*SPARKS Episode 25*

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Hello and welcome to Sparks. I'm Deirdre Brennan. I am the Executive Director of RAILS, Reaching Across Illinois Library System. We started this podcast to spark conversation about issues in libraries. My guests today are Leila Heath and Anna Behm. Leila is the Manager of Library Programs and Resources here at RAILS and Anna is our E-content Specialist. Welcome Leila and Anna and thank you for joining us.

LEILA HEATH: Thank you.

ANNA BEHM: Yeah, thank you for having us.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: We are going to be talking today about e-books and trends in e-publishing and libraries, which is a huge topic today, has been for probably quite a while, and will certainly continue to be. I guess I will start by talking about one of my favorite projects, which is the Soon-To-Be-Famous Illinois Author award. That was a few years ago that RAILS got involved with. It was about raising the profile of self-publishing and authors and showing how libraries can create and build readership for books. Things have certainly progressed since then. One of our latest and most exciting projects in this area is called Inkie. I'm going to ask Leila and Anna to tell us about Inkie and how that helps libraries, how it helps readers, etc.

LEILA HEATH: Okay, well, we were really excited to launch inkie.org on October 1st. Inky.org is a suite of resources that helps authors with online creation and publishing tools. It also allows readers to access locally produced content. When we started inkie.org, we were really excited about bringing everything into one place. It is accessible to anyone in the state of Illinois and Anna can add a little bit about this.

ANNA BEHM: There are really three main audiences for inky.org. The first component of it is the piece for authors. There's a section of this website, if you were to sit down at your computer and go to www.inkie.org, it would come up with a page that will allow authors to upload anything that they've written via this software called Pressbooks. An author can take something that they've created, they can take a book, a collection of essays, novel, poetry, whatever, put it into Pressbooks and then publish it as an e-book. They can publish it in any format. It can be an e-pub, it can be a PDF for print ready if they wanted to print off, and they could even publish it in a MOBI file format, which is something that they could then take and put on the Kindle e-book store. So, that's really exciting. The sort of added value of inkie.org, the really, I think, exciting piece of it, is that they also have a way on that website to submit their book to a library collection. What they can do is they can take that e-book file that they've created and then submit it to be included in a collection called the Indie Illinois Collection, which is available via the Biblioboard Library. The Biblioboard Library is a collection of e-content that is available to everybody in the state of Illinois. They can go onto this website, Biblioboard, and download and read e-books. Everybody in Illinois can use it; you don't need a library card you don't need a login and all the books are available for simultaneous access. These authors that are writing these books and publishing them in Pressbooks can then make their e-books available to everyone in Illinois, so, that's super exciting. Others also have the opportunity to submit their book to the Indie author select collection via Biblioboard which is a collection of independently published books that is available nationwide. It’s sort of the “best of the best” of self-published books. Then, they can also submit their book via inkie.org to the Soon-to-be-famous Illinois author project, which Dee mentioned. So, that's really exciting and then there is also a component on inkie.org for libraries that helps libraries get inkie.org out to their users, authors, and patrons. It’s got ideas for marketing, promotion, and things like that. So, it really is sort of a comprehensive resource.

LEILA HEATH: We've had nearly a hundred accounts set up in inkie.org since it was launched in October, which is really exciting. I think there's been three that have been-

ANNA BEHM: -three that have been submitted to Indie Illinois, for inclusion in the Indie Illinois Collection but there've been over seventy books that have been created since our soft launch in September, at least.

DEIRDREN BRENNAN: So a hundred books, authors, or libraries?

ANNA BEHM: Authors.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That's wonderful. It really tells you that there is a lot of demand for this kind of access and support.

ANNA BEHM: Yes, when we announced it in October we just saw an explosion of people interested in it and signing up for it.

LEILA HEATH: We do have on our website, inkie.org, tools or videos for learning how to use Pressbooks. It's very user-friendly. You're basically taking a word file and just putting it into the software and you end up with a book with chapters. So, it's user-friendly. Classrooms can use it if they're doing a group project for their students. Of course, individual authors can do it. It is geared for e-books and it does have an interface, so you can include pictures or graphics but it is not designed to do that as well.

ANNA BEHM: Yeah, we get some really great questions. Just in the short time that that we've had inkie.org out there in the world, some really great questions but one of the ones that comes up all the time for me is, “Can I publish a children's book on inkie.org?” The short answer is technically, yes. It is not ideal for image-heavy books but I think we're sort of exploring our options with that right now.

LEILA HEATH: Yeah

ANNA BEHM: This is sort of our first step.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So that's something that you've learned from this, we need to figure out a way. If Inkie doesn't do it, I guess that that we need to provide that service.

ANNA BEHM: absolutely. I’ve been to one Indie Author Day event and between that and the questions that we get from the website and over email, that's probably the number one question I get is, “How do I publish a children's book?”

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: It's so interesting because historically, of course libraries were very leery of self-published books. Vanity presses, those kinds of attitudes, negative attitudes, and I must confess, I was I was probably guilty of that myself but as this explosion in self-publishing has indicated, there is just so much creativity out there. This is enabling libraries to connect with their communities in a whole new way and really support writing- not just reading but writing *and* reading.

LEILA HEATH: It's really exciting to unleash that creativity. I think that is something that libraries are always looking to do with their communities. A lot of times when you think of a book, you think of a fiction or a novel but people can do their family history. They can do a cookbook. There’s just so many ways to apply it and it is at no cost to any of the people who are in Illinois.

ANNA BEHM: I think there's just something really exceptionally special about being able to say, “Hey, I wrote a book.” Like thing number one, that's awesome. Then thing number two, “You can all go to the library and read it. You can get via your local library or via the Biblioboard library resource.” That's just so exciting for an author to be able to say that. You have this community connection and this way that the library is able to uplift these authors and these writers and really support that creation. That's one of my favorite things that I think is so exciting about inkie.org.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So why is it called Inkie? I know people out there are wondering that. ANNA BEHM: That's a great question!

LEILA HEATH: Anna came up with the name, so let's talk about that.

ANNA BEHM: We had this long email chain going where I think we were trying to come up with something that was catchy and whimsical and that would really just spark interest immediately. There were probably five or six of us on this email. We just started throwing words back and forth and one of the words that that came up was ink, some way to use the idea of ink. The idea was ink is what you use when you write, obviously with a pen but also its inking something and Inkie just came up. It sort of plays out this idea of e-books are published in ink so we flipped that and made it Ink – e.

LEILA HEATH: Then the octopus became the branding logo because of the fact that they are associated with ink, they’re intriguing…

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: They’re creative and smart.

ANNA BEHM: Yes, and they’re cute!

LEILA HEATH: And one of the really fun things is when you talk to people about that octopus and the idea of Inkie, the octopus just opens up the door to the discussion. People get excited about it. We have heard a lot of stuff, we have found that a lot of people are very interested in octopuses and we have also learned that there's a couple ways to say octopus in plural.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Is it octopuses or octopi?

ANNA BEHM: That’s what we discovered, it’s all three. Its either octopus, octopi, or octopodes or octipides, if you want to be completely correct with the Greek pronunciation.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: No surprise that we're all librarians.

LEILA HEATH: Right and so it opens the door and then we talk about what inkie.org actually does.

ANNA BEHM: Right, and I think the octopus logo also is sort of a great metaphor for Inkie in a way. An octopus has multiple arms. It can be doing many things and inkie.org kind of has these different facets; it's the authors piece, it’s the collections for readers piece, and the for libraries piece. So, it's got lots of arms as well, so it ended up being a perfect logo.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: What about school libraries, are they participating? I mean, it seems like we've been talking about public libraries but it would certainly lend itself to any type of library, right?

LEILA HEATH: Yes.

ANNA BEHM: Absolutely, the first conference that we went to after we had launched inkie.org was the AISLE Conference, the Association of Illinois School Library Educators. So, that was sort of the first place we went where we were really talking up inkie.org and handing out all the materials. We got such phenomenal response from so many of the Librarians that were there. There was also a contingent of English Teachers who were there as well and they were like, “I have a creative writing club and we produce a book at the end of the year and we can now publish that as an e-book. This is so exciting for my students.”

DERIDRE BRENNAN: That’s perfect.

ANNA BEHM: Yeah, when I'm showing off inkie.org to school librarians and see their eyes light up, like, “Oh, I know exactly where I can use this” and that's what I want as a librarian.

LEILA HEATH: It's simple and there's no cost to them either.

ANNA BEHM: Right, which they love.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Yes and we should also say a few words about Biblioboard, which is sort of the host platform, the host software of inkie.org. I mean, I know its Pressbooks but we've been a partner of Biblioboard for quite a while now because they provide a collection of e-content and it is available for simultaneous use. So, that's not to be overlooked either when we're talking about what's available out there for libraries and patrons.

LEILA HEATH: Absolutely and the Biblioboard Library is accessible via inkie.org as well. It is able to be scoped for the schools.

ANNA BEHM: Its connection to inkie.org is it's where these self-published books go to live when authors submit the self-publish books to their library. They live on the Biblioboard Library, which is this collection of e-content. The way that I describe it when I talk to Librarians is that it is a wealth of content that is available right now to everybody all the time. It is rabbit hole-like when you get into the Biblioboard Library website because you have this fantastic collection of independently published e-books, some of the “best of the best” independently published e-books in the country but you also have these other really phenomenal collections. You have a collection called Recovering the Classics, which is classic novels that are in the public domain that have been given new, modern covers by artists. So, that's a really fun collection to promote. You also have a collection of educational content: books about science, technology, arts, ect. that are available to school-aged library users. You also have one of my favorite collections in the Biblioboard library, Biblioboard Core, which is this collection of primary source materials. That's where it gets rabbit hole-like because they group everything together by subject on there. You start going through that and you run into historical documents that you never knew that you were interested in. My favorite one is this whole collection of historical wallpaper where you can just go and look at historical wallpaper and then read about the wallpaper. I never thought I would be able to spend forty-five minutes reading about wallpaper but it turns out I can!

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: They also have dissertations and documentary films and I know they're trying to build the collection of open educational resources and textbooks. So, it is very rabbit hole-like. I always I always say that it is extremely robust and very difficult to describe in less than five minutes because it is so robust.

ANNA BEHM: Robust is probably a better word, I should probably use that from now on.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Yes, well that is great. I did want to ask you a question. You mentioned Indie Author Day, I think. Can you just say a little bit more about what that is?

ANNA BEHM: Indie Author Day comes up, I believe, in October every year. Not every Library celebrates it on the actual date that has been set aside for it but it is an initiative that is really pushed by Biblioboard, this partner that we work with on inkie.org and the Biblioboard library. It is a way to celebrate the independently published authors in your community and the self-published authors in your community. Libraries will hold events where they bring independently published authors in, they’ll set them up with tables and have them give talks or let them sell their books or promote their books. I was at an event at the Sugar Grove Public Library last month for their Indie Author day that they held where they had a whole bunch of authors. I came and spoke about inkie.org and presented it to this group of authors who were a phenomenal audience. It was really fun to talk to them. They were so interested in inkie.org and so excited about it and they were really excited about the soon-to-be-famous Illinois author project. Just to see that that they were connecting to this resource and working with their library to really promote their craft is a really exciting thing.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Well, we told our listeners that we would talk about trends in e-publishing in general. So, we certainly need to do that and talk about how RAILS is trying to assist in this area, which is so important to libraries. So, you want to talk a little bit about what you guys have been up to in this arena?

LEILA HEATH: One of the trends, of course we've just kind of spend some time talking about, is just the increasing self-publishing and how that's kind of rocked the publishing world. It’s disrupted things. Anna’s got some statistics that are interesting.

ANNA BEHM: We found a Publishers Weekly article that said that the self-publishing has jumped about 40%. In 2018 it jumped 40% over where it was in 2017.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That's a huge statistic, amazing.

ANNA BEHM: It is; 1.68 million books were self-published in 2018 and that does not include Amazon. Amazon has estimated that they account for another 1.4 million self-published books and so that's about 3 million self-published titles in 2018, which is huge, like you said, and it is hugely disruptive. On top of that, Amazon not only being the largest self-publisher, it’s estimated that they account for about 71% of the e-book market, so, selling eBooks. Then, of that, about 40% of those e-books are self-published e-books. So, it's a huge change in the way that people are consuming books and e-books. I think, like Layla said, it's incredibly disruptive to the industry. We've seen sort of some blow back from that, I'd stay.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: And Amazon doesn't sell e-books to libraries, do they?

ANNA BEHM: They do not, no.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN Speaking of a big trend or just a fact that restricts access. Another way that readers are suffering or lacking access is some of the embargoes. I know McMillan has embargoed the sale of new e-books. Can you explain a little bit about that?

LEILA HEATH: So, what's happened in the library world with the e-book market and the audiobook markets are that there's been restrictive pricing that's been going on for a long time. That takes the form of things like a librarian can only buy, when we buy a copy of an e-book or any audiobook, we may only get twenty-six checkouts and then we no longer have rights to that book or it might be two years. This has been going on for a while. The other thing is we pay maybe ninety-five dollars, where a consumer directly buying it pays maybe twelve or fifty dollars for the same title. What really kind of tipped things this year is that McMillan decided to go forward with an in embargo for libraries on some of their titles and for e-books. So, libraries can only purchase one copy of a title for the first eight weeks. Then, we can purchase additional copies. So, needless to say, this is really choking our ability to provide things for our members that they want to have. It's also really created some inequity in people's access to information.

ANNA BEHM: Yeah and I think the sort of crux of it is that libraries are only allowed to lone one copy at a time – a digital copy, which makes no sense to anybody who lives in the digital world now. It's an e-book file; why should one person have access to it at a time when we have the technology to be able to loan it to more than one person at a time? So, this only allowing libraries to purchase one copy for the first eight weeks really is designed, I think, to be frustrating to a lot of users.

LEILA HEATH: I mean, when you think about that, you have a library that's maybe serving a population of 15,000 people. They have one copy of this title for eight weeks.

ANNA BEHM: Then you have users who prefer e-book formats for whatever reason or find it easier to read an e-book format. You can have people with print disabilities, for example, where they cannot read the print in a regular copy of a book and maybe they're library doesn't have access to the large print version or cannot get access to a large print version. With an e-book, you can adjust font sizes and so it is much more accessible to somebody with a print disability. The same goes for people who may be have trouble holding physical books; an e-book is a much better option for them. Restricting access to those is incredibly frustrating.

LEILA HEATH: Yes.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: I think, generally, despite some articles that have been recently published in the Washington Post which is owned by Amazon, I think that library users generally are law-abiding and don't try to game the system and libraries are certainly very careful in terms of how they loan things, how they monitor library cards, etc. So, it strikes me that publishers are doing themselves some economic harm by doing this because we, RAILS, buy multiple copies of e-books at a time and now we can’t. So, it's rather unusual reasoning.

LEILA HEATH: Yes and for libraries, connecting people to books, of course, that's always been a very important role for us. So, this inhibits our ability to do that when we cannot get them to the book. Also we are not be recognized for the fact that we do really actually encourage sales of books in many, many ways, not only just for the libraries themselves but we get readers interested in a certain author or a certain topic. They may read the book and then they want a copy for themselves because that book is so important to them. This is a role that we've always played and that just isn't being acknowledged and it's harmful. It’s harmful to libraries and it's harmful to the people that we serve.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: All we can do is keep on educating publishers and the public-at-large about this because it is an ecosystem, I think: publishers, libraries, readers, book stores, authors, etc., we all need each other. To that end, RAILS has an area on its website now, Library Pulse, where we're putting all of the latest information about trends and what's going on in the e-book ecosystem.

ANNA BEHM: Yes, if you go to the RAILS website, railslibraries.info, it is right there at the top. There is a big giant button that says…

LEILA HEATH: E- content issues

ANNA BEHM: Yeah, I think its e-content issues, I think you're right. Smash that button and you will find a wealth of resources. We’ve got a series of “Did you knows?” for explaining the issue to patrons: “Did you know your library is only allowed to purchase one copy of an e-book at a time?” “Did you know that library e-books are much more expensive than they are for the consumer?” etc. We also have a collection of news articles. We update that whenever a news article comes out. I added one today to the website. So it's a wealth of what's out there in the press and the media, what's available to the public about this issue. We also have a sort of, “what you can do as a library to help combat this.” We have, “what your patrons can do” and then places you can go to get more information, other resources. It’s a resource we wanted to really just encourage libraries to speak up and to inform people about what's going on and so we created this webpage.

LEILA HEATH: We also have some examples of what some libraries have done to help get the word out to their patrons and some examples of brochures things that you can put on your Twitter or Facebook feeds – things like that. We also have a networking group that meets quarterly at rails Burr Ridge and we have an email list. It's the E-content List, so that people can just share their ideas, things that they're doing day-to-day and hour-to-hour, things that are coming up, and ideas they have. So, that is available too to people that are interested in these e-content issues.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Just so our listeners can quickly run to their computers after listening to this podcast and find out all this information and keep abreast going forward, where should they go? Should they go to the library post page?

LEILA HEATH: They should go to the library pulse page for information about the content issues DEIRDRE BRENNANL Which is railslibraries.info.

LEILA HEATH: Yes, and that has links to all these networking groups, articles, and things that that Anna had mentioned.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: And as always, you can call Leila you can call Anna, email, etc. and that information is always available on our on our website, also.

LEILA HEATH: Yes and then to access Inkie, you can go to Inkie.org.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Great, well, thank you Anna and Leila for being with me today. I'm sure that this is going to be very helpful to all of our listeners.

LEILA HEATH: Thank you.

ANNA BEHM: Thank you.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Thank you very much for listening to Sparks today. Sparks is produced by the Reaching Across Illinois Library System. If you would like to learn more about the show or share your feedback on the topics discussed, please visit railslibraries.info/sparks.