

Portland State University

PDXScholar

English Faculty Publications and Presentations

English

3-7-2022

Killer Serials: Amazon's Kindle Vella

Kathi Inman Berens

Portland State University, kberens@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_fac



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), and the [Publishing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Berens, Kathi Inman. (2022). "Killer Serials: Amazon's Kindle Vella," Publishers Weekly.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

TWO
PEOPLE
MUST
ACCEPT
WHO THEY
ARE TO
BECOME
WHO THEY
MUST BE.

**"READERS...WILL
BE DRAWN IN."**
BOOKLIST

"KEEN-EDGED."
FOREWORD REVIEWS

"2022 MUST-READ"
KATIE COURIC



PLA & Pacific Northwest Spotlight

Killer Serials: Amazon's Kindle Vella

From its inception, Amazon has pushed book publishing toward a digital future that other entertainment industries (video games and streaming media) have been quicker to embrace. And Kindle Vella, one of Amazon's most recent new digital programs, is worth watching.

Simply put, Kindle Vella is a serialized reading experience folded into Amazon's Kindle app. It quietly launched in July 2021, but if it can catch on, it has enormous potential to capture the attention of a new generation of readers and writers.

"We're in the middle of experimenting and learning," says Kindle Vella product lead Virginia Milner, who adds that Vella designers are looking for "the bridge between reading and social connection." It's a complex mission, but a fairly simple concept: bring to reading the excitement and shared anticipation that makes streaming TV so bingeable. Vella also seeks to "break the wall" between authors and readers by offering its platform as a place to communicate and interact. With Vella, readers can give a thumbs-up at the end of each chapter, and conversations can spill out into social media.

As of February 18, Vella's #1 performing story, *The Marriage Auction* by Audrey Carlan, had more than 75,000 total chapter likes. And strong engagement numbers are good news for authors like Carlan, because Vella authors are paid bonuses for reader engagement. Authors also take 50% of a story's revenue. For readers, the first three episodes of any Vella story are free, after which they can use "tokens" that are purchased in bundles to access the rest. Tokens keep the reading experience smooth, rather than interrupting after every chapter with a request for payment.

Can this form of reading "serialization" catch on? The jury is still out. Kindle Vella likely faces an uphill battle resetting reader expectations toward stories with no set ending and no fixed price. Among the first 70-plus reader reviews of *The Marriage Auction*, about half complain about Vella. While readers got hooked by the writing—Carlan is a bestselling author of erotic contemporary romance—the frustration of not knowing how far along they were in the story nor how much it would cost to finish it got in the way for some readers. "My kids say it's the 'trend' but I'm not a fan," opines one reader review. "I lived thru the days of *Reader's Digest* serials and wasn't a fan then, not a fan now."

But what about those "kids"? For Gen Z readers, serialization is enormously popular, as evidenced by the staggering numbers of readers around the world engaging with webtoons and web novels. Webtoon North America CEO Ken Kim recently told Rob Salkowitz at */Cv2* that there are currently more than 72 million monthly active Webtoon users globally, and growing—with the U.S. market representing "nearly 20%" of that total. Webtoons and web novels might seem adjacent to the U.S. book publishing business at the moment, but they are in fact the fastest-growing form of reading.

Another challenge for Kindle Vella: you can't stack up the spines of a Vella product, flutter its pages, nor stick a decorated bookmark in Vella's product for social media. The BookTok community—Gen Z book marketing darlings of the moment—often film themselves with printed books, using stop-motion to create cinematic cuts and transitions. Can Kindle Vella find a way to give TikTok fans ways to engage with Vella stories on social media? It is still early days, but if so, Kindle Vella could very well break through with Gen Z and greatly boost the future of serialized reading.

—KATHI INMAN BERENS



Kindle Vella, Amazon's reading app for serial fiction, launched last July. Can it find the Gen Z audience powering growth in serialized web novels?