

A COMPARISON OF 'ACX' AND 'FINDAWAY' VOICES

With the rise of audiobook popularity, comes a familiar question: wide or exclusive? While Indie authors still struggle, even today, with the decision whether or not to publish their eBooks exclusively with Amazon's KDP Select or 'to go wide' by distributing them to additional retailers there is little discussion of such competing strategies when it comes to audiobooks. Considering audiobooks are now the most rapidly expanding sector of the publishing industry, perhaps it's time for a discussion as to whether to go 'wide' or 'exclusive' to begin in earnest.

Author, Mary Louise Locke shifted last year from publishing audiobooks to working exclusively with ACX, the audiobook production and distribution arm of Amazon. However, in order to 'go wide' with her distribution she took the option to use Findaway Voices, a division of the audiobook distributor, Findaway. Mary offered to share her reasons for making the move, in order to help other authors who are considering whether or not a similar strategy might hold promise for their own audiobooks.

ACX and Exclusivity:

As a pragmatist, Mary says she has always tried to determine which strategy would *maximize* the availability and visibility of her books, while *minimizing* the amount of time and money she spends on production and marketing. It also helps her *maintain* the greatest flexibility so she can respond to changes in the industry. For her eBooks, this sometimes meant going wide, or sometimes going exclusive. Currently her '*Victorian San Francisco Mystery*' series are 'wide', while the '*Paradisi Chronicles*' science fiction series is exclusively with KDP Select.

It was in 2012, using the above criteria, that Mary didn't hesitate to go exclusive with ACX for the distribution of the audiobook version of *Maids of Misfortune*, the first book in her Victorian mystery series. Exclusivity was the only way she could use ACX's royalty share option (splitting royalties 50/50 with a narrator so she didn't have to pay money upfront). That particular option was the best way for Mary to '*minimize*' the time and expense it would take to produce an audiobook while '*maximizing*' its availability and potential revenue. This was mainly due to ACX being distributed to Amazon, Audible and Apple Books; the dominant audiobook markets at that time.

Mary chose to continue signing exclusive contracts with ACX throughout 2017, even though she stopped using the royalty share option, as a non-exclusive contract would cut the royalties from 40% to 25%. She says she did this, as she had no reason to believe she would make up the loss of that revenue by selling her books elsewhere.

Non-exclusivity and Findaway Voices:

Having done this for some time, in the summer of 2019, after hearing representatives from Findaway Voices speak at a NINC conference about how they differed from ACX, Mary decided to publish the audiobook editions of her new science fiction trilogy with ACX, but under non-exclusive contracts. She did this in order to experiment with the distributing methods offered through Findaway Voices.

In spring of this year Mary chose to move all but one of her Victorian mystery books (which was still under a royalty share option) from an 'exclusive' to 'non-exclusive' status with ACX and published them with Findaway Voices.

Mary says she made this decision for the following reasons:

- Unlike ACX, Findaway Voices doesn't lock you into a contract for seven years. You can take a book out of distribution anytime or change which stores your books are to be distributed in. Mary says she also ran into real problems with ACX's contract when she needed to replace one of her audiobooks with a new narrator and a new edition. (Her first choice of a narrator for this book hadn't turned out well. Another benefit for authors of Findaway Voices is that they have a more curated process when matching authors and narrators than ACX has.)
- ACX had made several changes that were beginning to undercut her revenue, thus weakening the benefits of exclusivity.
- Unlike ACX, Findaway Voices doesn't require exclusivity in order to get a higher royalty rate. For instance, if you distribute to Apple Books through them, you get a 45% royalty rate (unlike the 40% rate you would get through an exclusive contract with ACX or the 25% you get with a non-exclusive ACX contract.)
- Another element, is that Audible no longer dominates the market for downloadable audiobooks. One recent survey found that listeners only used Audible 27% of the time, thus reflecting the success of retailers like Kobo, GooglePlay, and Playster in penetrating the market. Findaway Voices is also currently distributing to over thirty outlets and has done an excellent job in tapping into the new global opportunities: for example, see their partnership success with Storytel and AudiobooksNZ. So far, nine percent of Mary's sales through Findaway Voices have been outside the USA.
- Unlike ACX, Findaway Voices also has partnerships with several of the companies that distribute to libraries; such as Overdrive and Bilbliotheca. In fact, Mary reports that so far, sales to libraries have been 58% of her unit sales and 29% of the revenue from her Findaway Voices account. With traditional publishers actually making it more expensive for libraries to order digital books, it is believed that indie authors have a real opportunity to carve out a significant percentage of the growing audiobook library market,

if they aren't locked into an exclusive contract with ACX.

- Most importantly, Findaway Voices offers more tools for promotion than ACX, which ultimately is going to determine whether the sales outside of ACX are enough to compensate for the lower royalty rate under the non-exclusive contract with ACX or increase in your overall revenue. These promotional tools, particularly the potential in their partnership with Chirp (the new audiobook promotion website that is being set up by the folks from BookBub) is ultimately what prompted Mary to speed up her timetable in shifting her Victorian Mysteries non-exclusive ACX contracts and getting them uploaded to Findaway Voices (a process which, she says, only took about a month.) The decision did pay off as Mary has reported that she has been offered a chance to promote one of the books with Chirp.

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