Justice Curry:

Greetings earthlings. And welcome back to another episode of Chat With WRAC. The only podcast about Michigan State University's Department of Writing, Rhetoric and American cultures. I'm your guide, Justice Curry, here to take you on another venture within the WRAC department.

Justice Curry:

Joining us today is Kate Birdsall. How are you doing?

Kate Birdsall:

I'm hanging in there. How are you?

Justice Curry:

I am also hanging in there. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and what you do in WRAC?

Kate Birdsall:

Oh wow. What do you want to know? I am an assistant professor. I primarily teach in professional and public writing. My focus has been for a long time editing and publishing, but I've recently pivoted to include community publishing, which I'm super excited about. I also direct The CUBE, which is an umbrella, amorphous wizard behind the curtain organization that helps us run our publications and take on cool new projects.

Justice Curry:

So can you tell me a little bit more about The Current and what you do there and the type of publications that you guys do?

Kate Birdsall:

Oh, The Current is so cool. It's the magazine. And a long time ago, it was Ing magazine. So we turned Ing magazine, which was light and fluffy, to hard hitting, socially justice focused publication, but we are available online at thecurrentmsu.com and we would very much like for everyone to read our pieces.

Justice Curry:

Your pieces look amazing. And I was going to say when I first got into PW at the time, and heard about Ing magazine, I was really curious about it. And now that you mentioned that you had to shut it down, I just thought about it in the back of my mind, "What happened to Ing magazine?" And so now I know that it's technically The Current now.

Kate Birdsall:

It is. It's still a magazine production class. And what I hear semester after semester is it's more like a job than a class, which I feel a little weird about because you all paid to be here, right? We're not paying you, but it's so amazing to me that a group of, anywhere between 12 and 20 students, can show up every semester and just get it and make it work and have this cohesive voice and care about these issues that are so incredibly relevant and be willing to put themselves out there and do it. It's amazing.

Justice Curry:

Yeah. I was going to actually ask how students can become a part of The Current and work with The Current?

Kate Birdsall:

Sign up for WRA 480. I really encourage students to take it for two semesters because then the second semester you already know what's going on. You're going to take on a more managerial role. I think that just makes for such great experience, not just to put on your resume, to narrate in a job interview, to have in your portfolio. I think it's great, but I teach it.

Justice Curry:

Are there any prerequisite classes necessary to take this class?

Kate Birdsall:

WRA 202, for sure. Technically WRA 370 is a prerequisite, but I am known for giving overrides into that class. I like WRA 370, maybe as a co-requisite or tell me about your editing experience. Because editing is a big, big part of it, but I'm always willing to have a conversation with people and see where they are and whether it's a good fit.

Justice Curry:

When I first heard about Ing, I thought it was one of those things where you had to have so much experience prior to be able to do it. And so, it's really awesome to hear that all you have to do is take a couple classes and it's not a super exclusive thing because when I first saw it, I was really intimidated and I was like, "Oh, this seems so exclusive."

Kate Birdsall:

Not at all. It's where you get the experience.

Justice Curry:

So going back to editing and publishing, can you tell us some skills that are necessary for becoming a successful editor and publisher?

Kate Birdsall:

That's a complicated question, Justice. I think the first thing you have to be is a writer. Editing and in particular developmental editing or in the fiction world, we would call that line editing, is all about internalizing the writer's voice and then developing a picture of the very best version of the thing you're editing and helping the writer to get it there.

Justice Curry:

Do you think it's possible to both write your own book and then also edit it or would that be extremely overwhelming?

Kate Birdsall:

Oh, that would be, dare I say, impossible because we all get so attached to our own work. We think of writers like the great American novelist as toiling away over a typewriter and then submitting the finished manuscript and it's published exactly as is. And that is just not the case. There is a team of people working to make it better.

Justice Curry:

What was your path to becoming an editor and publisher?

Kate Birdsall:

Well, I'm technically not a publisher. The CUBE is a publisher. We just published our first book, the REO Town Anthology, Dr. Matt Rossi. My path to becoming an editor was that I was a writer for a really long time and had to edit my first novel. But working with the editors just really like, what you are doing is amazing. And then I got a gig as a subcontractor for an independent publisher, and now I work as a line editor. So I like to envision myself as that person.

Justice Curry:

I know you mentioned, you said you saw what editors do and you're like, "This is amazing." But how did you know that that was something that was right for you?

Kate Birdsall:

Not to toot my own horn, but I'm a good writer. Then I was fortunate enough with the publication of my first book to have that experience with both my content editor and my line editor. And I just became enamored with seeing how they took what I thought was a really good draft and made it so tight and easy to read. And I wanted to be that person. So I got into it and I've been teaching for a really long time and part of that time, I've spent teaching creative writing. And in creative writing, we always talk about the importance of peer review, the importance of editing, but then to have it play out in my own creative life, just inspired me to want to do it. So I was like, "Okay, I'll do it."

Justice Curry:

So what is a typical day in the life of an editor?

Kate Birdsall:

That's a good question. Because again, I'm a lowly subcontractor. I get a project every two weeks usually, depending on word count and I have two weeks to complete the project. So I have to get it done really quickly. But typically when you get a project, you take a look at it, you figure out your time management on it, but you really do have to let the writer teach you. Because if we loop back to envision the best version of this, you've got to learn pretty quickly what the best version of it is going to be, and then make the recommendations to get it there.

Justice Curry:

Do you find that you have a better experience or a better outcome with your edits when you have that connection with the client?

Kate Birdsall:

Not necessarily with the client, but with their work and especially with their voice. And so if I can get into the story, I'm going to do a better job editing, but I'm probably also going to miss more nitpicky mechanical things, because I'm into the story.

Justice Curry:

How do you build a name for yourself in editing?

Kate Birdsall:

I think the way to do it is by doing it. So jump in, take The Current, the WRA 480 class, look for opportunities to edit around the department. If those opportunities aren't coming up, be willing to edit for free small pieces for your portfolio, but really it's word of mouth and keeping your clients.

Justice Curry:

I'm curious to know, what are some job opportunities for students in editing that are less talked about?

Kate Birdsall:

So, one day you might end up in New York working for a publisher as an agent, et cetera. And we do have those success stories, but it's far more likely that you'll end up working on a local publication. I think it's too easy to get locked into this Devil Wears Prada narrative when it's far more likely that first editing job is going to be either freelance or a smaller local publication.

Justice Curry:

So we have two questions from Zaria. And the first question is, how can you create a legitimate platform for publishing written pieces as an independent writer?

Kate Birdsall:

First of all, as an independent writer, make sure you have an editor and not just a dev editor, right? Make sure you have a proofreader. If you've got long pieces, like novel link stuff, you can publish directly to Amazon. I am not condoning Amazon as an institution, but it is the first logical place for an independent author to get his/her/their work out there. I think most of the successful indie and by indie, I mean truly independent, don't have a publisher authors, do a combination of things. So they get their books out on Amazon. Their books are quality. They're edited. They have a nice cover. They look professional. And then on their website, they get a little free thing going where if you sign up for the newsletter, you get to read this free story. And I know quite a few people who've really built a name that way. But, it depends for short stories. You got to send them out and try to get them published. Poetry is the same thing.

Justice Curry:

Good to know. And another question from Zaria, what's the best way to pitch ideas to editors/publishers?

Kate Birdsall:

If you're writing nonfiction, you can pitch an idea. If you're a fiction writer, you got to have a whole manuscript. If you're going to go the agent route, I would recommend looking into Pitch Madness on Twitter, have your book written so that if they want to read the whole thing, you can send it. You're going to have to write a query letter in which you do some comparisons. So you're comparing what you have written to established stuff. And then probably the hardest document I've ever had to write in my life is a one-page synopsis that tells the entire story from beginning to end, including the ending, but getting a book published is project management, just like anything else we do.

Justice Curry:

It's a process.

Kate Birdsall:

It is. And very few writers make a living writing.

Justice Curry:

I'm about to shed a tear.

Kate Birdsall:

I'm sorry.

Justice Curry:

You're going to make me cry.

Kate Birdsall:

You got to find a day job that you tolerate and make sure that it doesn't take all of your writing time.

Justice Curry:

My heart.

Kate Birdsall:

I'm not saying it's impossible.

Justice Curry:

It just broke. It just broke.

Kate Birdsall:

Hey, prove me wrong.

Justice Curry:

Absolutely. You know what? You're absolutely right. But this is the reality. I figured that would be the case considering a lot of writers I looked up to, they have had best-selling books, they took 20 years to write those books or it took them 20 years to get a best-selling book. It's not a race per se, but it's really, it's a journey.

Kate Birdsall:

Absolutely. And you write, you get 38 rejections and then your 39th manuscript is the winner, but publishing is so dependent on the market. I'll give you an example. My detective series is set in Cleveland, Ohio. I grew up near Cleveland and my agent, super excited pitching, pitching, pitching. And a big five editor, legit wrote back to her and said, "This is fantastic. And we love it. But right now we're only buying mystery that's set in exotic locations."

Justice Curry:

I would cry.

Kate Birdsall:

Oh, I had some moments with that one because it was like, we were so ... can we just change? But then, no, as I'm not going to give up my artistic integrity and pretend this is set in Brazil or something like that. That was the kind of feedback we got.

Justice Curry:

I'm just at a loss for words, because if the book is good, then why?

Kate Birdsall:

Because it depends on the market. Anyway, so yeah, I guess then my advice becomes buckle up because trying to get published is a wild ride and it is filled with absolutely ego crushing moments.

Justice Curry:

Just to close out, what advice would you give to someone that's interested in pursuing editing and/or publishing?

Kate Birdsall:

Don't give up. And freelance editing is the way the whole industry is moving. And with writing, you got to take rejection after rejection, after rejection. And then finally someone will see the light and will recognize your brilliance and pair you with a great editor and publish you. That might take a while. So in the meantime, don't give up.

Justice Curry:

Amazing words and I'm definitely going to keep that in my mind. That's also how I feel about music as well. Because I also create music and I know I'm probably going to end up breaking a nine to five or whatnot, but because I love making music, I'm still going to make it regardless if anyone's listening to it.

Kate Birdsall:

Yes. And the thing about work, we all have this idea of, this is what my career is going to be, but at the end of the day, you're working so that you can pay your bills so that when you're not working, you can do things that bring you joy.

Justice Curry:

This is such an inspiring conversation.

Kate Birdsall:

Thank you.

Justice Curry:

And I'm very happy to have gotten the opportunity to speak with you, to meet you officially.

Kate Birdsall:

Yeah. Absolutely. It's been delightful.

Justice Curry:

And to have this amazing conversation like this is awesome. And is there anything you want to plug before we go?

Kate Birdsall:

Both of my books are in Kindle Unlimited right now. Book one is called The Flats and book two is called The Heights. They're both Liz Boyle mysteries.

Justice Curry:

Thank you so much for being here.

Kate Birdsall:

My pleasure.

Justice Curry:

And I really enjoyed interviewing you.

Kate Birdsall:

Yeah. This was great. Thank you.

Justice Curry:

Thank you so much for listening to Chat With WRAC. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter @chatwithwrac and tell us what topic you'd like to hear next. Don't be a stranger.