

Episode - 73 Disability in Publishing

Emily Einolander 00:21

Welcome to the Hybrid Pub Scout podcast with me, Emily Einolander. We're mapping the frontier between traditional and indie publishing. And we're joined today by founding members of the organization, Disability in Publishing.

Corinne Kalasky 00:27

Disability in Publishing was founded by US-based disabled individuals who work in traditional publishing. Inspired by other organizations such as People of Color in Publishing and Latinx in Publishing, which have made great strides to make publishing more inclusive, we set out to find an organization that would focus on disability and health and inclusivity. In 2021. The decision to create Disability in Publishing was driven by the fact that we are trying to navigate an industry built on traditions that were not developed with us in mind, and the belief that universal design and inclusivity benefits everyone and that was drawn from your about page.

Emily Einolander 01:17

Great, so welcome. Would you like to introduce yourselves and tell a little bit about what you do?

Madison Parrotta

I'm Madison Parrotta, I have a day job and prospects research. I'm also a freelance sensitivity reader for physical disability and mobility devices for a number of different companies. And I'm currently a member of the communications team for Disability in Publishing.

Sarah Fisk 02:07

And I am Sarah Fisk. I am a literary agent for Tobias literary agency and for Disability in Publishing, I am a board member and the programming lead.

Victoria Hendersen 02:23

Yeah, hi, my name is Victoria Henderson. I work in foreign rights currently at Brower literary and management. I'm a foreign rights agent. And then with Disability in Publishing, I serve as the operations lead.

Sarah Fisk 02:39

Yeah, Victoria manages a lot of our kind of internal organization type stuff.

Emily Einolander 02:45

Let's start with your core mission of Disability in Publishing. What would you say that that is?

Sarah Fisk 02:51

I'm not sure exactly what our website says. Like. We basically started to support employees in the American publishing system. And so even though the work we do may affect writers, it's not necessarily for authors, it's for people who work in publishing, and in the various like, related things to publishing, like, people who work at publishing related news sites or anything like that. And literary journals. Also, we had to keep it limited to the United States, because there's a lot of, you know, different laws and kind of things related to disability, country by country. And so people always ask, Well, why can't I join? If I'm so and so I can, Jim. So those are the, those are the answers because we have to focus on something right. And we're just trying to support in many different ways. So we're trying to advocate for more disability friendly practices in with employers, and a lot of publishing employees are not employees, technically, they are contractors. And so that introduces another level of complexity to it as well. And we're also one of the things that we want to do is we want to have conference liaison to, you know, help people make their conferences more accessible. And, yeah, so we have a lot of different things that we want to do. We're just getting started. Our first real event that we're doing is going to be in January, and it is a webinar from a disability lawyer about knowing your rights as an employee. So that's going to be the first thing that we do and that was like, one of the things I think we all thought was really important for us to start with.

Madison Parrotta 04:42

And I think something we also were talking about, is we really want to especially advocate for disabled people who are entering publishing, just to mentor them and help them get started and help them learn the lay of the land. That Can't stop, and really decide to build a community of disabled publishing professionals that can again all support each other and provide resources and help increase accessibility across the industry.

Victoria Hendersen 05:16

Essentially, we wanted to make a place that existed as a resource, and community for disabled publishing professionals. There we had seen something that was geared towards writers, but a lot of us informally knew each other, and were experiencing disability related struggles in our work lives. So we wanted to make kind of a central hub of resources, information contacts, and our Slack is often like a place to vent as well. So yeah, that was the mission to create, to create space and an industry that doesn't like to create space often.

Sarah Fisk 05:58

And I did pull up the official mission statement, if you want, like the, you know. Our mission is to create community, provide resources, and increase accessibility across the industry, in order to increase disability visibility, and retain the talent of disabled publishing professionals. We all support each other through advocacy, education, networking, and community. We are committed to working from an intersectional perspective. So everything we said, but more concise.

Emily Einolander 06:30

Excellent

Corinne Kalasky 06:31

What would you say was the inspiration for disability in publishing? And how did it come to be?

Emily Einolander 06:35

And Victoria, I know that you did share a little bit about how you'd been speaking to each other internally and informally. And we talked about the People of Color in publishing and Latinx in Publishing. So I guess what was the thing that really, you know, said we're going to do this, like, let's, let's do this?

Victoria Hendersen 06:56

Well, if I recall correctly, Madison, Madison and Sarah, correct me if I'm wrong, but they're we knew each other, loosely, each of us kind of had like mutuals in law on Twitter, and a couple of us, a couple of us like a couple of different times, I remember like I independently had had it started reaching out to people kind of at the end of 2021. To put out like feelers for disability organizations and a couple of other founding members have done the same thing. And I think it was Emily Keyes, who put out the call that was like, I really wish there was a disability organization and a bunch of us were like, We also wish there was this thing and then we made it.

Madison Parrotta 07:46

Yeah, I think let's say reach out to me on like a discord like one of the entry level publishing Discord. I think Sarah tweeted something. You're like, oh, kind of similar to me. I wish there was something, some sort of disability organization. And then I messaged you, and I was like, Hey, we're saying something, come join us. And then who became kind of like, one of the head people, I think, which was really cool. I'm really proud of myself for being able to convert you..

Sarah Fisk 08:22

Yeah, because there was a group that was forming in the UK. And I had, I had actually tweeted a couple of different times, though, wish there was something like it. And then the last time he tweeted, Madison had messaged me and was like, Hey, we're starting something. Join this group. And it was just like a small chat group. And then I came in, and I have run several like nonprofits especially including a publishing related nonprofit. And so I was like, Oh, I know how to do all this. So that's when we kind of started formally organizing.

Victoria Hendersen 08:55

Sarah has an awesome thank God we have them

Madison Parrotta 09:00

They were like the person then like, at that moment, it was perfect timing I think.

Victoria Hendersen 09:07

I think like we have split up the different roles so that everybody has different things going on in their life. Sarah just has experienced doing this already. So they're like, we're always like, Sarah, what do we do here?

Madison Parrotta 09:22

And I also think some of our other more experienced members on our team like, like Emily and Eron, who have more experience in the industry in general. And there's well I always have some of the higher ends

Sarah Fisk 09:40

I guess. And then Ismita just like knows everyone, yeah, she knows everyone.

Emily Einolander 09:49

How many people are in the founding group?

Victoria Hendersen 09:54

Let me count. I know. You're gonna ask me to if you

Sarah Fisk 09:59

Caitie Flum, Victoria, Asmita. Emily, Aaron, Madison.

Victoria Hendersen 10:10

Miranda. Yes, Crystal, there's 11 of us

Emily Einolander 10:20

So let's talk a little bit about the work you do and why it's important. What sorts of barriers do disabled people in publishing face?

Madison Parrotta 10:32

I think Victoria did like a whole panel on this Book Council. So, I mean, in general, and I'm talking about my experience, I'm physically disabled. And I feel like people can tell that I'm disabled pretty easily when they see me. So for me, like having a visible disability. I've been trying to get a full time publishing job for like years, and I haven't been able to. And my theory is that part of the reason that that is the case is because people can tell I'm disabled. So then one of the big things that comes with that is figuring out how to disclose your disability if you disclose your disability. Like, personally, I have an internal struggle when it comes to that. Because I'm really passionate about seeking out books with disabled representation. But I don't necessarily want people to know that I'm disabled, right away, because it will create a bias. And I think part of that bias is that hiring managers think that non disabled people are compared disabled people cannot work as hard as non disabled people, when in reality, I feel like we all have to work 10 times harder, because some people will understand that we can do the same things as them, even though we're disabled.

Sarah Fisk 12:13

Yeah, remember Madison mentioning at one point going to interview and the actual location was physically inaccessible? Yeah. And so that's like one thing, and Eron mentioned this in her interview for the PW Star Watch. A lot of the job descriptions will say you must be able to lift 50 pounds, even though that probably has nothing to do with the actual job. Or it's a very, very small part of the job that you could easily get someone else in the office to do. And so that automatically rolls people out. And I think, on the other end of it, like, there is a lot of bias towards neurotypical people. So people who are

neurodiverse may face barriers just in the way that things are operated. There's a lot of like, well, I just know, there's...

Victoria Hendersen 13:04

I have so much to say about this. I know, to interrupt you, Sarah, go on.

Sarah Fisk 13:10

Yeah, there's a lot of like, you know, well, you just you should know this or that kind of thing. And the one thing that really bothers me every time is there's often this discussion on publishing Twitter about when it's okay to send emails, right? And it's like, you have to send emails during business hours. And then it's like, not taking the fact into account that, especially neurodivergent people are often not morning people, and so are working hours are not the same as other people's working hours. And also, if you live in California, like even just not even from a disabled perspective, like the whole idea is just preposterous. Because their emails, it's asynchronous communication, you can read them at any time. And so it's just like all these different little biases. And I remember when I was applying for agent positions, I was primarily applying for remote ones. And I had to think like, do I want to put them disabled on my cover letter? And it only came ultimately came down to I can wait for a position right? I don't—there is no rush for me. And so I put it in my cover letter because I didn't want to work for an agency. That wouldn't give me an interview because I said I was disabled.

Victoria Hendersen 14:27

Yeah, on the flip side of that, I have had jobs where I have disclosed like midway through for whatever reason or another. And, it's resulted in some problems for me at work. And I think that there are some I hesitate to call it privilege because I don't think it's privileged to have to mask your disability, but there's some On level of like being able to go under the radar, which is very stressful when you're trying to maintain sort of the standards of what has traditionally been like a genteel white woman's industry, and you're trying to maintain that sort of social acceptability, which would be stressful for anybody, but especially for neurodivergent people, and it's like, very difficult to navigate very minute social interactions. And then, in my world of foreign rights, we're also navigating across different cultures all of the time, which can be another layer onto that. And a lot of times, a lot of the times, it's not even necessarily like how the person you're talking to receives you. It's how the people around you watch, and think that the other person is receiving it. So it's a lot of monitoring of yourself, I would add to barriers that disabled people face. It's really, as we're seeing right now, like the current Harper mandates to come back into the office, people are being pushed to return to New York, which is an expensive city for the most neurotypical most able to have people. It's inaccessible for many, many reasons. And like, personally, I work a lot better remotely, because I'm not distracted. I hate an open plan office, I do not want to live in anybody else's zoom call. But there are a lot of reasons why somebody couldn't live in New York. And I don't think that it is fair to anybody to mandate that they live in like the most expensive city in the country, especially because disabled people spend a lot on health care, we spent more on transportation, on like basic life things. And health care can be a big issue as well. And a lot of like entry level, especially agency jobs don't offer it. And so that's another asset like barrier to access that I think needs to be addressed. I miss anything, there's more, I'm sure there's more.

Emily Einolander 17:15

I'm sure there's more.

Sarah Fisk 17:17

So we could literally just talk for like three hours. Like, well,

Victoria Hendersen 17:23

Also low pay. That's a huge issue.

Emily Einolander 17:26

Yeah, if everything's so expensive. Yeah, if you're starting at that level, where it's hard to where you have to pay a lot anyway, and then you're not actually getting the money for it, you're gonna be upside down probably.

Victoria Hendersen 17:42

I also, to add one more thing, this didn't happen at this in the publishing industry, but at a previous job, like I had disabilities like you buy one, buy one get seven free. So I had, I had disclosed a disability, that it was maybe like a more acceptable kind. And then I disclosed a different disability because I needed accommodations for that disability. And that resulted in some like, really harsh treatment at work. So it also you have to be discerning about what you tell people and there's things like, sometimes there are things that people can physically see about you that sort of marks you as different and not neurotypical and are not abled. And that can also be just another very confusing thing to navigate.

Emily Einolander 18:39

I imagine that whole having to try to do everything 10 times harder. Yeah, better than everyone else, that if people are thinking retaliatory, retaliatory against because of a disability that you've disclosed, you probably need to be, you might be a lot more paranoid about the way that you behave around other people because they're looking for something to catch you on. Yeah, not to go into specifics, but I've seen that happen before.

Victoria Hendersen 19:13

Yeah, I can only speak from my personal experience, but I have found that I'm a very capable employee, I get a lot done at the hours when I want to get things done. And like, in my experience, when I had disclosed the less socially acceptable disability, I found, like, the expectations for me, suddenly shifted drastically. And I was like, what happened? Like, I'm the same person that I was a month ago. So yeah, I mean, that was stressful.

Sarah Fisk 19:48

But yeah, I think we talked about this too, in our Slack channel, because so one of my things is I have a chronic illness and it flares up. And so there are days where I cannot get out of bed. And most jobs, they don't understand that they don't get it. And so I can just call and say I have a migraine, and that's fine. But I can't say what's actually wrong with me, right? So it's just ridiculous because it's like people understand migraines people understand like stomach bugs or whatever. But they don't understand a chronic illness flare up, which is the same symptoms just for a different reason.

Corinne Kalasky 20:29

I think we talked about this a little. But what would you say some of your main advocacy goals are?

Emily Einolander 20:35

Yeah. And I guess how, as advocates, you would be able to address some of the issues that you just brought up?

Madison Parrotta 20:42

Yeah, I think like we mentioned before, definitely welcoming new publishing industry members who are new to the business and showing them the ropes and helping them with accommodation, requesting those helping them with cover letters and resumes, helping them with interview tips, mentoring them in any way we can. And also, I can say I mentioned before, we want to help HR teams sort of make the whole process by just consulting with them and doing webinars, and I guess panels, helping them sort of figure out the right way to address or not address disability, if that makes sense.

Sarah Fisk 21:34

Yeah, so I think we're approaching it from a couple different angles, because we want to provide resources for disabled employees, but we also want to provide resources for their employers. And those are going to be very different resources, obviously. And, you know, we are approaching it from several different angles, where we are trying to blog posts with information and we're trying to have webinars with information, we have a newsletter. We're gonna advocate, industry facing so both the public and you know, inside. So but you know, through social media, obviously, we've been openly supporting different efforts and that kind of thing. We're going to provide resources, and materials. Interview coaching was one thing that we talked about that we haven't been able to launch. Yep. But we want to...another thing was we were looking at the Authors Guild, and how they provide legal consults for writers. And so that is a long term goal for us as well. So that if someone does have a question like, can I disclose this, or what happens if I disclose this, that kind of thing, they can get that kind of first level advice. And another long term goal is to facilitate an industry wide survey that focuses on disability, we see a lot of these surveys that focus on books and different types of diversity. And so we want to make sure that disability is part of that conversation as well. And then another thing that I really liked that We Need Diverse Books does is they provide internship stipends for unpaid internships for diverse employees. And so that's another kind of long term goal that we would like to look at, too.

Victoria Hendersen 23:18

I think that we were also, this was a very, very long term goal. But I think we also did pitch the idea of having an ombudsman which is like, how would you explain it?

Sarah Fisk 23:35

I grew up in the military. So I always think of it in that terms. So the ombudsman is the person that the family can go to if they're having an issue of any kind. So whether it's a childcare issue or something like that, obviously, it would be translated to our purpose.

Emily Einolander 23:54

Would that be a little bit of conflict resolution type intervention?

Victoria Hendersen 24:00

It could be a conflict resolution. It could be I'm having a problem with my employer, what resources Can you guide me to? It could be, I need a job and I can't decide whether to disclose or not. What is your advice? Basically like a catch all? Person who is there to mitigate anything that may come up?

Emily Einolander 24:26

Has your organization collaborated with any other ones?

Sarah Fisk 24:31

Since it's a lot not on an official level? I think that we have been talking to different people from different organizations to get feedback and that kind of thing. So I mean, all over the place from people of color and publishing to eating diverse books to even we are using governing docs designed for pitch wars by the pitch wars lawyer who gave us permission to use those and so have, you know, we've reached out to all our different individual contacts, but we haven't really done? I don't think anything is quite formal yet. But we are also that we've had several publishers reach out to us as well who want to coordinate with us.

Victoria Hendersen 25:15

And if anybody would like to meet us, our external relations person, and you can email us at this just disabilityinpublishing@gmail.com.

Corinne Kalasky 25:26

Do you have any specific advocacy successes that you can share with us?

Sarah Fisk 25:31

We haven't really gotten too started on our official operations yet. So we were actually just registered as a legal entity on October 25. And we submitted by we, I mean, me, submitted our federal nonprofit application the same day, which takes a while to get approved. And so we're hoping that comes through the beginning of December, the end of this month, end of November. And so we were, we're kind of waiting on some of those things to get some of our official programming started, because that allows us to do a lot more, you know, I think the the main kind of successes that we've seen so far is we've started to see a community build, we'd created a Slack we have a smaller group chat for management type stuff, we created a Slack where we've been slowly kind of inviting people and and we've seen a lot of, you know, really good stuff come out of that really good conversations even if it's just like ranting and other people commiserating, you know, that's can be really helpful to just realize that, like, you're not the only one experiencing this kind of stuff, right?

Madison Parrotta 26:35

Also via Twitter, where we kind of started, where we were pretty mature, we mentioned that we were starting and we got a lot of interest. And then we weren't able to really focus on that interest until a couple months later. But we are like retweeting stuff on there and answering things on there. So that for something else that we've kind of built up.

Victoria Hendersen 27:00

We've also I think, what I personally consider successes, we've had, like some publishers, diversity, either departments or initiatives reach out to us, which I think that was really exciting for us to see kind of action from their side as well.

Emily Einolander 27:21

Nice to see that people want to do better, at least Yeah. So how can people in the industry or who are hoping to get into the industry who identify as disabled get involved with you, maybe in that slack channel, etc?

Madison Parrotta 27:39

Yeah, so I can cover this. So, um, if people are interested, they can send us an email or reach out to us on Twitter, disabilityinpublishing@gmail.com, like, which were mentioned, and I can add them to the Slack. So there's that. And if there are anything, if there are agents or editors who are interested in supporting books that involve disability, or books by writers with disabilities, they can also get in touch with them, because we have a directory on our website that we can add them to. And I think in the future, this will include other other industry professionals, freelancers, etc. And if people are interested in writing for us, like Sarah mentioned, we are going to start a blog at some point. So we're looking for pieces on health, illness, disability, a combination of the three or anything else that someone could potentially think that will be relevant, so they can again, email us with their pitch. And we also have a newsletter. So people can subscribe to that, to stay up to date with what we're doing. And I believe that link is also on the website as well.

Sarah Fisk 29:12

Yeah, it's on our contact us page. And I think if you're, if you're not a disabled person, but you're interested in supporting the organization, I think the newsletter is probably the best place. Twitter if Twitter survives this week, is also a good place to follow us. And then if you are a disabled person who works in publishing or is working towards working in publishing, do you reach out to us and join the slack because I think community is one of the most important things.

Emily Einolander 29:38

So for people who want to help, since you're just getting the operation off the ground and everything you would say that following the newsletter would kind of give them the cue when you finally do have something that they can do to help out.

Sarah Fisk 29:51

Yeah, if we need anything that's gonna go in the newsletter. So if we need anyone to volunteer in a specific way, that will go in the newsletter of course and any fundraising efforts are gonna go through the newsletter as well.

Emily Einolander 30:07

All right, do you have anything that you would like to share in terms of advice, or just additional facts that people should know about your organization?

Sarah Fisk 30:17

I think I mean, in terms of advice, I think the best thing is to realize that you are not alone. And publishing is a particularly difficult industry, for people with disabilities, a lot of it has to do with being centered in New York City. But obviously, there are a lot of other things as well. And there are a lot of people you like, I am so surprised by the number of people who reached out to me who were like, I'm disabled, but no one at my office knows, you know, that kind of thing. And so there, there are a lot of us hiding in publishing too. And hopefully, we'll be able to kind of, you know, make an appearance and be more visible and help other people who, who want to work in this industry.

Madison Parrotta 31:04

So I think it's important for disabled people who are new to publishing, to understand that they shouldn't work for free, and extra work receiving their thoughts and opinions on things that are related to disability for free. And also without consent. And without being paid. Because that's extra labor. There's been like a number of times, I've done work for a company, and it's like, morphed into the disabilities side of things. And when I first started, like, I was like, Okay, I'll do it, whatever. But I was naive, and I should have been like, you need to pay me to do this. But now I know better. And I feel like everyone who is disabled should really know that. Because, you know, we're all worthy of being paid for our work.

Emily Einolander 32:12

And especially, if you're being asked to use niche expertise to help your company and being put on different committees and whatnot, there should be something in it for you.

Victoria Hendersen 32:25

Yeah, I would add, for people who are not disabled who are listening to this podcast, asked to maybe reconsider, like, I think it's an easy place to start with how you think about disability is how you think about yourself. I always like to say like, you're a temporarily abled person, like you, like people can be temporarily disabled, you can become disabled at any time. We have, I mean, just in our organization alone, we have people who are born disabled people who have become disabled due to illness or accidents. So like, to lead with that sort of compassion and understanding, I think, will get you very far in life in general, but especially when it comes to disability. And then to people who are disabled who are trying to get into publishing, definitely second, Madison's advice—don't work for free. And my other piece of advice is, it's okay to quit. And it's okay to leave. If you're in a situation that's bad to your health. Because that is so much more important than like a publishing job is. There will be more jobs, you can always find another job. And I think disabled people in particular, are taught to think of jobs as a miraculous opportunity that comes around every once in a while, but that's not true. And so yeah, my advice is to prioritize your health and not risk everything and work for free. And that this is an industry which asks a lot of its employees already. So to put physical health on top of it, or even mental health, anything that affects you. Like, that should be our priority. And that's what the reason that we exist as an organization to have a space for that and to remind people that like you are the valuable person, you bring value to the industry, and you should also value yourself. Yeah, literally the best. I'm not kidding. The best piece of advice I've ever heard in my life, is somebody online said that neurodivergent people should put about 70% of the effort that you think you should put into something. And I saw that like two years ago, and it has totally reevaluated the way that I live my life because that's definitely how I felt

when I got my first publishing job. I was like, I have to work 24 hours a day. Um, and that was not fun. So yeah, I urge you to consider what's going to be healthy and sustainable in the long term, and not make sacrifices to get something temporary.

Emily Einolander 35:13

So could you tell us more about the event in January?

Sarah Fisk 35:17

Yeah, on January 12, we are going to have a webinar on basically knowing your rights for disabled employees. And she is going to talk both about WT to employees and independent contractors. So if you're salaried, or you know, literary agents are most commonly contracted in place. And so it's going to be just a presentation, there's going to be a q&a section as well. And that's one of our first real big official events, I guess I should say. Yeah. So it's Meredith Moring, who is an author and a lawyer, and she is also disabled herself?

Emily Einolander 36:02

Okay. Well, I think that'll do it unless there's any other places that people can find you online, either as individuals or a group.

Victoria Hendersen 36:11

I think we have all of our individual social media links on our website. If you go to the founding members section. That's, the best place to find information in general is our website which is meant to do a great job on.

Emily Einolander 36:25

Yes, it's very easy to navigate. All right, well, you can find us hopefully on Twitter @hybridpubscout, but we'll see you on Instagram @HybridPubScoutpod. You can email me emily@hybridpubscout.com. Thanks for giving a rip about books.