Transcript – Podcast: Sandstone Press – A career in publishing and advice for writers
Host: Katie Masheter
Speakers: Ceris Jones and Nicola Torch

Katie:
Hello, this podcast is brought to you by the University of Highlands and Islands careers and employability centre. My name is Katie Masheter, and in this episode we're talking about publishing and advice for emerging writers. I'm delighted to be joined by Ceris Jones and Nicola Torch from Sandstone Press. Sandstone Press is a publisher of fiction and non-fiction books, based in the Highlands of Scotland. So Ceris, lets start with you, can you tell us a little bit more about Sandstone Press and your role within the team.

Ceris:
So Sandstone Press is an independent publisher, based in Inverness, with an international outlook. We aim to publish thoughtful, intelligent and emotionally engaging narratives and we cover both fiction and nonfiction for adults. These are usually from unique voices, with unique stories to tell, whether that is things that have happened in their lives, or novels. My job is to let people know that our novels exist, because nobody's going to buy a book if they hadn't heard of it. Whether that's engaging with the media, or doing more social media marketing, and wider marketing, that's essentially what my job entails.

Katie:
Thank you Ceris, and Nicola, over to you.

Nicola:
Hi. So my role at Sandstone Press is quite all encompassing really. Which was something I really gravitated towards as a recent graduate, I hadn't really figured out what department or area to really specialise in yet. I work kind of within all our departments so marketing, publicity, sales, editorial and admin and kind of within that I work a lot with submissions, logging leads and doing the kind of first read through, which is really fun. I also do a lot of kind of data uploading. Overall, the role is very broad. And it's been great to build a really diverse skill set, I'd say.

Katie:
Sounds like an interesting role to get a good picture of all the areas of the business and how Sandstone Press operates. So for our students and graduates that are looking to go into the marketplace at some point, some of those might be emerging writers, some might be wanting to go down the publishing route, some might not really know what they want to do yet. It's always really interesting to hear how people have got to where they are today. So Nicola, maybe we can start with you, you're in a role that has lots of different touchpoints and you are building up a knowledge of the sector, so how did you get to where you are today?

Nicola:
So I did my undergraduate degree in English literature, and I hadn't really considered publishing as a career, up until that point. I always thought kind of law would be the career route I would go down. It was only in my final year of my undergrad that we had a few career talks, where people would come in and speak to us about their jobs, and I remember going to one in publishing. I went very naively into it, not really expecting what was going to be spoken about, but by the end of the kind of 30/40 minutes, I was taken and started to really consider publishing as a career. And from that point it was the time of time where you apply for master's programmes if that's what you want to do. I

applied for a few publishing masters courses, and then went on to do that at the University of Stirling and managed to get a few kind of work experience placements throughout my time there. Then this role at Sandstone came up, just as I was graduating, so it was really great timing to be honest.

Katie:
Wow it really sounds like that 30/40 min career talk had quite an impact on you and helped you reassess what you might like to do. It's interesting, so often we don't realise the breadth of opportunities available within particular areas, I guess publishing being one of those. There are so many layers to the team behind the scenes. So thank you.

So Ceris, over to you, you've obviously got a marketing head and are in a publishing field. Has your career always been steered in that direction or have you done different things to what you are doing now?

Ceris:
And so I did my undergraduate degree in marketing, so I kind of always thought, well from the age where I was leaving school, I always thought that I would be going into marketing, but I hadn't really thought about publishing. Everybody from my hometown basically goes into the oil industry. But I think around second year, I decided that really wasn't what I wanted to do. So I joined the Society of young publishers which is active, particularly in Edinburgh, and it's got branches in London and Oxford as well. It's got some great resources for people who are starting to think about joining the industry. So then when I got to, I think, fourth year, I started looking at masters courses, similar to what Nicola said. I had a chat with my supervisor and she suggested that I take a year out to work before doing that. She said that I'd get more out of a master's degree, if I had done some work first. So I left uni, I did an internship with HarperCollins, which I got through the Society of Young Publishers which was great. That really helped reinforce that this was what I wanted to do, and helped me realise that I wanted to stay in marketing, if I went into publishing. And then I ended up working in the motor trade for six months, which was not what I expected to do, because I can't drive and I don't like cars. While that doesn't seem like it has anything to do with my career, it was a great way to gain some experience in customer service and just working with other people, which isn't necessarily something that I'd had a chance to do properly, until that point. So after that I went and did my masters, continued working in the motor trade through my masters. Yeah, I decided at the end of that that I still definitely wanted to work in publishing, and I was able to get an internship with Sandstone press, which then turned into the full time, marketing and publicity role.

Katie:
So I feel there is one question that is probably quite relevant given you have both mentioned the importance of work experience, placements and internships in your careers to date. Many of our courses at the UHI have a placement or work experience element to them, including our degree in Creative Writing BA (HONS). And these work experience opportunities take many forms from projects, to mentoring, to job shadowing or they might be quite a lengthy semester long work experience within a particular company. How important do you think it is for students and graudates to get that kind of experience under their belt?

Ceris:
I think it's really important. Partly for your own professional and personal development, I suppose, is really useful in figuring out what you actually want to do. Having those transferable skills that you can put onto your CV and kind of channel those into something that you do want to do, if that makes sense. I think it's hugely useful to have a placement.

Nicola:
Yeah, I would just echo what Ceris said really. I don't think you really fully know if you want to work in an industry unless you have had experience in that industry. I remember the summer before my masters I was lucky enough to get a place on the Osborne Academy, and before that time I had never worked in publishing at all. And that experience whilst it was only a week, it just kind of opened my eyes to every facet of the industry really and just made me really confident in my decision that that publishing was where I wanted to work. Which then kind of gave me the confidence in in my Masters but also then applying to publishing roles in the future.

Ceris:
Figuring out what you want to do in the industry. There are a lot of people, particularly Creative Writing students and English Lit grads, who think that editorial is the only option or is the only right option for them. I would suggest thinking about other areas as well. Don't be put off by sales, it's just an excuse to speak to people who love books, about books that you love. Don't be put off thinking about marketing or rights. I mean production and design are fascinating, although they do, they do, involve a very different skill set. So don't pigeon hole yourself, particularly before you've, you've seen a bit of the industry. The other thing I would say is, if you've got some spare time and you're looking for something to add to your CV. Do one of the free Adobe Creative Cloud trials and do some tutorials and learn to use Photoshop and InDesign and things like that, I use them every single day, and it's such a useful thing to have on my CV.

Katie:
Thank you. So moving on a bit. Advice for emerging writers. How should a student or recent grad get in touch with a publisher to present their work? I realise you'll be bombarded with requests on a day to day and there is a lot of information that needs to be considered ahead of time from a student and graduate perspective and a lot of that is in the public domain online already. So just general advice, is there anything our students can do to put themselves in the best possible place to be considered. Even if it's just to get some sort of feedback.

Ceris:
Our website does include a page about submissions and has full guidelines on what we're looking for, what we're accepting at the moment, and most publishers have similar information on their websites if they're open to unsolicited submissions.

Nicola:
And I do think sometimes people make the mistake of, and it just comes down to eagerness I think, of not reading the specifics of what each publisher is wanting, and just sending kind of random bits and pieces through, without really thinking through their proposals. And I think that when submissions do come in, is very obvious to us reading back, that they haven't read our guidelines, they don't really know what we publish. And so then when we read that we do take that into consideration.

Katie:
So in the first instance our students can grasp those key takeaways that you've shared. Check out your website, look at your social media feeds, immerse themselves in what you and other publishers do. And then consider who they'd like to be represented by before tailoring their approach to those publishers, considering what information is already out there in the public domain. For those

students and graduates thinking about their branding, who they are as an author, what they are all about. Ceris with your marketing background, can you share any top tips?

Ceris:
One size doesn't fit all, and figuring out what works for you, with your voice is really important. I think particularly on social media, which is a huge part of what marketing is these days, t's really clear when something isn't an author's authentic voice and ensuring that you're, that you're true to yourself, when you are marketing your work. I think that's really the most important thing in building your platform.

Katie:
The authenticity though is absolutely ringing bells, just so important, because people will see it through it if you aren't true to yourself. The reason they buy into you is not just about what you're writing, but who's writing it, and why they're writing it, and the story behind the story, I guess.

Ceris:
Absolutely. And actually, I'll focus on social media because that is, I'm not saying that you have to be on social media as an author, but at the moment it's particularly important, and we're seeing that more during the pandemic because we can't get authors into shops to do signings and we can't do book launches in the usual way. So interacting with readers, with other authors, building those connections, and having that support network, not only in terms of, you know, people to bounce ideas off and things, but also having people who will support your work when it comes to the time where it's where it is being published. Don't underestimate bloggers, book bloggers are huge at the moment, they're so helpful to us, authors that have good relationships with big bloggers from just chatting with them on, on Twitter, a lot of the time, that's really, really useful. I'm not sure that's the top three things but it's three things that have become increasingly important recently.

Katie:
So when it gets to a point where a publisher shows interest in your work and you as a writer are keen to form an agreement with them. There will obviously be contracts that will need to be written up, you need to consider the formalities of those contracts. You need to make sure you are getting a good deal but also that you are going to be represented and that you can meet the criteria that is stipulated. Is there anything that you think our students and grads should be aware of at that point?

Ceris:
My number one thing that authors should be checking is that they are not being expected to pay to be published. Because I'm seeing that happening on social media. I am seeing it being discussed on social media. And that's not how the publishing process should work, with a traditional publisher. Obviously that changes if you are self-publishing. But in the traditional model, an author should not be expected to be putting forward money.

Nicola:
Personally I think deadlines, you put so much energy into a campaign that has specific dates and deadlines and if the text isn't in then it obviously has a knock-on effect further down the line.

Katie:
Great thanks both. Two key things to consider there. And it's always worth doing a bit of research to find the information that is out there to find out more about protecting your creativity and intellectual property. So it's been a really turbulent 2020 and as we're heading into 2021, how much has COVID-19 impacted the publishing industry? Any thoughts from either of you?

Nicola:
Yeah I think I would just say that the industry definitely does have to adapt. But what I found quite encouraging is that book sales have, you know, continued to be quite strong throughout lockdown and I do think that just shows how books are in such a good place to cope with events like this, because reading is such an essential part of life, and I think it does show the resiliency of the industry, and authors, and readers, and loyalty of the readers in particular, that they do still go out and buy books. It just shows the importance of reading in today's world.

Ceris:
It's had a huge impact. I mean, book shops have obviously had to shop for quite a lot of 2020. I mean, in England, it's been even more of the year, more recently. We don't work with kids, kids books but children's authors, a lot of them, a significant portion of their incomes will be from school events, and school events haven't really been an option in the same way. Just author events in general have been hit, they've all had to move online, or they've been cancelled completely. Book festivals have been cancelled across the board, where they can't be moved online, and even where, where things have been moved online, the money just isn't the same. People aren't buying, buying books in the same way as they would like. So it's had a huge impact.

Katie:
Do you see any, any positives having come out of this really difficult time, in the way that people have adapted and, you know, people have had more time to maybe sit down and read where they weren't previously. Are you seeing a change in things in any way for the good, or are you hoping that the industry will bounce back to what it once was.

Ceris:
I absolutely hope it will bounce back. But I do think there's some real learning points from this I think we should be doing much more, much more online. In future, just having had to move book launches online suddenly we're thinking, we can reach a much wider audience, maybe you can get 9090 people into Waterstones for a big lunch, which is, which is a good turnout, but if you're sharing that on YouTube afterwards suddenly you've got 1000 views. Obviously that that is no bad thing. So, continuing with that sort of thing. Afterwards will will definitely be, I think, the silver lining is probably the nicest way to put it. And I think it makes it, it makes events, more accessible to people who wouldn't necessarily be able to join us in other scenarios. Yeah.

Nicola:
The COVID situation has meant that work from home and remote working is so much more common, and I hope that when normality does return, that the kind of positive effects of remote working aren't lost. I do think that will just make industry so much more accessible, so much less London centric, so that people outside of the main bubble can contribute and can work in this industry. Aside from that, I do think there can be quite a lot of imposter syndrome in this industry and a lot of, for a lot of years has been the assumption that you have to be a specific type of person to kind of excel in publishing. So I think in terms of advice, it will just be to kind of just go for it don't, kind of don't let the myths scare you, as I find it to be incredibly kind of rewarding and welcoming industry, full of incredibly articulate and passionate people who all just kind of love books, and want to share that love with everyone.

Katie:
Are there any resources news feeds, social channels, key industry publications, that you would say you refer to on a regular basis for, you know, insight into what's going on in the industry that our students should make sure they're on the receiving end of? I know there's a mass of information out there and so many opportunities to subscribe to e-newsletters but is there anything that you think is like gold dust that they should make sure that they're reading?

Ceris:
Firstly, can I just say that I didn't know anyone when I, when I started looking into the industry. All of the connections that I made were through the Society of Young Publishers, they're on Twitter. Get on Twitter, if you're not on Twitter already and you want to want to get into the industry. It's such a useful networking tool. But yes, the Society of Young Publishers, try to read The Bookseller, they do have a student subscription, and you can access quite a lot of it online as well. And the Society of Young Publishers, join the Society of Young publishers, go to their conferences, meet people, through their online events, and use their jobs boards, that's how I got started,

Nicola:
I would just reiterate that Twitter is such a useful tool in networking but also just seeing what is happening in the industry, I mean there's always big threads and posts on wide ranging topics so it's definitely somewhere to get to get up to date information.

Ceris:
They also have a mentoring scheme, which I found really useful, and I'm doing on the mentor site now but I joined the mentee side when I was still an undergrad, and it kind of gave me some really good pointers for how to make my CV work. What to be aiming to get out of internships that sort of thing.

Katie:
Ceris and Nicola, thank you so much for your time and for sharing so openly about your experience in publishing. It's been great to hear about your career stories to date and I'm sure the students and graduates tuned into this future me episode will be checking out the information you've got online.

Ceris:
Super. Thanks very much for inviting us.

Katie:
This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands Careers and Employability Centre. Don't forget our careers advisors are available to have a chat with our students and graduates at any point about your career. They can offer CV advice, interview prep, skills workshops and much more. Don't hesitate to get in touch.