



RESEARCH & EDUCATION

Canadian Leisure & Reading Study 2020



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CANADA**

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Data and methodology

The Canadian Leisure and Reading survey is fielded annually to track the number of people reading and their reading behaviours in the prior year. This is important from a cultural and business perspective, to enhance data-driven decisions around actions taken within the Canadian book industry, and to enhance understanding of how people spend their free time.

This survey was fielded in January 2021 to 1,253 Canadians over the age of 18. Where noted, we compare the 2020 results to the 2019 results which were gathered from the same survey fielded in January 2020 to 1,266 Canadian adults.

For both surveys, 1,000 respondents identified as 'readers': those who had read or listened to a book at least a few times a year in the past year.

- *Buying* refers to buying books from an online retailer (or retailing app for ebooks and audiobooks), a physical bookstore that primarily sells new books, a used bookstore or thrift store, a general retailer, or a subscription service.
- *Borrowing* refers to getting books for free from a public library, another person (gifting or lending), a free internet site, or a free illegal file-sharing site.

Survey methodology:

- Respondents were 18 years of age or older, located throughout Canada, and representative of the Canadian population based on age, gender, and geographical region.
- There is a margin of error of ± 3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, meaning that statistics for this group could fluctuate about 3% in either direction if this survey were fielded to the entire Canadian population.
- The online survey was limited to those with internet access who were able and wanted to participate in our panel in exchange for incentives.
- The survey focused on English-speaking Canadians.
- The data is unweighted to represent the behaviours and habits of individual Canadians.
- In 2021, 253 people were screened out for not having read or listened to a book in 2020.
- The incidence rate with 230 readers over quota was 67% and without over quota 80%. For a quota of 1,000 readers, there was a 94% participation rate.

The study was prepared by BookNet Canada staff.

Takeaways

Canadians' leisure activities

It should come as no surprise that Canadians spent more time in 2020 on leisure activities that were in, or close to, their homes. Time spent playing video games had the biggest lift, but browsing the internet and cooking also saw significant increases between 2019 and 2020. Activities that require traveling or spending time in enclosed public spaces saw decreases in time spent on them. It is interesting to note that while time spent on many stay-at-home activities saw increases year over year, time spent reading books and magazines did not. Roughly the same number of Canadians were reading at the same frequency in both 2019 and 2020.

Readers' activities

Generally, readers either said that they had enough leisure time or that it increased in 2020. For the most part, they have adequate finances to indulge in their preferred leisure activities. However, even though they have the means and the time, readers did not increase their reading frequency in any significant way in 2020. They chose to fill that extra time with one of the many other leisure or recreational activities that readers undertake. Perhaps this was due to issues around attention span or difficulty staying focused, as mentioned by a few readers. It could be related to difficulties in acquiring books because of retail and library closures during lockdowns. Finally, perhaps it was an issue of value. Price was still a big concern for those readers that buy books, especially for digital books.

Book discovery

Discovery can be serendipitous: readers found books through browsing in a variety of places (bookstores, retailers, libraries, social media, online, etc.) but also via direct recommendation from other people. Because of this, marketing opportunities that have multiple touch points across different forms of media are likely to be the most successful. Providing teasers of a book's content through giveaways and samples, bundling books, and adding first chapters from one book in the end matter of another book can work well for readers.

Acquisition by format

When we look at the primary ways of acquiring books, broken out by format, we found that borrowing was the most popular method of obtaining digital books, while buying was more popular for print books. Online acquisition increased across all formats. Subscription services for digital books also saw an increase.

Price and value

Overall, readers seemed to have the budget for books but price was still a big concern for buyers, especially for digital books. When there is so much cheap or free online content and many other competing leisure or recreational activities, the perceived value of books is very important. For many respondents, single books seem very expensive (\$11 to \$45 each) especially when compared with many all-you-can-consume subscription services for digital books or movies and TV content (\$5 to \$20 a month).

Format preferences and frequency

Most readers said they prefer reading print books. This matches up with their use when we look at the frequency of reading by format. Format preferences remained relatively unchanged from 2019. In 2020, readers over 45 preferred print books but they were also the most likely of all age groups to choose “no preferences.” Readers between 30 and 44 were more likely to prefer ebooks than any other age group, while audiobooks were preferred most among those 18 to 29.

Though print was the preference for most readers, there was a decline in overall print readers in 2020 when compared with 2019. There was a slight increase, however, in ebook readers. Reading and listening to books were mostly done on a daily and weekly basis.

Book habits and reading activities

Tablets and computers were the most popular devices used for ebook reading. The majority of ebook readers adjust the default settings to meet their access needs — readers commented that the font size was too small for them to read in print books. A quarter of ebook readers listen to ebooks using the text-to-speech feature or use a Braille device. When listening to audiobooks, readers mostly used a smartphone, tablet, or computer. Audiobook listeners would rather voice actors read the book than have the book’s author do it.

Subjects and authors

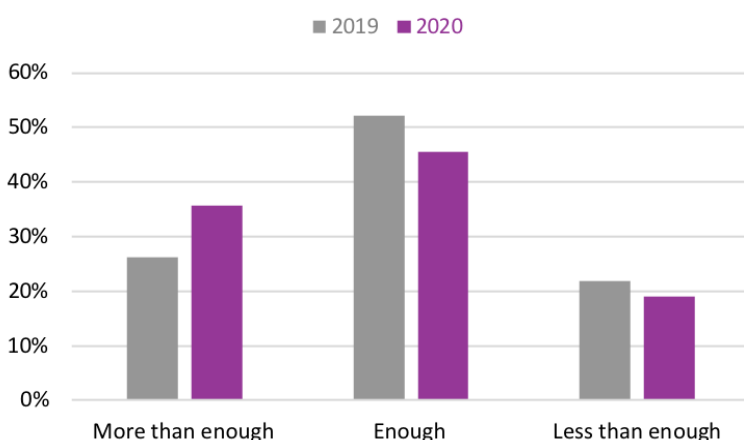
In 2020, readers read more broadly across all top-level subjects than they did in 2019. They read significantly more Non-Fiction in 2020, and there was also an increase in Young Adult (YA). Books that have been made into movies or TV shows were the most popular books read in 2020, followed by those by or about Canadians/local authors.

Canadians' leisure activities

Are people choosing to read a book or do something else with their leisure time? Roughly half of adult Canadians said that they read or listened to books on at least a weekly basis last year. Of those, most read for enjoyment or entertainment (63%) or to relax/for comfort (57%). When ranked against other weekly leisure activities, reading came in ninth on the list. So, reading is just one of many leisure or recreational activities that Canadians undertake. Let's look in detail at the amount of leisure time for Canadians, other leisure activities, and how reading fits in.

In 2020, eight in ten (81%) Canadians felt that they had enough or more than enough leisure time. This was up slightly from 78% the year before. However, if we look just at those respondents who said that they had more than enough leisure time, there is a more significant increase — 10% from 2019 to 2020. With stay-at-home orders in place across much of Canada at different times in 2020, people were commuting less and were out-and-about less overall, which may have resulted in more time to spend on leisure activities.

Perception of Canadians' leisure time



Notably, 40% of Canadians thought that their leisure time increased from 2019 to 2020, up 22% from the prior year. Slightly more Canadians thought their leisure time stayed the same at 43%, down 20% from 63% Canadians last year. Canadians who thought their leisure time decreased was at 15% in 2020, down slightly from 17% in 2019.

Let's look into how Canadians spend their free time in a typical week. Where does reading rank in relation to other recreational activities? When we rank weekly leisure activities by popularity, reading was in ninth place.

Leisure and recreational activities done by Canadians at least weekly in 2020:

1. Watching videos/TV/movies (92%)
2. Listening to music (87%)
3. Cooking (86%)
4. Browsing social media/web (84%)
5. Spending time with family (77%)
6. Exercising/working out (63%)
7. Shopping (63%)
8. Listening to radio shows (58%)
9. **Reading or listening to books (53%)**
10. Playing video games (40%)

The breakdown of leisure activities above are very similar in distribution to the results in 2019. The greatest change was in video games: 48% of Canadians played weekly in 2020 up from 40% in 2019. Canadians may have been drawn to the online social engagement that is included in the home-bound activity. ([The Entertainment Software Association of Canada](#) found that gaming frequency has also increased among Canadians who play video games.) While many stay-at-home activities saw increases year over year, book and magazine reading did not have any significant increase.

When we look at the activities that Canadians were doing daily, the numbers are fairly similar to those in 2019, aside from video game playing which increased 9% in 2020.

1. Watching videos/TV/movies (76%)
2. Browsing social media/web (74%)
3. Cooking (68%)
4. Listening to music (68%)
5. Spending time with family (51%)
6. Listening to radio shows (40%)
7. Exercising/working out (34%)
8. **Reading or listening to books (33%)**
9. Playing video games (22%)
10. Listening to podcasts (14%)

What about finances? Did money have an impact on the choice of leisure activity? In 2020, a quarter of Canadians had no restrictions in terms of how their finances affected their entertainment, leisure, or free time activities (up from 20% with no restrictions in 2019). Almost half of Canadians restricted themselves to leisure and

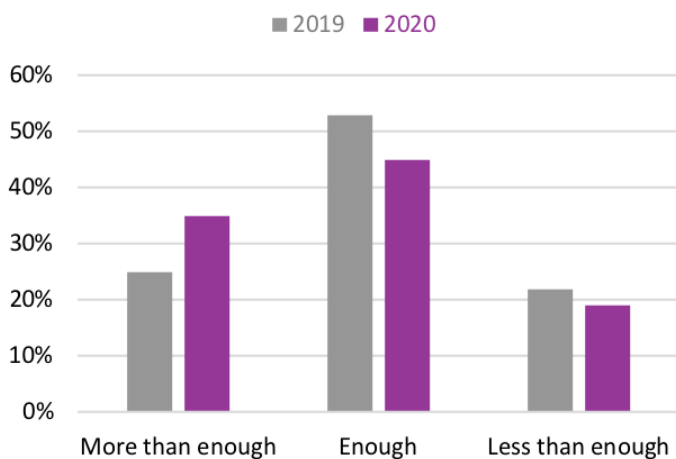
recreation activities within their budget (46%), down from 56% in 2019. We saw an increase of Canadians who were limited to free activities — 18% in 2020, up from 13% in 2019 — and 11% were limited to subsidized or discounted recreational activities (the same as in 2019).

Readers' activities

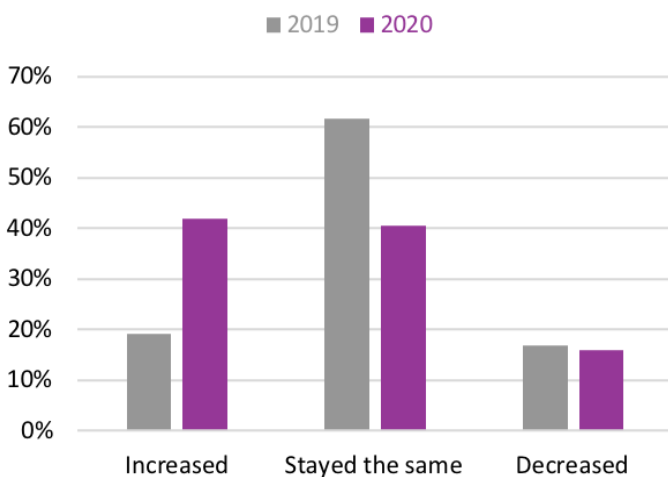
Shifting our focus to the roughly eight in ten Canadians who read a book in the prior year (a number that has stayed roughly the same across the last handful of years), let's look at how they see their leisure time.

A majority of readers (79%) thought that they had enough or more than enough leisure time in 2020, with 10% more readers saying they had more than enough leisure time compared to 2019. In the same vein, 42% of readers said that their leisure time had increased in 2020, a change from 19% in 2019. For the most part, readers seem to have adequate finances to indulge in the leisure activities that they want.

Perception of readers' leisure time



Changes in leisure time perception



For readers, reading or listening to books was the seventh most popular weekly activity before shopping and listening to radio shows.

Leisure and recreational activities done by readers at least weekly in 2020:

1. Watching videos/TV/movies (92%)
2. Cooking (90%)
3. Listening to music (89%)
4. Browsing social media/web (87%)
5. Spending time with family (72%)
6. Exercising/working out (70%)
- 7. Reading or listening to books (67%)**
8. Shopping (61%)
9. Listening to radio shows (58%)
10. Playing video games (51%)

The most popular weekly leisure activity for readers of all formats was watching TV. Watching TV weekly was at 90% for audiobook listeners, 91% for ebook readers, and 92% for print readers. Interestingly, the activities that audiobook listeners did at least weekly were mainly those that included an audio component: video/board games, podcasts, and radio shows. Audiobook listeners took part in more leisure activities, on average, than readers of the other formats. Perhaps this is because audiobook listeners are more able to listen to their books while doing other things.

Leisure and recreational activities done by readers daily in 2020:

1. Browsing social media/web (77%)
2. Watching videos/TV/movies (76%)

3. Cooking (72%)
4. Listening to music (71%)
5. Spending time with family (52%)
6. **Reading or listening to books (43%)**
7. Exercising/working out (63%)
8. Shopping (63%)
9. Listening to radio shows (58%)
10. Playing video games (40%)

In general, there are about 25 million social network users in Canada ([Statista](#)). In 2020, 40% of readers visited book-specific social networks (i.e., Shelfari, Goodreads, 49th Shelf, etc.). We found that 40% of readers visited one or more at least a few times a year in 2020, slightly less than the 43% who did so in 2019. In 2020, only 10% visited one once a month. When it comes to general social networks, in both 2019 and 2020, 66% of readers visited daily (a quarter checked it once a day with 41% visiting more than once a day). If you want to know more about Canadians and social networks, [Ryerson University's Social Media Lab](#) shared research on the specific sites that Canadians visit every day.

Canadians' online activities are not limited to social networking sites. In 2020 the number of virtual events increased during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Intrado Digital Media](#)). Moving events online has the potential to open up the number of attendees to a much more geographically distributed audience. These virtual events can also offer a more intimate experience, especially when interacting with book groups online ([Washington Post](#)). Virtual author events allow for various types of interaction using different online tools and media networks ([BookBub](#)).

About a quarter of Canadian readers attended an author or book-related event either online or in person (book launch or reading, award show, festival, presentation, etc.) at least a few times a year in 2020 (27%) and another 27% participated in a book club or reading group meeting either online or in person in 2020. There was no significant difference between online and in person events when looking at the frequency of attendance over 2020. In 2019 we didn't ask respondents to specify whether these activities were online or in person, but overall percentages were slightly lower: 24% of readers attended an author or book-related event at least a few times a year and 23% participated in a book club or reading group meeting at least a few times a year.

It doesn't appear that readers increased their reading frequency in any significant way in 2020. Perhaps this was due to issues around attention span or difficulty in staying focused — as mentioned by a few readers. Or possibly it was related to difficulties in acquiring books during retail and library closures. Finally, this may be an issue of price. Overall, readers seemed to have the budget for books, but price was still a big concern for those readers that buy books, especially for digital books.

"It's been a tough year to establish a reading pattern in these busy times and set time aside to relax and read."

"Reading books is an enjoyable pastime. However if you are on a limited budget, buying books isn't always an option. Due to COVID, borrowing isn't a preferred choice either."

"I love reading. I just get distracted by technology more and more so I don't read as much as I wish I did."

"[Publishers] provide a very much-needed service for entertainment and stimulation for the whole family."

Book discovery

An average of approximately 7,000 traditionally published new print books entered the Canadian market **every month** in 2020. Over the entire year, the total number of new books, including new editions, was 121,004, according to bibliographic data submitted to [BNC BiblioShare](#) (74% of those were print books). Yet, readers are not limited to choosing new or traditionally published books. They are also choosing from backlist titles, non-traditionally published, or self-published books. Readers have a lot of books to choose from. With so many choices, how do readers find books to read? How do they discover a specific book amidst the extremely large selection?

Discovery can be serendipitous: Readers found their books by browsing a variety of places (bookstore, retailers, library, social media, online, etc.) and also via direct recommendation from other people. When asked to select the top three ways they discovered books, 34% of readers chose word of mouth, 26% used the bookstore, 25% discovered books through the public library, 25% through online book retailers, and 22% on social media.

We also found, in a question about reading-related activities, that 37% of readers searched out other books by the same author they were currently reading.

The main ways readers discovered books in 2020 shifted more towards online discovery mechanisms when compared to 2019. Discovery by bookstore and public library each decreased 4 percentage points in 2020 from 2019, social media discovery increased by 4% and online media by 2%. There were also slight increases of 1% for online communities, print media, and digital book apps/websites.

"It is hard to know about newly published books without visiting the bookstore."

"I would like [the book industry] to know what interests me, so that they can give me advertisements for new books for me to read."

"it is very difficult to find books without the help of your staff."

"Book events should be advertised more."

"Bundle up some books to make it interesting. Talk more about it and maybe target people on social media."

"Merge more with other media to promote more about books."

"I love going into an actual bookstore and browsing. I hope COVID does not make this impossible."

Only 9% of readers chose literary awards or "Best of" lists as one of their top three discovery methods in 2020, a decrease of 5% from 2019. Though we did find that 62% of readers were aware of at least one of the following seven Canadian book awards:

- Governor General's Literary Awards (35%)
- Scotiabank Giller Prize (35%)
- Canada Reads (23%)
- Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction (8%)
- Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize (8%)
- Canadian Children's Book Centre's CCBC Book Awards (7%)
- Forest of Reading (6%)

Readers on what they want the book industry to know:

"Keep in mind not everyone cares to read the latest bestseller. I've read a few best sellers and wasn't that impressed."

"They focus too much on new releases and not enough on backlists."

"Awards and published reviews are nonsense. I want reviews written by people like me."

"Sometimes award-winning books aren't as good as lesser-known books."

In 2020, 40% of readers were aware of at least one of a specific list of Canadian events or campaigns. This is a significant increase from the 24% of readers who were aware of them in 2019, which may be because of increased marketing during lockdown or new approaches to programming. In 2020, the most familiar events were Canada Book Day (14%) and TD Canadian Children's Book Week (11%). In 2020, "I Read Canadian" was added as an answer option, and was familiar to 10% of readers, tied with Word on the Street. (A complete list of these events and campaigns is available in question 53 of [Appendix A](#).)

Once a specific book has been discovered, the greatest influence on a readers' choice to read it was the subject or topic (48%). Other popular influences were:

- the book's description (35%)
- the author (34%)
- recommendation(s) (28%)
- the main character or the series (19%)
- it's a bestseller (15%)
- it has content/information needed for reference (12%)
- it was made into a movie, film, or TV show (11%)
- sample, excerpt, or preview of the book (10%)
- front cover, interior images, or the inside of the book (10%)

It seems that proper and complete metadata can influence many reading decisions by providing the reader with samples, interior images, descriptions, covers, etc. A few readers commented about the importance and impact of book covers specifically.

“A front cover and back cover really help to sell a person on reading the book.”

“The cover of the book is very important! Unfortunately, some excellent books I’ve read don’t come with very attractive covers and people would just overlook them.”

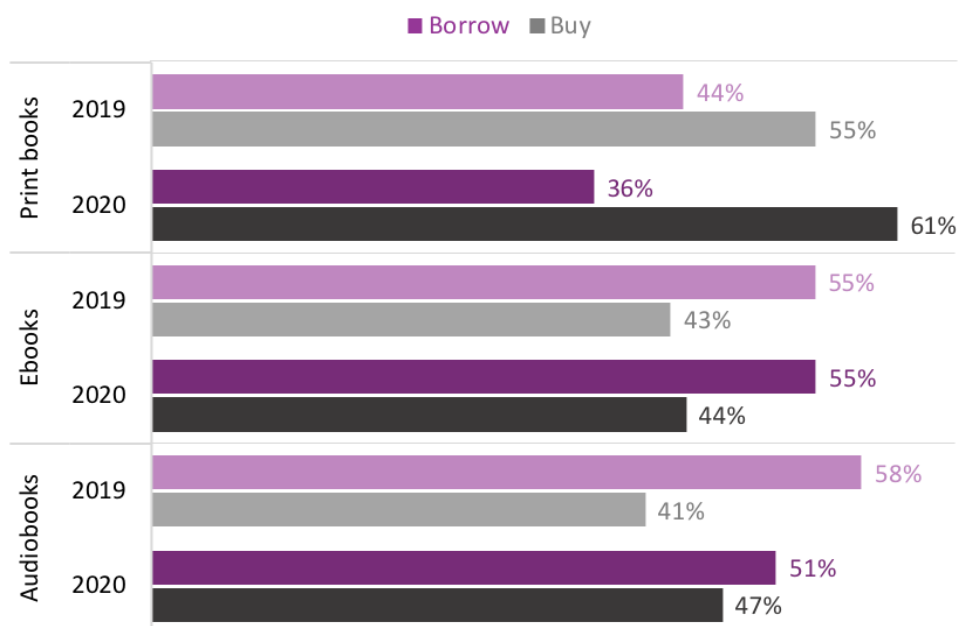
“I don’t like the pictures on the covers anymore — too many are ugly and garish and that turns me off from wanting to read the contents.”

“Providing bestseller awards [on] the cover of the book increases it’s chances of being read.”

Acquisition by format

Where do readers get print books, ebooks, and/or audiobooks? Are they choosing to buy or borrow them? When asked about their book purchasing and borrowing in 2020, 81% of readers said that they purchased a book (61% of print book readers, 44% of ebook readers, and 47% of audiobook listeners). In comparison, 55% of readers said that they had borrowed a book from a public library (36% of print book readers, 55% of ebook readers, and 51% of audiobook listeners). Focusing on the primary methods of buying and borrowing by format, we found that borrowing is the more popular method for obtaining digital books and buying is more popular for print books.

Comparison between borrowing and buying by format in 2019 and 2020



Print books

In 2020, 24% of print book readers got their print books from an online retailer, up from 19% in 2019. The public library was still in second place for print book acquisition at 22%, which was down 6% from 2019. Other places to get print books:

- physical bookstore (17%)
- other people (14%) (a new answer option in 2020)
- a used bookstore/thrift store (11%)
- a general retailer (10%) (a new answer option in 2020)

Additionally, respondents commented that they got their print books from their own personal library/bookshelf, giveaways, Facebook Marketplace, or Kijiji.

Ebooks

Ebook readers got their ebooks mainly from online retailers (27%), public libraries (25%), and free internet sites (19%). In 2020, 12% of ebook readers acquired their book from a subscription service, an increase from 8% in 2019. Interestingly, 25% of ebook readers shared their subscription log in(s) with others. Some ebook readers commented that they mainly got their books from school or their personal collection and, as one reader commented, reading what they have “had for years and never read”.

Most ebook readers used either a tablet (37%) or smartphone (25%) to read their ebook. Popular apps used to read ebooks were Amazon Kindle (33%), internet browser (25%), Google Books (21%), Kobo (19%), Apple Books (14%), and OverDrive/Libby (12%).

Audiobooks

For audiobook listeners, 24% acquired their audiobooks from an online retailer, an increase from the 20% in 2019. The 21% of audiobook listeners who mainly used free internet sites also increased from 18% in 2019. The public library was the next most popular way to acquire audiobooks at 19%. This is followed by the 13% who categorized their acquisition as from a subscription service, up from 11% in 2019. In 2020, 36% of audiobook listeners have shared their subscription log in(s) with others, 11% more than ebook readers.

Most audiobook listeners used a smartphone (38%), tablet (23%), or computer (20%) for listening to audiobooks. Popular apps used to listen to audiobooks were YouTube (31%), Audible (22%), internet browser (20%), Kindle (18%), Google Play (18%), and iTunes/Apple Books (12%), Kobo (11%), and OverDrive/Libby (10%).

While getting or pirating audiobooks for free from an illegal site was at 4% of listeners in 2019, it went down to 3% in 2020. Piracy rates is a big topic of debate in publishing, but as [BookNet Canada discovered in 2018](#): “if you provide readers with the content they want to read on the platform they want to read it on at a price they are willing to pay, piracy rates have been proven to decrease.” [This BNC Podcast episode](#) from 2018 explores the issue further.

Between 2020 and 2019, getting audiobooks from the public library dropped 11%, down from 30% in 2019 to 19% in 2020. This could be for a variety of reasons:

- physical/CD audiobooks being unavailable for checkout when libraries were in COVID-19 lockdown,
- wanting to own the audiobook(s) instead of borrowing,
- higher holds for digital audiobooks may have prevented more holds or loans,
- less time available for listening (less commuting or more caretaking), or
- needing a longer amount of time to listen to the audiobook than the library allows.

“Some people need longer than one or two weeks to read a book and renewing books is difficult for some people who don’t have transportation easily.”

Price and value

The average list prices of books in the Canadian market for 2020, according to our repository of bibliographic data, [BNC BiblioShare](#), were:

- Print books: \$24.39
 - \$22.17 for paperback
 - \$41.79 for hardcover
- Ebooks: \$16.52
- Audiobooks: \$27.52

When it came time to spend money, the bulk of readers seemed to have the budget for books: 34% of readers said that they chose books within their budget, but 30% had no restrictions when obtaining books. However, 15% of readers said they didn’t buy any books, 11% were limited to free books, and 9% were limited to discounted books. We also received comments from 9% of readers that the cost of books was prohibitive:

"I generally cannot afford to buy new books so I find them on book tables, thrift stores, or passed from family and friends."

"Books are priced too high for people on a fixed income."

"I love to read and cannot always afford to purchase new books so I use the library."

"I would buy more books if the prices were lower."

"Reduce the cost of books or people will stop buying them. Many free alternatives available now."

"Match US prices — I always feel gouged when purchasing a book that shows the lower US price."

About a quarter of readers spent more on books for themselves than they did for other people (27%) and another 27% spent about the same amount of money on books for themselves as they did for others, while 17% spent more on books for others (gifts, etc.) and 21% didn't spend any money on books for anyone. (The comments by readers above did not differentiate between buying books for themselves and buying for others.)

Readers thought they got good value for their digital books at the price they paid: 78% of ebook readers and 76% of audiobook listeners. Still, readers commented that the prices are too high.

"I would love for them to lower the prices on ebooks because they are still very expensive for an online product."

"Please lower the price on digital ebooks. The cost of new releases is sometimes quite high considering there is no physical material involved i.e. no paper, ink, etc."

"Why is buying an ebook as expensive as buying a printed book?"

"Ebook prices need to be dramatically lower than the physical books."

"Audiobooks shouldn't be so crazily priced. Reading print is particularly hard for me and I feel like the price of audiobooks are unfair."

"Books are generally too expensive and e-readers are great but the technology makes them harder to use with DRM restrictions and discourage their use."

Book spending by format

With book prices as they are, how much could readers who bought books have spent in 2020?

In our [Canadian Book Consumer survey](#), we surveyed the book buying habits of Canadian readers. On average, we found that book buyers bought a total average of 36.0 books in 2020: 21.6 print books, 10.8 ebooks, and 3.6 audiobooks.

While we did not ask about the number of books readers bought in this survey, we know that in 2020, 40% of readers read 1-5 books, 30% read 6-11 books, and 22% read 12-49. Only 8% of readers read or listened to 50 or more books last year. Taken as an average, readers read a total of 14.3 books in 2020: 8.6 print books, 4.3 ebooks, and 1.4 audiobooks.

According to [BNC BiblioShare](#), the average list prices of new books in the Canadian market for 2020 were:

- Print books: \$24.39
- Ebooks: \$16.52
- Audiobooks: \$27.52

Using an estimate of the number of books readers might have purchased, set against the average book prices by format, we found that readers might have spent between \$319 and \$804 on books in 2020, or about \$27-\$67 per month. The **minimum** range was for a total of 14.3 books: 8.6 print books, 4.3 ebooks, and 1.4 audiobooks in comparison to the **maximum** range of a total of 36.0 books: 21.6 print books, 10.8 ebooks, and 3.6 audiobooks.

Estimate of average book spending by format in 2020

| | Minimum books purchased | Minimum value | Maximum books purchased | Maximum value |
|--------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Print books | 8.6 | \$208.68 | 21.6 | \$526.82 |
| Ebooks | 4.3 | \$70.67 | 10.8 | \$178.42 |
| Audiobooks | 1.4 | \$39.24 | 3.6 | \$99.071 |
| Total | 14.3 | \$318.60 | 36.0 | \$804.31 |

With both estimated totals well into the hundreds of dollars, buying books at list price can be expensive. However, the above estimates don't provide a complete picture of book spending for Canadian readers. What has yet to be taken into account here are the books purchased at a discount or secondhand.

In our [Canadian Book Consumer survey](#) we asked buyers who bought a new book in March, June, September, or December 2020 (a total of 2,750 Canadians) whether they paid full price for their books in 2020. We found that 55% of buyers bought their books at full price, while 28% bought a discounted book. The rest used a coupon, bought the book as part of a subscription or multi-buy deal, or as part of an ebook and/or audiobook subscription. Notably, when asked for reasons why they bought where they did, 74% of buyers said they bought where they did because of the price.

How much money did buyers in this study say they spent on books, of any format, last year? Taking into account this includes secondhand books, discounted books, and buying for gifts/others, 30% say that they spent more than \$150 combined, 26% spent between \$50 and \$99, and 25% spent between \$1 and \$49. Only 3% spent over \$300, with another 4% spending \$400 or more.

Buyers' book spending in 2020, Canadian Book Consumer survey

| Range of money | Percentage of buyers |
|----------------|----------------------|
| \$0 | 2% |
| \$1-\$49 | 25% |
| \$50-\$99 | 26% |
| \$100-\$149 | 18% |
| \$150-\$199 | 8% |
| \$200-\$249 | 7% |
| \$250-\$299 | 5% |
| \$300-\$349 | 3% |
| \$350-\$399 | 2% |
| \$400+ | 4% |

Memberships and subscriptions

For avid readers on a budget, what about digital book apps that have memberships or subscriptions? In our Canadian Book Consumer survey, we found that 11% of book buyers used ebook and/or audiobook subscriptions to get their books. For popular paid ebook apps or subscriptions, 33% of ebook readers used Amazon Kindle and 19% used Kobo. For audiobook apps or subscriptions, 22% of listeners used Audible, 19% used Kindle, and 11% used Kobo.

Monthly prices for popular subscriptions are (as of April 2021):

- Audible (audiobooks only): \$14.95 CAD
- Amazon Kindle/Kindle Unlimited: \$9.99 CAD
- Kobo Plus: \$9.99 CAD
- Libro.fm: \$14.99 USD
- Audiobooks.com: \$14.95 USD
- Scribd: \$9.95 USD

On average, buying multiple books from a digital book subscription service costs about \$10-\$15 a month, much less than purchasing individual books at full price for an estimated \$27-\$67 a month.

Even with the affordability of book subscriptions, how does the cost and value of reading stack up to watching TV or movies? As you may remember, watching videos/TV/movies was the second most popular daily leisure activity for readers (behind browsing the internet). [Leger](#) found that 80% of Canadians subscribed to at least one streaming platform and on average subscribed to 2.5 platforms in 2020. [Netflix](#) shared that they had 200 million users worldwide in 2020, with [Statista](#) sharing that 14.6 million Canadian users are using the app or website at least once per month in 2019.

It seems safe to assume at least some readers are paying to stream TV or movies. [MoffettNathanson](#) found that slightly more than half of Netflix users personally paid for the subscription before April 2019 (55%) and that the rest are sharing passwords and accounts. And, as you may recall, we found that 24% of ebook readers and 36% of audiobook listeners share their subscription log in(s) with others.

Monthly fees, in Canadian currency, for popular streaming services are (as of April 2021):

- Netflix: \$9.99
- Crave: \$9.99
- Disney Plus: \$11.99
- Amazon Prime Video: \$7.99
- Apple TV+: \$5.99
- CBC Gem: \$4.99

With so much cheap or free content available online, we can see how expensive monthly book purchasing can get (\$10-\$67 a month) when compared with a streaming service subscription (about \$5-\$10 a month).

Format preferences and frequency

There are many reasons that readers choose one format over another, including ease of use or accessibility, availability, price, and portability. Each format has its pros and cons and many readers commented with their reasons why they want the same books in multiple formats. Some readers were worried that a focus on digital books would be at the detriment of print books and other readers were concerned about books not being available in digital formats. The following is a summary of readers' comments.

Print books:

- Available before digital books
- Screen-free
- More collectable

Digital books:

- Helps the environment
- More portable
- Easier to read
- Easier to hold
- Touch-free

"Have more formats available and in stock. Sometimes certain books I want are not available in Canada."

"Get books into digital format as quickly as possible."

"Not everyone wants ebooks. While they are certainly useful and preferable for some (or at least in certain situations), some people prefer (at least some of the time) to use a paperback or hardcover book."

"I switched from paper to ebooks because it is better for the environment and you can easily carry many books at once so there is unlimited options for reading depending on my mood."

"Please do not stop making traditional paper books."

"If you buy a hardcopy of a book you should receive an audio copy as well."

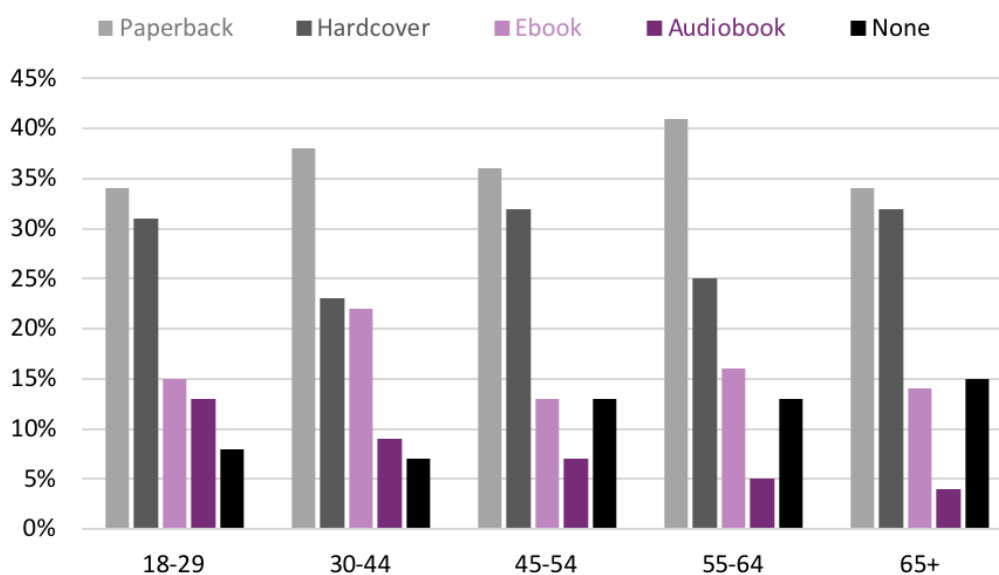
"We spend so much time looking at screens as it is, it's important to me to be able to read in print books, not ebooks."

"I prefer holding a book and reading it than reading off a screen. I like to collect books I enjoyed reading."

When we asked readers to select their preferred format, print books were preferred by 65% of readers. In 2020, 37% of readers preferred paperback and 28% preferred hardcover. Digital books were preferred by 24% of readers and 11% didn't have a format preference. These numbers were very similar to the format preferences in 2019.

In 2020, readers between 30 and 44 years (27% of readers) preferred ebooks more than any other age group, while audiobooks were preferred most among those 18 to 29 years (21% of readers). Readers over 45 years of age were less likely to prefer digital books but also selected 'no preferences' at a slightly higher rate than younger readers.

Format preference by age group



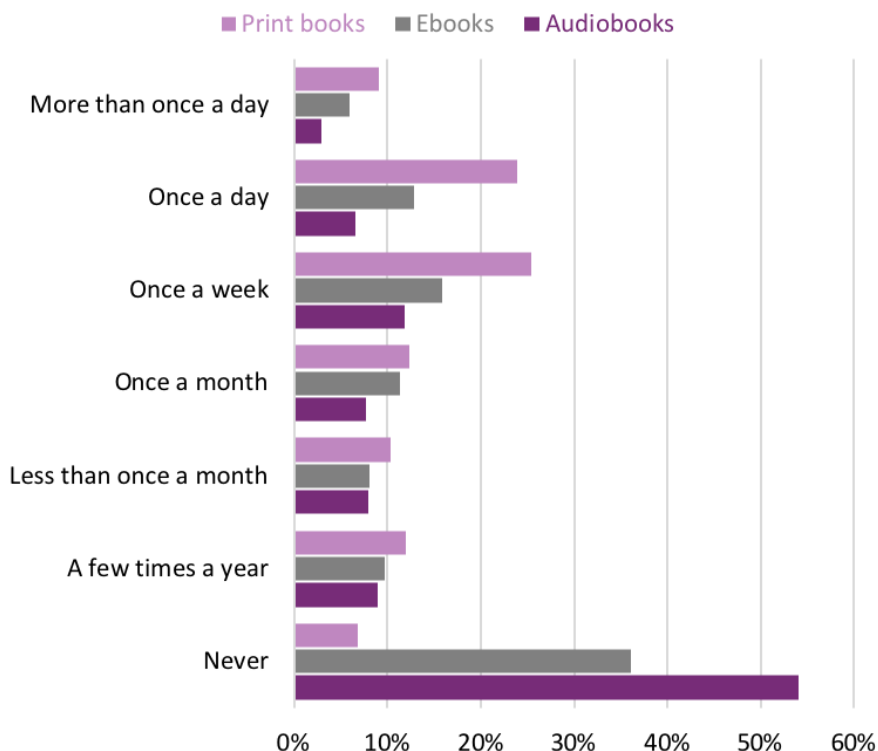
When we look at the formats that readers actually read, we found that readers either added ebooks to their reading lists or switched their print books for ebooks. In 2020, 42% of readers read all three formats, down slightly from 44% in 2019. Readers who only read print books in 2020 were at 30%, 3% lower than in 2019. Text-based readers (those who read both print books and ebooks) was at 19% in 2020, up from 16% in 2019.

Digital reading is less popular for readers. Those who only read ebooks increased slightly from 1% in 2019 to 2% in 2020. Audiobook listening is either flat or down between 2020 and 2019 depending on who is reading: 1% of readers in both years read only audiobooks; 3% of readers in 2020 read both print books and audiobooks, down from 4% in 2019; and 1% for both years read only digital books

(audiobooks and ebooks).

For frequency of reading, we found that 69% of print readers read books weekly, 72% of ebook readers read weekly, and 70% of audiobook listeners listened weekly. (And to contextualize those numbers, remember that 65% of all readers prefer print books, 16% prefer ebooks, and 8% prefer audiobooks.)

Reading frequency by format



There were some notable changes in the frequency of reading by format between 2020 and 2019. There were about 3% fewer print book readers in 2020 and generally they read with less frequency, with 2% more weekly print reading than last year. For ebook reading, there were about 3% more people reading ebooks year over year, and the frequency of weekly ebook reading went up from 61% in 2019 to 64% in 2020. There were slightly fewer audiobook listeners (from 49% in 2019 to 46% in 2020), but, for those who did listen, it appears that the frequency of their weekly listening went up from 9% in 2019 to 12% in 2020.

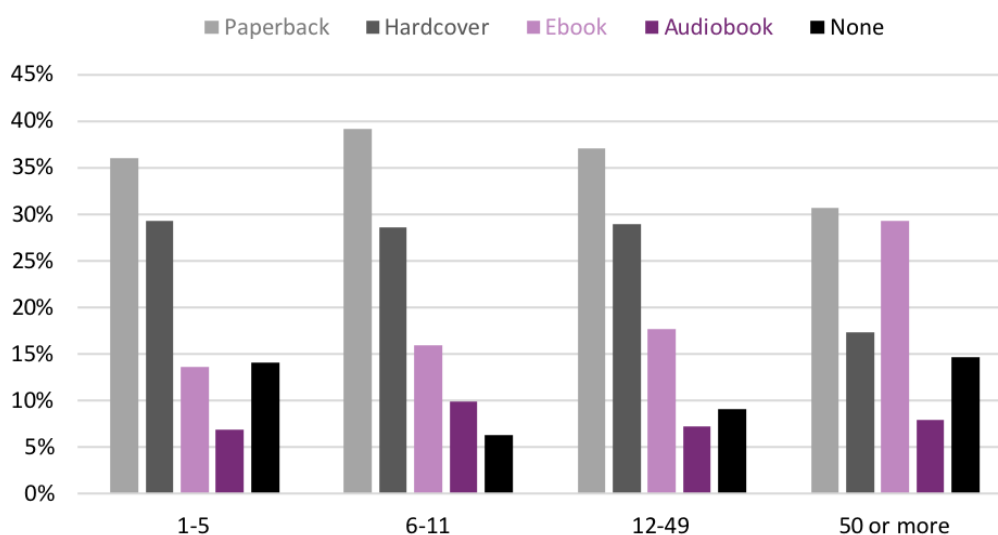
What about the number of books read? In 2020, 40% of readers read 1-5 books, 30% read 6-11 books, and 22% read 12-49. Only 8% of readers read or listened to 50 or more books last year. Those prolific readers were mainly aged 65 or over, with 16% of that age group reading 50 or more books in 2020, while for the

percentage all other age groups ranged from 5% to 7%. It should come as no surprise that looking at the trendlines, we found that readers over 65 read the highest number of books.

For the 8% of all readers who read 50 or more books in 2020, 15% of them didn't have a format preference. The 40% of readers who read 1-5 books came in close second, with 14% of those readers also having no format preference.

A preference for print books was highest among those who read 49 or fewer books, while those who read 50 or more books had a higher preference for digital books.

Number of books read in 2020 by format preference



Book habits and reading activities

How are readers engaging with books? Respondents were asked what reading related activities they did while, or shortly after, reading (regardless of format):

- searched for other books by the same author (37%)
- shared the experience, book, or photo of the book with others (19%)
- went online to read about the author or follow them on social media (17%)
- added the book to a list of books they were currently reading or finished reading (15%)
- made notes or highlighted text (13%)
- read parts of the book aloud (10%)
- took an action as a direct result of the book (9%)
- considered the book part of a reading challenge (8%)

- bought a copy of the book they had borrowed (8%)
- bought or borrowed the book in another format (7%)

In terms of reading accessibility, 5% of readers said they had a disability related to reading or listening to books, and a handful of people commented about how their access needs weren't being met, mostly in regards to the font size of print books. Asking specifically about features in digital books brought up similar concerns.

"They should make [the] print slightly larger [in] adult books."

"Some books especially paperback[s] could have a larger size print for the older generation."

"Print in larger fonts, not everyone has 20 year old eyesight. Stop with the 10 and 12 size fonts."

"When I read, print letters get jumbled in my head and I get stuck due to dyslexia. Reading print is particularly hard for me and I feel like the price of audiobooks are unfair. I want more books turned into audiobooks!"

"Bigger font makes reading more enjoyable"

"I would buy more paperbacks if they were in mass-market size. I find trade and hardback sizes very hard to hold, but more and more often that is the size that they are being published in, so I'll wait until my choices are available as ebooks even if it is a long wait."

Digital books

For those who read or listened to digital books, we asked them specific questions about use: what devices and apps did they use? What features did they use while reading or listening?

Ebooks

Ebook readers mainly used their tablet to read ebooks (37%), a quarter used their smartphone (25%), 19% used a computer, and 18% primarily used an e-reader. Since 2019, slightly more readers used a smartphone and slightly less used an e-reader. More than half of ebook readers used the reading mode on a tablet or smartphone (58%).

The majority of ebook readers adjust the default settings to meet their access needs. Two thirds of ebook readers adjusted the font size or spacing to increase the text size or to space out letters and/or lines (67%). Another 64% turned on night display when reading in dim/dark lighting and 62% adjusted the screen magnification to be larger. More than half of ebook readers changed the colour(s) of the text or background for a brighter contrast (56%) and 51% changed the text orientation from portrait to landscape.

Two thirds of ebook readers used both the search function (66%) and the bookmark button (63%); 43% linked between the text, the table of contents, endnotes, index, or footnotes.

“Footnotes in ebooks should show up at the bottom of the same page, not at the end of the chapter. It’s too hard to find the footnote otherwise.”

About a quarter of ebook readers turned on the screen reader to use the text-to-speech feature or a Braille device (26%). The potential for digital books to meet accessibility needs is something that these readers are undoubtedly taking into consideration when choosing the formats they read and are advantage of. As one reader commented:

“[Publishers] must make an accessible version of all of their books for blind people. Whether it be audiobooks or Braille.”

Audiobooks

Audiobook listeners primarily used YouTube (31%) to listen to audiobooks, maintaining its status as the most popular app in both 2020 and 2019. After that, 22% used Audible, 20% used an internet browser, 18% used Kindle, and 18% used Google Play. As for devices used to listen to audiobooks, 28% of listeners primarily used a smartphone, 23% used a tablet, and 20% a computer. Only 6% used a dedicated e-reader to listen to audiobooks.

About eight in ten audiobook listeners are doing other things while listening to audiobooks (82%). Almost three quarters of audiobook listeners wish there was the option of choosing their preferred narrator or choosing between multiple versions of the same audiobook (70%). When searching for audiobooks to listen to, 51% of

listeners search for specific narrators. About two thirds of audiobook listeners both prefer listening to a voice actor read or narrate the book rather than the author (68%) and prefer audiobooks with sound effects and/or music (67%).

“Having the ability to choose from different narrators would be great.”

Once the audiobook is playing, about half of audiobook listeners followed along with the book’s text (52%) or listened at an increased speed (46%); 42% of listeners set a timer to stop listening after a certain amount of time and another 42% specifically looked for abridged versions of audiobooks.

Subjects and authors

What and who are readers reading and listening to? Readers indicated which top-level subjects they read in 2020: adult Fiction, adult Non-Fiction, young adult, or children’s books. (Note: Audiobook listeners of Fiction are excluded from this analysis due to a programming error.)

As mentioned previously, the number of readers were similar from 2019 to 2020, they were not reading weekly as frequently, but they were reading slightly more on a daily basis. For those readers, we discovered that they were reading more broadly, across all top-level subjects but especially in adult Non-Fiction. In 2020, 13% more readers were reading Non-Fiction (from 55% in 2019 to 67% in 2020) and there was an 8% increase for readers reading Young Adult (YA) books, for a total of 17%. Readership of Fiction books and children’s books each slightly increased by 2% in 2020, to 75% and 11%, respectively.

When we categorized subjects by format and compared 2019 with 2020, we found that percentages of readers who had read children’s and YA books almost doubled across formats, despite few changes to the number of respondents who were living with young children between 2019 and 2020.

Readers reading subjects by format

| | Print books | | Ebooks | | Audiobooks | |
|-------------------|-------------|------|--------|------|------------|------|
| | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 |
| Adult Fiction | 69% | 74% | 64% | 68% | 62% | 63% |
| Adult Non-Fiction | 50% | 61% | 50% | 60% | 50% | 64% |
| Young Adult books | 7% | 14% | 7% | 12% | 8% | 11% |
| Children's books | 7% | 9% | 6% | 8% | 6% | 10% |

We asked readers to select up to three subjects they read in print book, ebook, or audiobook formats. In 2020, 42% each of Non-Fiction print book and ebook readers, 49% of Fiction ebook readers and 50% of Fiction print readers selected the maximum of three subjects. Text-based readers (of print books and ebooks) read across more Fiction and Non-Fiction subjects in 2020 than in 2019. Across Fiction and Non-Fiction subjects for print and ebook readers, 22-30% of text-based readers selected one or two subjects.

In comparison, 46% of Non-Fiction audiobook listeners selected one subject, 23% selected two subjects, and 31% selected the maximum of three subjects. As mentioned, audiobook listeners were not able to select Fiction subjects in 2020.

When we got more granular in our questions and asked which adult sub-genres had they read, we found that popular Fiction subjects for text-based readers include Mysteries or Thrillers, Science Fiction, Historical Fiction, Fantasy, and Literary Fiction.

Fiction subjects read by print and ebook readers

| | Print books | | Ebooks | |
|------------------------|-------------|------|--------|------|
| | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 |
| Chick Lit | 8% | 6% | 9% | 8% |
| Fantasy | 27% | 31% | 28% | 27% |
| Historical Fiction | 32% | 32% | 31% | 28% |
| Literary Fiction | 28% | 26% | 27% | 23% |
| Mysteries or Thrillers | 61% | 56% | 57% | 57% |
| Romance | 28% | 25% | 27% | 27% |
| Science Fiction | 31% | 33% | 28% | 34% |
| Short Stories | 17% | 15% | 19% | 17% |

Popular Non-Fiction subjects across all formats include Biographies or Memoirs, History, True Crime, Self-Help, and Health or Fitness. In comparison from 2019 to 2020, Personal Finance, Self-Help, and Health or Fitness reading have decreased.

Non-Fiction subjects read by format

| | Print books | | Ebooks | | Audiobooks | |
|------------------------|-------------|------|--------|------|------------|------|
| | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 |
| Biographies or Memoirs | 42% | 41% | 35% | 35% | 35% | 27% |
| Business | 19% | 16% | 20% | 19% | 21% | 14% |
| Cookbooks | 24% | 27% | 25% | 21% | 21% | 13% |
| Health or Fitness | 26% | 22% | 29% | 24% | 25% | 22% |
| History | 40% | 38% | 35% | 35% | 38% | 32% |
| Personal Finance | 20% | 15% | 25% | 18% | 22% | 20% |
| Self-Help | 26% | 21% | 28% | 27% | 31% | 26% |
| True Crime | 28% | 24% | 25% | 26% | 27% | 28% |

Find out more about 2020's [bestselling books](#) and [popular subjects](#) on the BookNet Blog or in [The Canadian Book Market 2020](#) publication.

We also asked about the types of books and preferences. Books that have been made into movies or TV shows were the most popular type of books read in 2020 (36%), followed by books by or about Canadians/local authors (27%). Of the approximately four million records in [BNC BiblioShare](#), approximately 4%, or 164,410, records had a [Canadian contributor](#).

Finally, other types of books popular with Canadian readers were comics or graphic novels (21%), books in a language other than English (16%), and poetry, books in verse, or plays (10%). Canadians also read books by or about:

- people with immigrant status (10%);
- Black, Indigenous, or people of colour (10%);
- people who belong to religious minorities (8%);
- queer and/or non-binary people (8%); and
- disabled people (6%).

About a quarter of readers responded that they had not read any of the types of books listed above in 2020 (27%). Only 7% of readers were unsure whether they had or not.

"There needs to be more diversity and representation."

"We need more books by Canadians about Canadian history, accomplishments, fiction, biographies, etc."

"Diversity is important."

"We need more books by BIPOC and disabled authors."

"Support local authors. There are many writers that have yet to be published."

"Encourage young and new authors more."

"Continue to support Canadian authors, especially young writers. The quality and diversity of outstanding writers that we have today [is] remarkable. CanLit has come a long way in fifty years."

"We need more books about disabled people, written by disabled people, that aren't inspiration porn ... that live full lives and that go on adventures just like abled characters. Most of the LGBTQAI+ representation is just gay men, and there's hardly any wholesome lesbian stories or asexual stories."

About BookNet Canada

BookNet Canada is a non-profit organization that develops technology, standards, and education to serve the Canadian book industry. Founded in 2002 to address systemic challenges in the industry, BookNet Canada supports publishing companies, booksellers, wholesalers, distributors, sales agents, and libraries across the country.

BookNet Canada acknowledges that its staff, board, and partners work upon the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, Anishnawbe, Haudenosaunee, Wendat, and Huron Indigenous Peoples, the original nations of this land. We endorse the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and support an ongoing shift from gatekeeping to spacemaking in the book industry.

The book industry has long been an industry of gatekeeping. Anyone who works at any stage of the book supply chain carries a responsibility to serve readers by publishing, promoting, and supplying works that represent the wide extent of human experiences and identities, in all its complicated intersectionality. We, at BookNet Canada, are committed to working with our partners in the industry as we move towards a framework that supports "spacemaking," which ensures that

marginalized creators and professionals all have the opportunity to contribute, work, and lead.

BookNet Canada's services and research help companies promote and sell books, streamline workflows, and analyze and adapt to a rapidly changing market. BookNet Canada sets technology standards and educates organizations about how to apply them, performs market research, and tracks 85% of all Canadian English-language print trade book sales through BNC SalesData.

BookNet Canada has extensive research available on our [website](#), both free and for purchase.

- [Canadian Book Consumer Study 2020](#): This free study shares the results from our quarterly survey on why and how Canadians acquired books in 2020 — from awareness and discoverability to the reasons why Canadians decide to read, buy, or borrow specific books. It also compares Canadian book buyers and library book borrowers
- [The Canadian Book Market 2020](#) is a comprehensive guide to the Canadian market with in-depth category data. It's an indispensable tool for publishers, booksellers, librarians, authors, and anyone interested or involved in the Canadian book industry.
- [The State of Publishing in Canada 2019](#): This free study provides a comprehensive overview of the Canadian English-language publishing landscape. It surveys Canadian publishers for a snapshot of the industry as of 2019 and pulls in results from other BookNet Canada research — including our *Impact of COVID-19 on Reading* survey — to provide a fuller picture of the entire publishing landscape.

We also feature our research on the [BookNet Canada Podcast](#). To stay updated on current and future research, including our forthcoming study on what readers think about diversity in the Canadian book market, subscribe to our monthly [BNC Research newsletter](#). To stay up-to-date on all BookNet Canada news and information, subscribe to our [weekly eNews](#).

If you have any questions or comments about this or other studies, please contact the research team at research@booknetcanada.ca.

Industry-led and partially funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, BookNet Canada has become, as *The Globe and Mail* puts it, “the book industry's supply-chain nerve centre.”

Learn more at booknetcanada.ca.