

# Navigating Towards Better Accessibility in Audiobooks

Presenters:

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# Land Acknowledgement

We are presenting today on the territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation Peoples. We respect and affirm the inherent and Treaty Rights of all Indigenous Peoples and will continue to honour the commitments to self-determination and sovereignty we have made to Indigenous Nations and Peoples.

# Who we are?

- Ioana Gandrabur, Peer Trainer at CELA (Centre for Equitable Library Access)
- Simon Jaeger, Accessibility Expert at NNELS (National Network for Equitable Library Service)
- Non-profit organizations that offer accessible reading services to people with print disabilities through Canadian public libraries
  - Offer accessible and alternate format collections of books
  - Build awareness of accessibility in all aspects of library service

# Presentation Outline

- Common audiobook accessibility challenges: books and platforms (Simon)
- Overview of Accessible Commercial Audiobooks Project (Ioana)
- Using AI for Accessible Audiobook Creation (Simon)
- New Options for Reading Audiobooks at CELA (Ioana)
- Q & A

# Accessibility Challenges : Audiobooks and Platforms

- Many people believe audiobooks are accessible by default.
- Digital accessibility is still a work in progress.
- Some reading platforms are still inaccessible
- Others lack desirable features
- mainstream audiobook formats are basic and also lacking desirable features
- The platform and the audiobook need to work well together, otherwise the experience is degraded

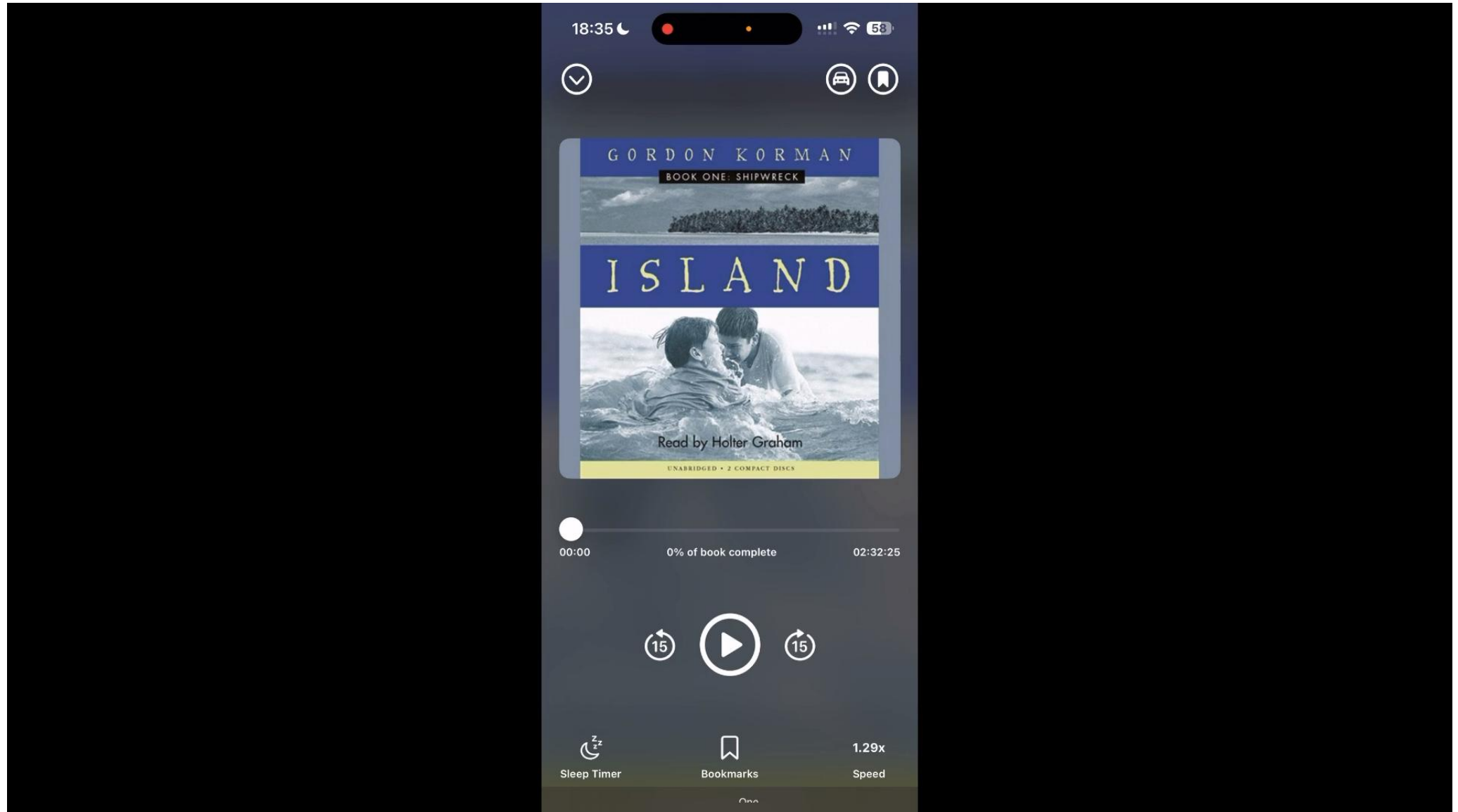
# Accessibility Challenges: Audiobooks

- Lack of support for skippable structures is key
- Example: A Gentleman in Moscow – relevant footnotes (not present)
- Example: LitRPG stat sheets in mainstream titles (present but not skippable)
- Some Audible books come with a PDF; sometimes the PDF adds essential context; usually there is no indication of this when searching
- PDF might contain images and they often have no text alternatives
- Users may not have the technical knowhow to read the PDF
- This content should also be present in the audio but skippable
- Skippable structures are supported in DAISY books and they can solve these problems
- Lack of text synchronization means searching for text is not possible
- Ability to determine spelling of words and names would be helpful
- In library apps, many audiobooks have no chapter titles—just track numbers


# Accessibility Challenges: Platforms

- Audiobook apps are often accessible but there are notable examples of platforms falling short
- When audiobooks use DRM and the platforms are not accessible, users have no way to switch to a platform that works

# Hoopla Demo – some challenges



# Overview of the Accessible Commercial Audiobooks Project

- The motivation for the project:
  - Lack of standards and best practices in commercial audiobook production (accessibility guidelines in ePUBs are much more evolved)
  - Significant difference between accessibility features offered in the DAISY format (used by libraries serving people with print disabilities) and commercial audiobook formats – how to move towards ‘born accessible’?
  - Industry players interested in collaborating
  - Lack of user engagement and feedback
- We acknowledge the financial support of Accessibility Standards Canada. 

# What We Aimed to Achieve

- **Understanding User Needs:**
  - Identify barriers and features needed for accessibility in commercial audiobooks
  - Create a platform and content for testing
  - Gather user feedback on these accessibility features and use of audiobooks in general
- **Understanding Current Industry Practices:**
  - Engage with publishers and producers to assess current processes and challenges in commercial audiobook production
- **Analyzing and Developing Recommendations:**
  - Develop recommendations based on the results of the consultations and user feedback to inform best practices on commercial audiobook production going forward

# Project process

- **Spring 2024-Winter 2025**
- Project advisory committee created across stakeholders. User consultations – gathering insights and needs.
- Industry engagement & landscape review.
- Audio feature and platform development, survey design. Doing the survey and focus groups.
- Data analysis, reporting, and dissemination.
- [Project page](#)

# Participant Demographics and Insights

## Participant Overview

- **Total Participants: 55**
- **Print Disabilities: ~50%**
- **Francophone Participants: ~25%**

## Digital Literacy and Audiobook Usage

- **Technology Comfort Level:** 91% comfortable or very comfortable
- **Non-leisure Reading :** 46% of respondents overall use audiobooks for educational or professional purposes.
  - **36%** of respondents without print disabilities use audiobooks for educational purposes.

# Audiobook testing and survey

Participants listened to audiobook samples with the following features:

1. Front and back matter
2. Narrated table of contents
3. Footnotes
4. Synthetic and human-narrated bibliography
5. Book cover image descriptions
6. Image descriptions within the text
7. Music and sound effects

They also answered questions about their experiences with audiobooks generally.

# Key Finding

Overall: no significant difference in needs/desires between those with print disabilities and those without

Data supports a 'born-accessible' approach – once fully accessible version to meet the needs of most

# Key Themes from User Testing

- Audiobooks and Well-Being : Positive impact on relaxation, stress reduction, and mental stimulation.
- Narration Quality: Importance of clear and engaging narration.
- Audio Quality: Issues with clarity and background noise.
- Navigation Challenges: Difficulty in locating passages and intuitive menu design.
- Availability Issues: Frustration with limited options and platform exclusivity.
- Device and App Usability: Poor user interfaces.
- Image description : Users without print disabilities report benefiting from image descriptions
- Music and Sound Effects: Preferences for minimal distractions.

# Ideal future audiobook experiences

## 1. Searching within audiobooks (87%)

- Allow listeners to search for specific keywords within an audiobook and jump to the relevant passage

## 2. Customizable background sounds or music (82%)

- The ability to enable or disable sound effects or music

## 3. Switching between audiobook and text (71%)

- Syncing between audio and text formats allowing readers to switch between reading text and listening.

## 4. Voice commands (69%)

- The ability to use voice to control playback, such as ‘go to chapter 5’

## 5. Customizable voices (64%)

- Modify narrator voice, adjusting tone, or even selecting different narrators

# Insights

- **Customizable Features:** Allow users to toggle accessibility features.
- **User-Centric Design:** Platforms must cater to varying tech literacy, preferences and disabilities.
- **Born Accessible Audiobooks :** There were few differences between the responses of participants with and without print disabilities, suggesting their needs are aligned and may be met by a 'born accessible' audiobook, rather than separate commercial and alternate format versions
- **Audiobook Usage :** Audiobooks are not just for leisure reading. They are used for professional and educational purposes

# Key shorter-term recommendations

- Complete content, including notes, image descriptions, front and back matter
- High quality narration
- Detailed and clearly labelled track lists and meaningfully-named audio files
- Where supplemental materials are needed, ensure they are fully accessible
- For libraries – develop robust and varied audiobook collections and consider accessibility in licensing digital resources

# Selected longer term recommendations

- Many recommendations will take time and coordination across the sector to implement
- Accessibility-focused audiobooks summit or working group to bring together actors across the industry
- Conduct further research and experimentation
- Develop metadata standards that better describe audiobooks and accessibility features
- Support ability to customize playback, including narration and skipping or including specific features ex. Image descriptions
- Explore how to integrate ebooks and audiobooks for synchronization

# Research Study Results

- [Accessible Commercial Audiobooks Research Project | CELA - https://celalibrary.ca/accessible-audio](https://celalibrary.ca/accessible-audio)
  - Full Report
  - Executive Summaries
    - Plain language
    - Detailed

# Using AI for Accessible Audiobook Creation

- AI voices are becoming more realistic and some may prefer to use them when a narrated version is not available
- Apps like ElevenLabs Reader let you import an ebook and change the reading voice, including creation of custom voices
- AI narration is still objectively inferior to human narration, particularly when expressing emotion or voicing dialog between multiple characters
- Works quite well for titles without dialog, such as textbooks and other non-fiction
- Some would rather read an ebook than read a non-engaging narration, and AI narration is often not engaging

# Sample AI Narrations

- A good demo of a fiction title “The Princess Bride”



- A bad demo of a famous line in the “Princess Bride”



# Other Uses for AI

- AI can describe images and transcribe text, but it often misses context or gets obvious details wrong. This should only be done with strict quality control.
- AI transcription is good and open-source; it could be used to aid with text/audio synchronization

# Audiobooks at CELA

- Digital Delivery Options including Direct to Player and zip download
  - Apps such as EasyReader
  - Devices such as DAISY players
- New Audiobook Delivery Options
  - Envoy Connect (introduced May 2023)
    - Envoy Connect reloading and delivery through Canada Post
  - Alexa Smart Speaker

# Smart Speaker Option

- Fully English and French option for accessing audiobooks in the CELA catalogue using voice commands
- Uses Alexa smart speaker (Echo Dot, app)
- Developed in conjunction with EDRLab and Valentin Haüy Library (AVH) in France
- Called Accessible Reading Canada
- [Accessible Reading Canada information page](#)

# Features of the Skill

- Search
- Bookshelf (user's personal bookshelf)
- Browse Recommended Books
- Ability to 'resume' to return to a book already started

# Demo of the Accessible Reading Canada



Extended Demo of various voice commands

- Resume reading a book, navigation
- Search for a title, listen to a summary
- Start reading a recommended book

# Questions ?

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