

Northern European Studies – and then what?

A video series on career prospects by j o l n e s

Transcription Episode 4: Literary Agent

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My name is Antje Hartmann. I received my bachelor's degree at the University of Cologne and studied Scandinavian and Finnish Studies and as a second subject English Studies. After that, I moved to Münster, completed my master's degree in Scandinavian Studies, and also studied for half a year in Denmark, in Aarhus.

WHY DID YOU STUDY SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES?

I went to Sweden for a year after my high school graduation, as an au-pair, and lived there in a Danish-Swedish family with three children. During this time, I thought about studying and found out that you can actually study Scandinavian Studies and the Scandinavian languages.

HOW DID YOUR PROFESSIONAL CAREER UNFOLD?

After my master's degree, it was already clear to me that I would like to work in publishing houses or the book industry, simply because my interest in literature was so great. I also did an internship during the semester abroad in Denmark, three months in a small children's book publishing house, also in Denmark. It was really exciting to see - for the publishing house I made contacts with German publishers so that they could perhaps translate Danish literature into German. I found it very exciting that literature can simply travel across borders. Then I went to a recruiting day in Munich, where various publishers and media companies introduced themselves. That was even during my studies, which was very helpful to get a little insight into the industry and to find out what jobs are available, and that is when I realized that besides publishing houses, there is not only press and editing work, but also this area of rights and licenses, which I found very exciting. Then after my studies, when I was about to write my master's thesis, I looked around a bit and applied, and then I actually found a traineeship in the area of rights and licenses, at Hoffmann und Campe Verlag in Hamburg. There I got to know the whole area: What do rights and licenses actually mean? In other words, everything that is produced in the field can be produced further, so it does not just end up in the hands of the reader. You can make audio books, sell film rights, for the theatre or even foreign rights, where you can see how a book travels and is translated into different languages.

WHICH TASKS DETERMINE YOUR DAILY WORK ROUTINE?

After the publishing house, that was just a kind of training, with this traineeship in this publishing house, which lasted a year. After that, I switched to the Literature Agency, which is again the exciting thing about working in the agency, because you have a different position there. You do not work with the finished product, the book, but you are involved from the very beginning as a mediator for authors, so we have about two hundred authors in our agency, which we look after. They send us their manuscripts, we review them and work a little bit with the authors, give them a little bit of an initial approach to what can be edited to make the manuscript a little bit better, and then offer it to publishers so they can buy it. Then we operate the whole administrative apparatus in the background. We then prepare contracts when we sell the book to a publisher; we do all the billing and bookkeeping for the authors. So we talk to the authors and the publishers and that's a bit of the core task, a lot of communication, that I sit in the office and check emails and then I talk to the publishers and the authors on the phone and then I follow the whole process from the first pages of a book to the finished product, which is really nice. Then we also have a few German publishers for whom we also work and sell licenses, which is what I really learned, that we then make audio book contracts or sell film rights or, which is just really nice for me, of course foreign rights, that we also sell the translation rights abroad. My area of expertise is actually Scandinavia and Finland, which is very nice that I can still bring my studies to this field, so to speak.

WHAT SCANDINAVIAN REFERENCES ARE THERE IN YOUR WORK?

The language is of course a big point when you sell books abroad and talk to foreign publishers. That is definitely a big door opener. That you know the culture a little bit as well, e.g. that in Scandinavia there is a big summer break in the summer, where everybody is on vacation and maybe the working mills grind a little slower and then you have to take into account a little waiting time.

WHICH COMPETENCES AND SOFT SKILLS DID YOU ACQUIRE DURING YOUR STUDIES THAT HELP YOU IN YOUR WORK TODAY?

A very important tool is of course the text work, because that is what we do with our authors or when we get manuscripts sent to us for review, that we need a certain feeling for the text and for the language in order to be able to assess whether the book has potential and to work with the authors. Apart from that, everything that has to do with rhetoric is of course very important, especially when it comes to the unpopular presentations in the seminars. Or to work in a team with different groups, to be open, to approach people and to research different topics, that is one of the most important things you get to know. Especially in my job, it is like this: you are a salesperson and you have to be able to present the book well, to

the publisher, so that he buys it and accordingly these are the most important points that I learned and took with me during my studies.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR STUDENTS?

Of course, internships are always good. However, I have to say that I did not really do any internships during my bachelor's studies because you were so focused on your studies and there was not really much time on the side. However, I did have a short break between my Bachelor and Master studies and did an internship at a small audio book publishing house in Hamburg. During my studies, I always worked in the field of literature, for example here in Cologne at the University and City Library, where of course you had to deal with books. During my master studies, I also worked in a small publishing house in Münster, where I also worked in proofreading. I always chose a few things where I had a little bit of connection to literature or simply got to know different areas. Then the studies in Denmark, where I did an internship in a children's book publishing house, which was of course the icing on the cake.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF STUDYING A SMALL SUBJECT LIKE SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES?

A family atmosphere is of course a big advantage, because you really grow together like a small family during your studies and have good contacts and connections. It is simply a great door opener because it is an exotic subject to study, unlike the other major subjects. No matter in which area you meet people later in life, be it at work or privately, so whenever you mention Scandinavian Studies, one or the other opens up and feels immediately addressed and you are in any case immediately in the conversation, which is very nice.

Credits

The interview was conducted on August 26 2020 at the University of Cologne, Department for Scandinavian and Finnish Studies.

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