

# Books at the Speed of Sound

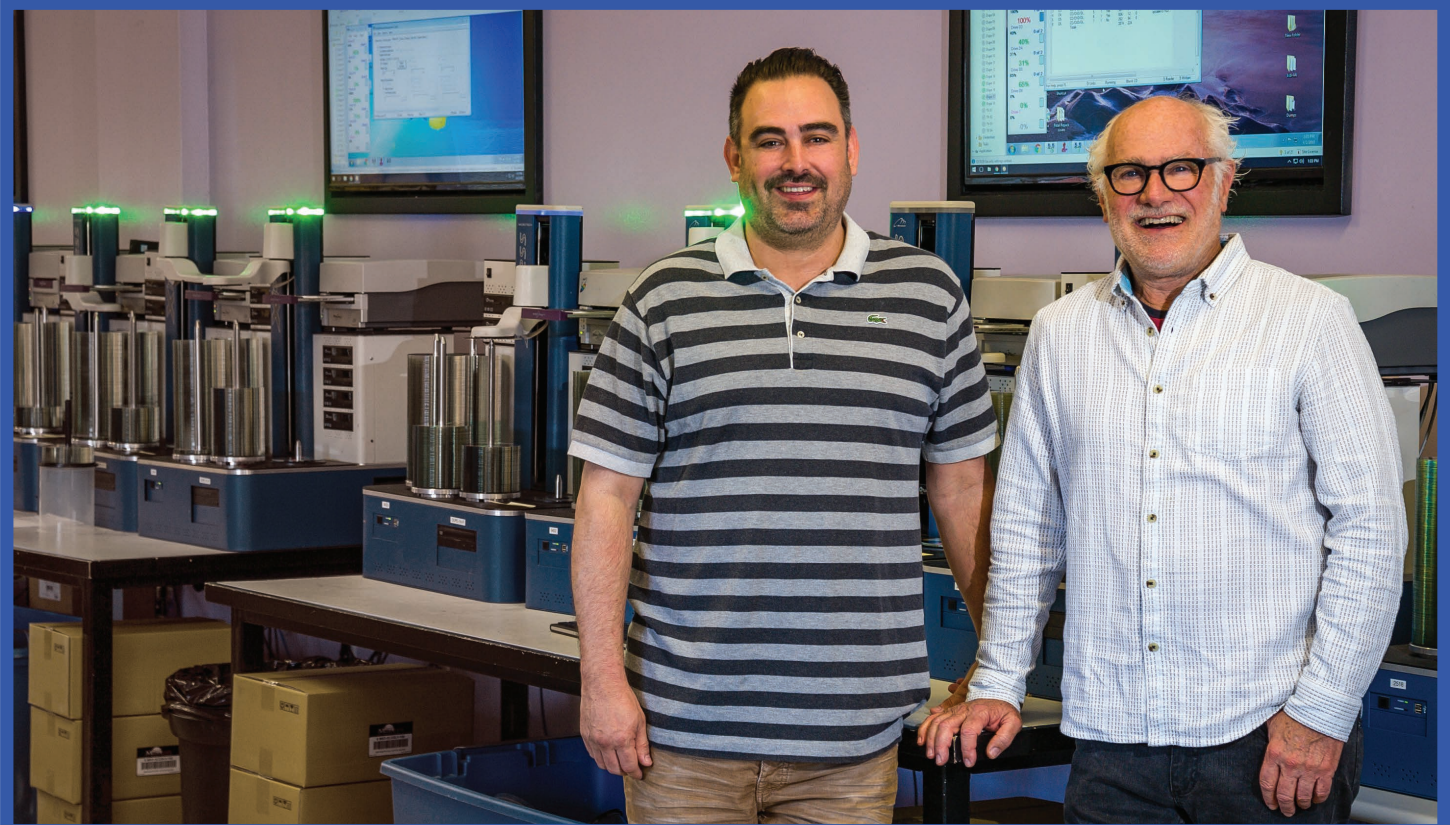


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Founder of Blackstone Audiobooks, Inc. Craig Black grew his audiobook startup into a full-fledged publishing company by moving from Los Angeles to Ashland, Oregon in the late 1980s.

When his wife Michelle agreed on selling their Southern California home to relocate to Southern Oregon, they were surprised to discover how many great opportunities awaited them. With their cheerful, family-like company culture as a foundation to maintain staff loyalty, they attracted affordable, highly educated local actors from Ashland's annual Shakespeare festival to serve as audiobook narrators.

Today the company is run by CEO Josh Stanton, and after 30 years, Blackstone Publishing has grown from one building into a complex of three buildings and a staff of 210, plus their own bookstore. They sell their in-house produced audiobooks, printed books and e-books internationally through direct orders and via Amazon and Audible. The company is now exploring opportunities to open additional branches abroad soon.

They're also developing a new format of digital hybrid books, e-books timestamped with the corresponding audio so that audiences can both hear the text and read along with it. All these endeavors are part of their mission to bring "quality, entertaining stories to as many people as possible in the most creative and innovative ways imaginable," Craig says.

Josh Stanton, CEO  
Craig Black, Founder and Chairman of the Board  
Blackstone Publishing and Audio, Inc.  
[www.blackstonepublishing.com](http://www.blackstonepublishing.com)  
31 Mistletoe Road  
Ashland, Oregon 97520  
(800) 621-0182

*"Southern Oregon is a unique market with a lot of very educated people looking for work. We have a lot of smart people in this company, and it's thanks to the availability of these people here."*

— Craig Black,  
Founder of Blackstone  
Publishing and Audio, Inc.

# Books at the Speed of Sound

Craig and Michelle Black's journey into entrepreneurship began while they were still living around Los Angeles back in the 1980s. Like many a frustrated commuter, Craig was tired of spending 90 minutes in traffic twice a day, so he started bringing books with him to read in the car while traffic was at a standstill. As it was difficult to both read and drive simultaneously, he was infinitely grateful when a friend bought him one of the first audiobooks ever recorded on a cassette tape: George Orwell's "1984." Immediately, Craig thought as he happily listened to the book while driving, "Why isn't everybody doing this?"

He saw the incredible potential of the new audiobook market, which didn't include many fiction books at the time. It was a rapidly growing field, and he was excited to use his MBA degree from Pepperdine University to jump into this new part of the publishing world. Within three years, he and his wife launched their own audiobook-publishing company in a place without the dreaded daily commute that was also brimming with business opportunities: Southern Oregon.

Ashland has a strong reputation of attracting great talent for the annual Shakespeare festival, and this group of people became the perfect pool of narrators for their audiobooks. Craig explains that Ashland has "really a unique market in that there's just a lot of very educated people looking for work, so we need a lot of those people for all of the proofing we do, like the proof editors and the copywriting. We just have a lot of smart people in this company. ... There's even some retirees. One man named Rick was very successful at the vice-president level for Sony BMG, and he retired, came here and found out about us."

Beyond that, they were happy settling down in Ashland because it's such a comfortable place to live. Craig was happy to report that "this is an attractive area for people, and we don't have any problem getting our partners. We work with all the big five publishing companies in New York, but it's not hard to get them to come out and visit us because everybody likes it here."

They started out 30 years ago in one building with six employees. Blackstone was originally an audiobook-publishing business that dealt in cassettes because that was the popular format of that time.

Today the company is run by CEO Josh Stanton, and after 30 years they have grown into a staff of 210 who work in a complex of three buildings, plus their Downpour online bookstore! They produce their own audiobooks in-house and sell many audiobooks through Amazon and Audible online. Additionally, they publish printed books and e-books as well. They've saved a lot on production costs by doing as much of the work in-house as they possibly can. They even create all of their own graphic designs and artwork.

"We're thrilled to be working with bestselling authors like P. C. Cast and Kristin Cast, Shelley Shepard Gray, Cory Doctorow and more to publish print books, e-books and audiobooks, furthering our commitment to bringing quality, entertaining stories to as many people as possible in the most creative and innovative ways imaginable," Craig says. "We treat our authors as though they're our own children. ... We sell their books everywhere possible, and we listen to them too. If they don't like something about the book, the way we did, we listen to them and change it," Craig adds.

Their production numbers continue to grow too. In 1988 when they first opened, they produced 30 books. Today, they produce 1,200 books annually. Plus, they're researching their prospects to open another publishing branch in either the United Kingdom or Australia soon.



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Blackstone will produce 1200 audio titles in 2018

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