebrating in person again, which everyone is very excited for, but also keeping the element of accessibility and keeping digital so everyone can kind of join. So it's been really interesting listening to those conversations and kind of seeing both sides of it.

**AH**

And I, and I've been thinking a lot about this moving forward, and being concerned that it doesn't become this two-tiered system where the people who now get to be in person again get the full benefits of being in person and having a well-organized event, but the people who have been benefitting from high-quality virtual events in the past year and a half they, then you know, becomes kind of second fiddle again to the in-person events. So, I'm very conscious moving forward that we need to keep up the quality in terms of the virtual, and I think though, honestly in terms of event planning is going to require more work on our part because it will almost be like planning two separate events.

Whereas before we could focus on the in-person and make sure that it was, you know, well-organized and entertaining and informative and meaningful for the people attending. In the past year and a half, we've been doing that fairly well in the virtual realm, but now to offer high-quality in-person events in conjunction with high-quality virtual events. [Laughs] I think that our work is cut out for us so that everyone feels that they're getting, you know, the best event that they can.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**SF**

See all the great work the Canadian Children’s Book Centre is doing at bookcentre.ca or find them on social media @KidsBookCentre on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Our last guest is Daphna Rabinovitch, the Submissions and Marketing Manager of the Scotiabank Giller Prize, who shared their experience with creating a digital gala in a year of changing public health constraints, as well as the new programs they are working on to connect more people with great Canadian books.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**SF**

Last year was challenging and not at all what anyone thought 2020 would be like at the beginning of the year. As news travelled about the virus and businesses and nonessential services were closed to the public for a first lockdown of the pandemic in March 2020, can you share what it was like for the Scotiabank Giller Prize team? What were the initial thoughts about how it would affect the gala?

**Daphna Rabinovitch (DR)**

Well, I think you know we, our gala is always held in November, the beginning of November, usually between the 6th and the 9th. So I think like the rest of the world, our hope was set, naively, this would blow over and we would be able to resume as normal. As time went by and we realized that really was a pipe dream. Then we realized we had to pivot quite quickly. So along with our production team and CBC, we held several meetings. And it didn't just affect our gala because we commonly have a longlist announcement, which takes place in St. John’s and then a shortlist announcement in person, which follows that by about three to four weeks, and that announcement takes place typically in Toronto and then the shortlisted authors go on a five-city cross Canada tour with stops in Halifax, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary or Winnipeg, and Vancouver.

As part of that, Between the Pages tour, we also collaborate with First Book Canada. So the five shortlisted authors get to go to heavy needs high schools, and underfunded, underprivileged, and they talk to the high school students. They actually give books out to the high school students and it's an opportunity for kids of that age in, again, high needs areas to meet with authors. See what their craft is like, see what their life is like and what it's like to be an author, and so the whole fall lead up to our gala was going to be very different and we knew it was going to be very different.

So early in the summer of 2020, which I can't quite believe was a year ago now, I mean, time is relentless. We did, we decided we had to pivot quite quickly. We decided to go virtual. Our production team, which is BT/A Advertising, Barry Avrich was able to give us some alternatives quite quickly.

So typically what happens is that for our long list announcement anyway, at which 12 authors are named as the longlist, the winner from the year before is flown out to St. John’s and then, you know, we have media there and whatnot. So we got Ian Williams who won in 2019 for his book, *Reproduction,* to do the virtual announcement for the longlist.

But even before the longlist announcement happened, we had to pivot because, you know, we have a jury of five members, and two of the members are always from the international scene. So, you know, we had Tom Rachman, who was in England, and Claire Armitstead, who was the literary critic for *the Guardian*. So instead of us meeting in person, of course, all our meetings had to be virtual, and usually what we do is we have that last meeting during which the shortlist and the longlist is decided in Toronto so that we can really, you know, dig deep to find out which book merited both lists. And so that was done virtually then similarly, the longlist and then the shortlist was done virtually.

**SF**

In particular to the gala, which usually takes place with everyone central in one location, with last year's gala, it had authors and special guests and presenters filmed in different locations, such as the public library, the authors’ homes. What was that planning process like to keep the magic of the award ceremony with so many different moving parts?

**DR**

Well, it was challenging. There's no doubt once we knew what the shortlist was, we had to move very quickly actually. I mean, because we had, you know, Emily St. John Mandel in New York, we had David Bergen out in Winnipeg, we had Souvankham Thammavongsa here in Toronto, Shani Mootoo was out Kingston way, and so it was challenging. We had to work very quickly and very coherently with our production team and with the shortlisted authors to get teams out to them to be able to film them and get their thoughts, and then in the midst of all this, we were also designing a new statue.

So there was a lot of visiting with our artist, masks and all, and you know really, I have to hand it to our production team who were able to fly across the country into New York, make sure that–well, they weren't flying, but what they did is they flew the equipment to the various different locales and then did it all remotely. They were the ones who worked with the Vancouver Public Library and Eric, who was our host last year. And it was, it was quite the effort.

**SF**

Were there any plans that were affected by the changing restrictions and public health constraints?

**DR**

Well, you know what, we decided to be very flexible from the very beginning, and as it became apparent that the epidemic was actually getting worse and worse, we decided to go with one idea, which was the virtual idea, which was visiting these people in their homes and to have Eric and then Ian at the Vancouver Public Library.

We did go through a few different iterations of how we would present the statue. The actual award to the winner that did go through a couple of different permutations because of the, you know, the sort of flux of government regulations, but we remained fairly flexible until, you know, about–well, no, until about 2–3 months before and then we just decided you know what we need to move forward, we have to make our plans and this is what we're going to do.

We were very lucky also because we wanted to pay homage to the health care workers and the frontline workers. And so, we were able to include them in our broadcast. We had them reading from the various shortlisted books and we felt very grateful that we were able to do that.

**SF**

Yeah, that was a lovely part of the ceremony.

**DR**

Thank you yeah. I mean, you know. Look, I mean part of the Giller is, you know, the excitement and the glamour and the leading up to the announcement. And we felt that we tried to capture that online. I mean, it's never going to be quite the same as it is in person. You know when people are schmoozing and drinking, but we did feel that we managed to convey who the authors were and what they felt about their art and what was the impetus behind their particular novels. So it was a bit of a different kind of excitement. It was more excitement about the art, perhaps the art of writing, but we felt we did succeed. And viewership was very good, so we were happy about that.

**SF**

That’s great. While you faced challenges, there were also some benefits to shifting the ceremony online. In particular, I've seen that it saved some costs, which were then donated to initiatives to support diverse writers. Can you tell us a little bit more about that decision?

**DR**

When we decided to go online there was some cost savings, and you know it was such a difficult year in so many different ways. I mean, socially, politically, so many different ways. I mean there was, you know the uprisings in the United States for the Black population, there was that issue here as well. It's always an issue in Canada. As well there was, you know, reconciliation. There was this awful, awful, pandemic that was killing, you know, millions of people. Retail was hit, but, you know, our domain is literature and we really felt that writers and writers of colour and Indigenous writers were particularly hard hit, and so you know, our mission is to help and support Canadian writers, right?

I mean that that's what the Giller Foundation is all about and the Scotiabank Giller Prize.

And so when we discovered that we had some extra funds we really, really felt it was our responsibility, as you know, the Giller Foundation to help support writers across the country.

So yes, we made a sizable donation to Diaspora Dialogues and both the Indigenous Voices Award and Indigenous Literary Studies Association (ILSA). And you know what? We felt that it was our small part of doing something to help all the writers within Canada.

**SF**

As event presentations and shows embraced the digital space, it also brought new opportunities for organizations to connect with audiences. In the case of the Scotiabank Giller Prize, there were things like the Giller Book Club and the monthly master panels. Were these inspired by the digital space?

**DR**

We had actually pledged to ourselves in 2020 that over the next five years, we want to bring more programming to the Canadian general public, and so prior to the pandemic we had made that commitment, and so we were going forward with that. We have plans to introduce a lot of new initiatives.

The first one was going to be the book club, but I will say that because everything had to go virtual, it actually made it a bit easier. It did, right? Because, you know, we put membership on our website and you know what? Within a month– I mean we, we ran into a little bit of trouble on our first broadcast, but it was a huge learning experience and so we launched in January 2021. We partnered with an AV company, we set up membership, we set up registration, and as I was saying, within a month we were over 1,500 members. Yeah, so the book club was inspired by this desire to reach more Canadians and to introduce Canadian authors both as interviewers and the interviewees to the Canadian public, and you know, it's been really well accepted.

And similarly, with the monthly master panels, which coincide with monthly themes, you know, Black History Month, Women's History Month, Indigenous History Month, Asian History Month. They've been exceptionally well received as well, and to bring all these disparate people from the different regions of Canada was, I think, facilitated by making it virtual because of the pandemic.

**SF**

My last question for you: are there lessons that you learned during this last year that would be brought forward to future award ceremonies and outreach?

**DR**

I think what we will find for the Scotiabank Giller Prize and the Giller Foundation is that we'll have a hybrid again, because we can reach so many more people with the book club, for instance, and with the monthly master panels, virtually.

I do think that we will, although this is not, you know, a final decision yet, but my feeling is that we will continue to do those virtually, but events such as Between the Pages, you know, we love that event. We love that tour because we get to take our authors across the country and people–there's I think, a very different aura and feeling and relationship when an author is reading on stage in front of you right and you can pose questions personally and see their facial expressions and see their body language and see how they relate to the other authors in the minute or to the moderator, right? So while we may have something virtual akin to the Between the Pages, I do think we're looking forward to taking that back on the road.

Plus, we have the added advantage of, you know, meeting the high school students. Which I think, you know, is part of the Giller Foundation's outreach. We have a whole academic outreach program, starting for instance, so we have that which we do with another organization, and we're also doing outreach to Canadian universities, so that they will hopefully be starting, we already have two starting capstone English courses on the Giller Prize books.

And making sure, you know, the shortlisted authors are more available to guest lecture, to be writers in residence, to just go and have an interview. And so that's part of our academic outreach, which I think is very, very important to do in person.

You know the gala this year, will likely be in person, but in a very minimized way, not quite as many people 'cause we tend to have about 400–450 people at our gala, so we'll probably look to do 100 and 150 people this year. Government regulations allowing but, you know, our hope and prayer for the future is that, yes, the gala will be in person.

Some of our other initiatives we hope to also be some in-person and some, for instance, some workshops, which would be virtual. So it's kind of an opportunity right to have both, right? I mean, I think, that's–if there is a silver lining to the pandemic, it's that we can, you know, we have reached out to so many people and have discovered that people are amenable to that outreach. Virtually and digitally, right? So going forward, I think it enriches our possibilities in our landscape.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

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**SF [OUTRO]**

You can see the full list of Scotiabank Giller Prize winners, and shortlisted and longlisted books on their website at scotiabankgillerprize.ca. You can also connect them @GillerPrize on social media.

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