The Straight Download | Episode 19

Elevating emerging authors

Publishing has never had more titles, formats, or noise, yet some of its most interesting work today comes from small and independent presses, the publishers willing to bet on debut authors, overlooked genres, and voices that don't fit neatly into a category. For libraries, those presses have moved from the edges of the collection to something close to essential. Amanda Ridout, founder and CEO of Boldwood Books, joins hosts Ann Ford and Jeff Jankowski to explain why she built a publishing company with libraries at the center from day one, and why she believes this could be a golden age for publisher-library partnerships.

Episode summary

Episode 19 of *The Straight Download* features hosts Ann Ford, Vice President of Library Partnerships at Hoopla, and Jeff Jankowski, Hoopla's founder and president, in conversation with Amanda Ridout, founder and CEO of Boldwood Books. Amanda launched Boldwood in 2019 as a global, multi-format fiction publisher after a long career in corporate publishing. In just seven years, Boldwood has earned Independent Publisher of the Year honors at the Independent Publishing Awards (2022 and 2025) and the British Book Awards (2025) and risen to seventh in UK publishing sales. It was recently acquired by RBmedia.

The conversation explores what a modern publisher-library partnership looks like from the publisher's side. Amanda explains how Boldwood's commitment to accessibility and sustainability shaped every early decision: publishing every format on a single global publication day, keeping audio rights in-house, printing on demand, and supporting every library lending model Hoopla offers. Along the way, she challenges long-held industry assumptions about which genres and authors will "work" in the U.S., how libraries decide what to stock, and how publishers should support the books they acquire.

At its core, the conversation asks: what happens when a publisher treats libraries as partners rather than a secondary market, and how can libraries and independent presses work together to help readers discover voices they would never otherwise find?

Key themes and insights

A golden age for publisher-library partnerships

Amanda described libraries as historically the “Cinderella” of the corporate publishing world, but said Boldwood put them front and center from the start. Because libraries offer every format, carry deep community trust, and employ skilled curators, she sees this as a potential golden age for partnerships, especially with smaller presses. Ann contrasted two conversations happening simultaneously in June: independent presses meeting with libraries to build better partnerships, while the Big Five were being pressed to defend their pricing and licensing practices.

> Key takeaway: Independent presses are actively seeking genuine, mutually respectful partnerships with libraries, a sharp contrast with how many larger publishers approach the library market.

Every format, one day, everywhere

Boldwood publishes more than 500 new titles a year, releasing eBook, audio, and every print format, including large print, on a single global publication day. Amanda chose to retain audio rights rather than license them out, and uses print on demand to avoid stock and warehousing. Her reasoning is simple: readers want a book when the buzz and marketing are happening, not 13 months later.

> Key takeaway: Simultaneous, multi-format release means libraries can meet patron demand on publication day instead of waiting for staggered formats.

Wide distribution disproves old assumptions

Amanda said the industry long believed certain types of fiction and authors “won’t work in America,” a view that Hoopla’s reach has proven wrong. The U.S. now represents more than 40% of Boldwood’s turnover, and genres that were dismissed found strong audiences once readers could access them directly through the library. Jeff noted that Hoopla’s on-demand model removes the gatekeeper and gives every title shelf space.

> Key takeaway: When readers get direct, unrestricted access, demand often looks very different from what traditional gatekeepers predicted.

Audiobooks add readers rather than replace them

With digital audiobook sales now outpacing eBook sales, Amanda argued that audio is additive, not a substitute for other formats. Once seen as a format for older listeners, audio is now drawing younger audiences, many through free library access and music streaming platforms, including people who might never otherwise pick up a book.

Key takeaway: Audio is expanding the overall reading audience, making it an important tool in conversations about literacy and access.

Open licensing reflects the publisher's real job

Asked why Boldwood offers fairer licensing to libraries, Amanda said a publisher's only job is to bring its authors to as many readers as possible, and that protectionism doesn't work. She believes no format or channel substitutes for another; each reaches a different reader. With most Boldwood authors writing two books a year in series, wide availability helps readers find the next title and keeps them coming back.

Key takeaway: Supporting every library lending model is good for readers and authors, and is good business for publishers.

Inclusivity is a cultural duty and commercial sense

Amanda said publishers have an obligation to reflect the whole community as part of a cultural industry, but noted that publishing a broad range of voices and genres for readers of every age and gender also makes commercial sense. The reading ecosystem is far broader than any single bestseller list suggests.

Key takeaway: A diverse catalog serves both a library's mission and a publisher's bottom line.

Discovery should move at the speed of readers

Amanda suggested some library selection practices haven't caught up with modern readers, who are comfortable relying on reader reviews, peer recommendations, and social media rather than only traditional trade reviews. What patrons don't want is a delay. Jeff pointed to patron-driven acquisition and on-demand access as ways to meet readers where they are, contrasting them with the scarcity created by the one copy/one user model and a "bestseller tax."

Key takeaway: Faster, more flexible selection and access models help libraries stay relevant to what patrons are hearing about right now.

Libraries should market themselves, and publishers can help

Amanda called libraries a risk-free space to experiment, where readers can try anything for free with expert help, yet said they rarely promote that value. She argued that publishers, with their larger marketing machines, should help. Boldwood runs a monthly Borrow Boldly campaign with Hoopla and encourages its authors to visit libraries. Jeff added that leaning into the long tail and diversity of content is what truly sets libraries apart from bookstores.

Key takeaway: Libraries and publishers share a responsibility to promote the library's breadth, and publishers benefit directly because so many authors are discovered there.

Rebuilding careers through wide distribution

Boldwood pays no advances but markets every title it publishes, rather than concentrating spend on a few big bets. Amanda described seeking out talented authors who were dropped by larger publishers after failing to earn out their advances, and rebuilding their careers; one Boldwood author has sold 5 million copies, and 10 other authors have sold more than a million. Her advice to authors: smaller independent presses can rebuild careers, and digital distribution lets readers, not gatekeepers, decide what succeeds.

Key takeaway: Wide, digital-first distribution is democratizing storytelling and giving mid-career and emerging authors a real path to an audience.

Final thought

Amanda's story shows that the publisher-library relationship no longer has to be a transaction; it can be a true partnership. Independent presses that bet on debut and mid-career authors, and on books without a big marketing machine behind them, may have the most to gain from that partnership. Libraries are where many of those books find their first real audience. When a librarian adds a title to a staff picks shelf, builds a display around it, or makes it easy for a patron to take a chance on an unfamiliar name, that is discovery in its truest form. For librarians, the choices made about what to bring into a collection and how to surface that content matter more than ever. For publishers, the message is equally clear: libraries want to be their partners.

What we're reading, watching & listening to

Amanda | Reading

Agnes Grey by Anne Brontë

Anne Brontë's novel about a young woman working as a governess for difficult families in Victorian England. Amanda picked it up after a visit to Haworth in West Yorkshire, where the Brontë sisters lived, and recommended looking beyond the best-known Brontë novels. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is next on her list.

Amanda | Listening

Chalk Dust and New Chapters by Gervase Phinn

A warm story of a Yorkshire primary school, its teachers, and its community in the 1950s, from a once-bestselling author Boldwood has brought back to readers. Amanda highlighted the audiobook, narrated by Phinn himself in a broad Yorkshire accent, as a classic Boldwood comeback story.

Jeff | Reading

James by Percival Everett

A reimagining of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* told from Jim's perspective. Jeff, about halfway through, called it beautifully written, satirical, and sad, with just the right amount of humor, and said he's looking forward to the upcoming film adaptation.

Ann | Listening

The Bookseller by Valerie Keogh

A mystery thriller from one of Boldwood's bestselling thriller authors, which, by coincidence, Ann had just finished before the episode. She listened while hiking and praised it as both a gripping mystery and a powerful story about redemption and starting over.