Pivoting Into Publishing with Rose Sandy

Fri, May 05, 2023 1:31PM • 34:49

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

publishing, harpercollins, books, work, author, people, role, career, academy, cisco, job, terms, writing, industry, company, skills, interested, hiring, ideas, paper

**SPEAKERS**

Rose Sandy, Speaker 1, Nicole Fan

**Speaker 1** 00:02

Welcome to this episode of Inside Publishing, the series where we interview industry experts on everything publishing.

**Nicole Fan** 00:09

Hey, it's Nicole here, Digital Content Podcasts Lead for SYP UK. Welcome back to Inside Publishing. We're starting off with a new season called 'The First Page', where we'll be offering targeted advice on entering the publishing industry. In this episode, I had the chance to talk with Rose Sandy, publishing director at HarperCollins as well as an author of thriller and suspense novels. Rose has previously worked in global corporations such as Sony, Coca Cola, and Cisco, and we chat about changing careers and entering publishing from a different industry.

**Nicole Fan** 00:42

Hi Rose, so it's so lovely to have you on our podcast. How are you doing?

**Rose Sandy** 00:48

I'm doing really great, really glad it's Friday. And yeah, absolutely delighted to be here to talk to you.

**Nicole Fan** 00:55

Great, I'm so glad you're here too. So we're gonna dive right in. And today, we have you here to tell us more about pivoting into publishing from another industry, which I think is going to be such an interesting conversation to have. But before we go into your journey, I'd love if we could start with what you're doing at the moment. So what does being a publishing director at HarperCollins involve?

**Rose Sandy** 01:19

Absolutely. So being a publishing director, or a publisher, in general, is you have responsibility for acquiring books or commissioning books for a list. For those who might be a bit familiar with publishing, it is a big business where, essentially a commercial business where publishers are buying titles in order to be not only profitable, but also to be a success. So my role would involve commissioning, as I said; it can involve coming up with original ideas, and finding an author to sort of get those on paper; it can also involve coaching and mentoring authors that we already have on the list as well. But the idea is to stay ahead of trends, and to be very commercially aware of what the list needs. And then you work with agents and other business partners to bring in books into the company. Also, the role involves sometimes nurturing authors: say you acquire a book, and maybe it needs tweaks here and there, and so you offer that editorial guidance to your authors as well. But the commercial bit is also understanding where your book will sell. So you need to also have a general understanding of the market the genre, what's hot, what's the narrative out there, because you essentially guide teams, and you're the champion of the book. So you need to know where it sits in the market, so in terms of what other books are similar, and so that sales can be informed in terms of how they will take it to market. And you also have to be strategic, understanding how you can grow a list. So you're responsible for a certain area, it could be say, entertainment, it could be lifestyle. So there is also that aspect of understanding how to think forward in terms of how you grow your list. You also can give guidance to the Art Department in terms of sort of the brief around the cover, because essentially, you are the champion of a project, and you are sort of the central nerve that makes this happen and responsible for that book coming into the publishing house, right all the way to when it's on the shelf in bookstores and etailers, and so forth. So that is essentially the role.

**Nicole Fan** 03:48

That all sounds so interesting. And so dynamic on a day to day basis even, with lots of people and factors that come into play. Yeah, but you haven't always been in publishing. And I would love if you could take us back in time to when you first started in your career. What had you initially wanted to be and where did you end up when you first entered the workplace?

**Rose Sandy** 04:12

Well, I can't even remember if there was a moment where I said, this is what I want to be when I grow up. I always tended to lean towards things that interested me or things that I was curious about. So going going way back, just a little background, I am a diplomat's daughter, which meant I grew up in so many cultures, in so many countries, and learned a few languages, and I was functioning in all these languages in the various places I lived. So by the time I sort of was in that career thinking phase I happened to be in Paris where my family was at the time, and that's where I did my education and my university. I guess being in university, you take all sorts of courses, you have a lot of interests, but I decided to do a business degree and economics because I've always been interested in how numbers work, how markets work. But I've always had this creative side to me as well. So that's where I sort of started — I did a business and international economics degree in Paris. And then I do remember something that was very interesting — to your listeners, if they are in, say, university or college thinking about careers. One of the things that helped me was listening to what people see in you. And I'll never forget that even when I graduated, I had a professor in comparative literature, who said, "Why are you doing a business degree? You should really think about literature and, you know, that side of education." And I did finish the course, but it wasn't my main major course. So that has always stayed in the back of my mind in terms of when other people see talents in you. So fast forward to when you are trying to decide what, where to apply for jobs, I got my degree in business and I was very lucky to know someone in Sony Corporation. And basically, they hired me, interestingly, for writing, and creative and communications. So it's very interesting that sometimes your degree opens doors for you to get through, but it's actually your inherent talents that might spark or open doors for you as well. So do not, I would say make sure that the two work hand in hand. So I had this business and economics degree, but I also had an interest in writing. So that's how my communications degree began, or sorry, career began, all those roles within Sony Corporation, and later, I joined the Coca Cola Company, and then Cisco, were in communications. So a lot of writing, a lot of coming up with content, a lot of coming up with ideas for content, a lot of guiding others and helping them steer their words, or getting their ideas on paper. So as you can see, there is a connection here to publishing. So I think we have to be very careful to not let job titles define us. Because it is inherently your skills that are going to be the ones — if you have transferable skills, that's how you can jump careers. And in my case, that's what happened. I was very much a person who, I've always loved writing, I've always loved playing with words, I've always helped other people with their words. So you can see how naturally that career suited me coming into publishing. Because if I really think about it, I'm in a different industry but the tasks I do day to day are not so different in terms of how to use language, how to create content, how to create ideas. So yeah, so that was my journey into switching careers, or industries.

**Nicole Fan** 07:57

That's so interesting, and I think that makes a lot of sense. It sounds like you had always had that creative element to you and you were taking opportunities in those companies to use them as well. Was there a point in which you decided "this is when I want to switch into publishing"? Had it been something in your mind beforehand? Or was there something that triggered you into thinking, "I kind of want to move out of these corporations and go into something different"?

**Rose Sandy** 08:27

I don't think it was something specific. It wasn't, I'll be very honest, it wasn't a goal. I never, ever thought I'd work in publishing. I didn't even — when I was working, I guess in Sony and the Coca Cola Company and Cisco, even up to that point, I didn't even know what an imprint was, or I couldn't name ten publishers. All I knew were authors and books. And I think this is something to remember that readers will no an author, they will know a book, but they won't know the publishers per se. So that's where I was. And it wasn't a conscientious "I need to go into publishing". It actually — in many ways it landed in my lap. And I think it's very... and how and why? One of the things about career change, and that I've seen that is really fundamental is your network. I happened to be at a point right after I left Cisco, where I wasn't even sure I wanted to go back to corporate because at the end of the day, they're all corporates and I I just wasn't sure I wasn't I was like, you know, should I look for a job in this area? Should I start my own business, which I did, as well. And I just started writing. I used whatever was in my hands because I had a season when, when I wasn't really needing to be back in a career and my children were young. And I used that season to really really dig deep and find out who I was. And back to the first question you asked about, around education: the words from my professor came back into my head. And I just took whatever was in my hand, I had the time, and I said, I'm just going to explore this thing called books and publishing because I want something so different to what I was doing. Little did I know that that was the journey that brought me into publishing. So I just went off, I wrote a few books, and educated myself around publishing. I got to know people working in publishing without an intention to work in publishing. So I just happened to be lucky, right place right time, I was writing my books, they had done really well, I had independently published them on with my own company. And I just went into HarperCollins to consult initially, I was only there for a couple of days, working on a big project in the William Collins team. So I was like, yeah, I can do my writing, and then just come in two days a week. But I think there is a lot of — there is luck, but there's also transferable skills. I went in to do a project for two or three months, I sent in my CV, so a well presented CV, and my CV — when I sent it into HarperCollins, it wasn't to apply for a job, it was "thank you for having me to do this project, but just in case, this is who I am and this is my experience, you know, you're not getting someone just off the street, and these are my credentials". And that led into one of the board members at the time asking me to come and do a full time job in publishing. And that's really how it all started. And I think if you remember that your transferable skills are very important. So what was I able to do that I did in my previous jobs and communication that worked well in publishing? I could write, we do a lot of writing, as, even in current role, you'll be writing everything from cover blurbs, to shout lines for books, and everything. When I was in Sony Coca Cola, Cisco, I had to help people, whether it was executives, or just general stories that I used to do for the internal newsletter and business television, I had to know how to put a story together. What do I do now? It's exactly the same transferable skills: it's understanding how story works, the elements that make a story, not only work but also engage, engaging for readers. So I like to think of it as transferable skills that are really key and not letting job titles define you. So yes, they do speak about your, you know, they do help to define your CV, but they don't define you. Job titles are job titles. Remember what you're good at, remember what you can do and what you can bring to a company.

**Nicole Fan** 13:08

And building on that idea of transferable skills, it also sounds like there are lots of people skills, like going back to the thing about building your network, and making sure you have the people around you. And I was just wondering, what was the adjustment like to a new industry coming from multinational corporations that were very, very much structured — and I know HarperCollins is also such a big company, but was there a shift in in these different environments that you felt?

**Rose Sandy** 13:38

I think personally, the biggest shift for me was coming from a more global or European organisation to a more local. I know HarperCollins is global, but in my roles in Cisco, Sony and Coca Cola, they were global roles, they were at the European headquarters or Europe, Middle East, and Africa. And then coming into, say, HarperCollins UK, it is all very — it's the UK market. So that was a big adjustment for me I won't lie, I came from using German every day or French or sometimes a little bit of Arabic, you know, and working with so many cultures to working in a more monoculture. So that was an adjustment for me — and keep in mind I grew up around the world. But London had always interested me, so I had to adjust, I said, "Okay, I might not have this in the company, but I have London around me and that fills that need". So that was an adjustment, in terms of "think global, think Europe", I had to think more UK. The other big adjustment for me is I came from technology and companies that you hot desk and you didn't have paper hardly sometimes, you literally — your life and your job was in the laptop. I mean, we're talking about about ten or so years ago, and the way we're working now is how we worked back then, when I was at Cisco. I mean, it was very much in the computer. It's what we're doing today. This was the norm. So when I went into publishing it, it felt like I was going back at least a good several decades. You know, from paperless to paper everywhere. Yeah. So these were some of the adjusting, you know, some of the things I had to learn to adjust to.

**Nicole Fan** 15:31

Yeah, that's, that's really amusing. And I guess that definitely served you well, that time in Cisco, because now everyone's all online. But also going back to that, I'd love to unpack more about your own business that you started. In that period, was there a lot of uncertainty for you? Because it sounds like, as you had said, you had learned a lot about yourself, like it was taking that time to learn about yourself, which is really amazing and exciting. But it also, I think, for a lot of people who want to kind of take time out or change career, it does also bring up a lot of uncertainty and anxieties about that. Did you have that and did you navigate in any certain way?

**Rose Sandy** 16:11

It's a very good question. Because I, one of my skills is being an entrepreneur, interestingly, and so if you actually think of the way I'm built, and I think of the way I'm built, actually, some of my — one side of me is not really built up for corporation, because I need to be in a place that innovates or embraces new ideas. So I think at that period, at that time, because I'd done corporate for such a long time, I wanted to explore — a, I wanted to explore, could I do this thing, could I do what I really love and not look for what I really love, could I create what I really love? I think that was my biggest motivator. I think I was very lucky because I was in a relatively good position financially, so I did not have to... it allowed me to explore, it allowed me to explore my real passions. And this is the funny thing is, my real passions — there's a thread through here, my passions around storytelling, around championing my stories, but other people's stories as well. So when I did start my company, it was all about finding a way to, to monetize what I actually really love. And I think you, it's a certain kind of person who can do that. I don't think it's for everyone, I'm going to be very honest. Because if you're in a company in a corporation, you know, you're like, besides showing up every day and doing your job and trying to be really good at what you do, aside from all of those factors working, there's hardly there's very little risk factor, you know. But if you're starting your own business, it is nothing but one big risk. But I've always been inspired by the geniuses and polymaths of our world. And I think for me, for me, it was about exploring what I really love to do. And could I do it and monetize it, and so — but that was me being driven. And if you remember the stories, I went into HarperCollins to provide a service for my business, it was not to apply for a job. So yeah, I think if you're very in tune with what you love, and at the end of the day, we spend a lot of hours at work. And I think you need to really love what you do. So perhaps what I can say about that whole experience, in house out of house, being an entrepreneur, I mean, I run the HarperCollins Author Academy, that is something that was entrepreneurial within a corporation. And I think I like to keep things interesting. It's just me. So what I can say is perhaps it's not for everyone, not everyone likes the risks, and the thrills that come from running their own show, but I value it, it all comes down to my values, I value, creativity, I value freedom, I value innovation, I value thinking out of the box, and I think I'll be doing it till I'm ninety-five.

**Nicole Fan** 19:23

And those are so good to have because it also sounds like it keeps all of your different jobs really interesting. So you're not — yeah, and after this, I would love to hear more about the Author Academy as well. But I also wanted to ask about — so you are a publishing director and your came into publishing with that as your career change. But I think as you had mentioned, you're also an author, and that's also part of publishing. So I was wondering if you could talk more to that, in the sense that that's also as you said, it's quite entrepreneurial, it's more independent. Did that feed into your job in any way, or do the two kind of have a symbiotic relationship where you feel like your publishing role is also helping your creative authorship role, and vice versa?

**Rose Sandy** 20:10

Yeah, I think all of the above. So me starting to write and writing my thriller novels was pure escapism pure, "I want a break from corporate, I just want to do something I really love, I'm going to do this, I've had this story in my head, since I can remember, I'm just going to write it". So a, that was the goal when it came to writing. When I realised I could do it, and I could do it well, I was like — keep in mind, at this point, I wasn't at HarperCollins — I was like, "Oh, the publishing industry is changing". And I came from technology as well, so oh, the Kindle had just started, you know, and all these platforms were coming up. And you know, publishing was being more accessible to authors. So I had a curiosity, I'm a curious person. So that is really the journey of writing. And back to the entrepreneurial thing, I had studied Business and Economics. So for me, I was like, "Okay, are you going to monetize this, how are you going to do it, you're going to need to start an independent company and this is how independent companies work", etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. So that aside — so when I did join HarperCollins, I do remember flagging, I said, you know, "I'm gonna write till I'm ninety-five. So as long as that works for you guys". I'm — and interestingly, it has served me so well, for what I do. Part of my role is to work with authors, it is to help them navigate publishing, it is to help them navigate their writing, it's to help edit their writing. I think if I had not done that journey, and written ten books of my own, I, I still could have done it. But I have a lived experience of the author side. So I know, I think it really helps my, my, my job and my work with authors. Because they have someone in front of them who has lived the journey knows the pain of putting ten thousand, seventy thousand words together. So in that sense, to answer your question, yes, it works together. And I think the reason I still do it is because technology around publishing and the industry is changing, and it allows me to be able to do that, to to just explore what's happening in the industry. Whereas sometimes you can get, if you're in a very siloed job, that just requires you to do one thing, you're gonna do that thing and stay in your lane. But because I have this outside interest in the general direction of what's happening in publishing — in all of publishing — I think it keeps things interesting for me.

**Nicole Fan** 22:57

For sure, that sounds — I can't wait to dig in as well. Will there be a new one coming out? Yeah, and I also just wanted to ask, so if you were hiring someone, would there be certain skills that you think would be very valuable to highlight? It sounds like there were a few that you mentioned, like communications being really important? Are there some key skills that you would look out for, say, if they're coming in from a completely different industry or completely different background?

**Rose Sandy** 23:27

It's a very good question, because obviously, we do, you know, in my ten years at HarperCollins, I've hired and worked with teams and led teams. It is, first of all, it depends what we're hiring for. But regardless of what we're hiring for, or what I'm hiring for, I think the first thing is you got to be able to work with people. That is the one constant in any job, is you're working with people, you've got to be able to bring the best out of people. And when I say working with people, it's it's understanding how to value people, when you come in into an interview, and you're more interested in what the company has to do for you versus what you can do for the company. This is what I mean, there is that gravitas around being curious, teachable, open to new ideas. So these are skills I, I actually personally enjoy in someone I hire, is someone being open to learn open to new ideas, and collaborative. People skills are so important because it's even how you answer an email. An example that happens to me about 90% of the time still today: my first name is Rose, my last name is Sandy, and I can write an email to someone whether it's in the professional life or personal life, is seeking something from me — it could be a favour, it could be a job, it could be whatever — I can write an email, sign my name off as Rose, and you don't know how many times people come to me and called me Sandy. You know, it is really incredible. And I get it, you know, I have, I have that, a very unique name in that you get, it can be your first name, it can be a last name. But this is what I mean by people skills. It's like if you — I'm very careful, because I guess my background and having worked in amongst cultures, if I don't know someone's first name, last name, I look carefully at how they've signed off their email. What did they call themselves? That is always the giveaway, if you do not know. But this is what I mean, like you apply for an interview, say, for example, and someone says, "Yes, come in and see Rose Sandy", and then send, you know, they send an email, but then they, you know, they call me Sandy. Things like that, they're very small things, but people skills are very important. Those people skills aside, the second biggest thing I would say is understand all of publishing, it's a commercial business. A lot, the biggest mistake I see people make, and I've seen it in my career in publishing, is a lot of people want to come to publishing and they only think the only roles are editorial. Biggest, biggest mistake: editorial is just one part of a big pie. We can't sell books if we do not have sales teams, we cannot sell books if we do not have warehouse staff, we cannot sell books if we do not have marketeers, we cannot sell books if we do not have a legal department, we cannot sell books if we do not have a finance team telling us whether we can afford to buy books or not. So one of the biggest mistakes I see people making is saying, "I want to join publishing, I studied English, I" — you know it's, it's one part of publishing. Where I see people who set themselves apart are those who clearly say, Listen, I, of course I'm interested in publishing, I read books, and I have an interest in language. But tell me more about publishing. What else is there? What can someone do and publish in publishing? So I think this is one tip I would leave with people: understand it's a commercial business, be very commercially minded. Somebody has to pay for the paper for that to be printed on, or the ink, you know, that makes that happen. Or the promotions that we need to to partner with our retailers. So thinking wider than just the pen and paper piece of publishing, I think is really key.

**Nicole Fan** 27:40

That's such good advice, and also comes back perfectly full circle to you when you first started out with your economics degree as well, entrepreneurial spirit. I love that. Oh, that's been such good advice. And we're going to be wrapping up soon now. But I just have two more questions for you, you've given so many great insights. My first is: what's next on the horizon for you? You were talking about the Author Academy, and if you have other projects like that, I think we'd love to hear about it, so.

**Rose Sandy** 28:09

Yes, so the author Academy is a programme that I started in about three, it's coming to three years now, that's been running. And it started during, I think our first or second lockdown, we had a few of them. And it was in an answer to that whole subject around not having enough representation when it comes to publishing. And representation and inclusion comes in many forms — where the Academy started was very much about the author part of that. I think all companies edited themselves or audited themselves. There was a letter sent from the Black Writers Guild, and I — remember I said I'd be doing this until I was, until I'm ninety-five, I'm going to be, one way or the other, still working with content and ideas but also giving back. So I was deeply convicted, because at that point I'd been in the industry about seven years, I was deeply convicted that we needed to do something about our children seeing more of themselves in their books, in books, or in bookstores. So the Author Academy is a six weeks programme. We train authors, writers, and designers now from underrepresented backgrounds. And when I say underrepresented, it's underrepresented in terms of race within publishing. And of course, we're always growing. We're always trying to see how we can make the programme bigger but it started off there. And it's because, it's a little better now but at that point, I would have challenged anyone to go into any retailer — not going to mention any names — and try to find how many books were from non-white authors. So the academy really is six weeks, it runs twice a year, and we, it's free to attend, and it's run by volunteers within HarperCollins. I mean, it is people's extra time. And once they complete the course they can, they have about 12 months to submit a work to be published, they do not have to publish with us, they can publish with any publisher, because this is about industry, not about us, per se. It has been one of the most rewarding things. And we've gotten, I think we've graduated about 250, roughly there, students, and several of them have gone to get their publishing deals, and as well as win literary awards. So for me, it really proves that, you know, sometimes you have to think out of the box to just make change happen. And I'm longing for the day we don't need academies, and longing for the day where it is just natural in how we do things. But yeah, so that's the Academy. And in terms of what I'm looking forward to, well, we're still growing the design part of it, in terms of we don't have enough illustrators and designers. So this is the second arm of the Design Academy and the Author Academy that we're building. So that is a really good challenge to have, and I'm looking forward to it.

**Nicole Fan** 31:19

That sounds so good, and I think we're all very thankful that, you know, the publishing space is widening up that and that people like you, yeah, are making that happen. And my final question is prefaced first with a congratulations, because I saw that you're now in the City of London Company for Stationers, right? Which is amazing, which is for the communications and content industries. So great, congratulations on that. Yeah. And I think things have worked out like amazingly and so well, for you. But my final question is, is there anything that you wish that you'd known before you made a career change that you'd offer as advice to those who want to pivot into the industry?

**Rose Sandy** 32:01

Yeah, and it's not necessarily for publishing generally, it's more about a career observation. I wish — I do know this now — but I wish when I'd started, I'd been a bit more confident in the fact that affirmation does not need to come from an employer or a, um, others. I think, when you're young, you think that others need to almost affirm you in what you have to do and where you have to go. And I wish I had also identified what my values in the workplace were before. I mean, I, I feel very confident in them now and going forward. But I think it's a very important exercise to step back. And really, because I think it guides all your decisions in the workplace, like, I mean, what do I mean by that? I mean, we talked about it today, a very big value for me is creativity in a role, and space to be innovative. And legacy is a very big value for me. And that's why I do things like the Academy, it's so important to me. So I think what I'm trying to say is there are certain things, we are given an education and we are have head knowledge, but knowing more about ourselves, and what makes us tick and what — I think this is what will sustain people, and sustain, at least I've seen, in my experience, that's what will sustain you through a long career. If you know what your values are, you'll be happier. And because you will try to find a place of employment where those values are a celebrated, it might not be all of them, but majority of them. I think that's a very key thing for any role and maybe helps to job satisfaction. I don't know but it's really key and I wish I had started maybe the process earlier, to answer your question.

**Nicole Fan** 34:08

That is such good advice, not just for careers — very good for careers, but for life in general. Thank you so much for those. It's been like wonderful hearing your experience and so lovely having you on the podcast. Thank you.

**Rose Sandy** 34:20

Thank you very much for having me.

**Nicole Fan** 34:23

And we're wishing you all the best from SYP.

**Rose Sandy** 34:25

Same to you, you take care of yourself.

**Nicole Fan** 34:28

Thank you for listening to Inside Publishing, I've been your host, Nicole Fan. If you've enjoyed this episode, you can find more on Apple Podcasts or Spotify, and leave a rating or review. See you next time!