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Book Readers Who Are Buccaneers and Buyers

Rachel Noorda

Portland State University, rachel.noorda@pdx.edu

Kathi Inman Berens

Portland State University, kberens@pdx.edu

Chris Kenneally

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**Interview with
Dr. Rachel Noorda & Dr. Kathi Inman Berens**

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KENNEALLY: These readers buy, subscribe to, and borrow books at higher rates than the general population. They engage at higher rates in fanfiction, too, and discover new authors across multiple media, including streaming movies and television. These readers are also pirates.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content. Immersive Media & Books 2020 is the first study to capture data expressly about how people engage with books, video games, film, and television. The final report focuses sharply on reader behavior across a wide range of demographic groups based on surveys conducted before and during the coronavirus pandemic. Co-authors Dr. Rachel Noorda and Dr. Kathi Inman Berens probe especially for reasons why book readers may choose to become book pirates, and they offer data-informed guidance on turning those buccaneers back into book buyers.

Dr. Kathi Inman Berens is associate professor of book publishing and digital humanities at Portland State University. She's co-editor of the forthcoming *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 4*. Welcome to the program, Dr. Inman Berens.

INMAN BERENS: Thank you so much, Chris. I'm delighted to be here.

KENNEALLY: We're very happy to have you. And your colleague, Dr. Rachel Noorda, is director of book publishing and an assistant professor in English, also at Portland State University. Her book, *Entrepreneurship in US Book Publishing in the 21st Century*, will be coming out from Cambridge University Press later this year. Welcome to the program, too, Dr. Noorda.

NOORDA: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: The Immersive Media project is a really important one, because it gets at the topic of reading and readership in a variety of ways. I guess the place to start with all of this is to tell us a bit more, Dr. Noorda, about the project, which was published by the Panorama Project and funded by a variety of groups, including OverDrive, the American Library Association, Book Industry Study Group, and the Independent Book Publishers Association. So how did all this come together?



NOORDA: The Immersive Media project is a cross-media consumer behavior study, and it's open access thanks to, as you mentioned, Chris, our funders. The project is in collaboration with Panorama Project. It's published by them. And also a cross-industry research committee – this committee is one that helps to peer-review the survey questions, for example, and also the research once it was finished. We had a large sample size for our survey, over 4,000 respondents. And we were able to implement quotas in the survey as well for things like gender, race, age, and region to ensure national representation. There are long and short versions of the Immersive Media report that are free and open access that people can look at at panoramaproject.org.

KENNEALLY: Dr. Inman Berens, tell us about the demographics here. Dr. Noorda mentioned just how scrupulous you were to be sure that the portrait that emerges is one that is representative of the entire US population. So we're going to dive into the particular segment called pirates. Tell us about the demographics there. Who are book pirates in the United States today?

INMAN BERENS: Yes, Chris. Well, the headline is that pirates buy books. They buy books more than the general survey population in several categories. They borrowed a library book that they first found online – 58% then went on to buy a book in a bookstore that they first found in a library, compared to just 31% of the general population. You can see what a significant jump that is – that pirates, when the value proposition makes sense to them, are happy to open their wallets. 65% of them bought a book in a bookstore that they first found online, compared to 45% of the general population. And 41% of book pirates buy the same book in multiple formats. So when they like something, they really like something.

We are defining book pirates as individuals engaged in illegal downloading or file-sharing, not people who systematically market large quantities of copyright-protected material without authorization. Book pirates are slightly more likely to have a library card than the general population – that's 77.2% compared to 75.8%. About 14.4% of all the respondents engage in book piracy. But we really need more discovery around what motivates a pirate to buy, or conversely, in what cases does someone who would seek first to buy or borrow a book turn to piracy when their needs aren't being met by the available options, such as when a book they want to check out of the library isn't available?

The top three things that book pirates are most likely to do when a book isn't available at the library – number one is they'll buy it from an online bookstore. That's 39% of book pirates. They'll put themselves on a hold list. That's almost 29% of book pirates. And this is a large increase for finding books for free compared to the general survey population – 27.1% of pirates will find a book for free, compared to 15.5% of the general population.



Book pirates are predominantly white, male, and young. However, there are more BIPOC pirates – Black and Indigenous People of Color pirates – across all non-white races and ethnicities proportional to the number of BIPOC people in the general survey population.

KENNEALLY: As you say, Dr. Inman Berens, what's important about these pirates is that they are book customers. In the trade book business, at least, when one thinks of so-called super-readers, they're often associated in people's minds with the image of – book club members tend to be white women. And you're saying that this is a particular group that includes men in greater percentages as well as people of color. That means that if we take the view that these pirates are potential customers, this is really about growing the market and being more inclusive with who publishers are trying to reach for readers.

INMAN BERENS: Exactly. I think that the more that publishers and libraries can dig into what motivates book pirates, the more likely they are to find new audiences.

KENNEALLY: Dr. Noorda, let's address that particular question, then. Why are these pirates pirating? Book pirates, we've begun to see, are not a single identity. There isn't one suspicious character. It's almost everyone. In fact, when your colleague was describing who these pirates are, I thought, well, they're my neighbors, right?

NOORDA: Yeah, that's the ultimate question – why are they pirating? Because it's clear that they aren't just thieves, that they are willing to open their wallets. And the question which honestly we still need to gather more data about is why? What is it that makes them then buy something?

So one of the things we'd like to kind of push back against and think about is in the publishing industry, book piracy has often been seen as this binary categorization – you're a book pirate or you're not. And there's a hefty moral judgment that comes along with that.

But book pirates have multidimensional identities. So not only are they book pirates, but they are also readers. They are book customers. They are fanfiction readers and writers, because they are much more engaged in fanfiction reading and writing than the general population. They're really invested in story worlds, in other words. They have a higher percentage of library patrons, for example, as Kathi had mentioned. So they're not just thieves. They will buy books. For example, compared to the general survey population, we saw that a higher percentage of book pirates were buying more books in all formats during COVID.

Some of the things that prevent them from buying and mean that they are pirating have to do with things like access – because it's not available in the format or price point – and



that's another thing that we'd like to investigate further. So some of the things that we will talk more about and have thought about are related to thinking about other ways to have sampling methods, because people are investing time and money within these products.

So if we can move away from the perception and rhetoric that puts book pirates in this narrow box, then maybe the industry as a whole can start thinking about better ways to turn these readers and consumers and borrowers into paid and legitimate users every time.

KENNEALLY: Another way to think about these pirates, these readers, Dr. Inman Berens, is to think of them within the context of the greater media world and their engagement not only with books and literature, but with all the other entertaining distractions that are available, particularly online.

INMAN BERENS: Absolutely. Pirates bought significantly more media across channels, meaning games and TV/video streaming, than the general survey respondents during COVID-19 lockdowns. They are very invested in discovering properties in one place and looking for them in other formats in another. Pirating games by downloading them accounted for 11.4% of our respondents, compared to 14.4% of people who are pirating books. One thing to know, though, is that our survey doesn't capture tacit forms of piracy in gaming, such as using somebody else's login credentials.

KENNEALLY: Dr. Noorda, when it comes to these pirates, we sort of are establishing the case that they are very enthusiastic readers, very voracious consumers of books and other distractions, serious and otherwise. But talk about this notion of engagement. You really emphasize the point that they are not just readers, but they are engaging with the literature. What does that mean?

NOORDA: Yeah, they are very avid engagers. We defined engagement within our study very widely – borrowing, buying, subscribing in part or in whole to a book in various formats – but book pirates are doing that at higher rates than the general population. They engage with an average of 10 books per month, a median of six books, whereas the general survey population engaged with an average of eight books per month. That's a median of four books per month.

And not only that, but they also have a high proportion of buying the same book in multiple formats, as Kathi mentioned. They're also very engaged in fanfiction, as I've talked about before. While only 12.2% of the general population engaged with fanfiction, over double that, 27.4% of book pirates, did. This indicates they're highly invested in the story worlds that they inhabit.



KENNEALLY: It just makes me realize, Dr. Noorda, that this word pirate may be so problematic as to call for us to find another word to describe these people. How do you feel about that?

NOORDA: I would wholeheartedly get behind that, because there's such a stigma attached to the term pirate, and yet there's so much more to the people behind this word. Maybe if we had a different word, people in the publishing industry would think differently about them.

KENNEALLY: Again, we are talking here about individual readers – our neighbors, as I like to think of it. We're not talking about people who are somehow in a kind of wholesale, systematic way looking to make books available to people – in other words, appropriating intellectual property. We're talking about people here who simply want to have a book in their hands.

NOORDA: Correct, yeah.

KENNEALLY: So that means there's opportunities here. There are takeaways from your survey that publishers, authors, and librarians, even, should be looking into. Dr. Inman Berens, tell us about that. There are ways to engage pirates by giving them things free rather than having them go look for those free items.

INMAN BERENS: Absolutely. I think that the headline here is fish where the fish are. If you want to attract people who pirate, but who also buy books at much higher rates than the general population, people should be designing marketing centered on robust sampling, where you gather email addresses, perhaps, and get those people signed up for your newsletter delivery as a condition of free access.

Pirates are both price-sensitive and lavish spenders. I'm going to say that one again – price-sensitive and lavish spenders when they really like a book. Of course, we need more discovery about that. But these are not people who are stealing because that's the only way they want to engage with a book. They want much greater forms of engagement than the industry and libraries are currently giving them.

While we deplore that pirates deprive authors, publishers, and booksellers of money, we also believe that pirate behavior is likely to be less and less outlier behavior in the future than it is right now. For children – which is to say people ages zero to 17, who are not part of the survey – the distinction between paid and free content may not even be obvious. It will be harder to convince a generation of young consumers raised entirely on leased access to streaming content to buy books.



KENNEALLY: I wonder whether either of you have a thought regarding the way that other streaming content is competing with books, and particularly not just competing with them for attention, for share of mind, but for their wallet, and they do so with a subscription model. Any thoughts on how that is training the future generations of readers to think about book purchases and book acquisition?

INMAN BERENS: Yes. One thing to note is that especially for younger consumers, meaning millennials and Gen Z, they are often engaging books on mobile devices, where moving between different platforms is trivial. So we need to actually make it very easy to chunk content in smaller pieces. People who want to go look at the report and look at our data on multitasking will find that multitasking is a huge use case for e-books and audiobooks and even printed books. That's my takeaway on that. What do you think, Rachel?

NOORDA: Yeah, I was just thinking about how one of the things that we learned from our data is that the most avid book consumers are also the most avid consumers of other media. Those who engaged avidly with books were also engaging avidly with TV, movies, and with games. So it's not necessarily a zero-sum game of you're engaging with books, so you're not engaging with the other things. But actually, the ones who are most avid are most avid across. It's more that the avid ones are the ones to be looking into. That was something that came up in looking at cross-media and how media interacts.

KENNEALLY: It's a subject that goes beyond just the pirates themselves, but the topic of discovery for books is one that people have thought about a lot over the last decade as the digital experience has grown better and deeper. Do you get into any of those issues around discovery? How are these pirates discovering their titles, and what might that point to as perhaps paths towards, again, converting them from book buccaneers into book buyers?

INMAN BERENS: We know that discovery is highly heterogeneous, that the top form of discovery, which is recommendations from friends, is just 20% of the market or of the survey population. Because discovery is highly distributed, and we know that book pirates are also media-savvy and working across platforms, it stands to reason that those individuals would be best served with multiple touch points across media.

KENNEALLY: Dr. Noorda, perhaps as the last question, I'll ask you what the reaction to the report has been from the publishing and authoring community. Some of your funders included the Independent Book Publishers Association, many of them independent authors there. And I'm sure some of them feel strongly about the issue of piracy. But here, again, you're asking them to think with a fresh perspective on this. How have they responded?

NOORDA: We're actually going to be doing a webinar in the next couple of months with the Independent Book Publishers Association and with the Book Industry Study Group. So I



think the takeaway is that everybody wants to learn more about book pirates and about the best ways going forward, because really, practices to kind of curb piracy in the past have not been successful. Clearly, we haven't learned enough about what is motivating pirates to do what they do and then to turn them into paid customers. And the more data that we can gather and learn about them, the better it is for everyone, including and maybe especially authors.

KENNEALLY: It occurs to me that this is not just a data question, although your data is very valuable to have. But it's an emotional connection that people need to make. There's a certain empathy here. These pirates aren't doing these things because they just enjoy stealing. They really just want to read.

NOORDA: Yeah, I do think there is a piece of that. And again, kind of understanding that there might be more to someone than just this one piece of them, and perhaps this data can start to shed light on that – I like the idea of looking at it through the empathy lens.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. We appreciate chatting with both of you. That was Dr. Rachel Noorda, director of publishing and assistant professor in English at Portland State University. Dr. Noorda, thanks for being on the program.

NOORDA: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And Dr. Kathi Inman Berens, associate professor of book publishing and digital humanities, also at Portland State University, thank you, too.

INMAN BERENS: It was great fun, Chris. Thanks for having us.

KENNEALLY: You can download a copy of Immersive Media & Books 2020 from the Panorama Project at panoramaproject.org.

Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening. Join us again soon for another Velocity of Content podcast from CCC.

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