Internship Report

Three times a week, I get off the N train at 23rd street, grab an iced coffee, and make my way to the Flatiron Building. Before I enter the building, I take a moment to look up at the view of the Empire State Building and reflect that surely this can’t be my life. Surely I do not get paid to work in this amazing building in New York City and read manuscripts all day. Working as an Editorial Intern for Tor Books, I have certainly seen my good days and my bad. Most days, though, I have felt incredibly grateful to have this opportunity.

I began working at Tor on May 29, 2012, as an intern in the Editorial Department. After a brief orientation with the Macmillan HR personnel, I reported to my direct supervisor, Associate Editor Melissa Frain. Ms. Frain quickly taught me the basics of how to go through the ‘slush pile,’ or unsolicited manuscript pile, and that became my project for the rest of the week. As my general back-up task if no one needed any other help, I spent those first weeks at Tor going through manuscripts ranging from mediocre to appallingly bad.

While sometimes a source of entertainment (take, for example, the ‘golf thriller’ manuscript), going through slush is a difficult task to do for eight hours straight. While the process is certainly simple, and the rejection letters are form letters, the real strain is in remaining focused. After several hours of reading pages of truly bad writing, I began to go blurry at the eyes. I also found, at least at first, that I had a difficult time with the rejection. This emotional reaction to the process of rejection was unexpected. I kept thinking, “Who am I to reject this? What do I know? I’m just an intern on her first day.” Perhaps it was the writer in me that responded so deeply, but I hated knowing that after an author’s months or maybe years of work, an intern spent five minutes with a manuscript on her first day and turned it down with a form letter.

Since that first week with the slush pile, my attitude towards the rejection aspect of the job has certainly evolved. I think what opened my eyes was the next stage of the process: reading solicited manuscripts. After a week or two of work, Ms. Frain gave me a young adult thriller to read and report upon. To give me an idea of what she was looking for, Ms. Frain gave me sample reader’s reports from other interns. I also asked for some feedback on my final report, so I could make sure I was on the right track. When I read that first solicited manuscript, I realized that it was a step above anything I had read in slush. Yet, by the end, the manuscript fell apart, turning to clichés in an anti-climactic finish. I realized that even this solicited and agented manuscript, with a decent plot and writing style, was simply not the quality it needed to be in order to be picked up for publication. As I read more solicited manuscripts, I understood that the sheer number of inquiries Tor receives makes most rejection
necessary. Now, I am able to easily turn aside a mediocre manuscript because I understand what it is we’re looking for – a gem.

Reading the solicited manuscripts has become my favorite aspect of the internship, because it most closely resembles the initial acquisitions phase of an editor’s job. Writing these reader’s reports has forced me to work on my ability to briefly summarize and describe an entire novel – a useful skill in a job that will require brevity in marketing copy and sales pitches. It has also allowed me to hone my critical eye. I cannot afford to overlook or ignore the phrases, passages, characters, or plot points that I don’t like. In one quick reading, I must be conscious of style, tone, plot, characterization, readability, and themes, and regard each one without bias. This is a skill I have been working on for some time, but the condensed process at Tor has helped train me to look for what editors consider during acquisitions.

Another skill that I’ve found essential as I approach these solicited manuscripts is the ability to read a work as if I’m the intended audience. I was excited to work for Tor because I am absolutely the intended audience for most of the books Tor publishes. I grew up loving fantasy and science fiction, and I imagined I would get to spend a lot of time poring through epic fantasies. However, I was surprised to learn that most of what I would be reading was young adult fiction. Moreover, much of it was paranormal romance, since writers keep trying to jump on the bandwagon of successes like Twilight. One of the books that I read seemed completely off the mark for Tor’s usual list – a women’s commercial fiction/romance novel. None of these genres are my areas of expertise, and I definitely struggled at first to give balanced reports on these books. I was looking for nuance and style, which are not necessarily essential elements in young adult paranormal romance. Nor are surprises and originality an essential part of women’s commercial fiction, although they are key elements of what I normally take to be good fiction. Therefore, I had to put myself in the mindset of the audience, and be cognizant of what it is they want from these genres. I settled on key elements such as plot, characterization, and suspense. In reacting to how these basic elements were handled, I was able to focus on the heart of the stories, and make suggestions from there.

Reading these manuscripts has had another valuable consequence. When I first started working on the manuscripts, I asked the editors if there was anything in particular I should be looking for. The response was simple: ‘go with your gut.’ I was disappointed in this answer at first, because my problem was that I didn’t trust my gut. But now, having read and reported on several full manuscripts, as well as countless slush pile submissions, I understand why they gave me that answer. ‘What to look for’ is not something that can be written down in guideline form. I feared that at the end of the manuscripts I wouldn’t know whether to suggest “Pass” or “Further Reading,” but each time I knew. I simply knew
that I liked it or I didn’t – that the good outweighed the bad, or it didn’t. And while I still worry that my opinion of the book might differ from my editor’s opinion, they told me to use my gut. So that is what I have learned to trust.

While reading manuscripts has been a highlight of my time at Tor, it is certainly not my only task. One editor uses the interns regularly for administrative work – for filing away contracts, making copies of manuscripts, making UPS labels for packages, or mailing galleys. I don’t mind these sorts of tasks, especially because they break up my long days of reading. At times, it feels good to do something a little more productive and hands-on. It also gives me an opportunity to interact with editors I don’t normally work with.

I’ve also gotten a few rare opportunities to branch out into work for other departments. I jumped at these opportunities, eager to learn about new aspects of the company. One such task was to research competing titles for a book, both by searching the internet for appropriate comp titles, and also looking up the sales numbers in Bookscan. In doing so, I got to see the difference between sales of self-published titles and titles published by the Big Six, and the effect a celebrity author can have on sales numbers. I also had the opportunity to help with the construction of some promotional materials. Along with some other interns, we assembled boxes and promotional packets to mail along with galleys to reviewers. While the work itself was mostly taping boxes, it gave me a chance to ask the marketing staff questions about Tor’s typical promotions. I have always been interested in editorial work, but marketing is the one other publishing department where I might be interested in working. The interplay of digital and traditional marketing is intriguing to me, and I think it involves a high level of creativity, especially in forging new ways to market books in a digital sales climate.

The culmination of my experiences at Tor has been an increase in my overall confidence. Learning to trust my gut and my instincts has been a key factor in feeling more confident about my editorial work. I feel a higher level of self-assurance when I turn in a reader’s report, confident that the opinion I’m putting forth is a valid one, if not exactly the same as my editor’s opinion. I also feel more comfortable around the office, with a better understanding of my boss’s expectations. With increased confidence comes a certain level of pride in my work, which is an essential part of any job. It’s a fantastic feeling to believe that I am a part of something – of finding, promoting, and acquiring great pieces of literature.

While the idyllic nature of the job must fade over time, I have been thrilled to have experiences that support my belief that this is the right industry for me. The first-hand experience in the industry has given me a taste of what a full-time job would be like, and I am happy to report that I am even more
inspired to enter the industry than when I started. I will take the lessons learned, the notes for improvement, and the confidence I have earned and apply it to continuing this fantastic life in publishing.