My Summer at Nancy Yost Literary Agency

I have always believed that I would work within the world of words. I still am not sure whether I would like to work primarily in the book or magazine industries, but spending a summer with Nancy Yost Literary Agency has shown me a side of book publishing that I would not have otherwise known. I am very honored to work with brilliant minds that have a hand in the famous titles of talented writers like Linda Castillo, Stephanie Laurens, and Ilona Andrews. There are many differences between an editor and an agent, most importantly that agents are the “middlemen” or author advocates in publishing. I really admire the heart and personality that the agents I am working with put into their jobs and the genuine relationships they cultivate with their authors. It is apparent to me that agents are still a very necessary part of the publishing industry and that this job requires a blend of both editorial, negotiation, marketing and communication skills. I have truly learned so much about the inner workings of book publishing, from the importance of “editor’s eyes” and social media to the complexity of contracts.

Throughout the summer, I have been able to develop my “editor’s eye” by reading and analyzing manuscripts submitted to the agency. I search for the necessary qualities of a great book in each submission or query. Reading has been my main job as a literary intern, among other projects within the office. Some of the criteria I look for include voice, tone, language, characterization, dialogue, setting, pacing, plot formation, setting, tense and attention to detail. The agents at Nancy Yost Literary Agency especially love submissions that have a strong voice, something I keep in mind as I read. A novel with a strong voice is more likely to connect with readers and keep them engaged in the text. Queries are an author’s way to ask agents to represent them and their novels in the “pursuit of publishing.” These submissions contain manuscript summaries, sample chapters and brief author biographies. If I believe that a submission has quality writing and real potential, I label it a “Yes.” These queries are then passed along to my supervisor, Ms. Sarah Younger, who reviews my limited “Yes Pile,” as we like to call it, to further review these submissions. Some of Ms. Younger’s query advice was to decide
whether or not I could “see this book on bookstore shelves tomorrow.” If she is also impressed by a submission, she will contact the authors and ask for the complete version of the manuscript. It’s gratifying to know that I act as a “gatekeeper” between would-be writers and this agency. This position also requires responsibility and I take my time in writing a detailed analysis of why each query either does or doesn’t work well.

In the month and a half that I have been at this internship, I have read 267 queries. Of this total, I have given the mark of “Yes” to 12 manuscript submissions. I am confident that there is greatness in these queries. I hope to see one of these titles as a published book and know that in some way, I had something to do with its literary success. I have certainly become more selective in what kinds of queries I approve of over time. When I first began this internship, I found it very hard to say “no” to sample chapters that represented a writer’s dreams. Rejections to queries also included grammatical and spelling mistakes in query letters. Successful authors take care in both their queries and manuscripts. I am better able to detach myself and read specifically for the quality writing. Surprisingly, my “Yes” queries vary in genres from historical fiction to YA science fiction, suspense and romance. When reading queries, it is also crucial to consider how each query would enhance and complement the agency’s book list. Nancy Yost is known for its romance, contemporary women’s fiction, suspense/thriller and historical fiction titles. Before this internship, I would have categorized myself as a solely historical fiction and romance reader. Now, I can appreciate the talent in all genres and know that across this wide range, the criteria for judging queries is the same.

Working with contracts was a very interesting experience for me. I used to think that I would never have to work with contracts because they are filled with my arch nemesis, numbers. While proofreading author-agent and author-publisher contracts, I learned that contracts actually have an emphasis on wording. Many of the changes I had to review were based on adding, eliminating or rewording the tenets of each contract section. There were fewer numbers than I imagined and those that were listed strictly related to royalties. A majority of the contract that I edited dealt with royalties authors receive from books sold in stores as opposed to sold online. There was also a specific section dealing with what percentage of royalties authors and agents receive from books sold online overseas and when these versions of a book would be able to be listed on
Amazon.com and other online marketplaces. Working with agency contracts has definitely made me more confident in this aspect of publishing.

During this time, I was given the opportunity to watch firsthand as Ms. Younger dedicated her time to cultivating a Contemporary Women’s Fiction manuscript and then received wonderful interest from multiple publishing houses. She has invested herself in the enhancement of this manuscript and in the development of this author’s career and it was really great to see her hard work pay off. After working with the text, she passed it along to editors that she thought would appreciate the tone and genre. Ms. Younger reminded me that this is only half the battle, as contract agreements and publishing house editorial changes will be soon to follow. If these editors are pleased with the manuscript, they send it for further review to the company publisher, who decides what kind of offer to make to purchase the book. It has been intriguing to see the beginning steps of a book’s journey through the industry. I have watched as she negotiated the terms of potential contract with different acquisition editors from publishing houses, focusing on the aspects of author advances, series potential and international language rights. Receiving different offers from houses appears to be much like an auction, with each representative bidding for the book.

I also learned that organization of author-publisher-agent databases is crucial to running a successful agency. I worked to update the information in the database, allowing the agents to properly track royalty statements and editorial deadlines for each individual project by way of individual authors and publishing houses. In the spirit of organization, I worked on a project called “author bragsheets.” Author bragsheets are a culmination of author and book reviews that literary agents use to gain the interest of publishing houses. I scoured the Internet and reviewed authors’ websites for book reviews and specific author-writing-style reviews to include on each of the agency’s many established authors. This was a really interactive way for me to learn about the various types of writers and genres Nancy Yost represents. By compiling this author information, I also realized that there are countless book reviewing groups in the industry, many geared specifically for certain genres. As this agency represents many Contemporary Women’s Fiction and Romance novels, I came across multiple reviews from the “Romantic Times.” It was really impressive to see how many very talented and
well-respected writers Ms. Yost represents and how many Bestseller Lists her authors have been on.

The publishing industry’s new emphasis on social media is apparent within my office. Ms. Younger is always checking the many Twitter, Facebook and website pages of the agency’s many authors, reading their posts and reposting them in relation to their upcoming releases and passed titles. The agency even has its own social media accounts and uses them to keep in touch with their clients and up-to-date on industry events and trends. Using social media in publishing is becoming a very common practice, as a way to create author and book publicity and new readership. The agents that I work with even have their own Twitter accounts that they use to stay connected to authors, readers and the literary community. This has definitely influenced the pages that I follow on my social media sites, making me more contentious about technology’s influence in my future field.

I feel that I have really benefited from the positive atmosphere of the agency’s office and their constant willingness to help each other and their authors. My supervisor is very approachable and actually appreciates the millions of questions I ask on a daily basis. I really value Ms. Younger’s input on my research for this class and my “status reports,” when she tells me how I am progressing in regards to my internship experience. I know that the contacts I have made within this agency will be invaluable to me as I continue in the publishing industry. I will always be grateful for the advice of the talented, unique and genuine agents who I was able to surround myself with this summer.

In the following semesters, I hope to obtain more internships that will help me officially decide whether I want to work within book or magazine publishing. I don’t know if I will become a literary agent in the future, but I am certain that what I learned in this position will be of value no matter what direction I take.