Being a Writer Podcast—The Role of an Agent with Abi Fellows

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**SPEAKERS**

Abi Fellows, Nelima Begum

**Nelima Begum** 00:00

Welcome to this Edition of the Being a Writer podcast, a podcast that explores writers’ creativity and resilience. This series is part of the Literary Consultancy’s new programme of support for writers that focuses on cultivating and safeguarding literary creativity. With a range of special guests, we explore what it means to be a writer today. In this episode of the Being a Writer podcast, we sit down with Abi fellows of The Good Literary Agency to discuss the role of an agent. In this candid, behind the scenes look, Abi pulls back the curtain on what a day in the life looks like, the relationships with writers and editors and the process of developing a manuscript alongside its author in the early stages. She provides clarity and insight into the industry landscape, and she has her own tips for writers on how to deal with rejection and what an agent is looking for in a submission.

Hello, and welcome to the Being a Writer podcast, Abi, how are you?

**Abi Fellows** 00:59

I'm very well, it's lovely to speak to you. How are you?

**Nelima Begum** 01:02

I’m great, thanks. It's lovely to have you here. I'm really excited about this episode. So, we're talking about the role of an agent. And it's a really great opportunity for our listeners to kind of get that behind the scenes, candid insight into what really goes on, because I feel like with writers, a lot of writers that come to TLC, sometimes that line between agent and editor becomes slightly blurred, and so there are a few questions around it. But who better to give us clarity and insight, then you. Thank you for joining us. I'm going to dive straight in: take me back to where it all started for you. Where did you begin in the books industry, because I know it's very vast.

**Abi Fellows** 01:41

I actually began by making coffee in a bookshop. So, I was working as a barista when I was a student in Bristol, and the manager of the bookshop quickly realised that I was better at talking about books than I was at making coffee, and he offered me a role as a bookseller. So that was my in, and I can't think of a better way to start because I learned so much from doing that.

**Nelima Begum** 02:05

Of course, and… I assume that there was a lot of learning on the job. And just insight into what people were interested in reading and what they were picking up.

**Abi Fellows** 02:14

Yeah, it’s just kind of the coalface of the industry. So seeing how, you know, customers and readers react is really important, but also understanding things, a bit, of how books come through from publishers and how they're sold into shops was really useful, too.

**Nelima Begum** 02:28

Fantastic. So what was it about being an agent that called out to you? Like, how did you get to that point? And how did you know that that was, in a way, what you were meant to be doing?

**Abi Fellows** 02:39

I was quite lucky in that I did quite a few different roles very early in my career. I worked in book selling, as I said, and in sales, I did a little bit of, sort of, work experience in editorial and rights. So I was sort of drawn to working in a publisher, but I didn't know which role because they all seemed really interesting in different ways. And then I met a couple of agents when I was a bookseller, and when I was looking for work, and I realised that agenting is this really multifaceted role that kind of dips into so many of those other departments that I'd already sort of had an insight and tried out. And that really appealed to me—the idea of being, sort of, across the life of a book and being involved in different parts. But I think the main thing is working with writers. That to me is the biggest draw, just sort of steering them through their careers and being with them through hopefully many books.

**Nelima Begum** 03:33

Fantastic. And were there, I mean, what kind of books were you really into reading and what kind of genres steered you in the direction of refining your tastes, in terms of what you enjoyed and what kind of roasters you were looking for?

**Abi Fellows** 03:46

It's really changed actually. I think of when I did my masters, and when I was young, I really loved literary fiction. And… that was predominantly what I read, and sort of serious non-fiction. And then, as I got older, I worked as a scout for a number of years, which is not a very well known role, but it's a really important role in the industry. And I was essentially reading for lots of different clients with different tastes. And that really broadened my appetite. So I started reading a lot more crime and commercial fiction, children's books, more sort of commercial non-fiction. And so I've got quite a wide taste, really, and as a result my list is very diverse as well. I don't really specialise in a genre at all.

**Nelima Begum** 04:27

Fantastic. So it keeps it keeps the plate quite full and quite varied of everything.

**Abi Fellows** 04:33

Yeah, [it] keeps every day different.

**Nelima Begum** 04:36

Amazing. Can you take us through a day in your life? What does a typical day look like for a literary agent? Because I don't think many people are aware of just how much you guys do.

**Abi Fellows** 04:47

Yeah, I mean, there isn't really a typical day, I suppose. I always set out… with a plan for my day, but I always leave lots of wiggle room in my day because I never quite know what might happen. And so I tend to start my day [with] things like contracts, negotiations, the sort of serious heavy lifting bits of the job at the start of the day of my coffee. And then I try… so the sort of more creative parts of the job, which are things like writing pitches for books, obviously editing is part of the job to, I tend to leave that for later in the day. And then in between meetings, so it's really important that agents make lots of contacts, get to know editors and other people in the industry, so I will have, you know, most days I'll have a couple of meetings. And either in person, I might have lunch, or these days, lots of Zooms and phone calls. But then anything could happen that could, sort o,f disrupt the flow of that day. So if one of my books goes under offer, or I might get some exciting news about a prize listing, something like that, there're always a lot of unpredictable moments as an agent.

**Nelima Begum** 05:55

It definitely sounds like it. I was really surprised recently to learn, I mean, we had John Baker at one of our industry days, and he's just brilliant. And he recently shared how, like what you've just said, no two days are the same. But in a single day, he’ll do things like reading submissions, and editing and contracts and finances, and then there are meetings and admin and just brokering as many relationships as possible across the publishing landscape. It’s a lot, I really do think that agents are the unsung heroes of publishing. There's so much to do and so much to talk about as well.

**Abi Fellows** 06:29

You need a good memory or a really good database, or both, ideally.

**Nelima Begum** 06:34

I imagine both would be absolutely imperative. So, I think that one thing that our listeners would be really eager to know about is, you know, what is the relationship between a literary agent and a writer.

**Abi Fellows** 06:49

It's a relationship that has a lot of different elements to it. I think sometimes we're talked about as midwives, steering these books into the world. Sometimes there’s… finance management, conversations with deal making, selling, all of those things that we do. But the relationship with the writer is predominantly about being their ally, and about being their biggest advocate, and really helping them to navigate every moment of their career as a writer, from that first development stage, through to publication and beyond. So being by their side for celebrations, and also there's moments where things don't quite go to plan. And we have to sort of think, right, let's regroup, what do we do? So, yeah, it's really about supporting them, advocating for them, and having that trust so that they, the writer, really trusts that agent has their back and trusts their judgement and advice.

**Nelima Begum** 07:44

Amazing. I think it's really important for writers to know that, you know, your agent should be in your corner.

**Abi Fellows** 07:49

Absolutely. But but you know, also, there is tough love in the role, [and] it is important that we're not just there to do everything that our writers tell us because we bring our professional insights. And it's really important to have that trust to say, you know, this is my professional opinion on what you should do in this situation. And so that's why choosing your agent is really important.

**Nelima Begum** 08:09

Of course, because you want the relevant industry insights and expertise to be suited to you and match your work and your intentions for your work as well. Because, I think, an agent works very hard to keep true to the vision of the writer while also trying to navigate the best possible path for them.

**Abi Fellows** 08:25

Absolutely. And it's about, you know, it's often about thinking long-term as well. So it may not just be about that one book, it might be about a, sort of, five-year strategy and beyond and how that's all going to pan out.

**Nelima Begum** 08:36

Wow, so [there’s] a lot of longevity involved as well. I think that brings us really nicely on to the next question as well, because we wanted to look at the editorial process with a writer and what that entails.

**Abi Fellows** 08:52

So I thought it's probably helpful if I split that into non-fiction and fiction, because they work slightly differently. So, starting with non-fiction, sometimes it begins with a germ of an idea. I have a couple of clients who really arrived at me with a blank page, but with, you know, previous writing experience, and we work together to produce proposals. So non-fiction is sold to publishers, in most cases on a proposal, so my role at that point is understanding what the writer wants to achieve with the book and what their thesis is, what their argument is, what their idea is, and then helping them shape that into a proposal that shows how that will come together in terms of what the chapter structure is, also who they are, what their profile is, what their experiences is, why they're the right person to write this book, and creating this proposal, which is a really strong selling document to convince the publisher that this person can write this book and that it's important [and] that [it] matters. So that can be, generally, quite a quick process with a lot of back and forth between me and the writer as we shape that proposal.

Fiction tends to be [a] longer process, because we sell on a full manuscript. There's the occasional exception where we sell on sample chapters, but most novels are sold on a full manuscript. So it depends. I mean, I would say that most of my clients, I've probably done four, five drafts of their novels before submitting them. I mean, I do like to get in quite, I do really love the development part. So, I mean, some of my novelists will sort of disappear for a while whilst they're revising and working from my notes. So that is a longer process on the whole.

**Nelima Begum** 10:38

Okay, and how does your work with a writer differ from the work that they'll do when an editor slash publisher?

**Abi Fellows** 10:45

Well, it's an earlier stage of the editorial process. So all being well, once I've done the deal, I sort of relinquish editorial control, and I pass that over to the editor. And, you know, on most occasions, they will do editing work again on the novel. They usually do another round or so. And with non-fiction, they will then edit the full book once that's written because we've just sold it on a proposal. But the editors roll, they’re editing, but they're also in many ways a sort of project manager within the publishing house. So they are overseeing this book and making sure that every other department in the publisher is doing what they need to do at the correct time. So design and marketing, PR, that the sales team are getting ready to sell it into bookshops. So they're sort of overseeing all of that in the publishing house and [the] agent is keeping tabs on that, but we're really, sort of, entrusting that to them at that point. I will read everything because I'm a control freak, and I also like to know, I like to join the conversation editorially. But I do pass on that to the editor and their publishing house.

**Nelima Begum** 11:57

It's great to know that you're so invested in the process, though, even though you've called yourself a control freak. But yeah, it's really interesting to see how so many different moving parts come together.

So, you're at The Good Literary Agency and they are brilliant, with a fantastic team and sparkling roster of writers. I think our listeners would be really eager to find out about the submissions process on your end: what does that look like, and how do you navigate it from the moment that something comes in to when you contact the writer to work with them?

**Abi Fellows** 12:29

We're very lucky—and thank you for your kind words—we're very lucky that we have an in-house submissions co-ordinator, Briony, who is fantastic. And Briony has taken a lot of time to, so I'm one of four agents at the agency, and Briony’s really spent a lot of time getting to know each of us and what we're looking for, what we're interested in, our wish lists [which] we update that all the time. And so we meet very regularly with her to talk about that. And Briony looks at everything that comes in. And what she will do is that she will, anything that she thinks aligns with what we're looking for, she will pitch to us, and she will flag to us. And sometimes if it feels like there's a lot of interest from other agents, she will send me quite an urgent message saying you really need to read this, you're gonna love it. And other times, it's sort of, we've got a bit more time. But yeah, she really advises on that, but she will also bring things that she loves. She'll quite often come to our meetings and say this is a curveball, but I think there's something in it. And we discuss submissions as a team, and we talk about which agent might be the best fit. And so when I read something that I really like, I'm interested in or love, I then get in touch with the writer and hopefully set up a meeting to talk about it some more with them.

**Nelima Begum** 13:46

Oh, fantastic. That's really great, though, that includes all of your interests. And it moves quite quickly every day to day, it seems. And shout out to you, Briony, because it sounds like you’re doing brilliant work

**Abi Fellows** 14:00

We would fall apart without her.

**Nelima Begum** 14:03

How do you broker a relationship with an editor, and what does a pitch to them involve? Because I understand that that could be the next moving part of the process after you've, as you've mentioned, been in touch with the writer, you guys have worked with it, dug deep, gone through the five to six drafts. How do you decide what kind of editor to send work to?

**Abi Fellows** 14:23

Well it’s funny, I often start thinking about the editors—editor or editors—for the book very early on. So even at the same stage where Briony tells me about something and I start reading it, I can't really go anywhere with that unless I've got a few editors in mind, who I think would be a good fit. So I start plotting really early on and one of the first conversations that I would have with a writer before I sign them is just a conversation about which publishers and imprints I think might be a good fit. That’s kind of part of making sure that we're aligned in our vision for their work. But in terms of the relationships, I mean, I've been around a really long time. Some of the publishers now, we've kind of grown up in the industry together, which is wonderful, but I never, sort of, rest on that, because there are so many amazing editors coming through and coming up. So it's, I just try and meet new people all the time, from indies, from big publishers, just, kind of, constantly widening the net of opportunities. And sometimes it's lovely lunches or ice creams or tea. And other times—most of the time—it Zooms. And in terms of, yeah, so I tend to, I'm at the stage now with something actually, which I'm doing final edits on writing my pitch, and I'm just starting to have, sort of, teaser conversations with editors and just casually mentioning it and just getting them a bit excited. I tend to do that a few months before pitching proper. And then, when I go on submission, I tend to either call people or have a Zoom with them, have lunch with them if I'm lucky, and start to, sort of, getting them really hyped up to receive my book, and hopefully move it to the top of their reading pile.

**Nelima Begum** 16:03

That's so great. So it's a job of, like, building excitement, but also mapping out exactly which direction do you think it could go in?

**Abi Fellows** 16:09

Absolutely. And I think, I mean, for me, as you know, for my list I work with marginalised writers, and it's really important to also think about who will look after their work sensitively. So it's not, you know, it's not just about… who's going to give me the most money, and where's the biggest advance, it's also about who's the best fit for this in terms of the, you know, the editorial vision. So there're lots of things to think about.

**Nelima Begum** 16:32

Absolutely. Again, going back to that thing of just keeping true to what the writer’s intention is for their work and finding a place where it will really like sit comfortably in the market, too, because the market always changes as well. And that was another thing I wanted to ask: do market trends and the changing landscape of publishing, and publishing appetites, so to speak, ever inform how you approach a submission or whether or not you think there is a future for it with you, in particular?

**Abi Fellows** 17:03

To a degree, but I think with what we're doing with TGLA, we've always tried to be pushing ahead of where the markets at. So… I feel like it's sometimes about being slightly ahead of a conversation. And I feel like a couple of my books in particular, when I was selling them, publishers were a bit sort of, oh, we're not sure, we're not sure how to market, we're not sure who the audience is. And then someone did take that punt, and by that point the market had caught up. Because there's generally a year, or year-and-a-half between me selling a book and it actually being published. But yeah, I mean, I read incredibly widely, I think it's really important. It's important to know what people are publishing what the trends are, it's another way of understanding what editors like and what they do well. So that's part of my, sort of, network building. But I like to… be anticipating what people will want, as well as, sort of, listening to what they're currently really tuned into.

**Nelima Begum** 17:59

Absolutely. And I think you do a brilliant job of it, too, because immediately *The Khan* by Saima Mir comes to mind as [one that] might have come across a bit unconventional… [to] mainstream publishing or trade publishing, so to speak. But it was just such a brilliant story. And Saima Mir is brilliant, too. I think the journey of that book, seeing it go as far as it has, and become as successful as it has, is just a true testament to how, you know, sometimes it's about shaking things up a bit.

**Abi Fellows** 18:28

I mean, that, to me, I think… is one of the things I'm most proud of, and Saima has talked very publicly about how long that journey was for her. But we kept the faith with that. And I'm so glad that her publishers believed in her and they really pushed it because it's just been amazing, the response. And it's just a reminder to, kind of, not be always dictated to by the current market.

**Nelima Begum** 18:50

Absolutely. And I think that's something that will ring true with writers as well, [that] if you are passionate about your story, if you've got a good story, you should always go for it and have conviction in what you're writing. It's not necessarily always dictated by numbers and trends.

**Abi Fellows** 19:04

Absolutely. And also, I think, sometimes with the writer, because of the timeframe of things, if you're writing to, sort of, see that something's working and thinking I'll do the same, by the time that it's actually ready for submission, the market might have moved on. So there's a risk in sort of getting on a bandwagon in a way.

**Nelima Begum** 19:22

Yeah. What do you think of the current market trends at the moment? Is there anything that strikes you or you think is quite interesting or out there at the moment?

**Abi Fellows** 19:32

Well, we're seeing and we're seeing an amazing response to Heartstopper, and I'm really heartened to see that queer love stories are getting a really big boost from that, and I think in particularly in YA, which has been this, you know, we've all talked about it being a tough market for quite a long time. It's nice to see that, sort of, shift in confidence in that area and those stories because [it’s] something I've been, sort of, pushing for a long time. I think obviously, you know, we are living through a very difficult time, so I think there's a lot of interesting books that help us unpack that and help us to understand how to navigate that, whether it's from a mental health point of view, or whether it's books about climate science. But I think there's also a lot of appetite for escapism as well. And Joy and romance and fun. But I think we are really seeing that, not really a trend, I suppose, but we're just seeing the proof that more inclusive publishing does work. And that therefore there is more space for more diverse voices and that they sell. So that's not a trend. That's a shift.

**Nelima Begum** 20:41

Yeah, for sure. I was just going to add that yeah, I've seen genre fiction doing particularly well.

**Abi Fellows** 20:48

I think editors have been asking me about thrillers a lot, and crime.

**Nelima Begum** 20:54

Yeah. Where, I think, possibly pre pandemic, you could see that there was a lot of emphasis on literary fiction and prize-winning fiction in particular, there has been a slight shift in that. And obviously, social media plays a massive role in this with the rise of like BookTok, and things like that, dictating how Waterstones put their windows together and what the bestsellers are, and what takes front and centre in the bookshop. It's really amazing to see that, you know, more genre fiction is on the rise, and that people have an appetite for it too. And that it's not, I mean, it's regarded as highly as literary fiction is now, because there is space for it.

**Abi Fellows** 21:31

Yeah. And I think when I was a bookseller, I mean this, we are going back 20 odd years, but there was such a snootiness around genre publishing. And I'm, you know, really glad to see that acknowledgement of the skill that goes into, you know, a really good commercial novel. And this sort of breaking down of this kind of hierarchy of publishing.

**Nelima Begum** 21:50

Absolutely. I mean, it definitely has an impact on reading culture as well, in general—how even young people, teenagers and children approach books and reading tastes, too. It doesn’t feel so one dimensional anymore.

**Abi Fellows** 22:04

Yeah. And similarly, the rise of the graphic novel, I think, really helps with that, that says, you know, this is an art form that's really important to our industry, and that needs to be celebrated more. So it's really good to see more recognition of, you know, just what fantastic reads graphic novels are because it opens up to so many other readers who found, you know, reading a bit inaccessible.

**Nelima Begum** 22:26

Absolutely. It's a whole other realm of reading and publishing. So nice to see that, you know, we can create space for various tastes in literature. So, this brings me very nicely on to what you like to read. And I know you said you're not, you know, genre specific or anything, but what kinds of submissions in particular do you look out for? And what do you kind of hope lands in your inbox, if you wake up thinking I'd really love this kind of book today?

**Abi Fellows** 22:55

I mean, I am an absolute sucker for a love story, and especially a queer love story, because I feel like they're so overdue. And it's just, it's the thing that was really lacking to me, personally, when I was younger. So it's the kind of thing that I have a particular personal vested interest in. But I mean, love stories of any kind, but getting them to be more inclusive is really important. And in terms of non-fiction, it's really books that sort of tap into an emerging conversation, and spark ideas and make people think, and really in doing that, even if they're talking about difficult subjects or trauma, that that offer ways for things to change, whether it's systemic problems, or political issues, so books that I feel will make a difference to people, either in terms of making them feel seen or less alone or giving them practical ideas. Books that cause positive change, I guess that's the kind of the running theme through the very diverse list that I have.

**Nelima Begum** 23:57

Oh, I love that. And I imagine one of the perks of your job, or one of many perks of your job, is being able to really champion the writers and the voices and the stories that you would have loved to have seen while you were up and coming as a reader and within the industry.

**Abi Fellows** 24:11

It's really exciting. I mean, my to-read pile at the moment is just insane. I don't think I've ever had so many new books at once because it's just such an exciting time. You know, these sort of long, unheard stories that are all suddenly bubbling up. It's fantastic.

**Nelima Begum** 24:26

It's the best kind of problem to have—so many things to read and you don't know where to start.

**Abi Fellows** 24:30

I'm on holiday next week so it’ll be okay!

**Nelima Begum** 24:34

Can you share with us a moment in your role that felt like a really big triumph? I imagine that you probably have many on a day-to-day, having worked with so many different kinds of writers, but is there one in particular that really stands out for you?

**Abi Fellows** 24:48

Yeah, well, I was going to talk about *The Khan* but we've spoken a bit about that already, just because I think that moment when that hit The Times bestseller list was just such a wonderful vindication, you know, everything that we've been pushing for. I mean, every time I do a deal, it's thrilling, but I have got something being announced quite shortly, which I'm so excited about because it's a really important children's, start of a children's book series, and which has the most fantastic representation of neurodiversity and brain injury, seizures, epilepsy, but it's just an amazing adventure. And I'm just really excited for, you know, children to see themselves in this book, and to go on a great journey at the same time so that, when I called the author with that offer that felt like a really, really wonderful moment.

**Nelima Begum** 25:39

Oh, that's fantastic. And hopefully, we get to hear about it soon.

**Abi Fellows** 25:44

Any day.

**Nelima Begum** 25:48

Hopefully! What are the most challenging parts of being an agent?

**Abi Fellows** 25:53

Rejection, I think, because we, you know, we take on writers and their work with huge passion. Agents never go into things half-heartedly, so we start with these projects that we are really excited about. And of course not everyone feels the same way. It's a very subjective industry, and so we feel these redactions for all our authors, and in most cases you also have editors who love it and it all works out well. But not always, sometimes something just doesn't land. And that's the hard bit because it's sort of working out where you go from there. But also, you know, being really mindful of the impact that that has on the writer, and navigating that in a way that doesn't dent their confidence and, sort of, helping them understand that, you know, there are reasons possibly beyond the work itself that it hasn't got a deal that time. So yeah, definitely sort of working out what to do when things don't go quite as you hoped.

**Nelima Begum** 26:51

Okay. And do you have, like, any advice or any tips for writers who may have gone through that process of, you know, it didn't really land or it didn't work out the way that they hoped it would?

**Abi Fellows** 27:03

Well, I think there're two things to that. I think there's the sort of being sensible and logical and looking at… there may be reasons why that you can do something about. So it might be, you're getting lots of similar feedback. And you can think, well, actually, if I changed this aspect of it, that might swing this for me, and this might make it work. And particularly I think with non-fiction, there can be changes you make to a proposal, and then suddenly it's more appealing to publishers. But I think also there are other things that play and some of it, you know, there are systemic biases and various issues. Sometimes it's about keeping the faith. Other times it's about knowing that, actually, you know, maybe not this project now, but maybe it's something that will come back, maybe you work on something else. That's the one that gets you your first deal. And this, this original idea has a chance later as trends shift and things change. So, I think it's good to listen to criticism, but also you do have to keep the faith in terms of what you're trying to achieve.

**Nelima Begum** 28:03

For sure. It is, you know, a lot of it has to do with persevering and being resilient, knowing that eventually the right thing will come to you. Just off the back of that, do you have any, like, practical advice for writers in terms of what a great submission package looks like, in terms of an agent letter, a synopsis and maybe that opening extract that they'd have to send you?

**Abi Fellows** 28:26

Yeah, I think it's really important when you're approaching agents to think about personalising your approach and doing your research so that you're making sure that, I think it can be very tempting, and I understand the reasons for that, to send something to lots of agents at once to improve your chances. And I would definitely always suggest to sending quite a decent number. But I think really look at what the agent’s working on [and] what their list is like. It’s always great when someone says, you know, I noticed that you like x, or you worked on x, and therefore, I thought you might be interested in my book. So it sort of shows an awareness of why you want to be represented by that person. But I think yeah, I mean, I think the big mistake that people can give in covering letters is just too much information. We don't need to know the whole story, just really think about keeping that pitch quite short and snappy, like something like you would read on the back of the book which really entices us, because that letter is really about getting us to open the attachment and read more.

**Nelima Begum** 29:27

Of course, and it's about, kind of, reeling you in that just enough to keep you wanting more. So, what do you wish more people, writers, readers, editors and the industry overall, knew about agents and their role and the work that you do?

**Abi Fellows** 29:44

I think it would be fantastic if people knew a bit more about what we do beyond the, sort of, doing the deal and taking the commission because, to be honest, most of the work is either side of that, you know, there's a lot more that goes into it. But I think I see a lot of discussions at the moment that sometimes pit agents and editors against each other. And I think it's really important to remember that we all, agents have the best interests of the book and the writer at heart, but we really want to work with publishers, because we're all facing the same challenges in terms of the market, and other issues within the industry. So that, you know, it's a collaboration, it should be a collaboration, and that, you know, good agents are up for that and about problem solving together with publishers.

**Nelima Begum** 30:27

For sure. It's a team effort. It takes a village to bring a book into the world. So as you mentioned earlier, you champion a variety of marginalised writers’ voices, both in and outside of your work. How has the industry changed since you first began?

**Abi Fellows** 30:46

I mean, I think it has changed a lot. And not to a point where I sort of feel satisfied or complacent. But I do think we have seen a shift in terms of, well, recruitment, changes to practices in terms of internships, so that, you know, these are paid now, [and] the opening of regional offices, I think, is a really positive step. And I think there is a bigger commitment now, or a bigger interest, in looking at writers from marginalised backgrounds. There's still a lot to do, but I do feel we are widening the pipeline in terms of what we do. But lots more to be done.

**Nelima Begum** 31:23

Absolutely. It's kind of… just an ongoing effort, I think, industry-wide.

**Abi Fellows** 31:30

Yeah, and I think it's really important when we talk about inclusion that we think about all facets of that. So, I mean, I think a big bugbear for me at the moment is that we're not talking about disabled writers and neurodiverse writers enough. And we're not talking about disabled publishing professionals enough. And there's so much to be done there to make the industry accessible for them and inclusive of them. So it's important that we think about diversity really widely and inclusion really widely.

**Nelima Begum** 31:59

Absolutely. And I think that ties in beautifully with the next question: you have a wealth of experience, so it's fair to say you've seen publishing undergo a few shifts in its culture and landscape. What are you hopeful for in the future?

**Abi Fellows** 32:13

I'm just hopeful that we keep building on what we've seen in the last couple of years, in terms of taking risks. I want to see more investment in homegrown talent, particularly when we think about marginalised voices. I think there's, you know, we see amazing voices come in from the US and other countries, and I love American fiction, but I would love to see us take more risks on writers here, because, you know, we have a different culture, and we have an amazing talent here, and it just really needs to be championed and supported. And to see, you know, we've seen various diversity and inclusion schemes, but just to be really conscious of making sure that they're impactful long term, and that they, you know, really invest in authors beyond one book that they go the journey with an author and that it's really meaningful and impactful. And that we retain staff, and that we keep our industry being something that appeals to people.

**Nelima Begum** 33:14

Absolutely. I completely agree with you on that. It goes beyond the author. It really is about what goes on with the internal structures as well, you know—who was reading the work? Do we have adequate sensitivity readers to really give it the time and attention it needs? You know, do our staff reflect the authors that we’re publishing?

**Abi Fellows** 33:32

Yeah. And I think we've seen a real change in that in terms of the agenting and editorial landscapes but I don't know if that's filtered through to sales, for example. I mean, I don't know the stats on this, so, you know, don't quote me on anything, but I just think it's really important that we see that throughout embedded in the entire industry. Because otherwise we can't do these books justice, and we can't open ourselves up to the possibilities of new voices.

**Nelima Begum** 34:02

Of course, and you know, it all ties together [in] making an audience or a group feel represented and properly, when they know that, you know, an adequate amount of work and time and staff has gone into this book.

**Abi Fellows** 34:15

Yeah. And also, I mean, you touched on it when we spoke about sensitivity reads about also thinking, you know, what accommodations it’s important to make for writers. So if I'm working with a disabled writer, I may need their contract to reflect the fact that they need adjustments made and we need to, as an industry, do that and not just have this sort of one-size-fits-all way of doing business because it won't be appropriate and it won't be inclusive.

**Nelima Begum** 34:41

Absolutely. So finally, if there are any writers out there who think you'd be a perfect fit for their work, how can they reach out to you? Because I'm sure everyone thinks you're epic. Everyone wants to get in touch. Everyone wants Abi Fellows to represent them. How can they reach you?

**Abi Fellows** 34:57

Well, as I said, I'm very lucky because we have our submissions coordinator, but we've also, we're trying to make the process less daunting and as accessible as we can. And we're always trying to improve that. And but we have, on our website, on The Good Literary Agency website, quite a comprehensive page about how to submit to us, and it breaks it down into fiction, non-fiction, adult, kids. And hopefully most common questions are on there. And we do also have some allowance for if people, for reasons of neurodiversity or access, need to submit slightly differently. But through that website, you can access a form, which will take you to our submissions portal, which will take you to me and anyone is very welcome to mention me by name, if they would like me to, if they would like Briony to, sort of, funnel something in in my direction specifically.

**Nelima Begum** 35:48

Well, thank you so much for this conversation, Abi. I want to round off with some quickfire questions. So, you know, just say whatever comes to your head first, there's no thinking required here. What are you reading at the moment?

**Abi Fellows** 36:01

Oh, well, I'm doing a final edit on something that I want to submit after my holiday. So I'm reading that and it's amazing. But at the weekend, I just read *If You Still Recognise Me* by Cynthia So. It is a YA, which I really love, because it's just a great queer love story, which as we know, I love and it's set in the UK, which is really refreshing because I've been reading loads of American books in that area. So yeah, I really enjoyed that.

**Nelima Begum** 36:30

Brilliant. The least exciting thing about being an agent is—

**Abi Fellows** 36:37

Tax forms. To get the money, you have to fill out the tax forms. You do deals overseas, and they're really, really dull.

**Nelima Begum** 36:47

I love that. I love how, like, finances and accounting are—

**Abi Fellows** 36:53

I mean, it’s the core of what we do, but it's not glamorous or fun.

**Nelima Begum** 36:57

Yeah, okay. Yeah, it doesn't really fit with like the fancy book launches and going out for ice cream and lunches.

**Abi Fellows** 37:04

Not all the schmoozing.

**Nelima Begum** 37:06

If your life needed a title, what would it be?

**Abi Fellows** 37:09

Oh my gosh, that's so hard. I'm gonna say Never a Dull Moment.

**Nelima Begum** 37:16

Love that. An author to watch out for in the coming months is—

**Abi Fellows** 37:20

Oh, this is so tricky because I don't want to be favourite. Well, I'm really excited about Lizzie Huxley-Jones, because there's been quite a lot going on in the background for a good couple of years, and there's lots of news coming out for them soon. And I'm just so proud of what they've done, what they're doing within this industry. So yes, watch out for their announcements and their books coming next year.

**Nelima Begum** 37:45

Brilliant stuff. And finally, what is the number one piece of writing advice you'd give?

**Abi Fellows** 37:52

I think find your tribe, find your writing community who you can go through this web [with], because you know, if you find an agent, that's fantastic. But before that point, it's so useful to have people just to share notes with just to maybe do reads for you. And just to have that, sort of, camaraderie and mutual moral support through the process, I think, is really important because it can be a very lonely business otherwise, especially before you get an agent and a publisher on board.

**Nelima Begum** 38:24

A beautiful way to round off, thank you so much for your time, Abi.

**Abi Fellows** 38:27

My pleasure.

**Nelima Begum** 38:29

A wonderful conversation. You are such a trailblazer and your authors and this industry is so very lucky to have you.

**Abi Fellows** 38:36

Oh, you're very kind.

**Nelima Begum** 38:37

Really appreciate your time. Thank you for joining us.

**Abi Fellows** 38:40

Thanks.