



Publishing in a Pandemic



Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance

by **MACKENZIE HAMON**



I was first asked to write this article back in February, which feels simultaneously like the eight months it's been, but also like several years, or just yesterday. Ask me what I thought the future of publishing might look like in February, and this piece probably would have looked different. The months we have spent in quarantine have changed the way we interact with stories, and the industry has responded with a number of new and innovative ideas – not because they wanted to, necessarily, but because they had to.

If there is one positive to come out of the COVID-19 pandemic it's the rediscovery of the arts – while at home, many people spent at least some of their time watching movies and television, writing, drawing, and, of course, reading books. We have seen a number of successful book launches and events, and, with much of Saskatchewan now re-open, the opportunity to return to our favourite new and used bookstore haunts. We have even had the privilege to welcome several new bookstores in the Regina area recently (Quill and Ink and The Penny

University); a resurgence that bodes well for future in-person events.

In a recent webinar on the [State of the Arts from CBC Toronto as part of Culture Days](#), the conversation inevitably flowed into a dialogue about the ways in which we can future-proof the arts and culture industry moving forward. How do we ensure that Canadian publishers can earn enough to continue producing books in the future? And what does that look like?

During the pandemic, book publishers have been able to work with booksellers and festivals to continue to promote their publications and authors. Many of these events were offered free of charge, especially during March and April, as businesses pivoted their models online, and the expectation from consumers that webinars and streams would be offered for free was at a high. But is this sustainable moving forward? Online platforms present us with a unique opportunity to reach readers wherever they are – but as with pre-pandemic marketing for books, a mix of

free and paid events is crucial not just for the health of the industry but for maintaining an inherent value to the work that we are doing.

While the online shift for bookselling and buying was already well underway prior to COVID-19, the last few months have amplified its importance, and allowed publishers across Canada the opportunity to widen their audience. As online selling and buying has grown to launches and literary events, people are now able to interact with authors from their own homes. In Saskatchewan, with our incredible community of writers and publishers, we have already seen a number of unique opportunities develop online in recent months, offering the chance to get our stories into the hands of the world.

The pandemic has altered the way that people are consuming art – it has also changed the way they are interacting with digital content. People still want the printed book experience, but they also want to listen to books while they take walks around their neighbourhood or get ready in the



morning. They want to read interviews with authors, or watch short videos, and have bite-sized quotes ready-made for reposting to Instagram. Events, like launches and festivals, have adapted for the times, but in order to continue reaching an engaged audience, publishers will need to develop a strong online presence in order to succeed. We now have the opportunity to connect with readers directly, to sell their books online (or direct readers to amazing local indies), and build purposeful, well-crafted websites – which people can visit not just to purchase books, but to explore podcasts, blog posts, and video interviews with authors. How do we continue to demonstrate the value of these works and products if getting to a bookstore is not feasible, and gatherings for in-person launches have shrunk, if they happen at all? Perhaps providing the opportunity to monetize these experiences through a paid portal could enhance publishers' offerings, with social media channels used as a means to drive traffic, build excitement, and share free content via Facebook Livestreams and the Instagram Stories/Live platform.

The pandemic has also presented us with the unique opportunity to potentially overhaul our granting and funding opportunities; to create a more robust printing, publishing, and shipping industry within Saskatchewan, and Canada as a whole, with the opportunity to market worldwide. In our country, with the granting agencies we have in place to support publishers, this is one of the most important ways we can future-proof the industry. If we are reimagining this world, we can not only reach our readers where they are, but we can reimagine a system where we can offer not just financial support, but mental health support, and where we can afford to pay writers and staff a fair and living wage – allowing these agencies to fund publishers who have the capacity to publish the best Canadian writers of our time.

Storytelling is the foundational tenet of humanity. It's how we make sense of what is going on in the world around us – and, right now, it's more important than ever. What we choose to say – how we

choose to say it – and why we choose to say it – all of this matters, particularly in these tumultuous times. Publishers are the gatekeepers of these stories, and their responsibility lies in ensuring these works are not only representative of our current time, but that we can build an industry that will be successful and profitable well into the future, continuing to publish the most important Saskatchewan, and Canadian, books. The Saskatchewan arts community has always been resilient – and the caliber of writing and publishing in this province is prodigious. Ensuring the success of the industry nationwide through the pandemic and beyond will simply be a matter of rethinking how we share our stories.

MacKenzie Hamon (she/her) is a marketing and communications professional working and living in Regina, SK, Treaty 4 territory. She obtained her BA (Hons) in English at the University of Regina and her Master's of Publishing from Simon Fraser University. Currently, she is the Communications Coordinator at the MacKenzie Art Gallery; prior to that she was the Associate Editor at *Prairies North* magazine and the Marketing Manager at Coteau Books. Her writing has appeared in *Freelance*, the magazine of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild, as well as *The Hamilton Review of Books*. She is a lover of food, books, and family (not necessarily in that order).