

On navigating the publishing industry



Literary agent Heather Carr discusses the ins and outs of publishing , focusing on the work you want to do, and the value of networking even if you think it's gross.

March 11, 2022 -

As told to Loré Yessuff, 2725 words.

Tags: [Editing](#), [Writing](#), [Publishing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Business](#).

The literary world is full of various roles and duties. How did you decide to pursue the agent path?

I really like the editorial process, but I wanted the freedom to work on only the work that I wanted to work on. And I feel like being an agent, you have the most control and flexibility over who you decide to work with. There's no one telling me I have to work with a politician I don't like or a writer whose work I don't believe in or don't think needs space on the shelf, or whatever. I have the ability to curate that.

I'm also really passionate about there being more transparency as far as how the financial parts of publishing work. I get to talk to authors directly about that as an agent, about what their financial life as a writer could look like. And, I also get to help them, from a business perspective, make those financial decisions for their career and manage that. I get to be a matchmaker, and that's probably my favorite part. You get to find a book that you know an editor will fall in love with. Being able to do that over the course of a writer's whole career was really appealing to me. You just do everything. You don't have to be specialized, which is nice.

What aspects do you dislike about your work?

I hate rejecting people. I hate that I can't respond to all the queries that I get. I just don't have time. But that sucks because everybody probably wrote their query letter and sent it to seven friends. And then to not get a response...I hate that part of it.

Whenever you're editing a manuscript, whether you just received it or you're on the second, third, or fourth round of edits, what are some things that you keep in mind?

That, I think, changes so much depending on the book. I'm trying to make sure what the author wants the book to convey is being read that way by the reader. So a lot of my work is saying, "I'm feeling this in these sections, is that what you wanted?" And if they say no, then we have to figure out how to achieve what they're hoping will come across on the page. If you're so close to your book, then it is hard to know how someone else will read it, if someone else will get everything that the writer is trying to weave in.

And what do you think is the difference between how you're approaching editing versus how a book editor is approaching editing?

Editing is such a mysterious thing. You're never really taught how to do it. And I feel like many editors I speak

to feel the same way. You learn from your boss, you read their editorial letters or whatever, but much of editing and learning how to edit is being a really engaged and thorough reader. Some editors are brilliant with plot or have ideas for scenes or can help you develop a character or whatever. But, I think it's just kind of your style and the skills you've developed in order to tease out the best parts of a book. I see it as being a midwife for a book. I try not to project onto someone's work, but instead to unearth what's already there.

You mentioned being an engaged reader and I'm wondering how you learned to approach your reading practice with a critical mindset as opposed to just passively consuming? What advice would you give on how to be a good reader?

This may be counterintuitive, but I try not to filter my reactions and that's something I've learned from my boss, Molly Friedrich. If you look at one of the manuscripts she's read, it has all of her feelings and all of her questions and all of her thoughts that came up while she was reading. I think that is the best way to become a critical reader; don't doubt your response to a text. We're taught that there's a right way to read or engage with something, but when you let go of that, you're so much more engaged with what you're reading.

Maybe this is why I'm not a full-time editor because I'm sure there are more structural skills you learn, like beats that have to be in a plot or whatever. But since I don't have to be the final person to look at it, I feel a little freer to just start a conversation with the author about what I'm experiencing while reading the book, and if that's working. It's about noting the places where your attention drops or where you're confused or where something isn't believable, noticing all of those feelings that you're having while you're reading, and trusting that your reaction is valid.

That's a very moving way to think about that—to trust your feelings while you're reading something. I think that is really valuable because whenever someone reads a book that is very critically acclaimed or widely disapproved, they might feel this pressure to read it the way that other people are reading it or perform a sort of intellectualism. All people in the literary world probably feel this pressure to be a certain sort of bookish, intellectual person and to have read all the most "important" books, to have the sharpest thing to say all the time. How do you tackle these pressures?

Yeah, it's so distracting. I don't want to be shady, but I'm not trying to be like a Twitter agent. And I feel this pressure that if I'm not doing that, then I'm not successful or I'm not engaging correctly with my audience. But that's not how I know how to be a reader. I think it is a distraction and I think I get burned out the more I try to be something that I'm not.

With that in mind, what are some values of yours that guide and motivate the work that you do?

I feel like there's a responsibility as someone who is this... I mean, I think the word gatekeeper is used a lot in publishing, but it's true. It's hard to gain access to traditional commercial publishing, and I take that really seriously and try not to be limited to what I've read before. I try to evaluate my response to the work that's coming in and what I'm drawn to on a more regular basis. Because it's important to me that I'm not just doing the same kind of work that's always been done in publishing.

A big value that leads my work is transparency, as far as salary transparency, transparency with younger people in the industry about what it looks like to be an agent, how that can work financially for each person. I was always told that you had to be rich to be in publishing, which wasn't true for me. And I think a lot of people get pushed out early. There's a lot of conversation about re-imagining publishing. And I'm curious to see what happens and if we do re-imagine publishing, because I do think a lot needs to change, but I haven't seen a really compelling new model yet. I want to continue to make that part of my goals and values in the industry.

Can you explain how the pay structure of being an agent works?

It's different at every agency, which is not helpful. But typically, as an assistant, you're getting a salary to work for your boss or your bosses, depending on how your agency is. Eventually, you start taking on clients of your own. Oftentimes that role is called an associate agent. Sometimes you get a portion of your commission on top of your salary and sometimes you don't.

And then, eventually, you either take that leap to become a full agent and get what's called a draw, which is very similar to a book advance. So, let's say you get \$30,000 a year, then you have to make that back in the commissions that you earn that year via the payments that come in. This is very convoluted, but you get a signing payment for your author. Your share is often 50% or 60% of the 15% commission, with the other 40 or 50% going to the agency where you work, and your share going towards earning out your draw. It can take a long time to get to \$30,000 of commission since you're doing it on the payments that come in.

In some places, like where I work, I also have a salary for the other work I do for the agency. I am the contracts director and I manage aspects of our payment system, so I get a small salary for that, and then I have a partial draw. Once you make your draw, you get any commission that comes in after that. But if you go from having a salary to having a draw that's often way less than the salary you were making, you're taking a pay cut and hoping that you can make that money in that year and go and earn in the same salary you were making the year before. Yeah, so it's really risky.

Some agencies are full salary, but then you don't get any commission. As far as how I navigate it, it's hard because you need to make money, but I don't want to take on books because I think they will sell, that devalues the work and it's not why I'm in this business. But then I also hate that it's like, "Well, you're only in books for the love of the work," because we all need to make money and that's really exclusionary as well. It's not ideal.

Gosh, that's very convoluted.

It's so hard to explain the draw.

You spent some time at The Columbia Publishing Course. How did you decide to pursue that and what was your experience like?

I always feel a little controversial talking about it because I appreciate the value it provided me in my career, but I have issues with it. It feels very pay-to-play, as far as getting a job in publishing. I heard about it in college, was able to get a grant to pay for it. There's no way I could have afforded it. When I went, I think it was \$6,000 for six weeks or something, which is insane. It's so much, it's \$1000 a week. I got their \$1,000 scholarship and then I had to get a grant outside of that to pay for the rest because I couldn't afford it.

I didn't know anyone in New York, so I decided to move here, do the program. I had enough money from winning a writing award in college to pay my first month of rent after the course. So I gave myself a month to find a job. It was very stressful, but I did get a job through the course. The director sent an email saying there was a job opening and I'm sure that's why I got the interview. I appreciate the course. It exposed me to what an agent was. I don't think I knew that job existed before going. And, I met a lot of people who are still my colleagues in the industry, which is great. I think a lot of people in my year feel this weird, mixed feeling about the course because it's the epitome of exclusionary. Now there are other publishing courses like, Julia Kardon is an agent who started a free summer course. There are other ones that are coming up, which is great and I think that's a great way where you can learn about the whole industry.

Before the course, I didn't know anything about publishing. So, I learned about subsidiary rights, sales, publicity, marketing, and what those roles entail. I learned what an agent does. I learned all the basics about the industry, which was super helpful. We had speakers from all across the industry come in and give lectures. And then the rest of it was just networking. You don't need those skills to have a job in publishing, but it's helpful to have a lay of the land ahead of time.

Those are really crucial things to learn. I understand why you feel frustrated about the fact that that information is not widely accessible. I mean the only reason why you could do it is that you got a grant.

It's just it's so expensive. It's insane.

What advice do you have for aspiring agents or people who want to work in the literary world, but don't want to be a writer?

I wish I had really easy advice. There's no obvious way. The popular advice is like, "Take an internship!" That's not always realistic or helpful. It doesn't feel like there's really good obvious advice. With any job in publishing, it's more possible to move around than I thought it was. If you're in sales and you actually want to be in editorial, don't be afraid to talk to your boss if you have a good one and make those switches happen. For people just starting out: make friends with your colleagues at your level, because those are the people who you'll be coming up with, who will support you, and who you'll hopefully change things with, ideally. People are more willing to connect than you would expect. I'm always happy to do an informational interview if someone reaches out to me. It's kind of a business of connections, which is gross, but still true. It just is.

And I think there is hope for publishing to be a business of connections that feels more fruitful and less transactional. There's nothing wrong with wanting resources from someone, that's how people learn and grow, but I think it's important to be clear about your intentions. And obviously, colleague-ship can grow into friendship. A friend of mine told me that once. And, I really like that perspective shift. It leads to less shitty feelings.

Right. It's very much about sharing information with other people. Especially in this industry where the info is nowhere to be found. I mean, I know that people are putting together resources now. But some things are so counterintuitive. How are you supposed to find it out if you don't ask someone?

What advice do you have for writers about their writing, submitting a query letter, the publishing world in general?

I don't think this is my advice, I don't know who I heard it from, but it doesn't ever pay to write the book that you think is going to sell because you have to work on it for a long time. Make sure you're writing what you want to write. It sounds very simple, but I feel like many writers go astray. As much as we think, if we pay this much money for it, it'll be successful, there's just no way to know. If you're writing a book for reasons that you feel really strongly about and are really compelled by, then the work will be the reward.

It's all unpredictable. It's hard to go into publishing with any kind of expectations. Maybe that's very jaded. There should be some expectations, but there's so much that's not in your control aside from the work. I feel that it's best to, as much as you can, bring the focus back to what compels you and not worry about what anyone else is doing. Don't compare yourself. All that stuff gets really distracting. And as far as querying, if you're respectful and polite, you're already head and shoulders above a lot of what's in my inbox. Call me by the right name and be nice and you'll be great.

Heather Carr Recommends:

Take email off your phone, for work and your personal life

Haribo Twin Snakes

[Deb Perelman \(aka Smitten Kitchen\)'s Chicken and Leek Soup](#)

[Kota the Friend](#)

Use all your PTO, if you have it because your job won't love you back

[Name](#)

Heather Carr

[Vocation](#)

literary agent

□

