Episode 6 - ...And Get It Published

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**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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**SPEAKERS**

Meredith Benjamin, Nicholas Lampietti, Clare Mao

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:09

From the Center for Careers, Life and Service at Grinnell College you're listening to Going Forth. I'm Nicholas Lampietti.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:17

I'm Meredith Benjamin.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:18

And today, we give you the second half of our segment on literature. In the last episode, Ali Benjamin talked about the process of writing a book.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:26

But from editing to marketing to connecting with readers, publishing a book--it takes a village, and our guest today knows this like no one else.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:33

As a literary agent, Clare Mao class of 2014, is involved with books in every step along their journey. She considers herself part editor, part therapist, and in her words 'part giver of questionable legal advice.'

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:48

But when you hear her talk, you'll quickly realize that she is more than expert at what she does. In just a moment, Claire takes us on a behind the scenes tour of the literary world. Stay with us.

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:04

Hi, Clare, how are you?

**Clare Mao** 01:07

Good. How are you two?

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:08

We're doing well.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 01:09

Wonderful!

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:09

We are really excited to talk to you.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 01:11

Yeah

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:11

We're really excited and grateful that you're here with us. To start, can you tell us about your job and the duties of your role?

**Clare Mao** 01:20

Sure, yeah. So I'm a literary agent. I'm based in Brooklyn, New York. And as a literary agent, you know, it's kind of uh--I guess I would say that a literary agent really differs from agent to agent. But literary agents help writers prepare either their manuscripts if they're writing a novel or a proposal, if they're working on a nonfiction book. Agents submit that work to publishers, help negotiate the deal, and then our writers' advocate their translation opportunities, you know, sales in other countries, film, TV, you know, those are all things an agent is all involved in. We're the person who's always on the writer's side.

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:53

I'm wondering, given that as of right now, you're kind of our spokesperson for the publishing side of books. what are some of the other roles--kind of what is an editor versus a publisher versus an agent versus, you know, anything else? All those people that are less visible than the author, what should people know about those roles?

**Clare Mao** 02:17

So an agent effectively works for the author, you know? Something people ask me is how an agent makes money. And basically, an agent doesn't make money until a writer makes money. An agent works on commission. So agents get 15% of an author's publishing deal. But you know, an author never pays an agent before a publishing deal is secured. You know, basically a writer would never pay an agent directly. So any agent who you know, charges like reading fees or like, you know, asks an author for money, like those are not legitimate agents. And writers should never sign with anyone where they have to pay them for representation. To that end, obviously, an agent is someone who is in the author's corner. And then I guess I would say the kind of like other part of the process is that a writer enters into a contract with a publisher. And so there are the four big publishers: Penguin, Random House, HarperCollins, Hachette and Macmillan. These publishers obviously don't represent all the publishing, there's a lot of amazing midsize and independent publishers. But then there are the really small indies, the publishers are like, you know, printing like a couple hundred print runs, but you know, are all still legitimate publishers. And so again, a writer enters into a contract with a publisher and then at a publisher, the point person for a writer and an agent is the editor, who's the person who acquires the work and is also the person who sort of works with the writer preparing it for publication editorially. And then you know, there's a whole host of other people like production staff, there's a copy staff, design staff. And then I guess the other important component is that every writer gets the publicity and marketing team. Publicity is when the book comes out, you know, they publicize the book, like help secure reviews; they help think of like fun readings or like other events for an author. And then marketing is kind of like the other things, you know? There's digital marketing, making sure that like high up on like Amazon search keywords or like buying out ads on like Facebook and Instagram, or doing giveaways on like Goodreads, or like in partnership with a brand or something. Those people are also really important, obviously, because without them, you can't get the book in the hands of the people who would most like that book. So I would say that those are like the main players, I guess, that an author could expect to be in touch with.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 04:17

So you just mentioned a lot of really vital steps in the process from sort of going to a manuscript to actually a published work.

**Meredith Benjamin** 04:26

Yeah, walk us through the steps that a fresh manuscript would go through before it reaches the bestseller list.

**Clare Mao** 04:32

First of all, I guess I would love it if every book I worked on was the bestseller. But you know, generally, again, every literary agent is different, but I generally expect to do quite a lot of work with my clients before, you know, I deem their manuscript even sort of ready to be shared with publishers because I think something that is important about the process is that you'll only sort of get so many chances to share your work with publishers, you know? Publishers receive up to hundreds of queries a month and so it--it really is sort of like a battle for attention. If a publisher passes on it, then you know, it's very difficult to sort of get them to take a chance and look at that manuscript again. So I think working with a literary agent, there's actually a very long editorial process that can occur, you know? Some of my clients I work with for, you know, one year or two years before their manuscript is even ready to be shared with publishers. So I think that is kind of maybe one thing that people aren't maybe surprised by with working with a literary agent is that, you know, there is a lot of--a lot of editorial work before, you know, an editor even sees it. You know, to be a professional writer, it's you know, it's harder and harder. Advances are oftentimes not quite at the level; for some writers, it's not possible for them to live on. But I think something that is always very interesting is that there are a lot of different streams of revenue or like income opportunities for a writer selling a book abroad, you know, in translation in different countries. It's not as if someone writes a book, it comes out, and then that's kind of like the lifespan of a book. There is a very long lifespan; a lot of different ways that like a book could still find attention. It's a very ongoing process.

**Meredith Benjamin** 06:02

Well, so in talking about the lifespan of a book, I guess, what are markets looking for in books? Is there a market? If so, are they--are they volatile? Are they changing, you know, kind of with the ebbs and flows of culture? Or would you say, you know, in your experience is there--are there certain qualities that most successful literature shares?

**Clare Mao** 06:27

Something that's always really important is that the author has a very--has an outstanding voice. When people read books, you know, they want to feel like they really get a sense of, you know, who the author is, what their opinions are. Voice, of course, means different things in nonfiction and fiction, you know? In fiction, it's whatever character is created, you know, what that voice sounds like. In nonfiction, maybe that means is it someone who, you know, you feel is an authoritative voice, you know, someone who can take care of you--that as much as possible, you know, feels like it's someone else telling you that story. In terms of market, the wonderful thing is that there are so many different readers out there who are looking for different things. If someone writes a book, then, you know, generally, I would say that there is an audience out there for that book. Right now, publishers are looking for more diverse voices to champion both in the fiction and nonfiction space. A reckoning that kind of seems to happen every like four years or so I think there's always like a new batch of political books that crop up. I think right now, with the pandemic maybe reaching a point where, you know, we're kind of returning or, you know, kind of creating a new normal, a lot of people are interested in sort of like self development, self help, transitioning out of your job, or, you know, I think there's this kind of trend towards like 'what is the future of like office work look like?' There's also I think, a growing space for what we call the mind-body-spirit category. And this can cover sort of all kinds of different topics. But you know, I think, as I'm sure we've all seen in the past couple of years, you know, the rise of like astrology, tarot, all those different kinds of things that, you know, it's not religious, but I think it does sort of call to higher power than what we see ourselves.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 07:54

That's really interesting.

**Meredith Benjamin** 07:57

Yeah and it's not really what I expected you to say, but it makes so much,

**Nicholas Lampietti** 08:02

I was gonna say the same thing. It makes so much sense when you lay it out like that.

**Meredith Benjamin** 08:06

Yeah

**Nicholas Lampietti** 08:07

In that vein, sort of on the--on the creative side, how proximate are you to the creative process of the writer you are representing?

**Clare Mao** 08:15

I am a pretty hands-on agent editorially. So generally, whichever client that I signed up, if it's a novelist, I will go through one or two major passes with their manuscripts. That means I'll read the manuscript, we'll go--we'll get on a call to sort of suss out what I identify as like places that they should focus on in revision. I'll get a sense of whether or not that feels like something they can do, or if that's something they're interested in. And then I'll also send them written notes so that they can then revise accordingly. If it's something like nonfiction, then generally I'll work with the client to really sort of build up their proposal from the bottom up. But yes, I would say that I'm--I'm very close to the sort of editorial process of preparing a book for publication. But, you know, it depends on the project.

**Meredith Benjamin** 08:59

That's so interesting, because I feel like there are so many creative people out there that want a kind of an outlet and avenue to be, you know, proximate to the creative process without having to constantly be producing and to kind of play with that in a different way. And it seems like literary agent is--is a really neat way to accomplish some of those goals that people might have.

**Clare Mao** 09:22

Absolutely

**Meredith Benjamin** 09:23

And so I'm wondering, like, what does an agent need to know or understand to be successful? And what are agents thinking about that writers aren't thinking about?

**Clare Mao** 09:33

You know, I think an understanding of the marketplace is always helpful obviously. I think that it is important for agents to develop--I wouldn't say a niche but I think it's important for an agent to sort of know what their own interests are and to, you know, find the books that I, you know, can wholeheartedly get behind and champion. But at the same time is a book that I know will find, you know, an ally and an editor and also be able to grab attention from the audience, you know? There's so many distractions these days with, you know, screens and other books. So I mean, obviously, if every agent knew that, then every agent would only represent bestsellers. So, you know, obviously, it's not a perfect algebra. But, you know, I think that the most successful skill and--or most useful skill an agent has is being able to honor and respect the author as an artist, as a creator, you know, as a storyteller, who is often sharing a story that is very personal and very individual to them. But at the same time, being able to balance that with, you know, sort of the expectations of a publisher where sort of later on in a book publication process, some of the most important people are the people who work in publicity, marketing and sales, trying to sell this book to all kinds of audiences. And help give them a way to talk about the book in a way that will allow the people that they're speaking to, you know, sort of really understand what's special. And so, you know, I think that--that is an agent's job to kind of always be thinking about that business side of things that maybe a writer isn't necessarily thinking about. I think every writer should know that what publishing is ultimately a business where there is a consumer: the reader. And there is a product: the book. But I don't think that there is use in trying to write a book that they think will sell because no one knows that for sure. And ultimately, I want to work with writers who are writing the stories that they feel compelled to share.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 11:17

Well, that is a perfect segue to our next question, which is, can you speak to some of the harsher realities of a career like writing or editing?

**Meredith Benjamin** 11:26

Yeah, I think that creative professions like writing, or just art, in general, aren't given the value that is, you know, helpful in a market-driven world. And so

**Nicholas Lampietti** 11:39

what suggestions do you have to offer for how to navigate some of those constraints and difficulties?

**Clare Mao** 11:45

It's definitely difficult, you know, I think that these days, it's, you know, it's very hard to make a full-time living as a professional full-time writer. You know, I think, gone are the days, you know, when like, Gay Talese or whatever, could write a piece and get paid $3 a word or like, you know, like Carrie Bradshaw, you know, like, I forgot, like, what her rate is, but you know, she writes like, a column, like a week, you know, like that, that would be impossible for any writer today. You know, I think for someone who wants to go into journalism, media, you know, that kind of like freelance lifestyle, I think, something to kind of think about is that, you know, writing is a creative act, but it is very tied to, you know, the forces of how labor and the market works. And, you know, I think that's something that's really sort of led to the demise of being able to pursue a full-time freelance writing career. Big media conglomerates, or a lot of corporations have bought up previously, independently owned media companies, or like local newspapers and, you know, have effectively sort of killed those places as places of employment. When corporations are against unions, are against their workers organizing, that's what it leads to, you know, is really that rotating door, you know, if you don't like your job, then okay, I'll find someone else to write it for, you know, less money than you're willing to do it for. It becomes a race to the bottom that way. There's also a way to make a living as a writer without the freelance grind and that's kind of living book contract-to-book contract, also not a completely sustainable way to make a living either. The harshest reality of leading a creative life is that there isn't that much money, that means it's not going to be a reality for a lot of people. You know, a lot of people who might want to dedicate time to writing a book may not have that time, may not ever have that time. And so I guess I also sort of see my job as an agent, it's important to, you know, really fight for contracts that are fair to an author, and that allow them to give them that space to take time off and write whether that means taking off a day a week, or like taking off like three months to write, you know, whatever makes it possible for them to do that. That is my job as an agent. It's not something that is on the writer as an individual to change, obviously. But you know, I do think it is important in recent years, there have been a lot of conversations about transparency in the publishing space and seeing sort of like different levels of advances. A sort of trend that arose is that white writers, you know, writers who maybe had gone to MFA programs, you know, who had come from ivy--ivy league schools or even just private four-year institutions consistently received higher advances than maybe their counterparts who are writers of color, you know, writers without formal education, you know, writers who didn't go to MFA programs or anything like that. So those are all necessary conversations to have. I don't think it's, you know, it's not the fault of the writers that they are subject to that, obviously. But you know, I think it's also important for people in the publishing world to also see that and evaluate how they're approaching that process.

**Meredith Benjamin** 14:24

That's really interesting and disturbing, but unsurprising.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 14:28

I mean, this is--this is meant to be helpful, and we wouldn't be doing--none of us would be doing our jobs if we didn't accurately represent it.

**Meredith Benjamin** 14:36

So I mean, we always like to ask people like how Grinnell and your experience here prepared you or shaped you? And knowing Grinnell is there anything specific that a Grinnellian might want to consider when venturing into this industry or when considering venturing into the industry?

**Clare Mao** 14:54

When I was at Grinnell, I was a history and Chinese major. So I really did not think about publishing as a career for me. I spent two summers in DC. So you know, I really thought after I graduated, I was going to work for my representative. But you know, I kind of got burnt out on that after two summers. I don't know if there still is, I think there was a very big emphasis on going to grad school, pursuing education. I was like an okay student, I wouldn't say I was like the best student. So I did not really foresee myself doing like two to six or eight more years of school. A lot of people I know did go on to do that and were very successful at that, but it was not for me. I guess it is all to say that I really didn't really know what I was going to do. I thought maybe I would still go back to DC and like go to law school eventually. But I will say that I directly owe my job, my career in publishing to like really funny and really random Grinnell connects along the way. There was a time when I was like kind of floundering and didn't really know where to go. And it seemed like there was an obvious ladder of contexts. But maybe it wasn't necessarily people I met Grinnell, but it was definitely people who were very happy to help me because of a Grinnell connect. So I think the English department had circulated some kind of hosting for an internship at a literary agency in New York at Sterling Lord Literistic. And Sterling Lord is a Grinnell alum. Yeah, he graduated in like the 1940s. So he went to a very different Grinnell, but you know, it helped that that was sort of how I had first known about this internship. So I did that internship for quite a while after I moved back to New York. I'm from New York originally. So I also was able to sort of make it work because my mom very kindly let me live in my childhood bedroom for eight months. I also picked up two different internships at that time. One of them was at WW Norton, which is both an academic and trade publisher. I worked on the academic side in the history department. So I did get to put my history degree to good use. One of the editors in the academic department had also gone to Grinnell as well. So, you know, again, I don't know if that helped me get the job. But you know, it was nice to sort of like be able to speak to someone you know, who had also gone to Grinnell. I also had another internship at a different literary agency. And when I went in for my interview, we basically did not talk about publishing because the first thing that that agent said to me when I sat down was, 'oh, you went to Grinnell, my son went there.' I was surprised at all the Grinnell connections that really did help pave my way in publishing. People love to connect about--about Grinnell.

**Meredith Benjamin** 17:12

That's definitely becoming a theme, is that the connections will find you and

**Nicholas Lampietti** 17:17

and you will find the connection.

**Meredith Benjamin** 17:18

Yeah

**Nicholas Lampietti** 17:18

And something great will occur.

**Meredith Benjamin** 17:20

Yeah

**Clare Mao** 17:20

Absolutely

**Meredith Benjamin** 17:21

The types of connections that you have. So before we wrap up, do you have--we always ask this--do you have any parting wisdom or advice to young Grinnellians? This doesn't have to be career related. This doesn't have to be about books or about publishing. But you know, as somebody who's ventured out, who's gone forth if you will, into the big wide world, is there anything that you have to say or would like to say?

**Clare Mao** 17:47

Stop worrying about the future. Not that one should not think about the future, but I think that at Grinnell, I was very--I mean, I wouldn't even say I was super career driven. But I think I was very concerned about getting a career and like that feeling of you know, 'I'm already behind' or like, 'I really need to get started now.' Life is short, no one is the same person at 21 as they are going to be one year or five years or whatever after that. I think Grinnell is a great place for sort of like allowing someone to learn about themselves and explore different interests still within a very sort of constrained environment. And so I think that I would just encourage people to, you know, as much as possible, just try to experience different things.

**Meredith Benjamin** 18:26

That's amazing! Claire, this has been a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much!

**Nicholas Lampietti** 18:31

Yes, thank you!

**Meredith Benjamin** 18:32

I'm really excited to share this

**Nicholas Lampietti** 18:35

with the Grinnell community.

**Meredith Benjamin** 18:35

Yeah, yeah. Thank you so much!

**Clare Mao** 18:38

I hope anyone who listens to this understands that publishing can be a very challenging industry to go into, but ultimately, I think it can be a rewarding one. But you know, at the same time, I think I want people to be fully prepared when they go into it, you know, it is not financially easy. I think a common misconception maybe is that all one has to do is love books to work in publishing. But you know, I don't think that's true. And I think that with any career, the better prepared you are, the better it is. And so, you know, yeah, I would just encourage people to take that to heart and I really appreciate the two of you for taking the time to speak with me.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 19:08

Wonderful!

**Meredith Benjamin** 19:09

Thank you so much!

**Meredith Benjamin** 19:17

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