Interning at The Hay Festival with Sophie James

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Jessica, welcome to this episode of Inside publishing, the series where we interview industry experts on everything

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I'm your host, Jessica Davis, and today I'm talking with Sophie James about her experience interning at the hay festival. The hay festival is a literary event which takes place in Hay-on-Wye, Powys, in Wales. Sophie is a member of the Welsh branch for the SYP and is eager to shed light on the Welsh publishing industry. Hi, Sophie, thank you so much for joining me today. Hiya Jess, thank you for having me. I really looking forward to chatting with you. Me too. I'm really excited to hear all about your experience interning for the hay festival. Yeah. I'm really looking forward to kind of like reliving it all again so you'll see great please. Could you start off by describing to us your role as an intern at the festival and the main responsibilities that you had? Yeah, so it took place over the 11 days of the hay festival back in, oh my gosh, it was May now.

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So throughout that time, we would have about 26 of us in total. And during that period of the festival, we had each two to three events a day. Three was a pretty full day, and you were lucky if you just got one, because then you could go off and enjoy the rest of the festival. I think I tended to have a lot in a day, so I was, like, very busy, but it was such an amazing atmosphere there that it just felt, you just felt like you were part of something really, really cool. So the day to day kind of like responsibilities, I guess, were you come in in the morning and you would have checked on the platform that we used to kind of see who you had, where you were going to be, where you were going to be based, and try and, like, learn a little bit about the artists you were going to be dealing with, just so you could kind of see, for example, if you didn't know who they were, you might give them a quick Google so you know you were looking out for in the green room, and then kind of coming back and maybe preparing yourself a little bit. I know that for me, for example, there were lots of, like, children's authors that I didn't know about, so it was really useful to kind of have that time to look and see who they were, who I was going to be chatting with, and basically not make a fool of myself. So yeah, from day to day, it depended on what events were on, who was speaking, and you just come in and make sure your role then was that you made sure the people had turned up. That was number one. And then you would hand them a kind of consent form, just to make sure that they were happy for you to take photos and videos of them, and that they would be put up on the hay festivals website. And that was basically, that was pretty much it. That was your responsibility for the first kind of part of the day. And then you would take them. You'd walk them from the green room over to their stage, one of the five or six different stages that was there. And depending on the route that you took, it might take five minutes to walk them to their stage, just kind of chatting with them, maybe chatting with the people that were with them, and making sure that both the speaker and maybe the presenter was there as well. So there's lots of things that you kind of kind of keep on top of, but it was such, such kind of like a rewarding experience, getting to chat with these different authors, with their speakers, like with the people presenting them, but then also the people that came with them too. So there was so much to all of it that, yeah, looking back on it, felt like such a busy, busy time, and I could speak about it forever, but that was the main kind of responsibilities. Yeah,

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that sounds great. It sounds like every day would have been very different, which I think must have kept it really exciting for you. So just wondering as well. So what attracted you to apply for the internship at the hay festival in the first place?

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So I actually found out about it from the SYP networking meeting that we had when we first kind of got welcomed into the committees. So I remember being put in a breakout room with a gal called Sadie, and she had done the same thing the year before, and then I kind of jumped on that she was encouraging pretty much everyone that she spoke to to do it, to apply. So the scheme is for 18 to 25 year olds, and it's kind of only open for that period of time, but it's really, really, really worth going for. So for me, it was just like that kind of experience of getting to see the inner workings of the event system within the festival itself, but also. You exposed to, like the literary world, that was really exciting. Too

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great. So what was your favorite part of the festival, looking back on your experience,

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that is a really good question. I think my favorite part was probably getting to connect with the other people who were doing the role that I was doing, or, I suppose, more generally, just connecting with people, so less from maybe like a networking perspective, but more from, like getting to meet similarly minded people who really wanted to be there, people who were really good at their jobs as well. It was really inspiring to see like such an array of experience and passion for the literary like kind of industry in general. So yeah, getting to connect with people who wanted to be there that felt really cool,

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amazing. So do you feel like this internship has helped you develop professionally and personally? And if so, how? Yeah,

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I do definitely think so. I think working across so many different departments, even though I'd never worked in that kind of setting before, I was able to use transferable skills, things that I'd picked up along all my different jobs that I've had, and just using people skills and chatting with people, but it gave me a lot of confidence in my own abilities to kind of Yeah, build on it and and work with other people, and not be afraid to ask questions as well, and kind of preempt things. And know, know that no questions a stupid question, because if you thought about something that might go wrong, then that's worth thinking about. Yeah, really rewarding, but also kind of reassuring that I would be good in a role like that. So

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you mentioned that one of the best parts of your experience was meeting like minded people. Did you have the opportunity to network or make connections with other publishing professionals?

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I did, but you were also so so busy that the most you could really get is like a two minute chat and an email address. And whilst that felt really cool in the moment, once you'd left the kind of festival scene, you were like, What do I do with this now? So I think having the confidence to then actually do the follow up networking is something that I would need to work on. But you do, you do have that opportunity, and it's really, really cool to be able to chat with I chatted with some editors. I chatted with a couple of publicists, and it was really interesting getting to see that, oh my gosh, they're actually normal people. They're not like, super special aliens who have been working in this industry and aren't connected to real life. Like, no, they are like, they have jobs. They are normal people. They have lives to go home to. So it was nice to be able to, yeah, make those connections, but knowing that then I have to do that hard work afterwards to, like, buck up the courage to actually pop them an email. But I do feel like I could if I had the courage. Does that make sense?

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Yeah, that makes sense. I think sometimes it can be quite daunting, but I'm sure all these experiences will help you to build confidence and for other people who are looking to do similar sorts of things, definitely. So did you have the chance to attend any talks or events at the festival that focus specifically on the publishing process, and what insights did you gain from these

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so like I said earlier, I think it was so busy that I didn't really have much time to go and watch specific events. I think I was quite lucky that I was interested in a lot of events I was given in terms of ones that I did actually go and see. I think there was only two that I took the time out to go and watch. But other than that, like the ones that I went that, ones that I was working anyway, were really interesting. I remember there was a Bookseller nibbies award panel, and I think that was really interesting, getting to, yeah, getting to meet people on the Bookseller kind of team. But I think in terms of takeaways, yeah, my biggest takeaway was just that everyone is a normal person. And I think in the publishing industry, we can, we aspire so much to get into this industry. And I think there's then this kind of pedestal that we put this, these jobs and those people on. And I think it was really, really eye opening and rewarding in a way, then to get to meet people and for them to just be normal people. So I think in terms of takeaways, that was my biggest one, rather than it being some big learning that I took away about the industry itself, it was more just about the reality of it.

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Yeah, amazing. So after completing your internship, do you have any plans to continue? Working in the events, literary field,

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yes, so I'm currently working for bit of a side step, but for a theater company in which I help run events, put events on but I've actually taken a lot out of the in the I've actually taken a lot out of the internship in terms of wanting to be within a very specific events kind of management area. So I think if I didn't have this job currently, I would probably go off and do a stage in Event Management masters. I think that was what I was planning to if I hadn't got an extension on the job that I'm working on at the minute. And I think, yeah, it was really, really cool to get to see something that I'd never considered as being an actual job, which sounds a bit mad, but until you meet stage managers, until you meet production managers, until you meet people who are programming things you I don't think there's a lot of education out there about what goes into actual events and what's behind the scenes. So for me, even though I was involved with things like school theater growing up, there wasn't anything in terms of education for what a career in that might look like. So yeah, seeing it in the flesh was really refreshing.

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Great. So do you have any advice for someone considering applying for an internship at the hay festival or any similar events?

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I mean, the standard bit of advice is, do it, but that's not really advice, is it? That's just encouragement. I think in terms of advice, it would be, and I think I've heard a lot of people say it is honing on those transferable skills, but also let yourself shine through in your cover letter. I feel like a lot of the time I pull myself back, and you have a tendency to maybe use like AI to write your cover letter now, because it's easier, because it's simpler, because they can phrase things better. But I think if you use a little bit of that just to kind of help you structure it, but then definitely keep yourself within it as well, and really kind of make things specific to you and your interests. Don't tell people that you're passionate about books. We all know we're passionate about books, but in terms of this specific internship, I think using, like, yeah, using your passion, but being able to show that in a different way. Show, not tell. Do you know what I mean? Like, explain why you love Hey festival. So much if you've been or if you haven't been tell them why you want to. Are there any other literary festivals that you've loved? Like, just bring in as much as you can. And in terms of, yeah, in terms of advice, like, do it

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definitely so kind of bringing it back to publishing, how was your internship at the hay festival influenced your understanding of the publishing industry itself.

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So I think, yeah, it just goes back to like this idea that the people working in the industry are real people, but that a lot of people come from different areas as well. And it's not necessarily always about kind of, who you think makes an editor, who you think is a publicist. I think chatting with a lot of people that I met that work in the publishing industry there, it was very much like there were quite, quite a few of them that had never really considered it as a career before. And that was quite eye opening to know that people had gone off and learn other things in different areas of careers, and then come into publishing through that way. I think in terms of the industry itself. I'm not sure I took away too many takeaways, because whilst the festival itself is a big part of the publishing kind of culture like you can't have that festival without books existing, and you can't have books existing without publishing existing. I think, yeah, being able to see, see how it all feeds in together. That was really interesting. And being able to figure out, like, yeah, just the importance of of books within that, but tying it then back into seeing, I feel like I'm going around in circles now, but going from it being the publishing industry to books existing, to the festival itself, existing, and then going one step further and seeing the readers and seeing the audience. Yeah, it was really eye opening to see the connection then between publishing and then the final the final product being audiences with the. Book in their hands and discussing it. And I think that was something that inspired me maybe more than maybe like. So my initial dream for publishing was to be an editor. I think that's a lot of people's dream, but looking at it now, I'm like, oh, maybe, maybe I would be more interested in the event side of things, because then you get to see the connection that the book itself has on people, like the impact that it has, the relationship people have with the words that the author has created. So yeah, it kind of opened my eyes up to lots of different roles that I hadn't thought that I would be suited for, but kind of showed me that, oh, actually, I could probably work my way into different roles depending on what my personal strengths are, rather than what I think would be the best job.

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Yeah, I think that's a really interesting perspective. As you said, I think a lot of the job roles in the publishing industry are kind of behind the scenes. So I think getting that chance to see the impact of the books on people and the excitement people have at these festivals. I think that's that's really exciting. Yeah, what role do you think that festivals such as hay play in shaping trends or promoting new talent within the publishing industry? So

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it's a really interesting question. I think seeing them invite people like book talkers and books to grammars into the actual green room of itself, and giving them a space for content creation, that was a really interesting part of seeing how maybe trends are shaped in that way, knowing that there were specific books that had been put out, knowing that there were specific kind of video ideas had been created, and wondering maybe whether that then the exposure to certain books, to certain thoughts and ideas, maybe that, then itself creates trends. So it's interesting to know that there is, there's this thought behind the marketing, in that sense of things. So I think it does have quite a big role to play. But then also knowing in terms of you saying about new talent, knowing that they have their writers at work scheme, I thought that was really cool. And being able to, yeah, being able to host different workshops for new and upcoming writers within Wales, specifically, I thought that was really lovely to see. And since then, like hearing about the work that's come out of that has been really cool. I mean, it was very much still a mixture of the same things you'd expect to come out of hay festival. There was lots of literary genres. They were I mean, obviously, at the minute, we've got a lot of kind of, like fantasy romance coming out, and that tends that would that was quite big during the festival, but there wasn't anything that really stood out as being, oh, this is a definite, specific trend that came out of it. I think, hey, focuses a lot on new ideas and the facilitation of IDEA building, but also lots of green ideas as well. So for me, it was really interesting pairing literature and sustainability and getting to hear those be talked about in the same space and maybe within the same talk as well. But I think in terms of trends that came out of it, I'm not sure that I picked up on anything specifically. I think I was just a bit too involved with the on the ground, running around, to really pick up any of the nuances in terms of publishing. But you definitely could like if, if my brain had been in gear for that, I probably could have picked up more, if that makes sense. Yeah, that does. So

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did you have the opportunity to see how publishers or even literary agents operated behind the scenes at the festival?

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A little bit? Yeah, I got to chat with a couple of people, and it was nice to see that they get to do some fun things too, like they get to come along to different festivals. And it's nice to get to chat with them. It was interesting that in majority of capacities, I met them, because they were kind of there to support their artist, their author. And so for them, it was like they were holding extra Sharpies and going and taking people's names to put on books. But there was a lot of behind the scenes stuff as well, as well as that. So it was making sure that they had been picked up from the train station at the right time, that they arrived to the festival site at the right time. There's a lot more logistically that that I think, you know, I wasn't expecting for maybe public publicists, yes, but people like editors, I wasn't expecting to be there, and there were only a couple, but it was nice to see that the option was there and it was felt more like a cohesive thing. That people might be invited to come to rather than it just being the publicist job.

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Yeah, so you mentioned that you've got a new role working within the arts based industry. So do you feel like your experience at the hay festival helped you to secure that role? Was that something that came up within interviews? Yeah, you just tell us a little bit about that.

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Yeah. So the role that I've got at the minute actually, is a bit of, I don't want to say a funny one, but it is a bit of a special one. It's so the job that I currently have is an internship through Ara far, which is, it means coast in Welsh, and it's based around North West Wales, and then also South West Wales too. So there's two projects that are going on all along that kind of coastline, basically where you can get funded to do a job, to go into a specific company, and I'm really lucky that mine was in an arts based role, and within within this I literally just applied in the simplest little way. I definitely keep an eye out if you live in somewhere like Gwyneth or Carmarthenshire, and keep an eye out for any roles that come up within their kind of realm. They're putting a lot of money and time into upskilling young people to kind of keep them in the areas. And I thought it was really amazing as well that I've been given a lot of help with Welsh. So the company that I work for. We work in Welsh all day, every day, everyone that I work with is first language Welsh, just trying to think I'm the only learner, but I've been given this level of support that just feels absolutely amazing. And yeah, going off on a bit of a tangent now, but I feel like I can chat about my job all day really now, because I am really passionate about Welsh opportunities and getting to develop your Welsh as well. So I feel like coming from a family that didn't speak Welsh at all, not really speaking it until I put in the effort to learn it through GCSE and then a level, and then I moved up to North Wales from Cardiff, where for university, and then, yeah, getting to develop that, and now working within a sphere that kind of supports me to continue learning and knowing that there are jobs For people like me who have learned the language and have developed skills within that area, but working now in a professional capacity within the language itself is amazing. So the job that I currently have, I'm a creative coordinator, which says nothing and everything, but I'm learning so many skills. I'm upskilling, I'm, yeah, kind of developing stage management skills, events management skills, and I'm currently planning a conference, which was very exciting, in collaboration with Gwynedd Council. And, yeah, we're really looking forward to, kind of celebrating the culture that's in Gwynedd, and kind of, yeah, taking any learnings that we can from across across the country, but across the sector as well. So yeah, I think in terms of the the skills that I've pulled out of the events management internship at hay festival, it was definitely like the confidence to go after things. I don't think I could have necessarily found the confidence within myself if I hadn't been given the chance, for example, at hay of someone recognizing my abilities and my my potential to then turn around and say, like, oh, well, actually, now I can do this, this, this, I've had some really amazing experience. I know that have brilliant people, customer skills, and I know that I am able to kind of, yeah, think under pressure, work under pressure, and keep on top of things like it gave me so many tangible experiences that I then felt I could go on and use, but was also able to bring a lot of my own experiences to it as well. So yeah, a bit of, a bit of a long answer to that one, but I think, yeah, I think I learned a lot, and I've taken a lot from it.

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So just touching on the publishing industry in Wales, more specifically, do you have any tips for anybody looking to get into the publishing industry in Wales?

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I think definitely join the SYP. We are. We. Next year, we'll be hosting some more events. We'll be having, hopefully some more things in person, but in terms of the jobs board, that's a really good place to start. If you're still on Facebook and you haven't heard of publishing helpfuls, get on publishing helpfuls. It's a really lovely community of people who are wanting to get into publishing. And then I think just a general tip, other than, you know, use your transferable skills, sell yourself well, and have confidence in yourself for specifically working in Wales, I would say, learn the language. There's so much support there now that in the world that we live in currently, like the Welsh language, is so important for keeping the culture and the language alive and for being able to dive into something specific, like literature. I do think that having that, that knowledge of the language is really, really useful, and does set you apart from other people who are trying to get jobs in Wales. It means that you have something to offer, and yes, it's bloody difficult learning another language, like I've learned too. Like I'll pat myself on the back for that one. I've learned two other languages, but you still it's still so hard to tap into the culture side of it, because you have to do the hard thing, like read a book in another language. That is the thing that I find the hardest, right is, yeah, finding a way into the culture, but through through learning and through finding communities of people and putting yourself out there and going off and learning the language, then you can, you can educate yourself, and it goes around in a circle, like you have to not understand something in a book, first to then to then eventually understand it. And it's kind of a journey that I'm on at the minute. It's figuring out the more nitty gritty stuff about Welsh language and Welsh culture. But I do think that being able to speak the language does set you apart from other people trying to get jobs in Wales.

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Yeah, do you feel like your ability to speak the Welsh language has kind of improved since having this role, or since venturing into the world of publishing, and even with SYP, is that has it all motivated you to keep learning?

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Definitely, I think it's really important that that the SYP in general has more of the regional languages that within it. I think it would be lovely to see more from Ireland and Scotland as well. But in terms of us in Wales, I think knowing that the Welsh language is legislatory, like as important as English that we need. We need in SYP Wales to have more Welsh on our social media, on our emails, in our events pages, like it needs to be there, and being able to have that knowledge of how to translate, which is a hard thing to do. It's not an easy thing to be able to translate from English to Welsh, Welsh to English, from any language to any language. It's a skill, but having it, I think, is really important. I'm still learning a lot about like the Welsh language publishing industry, because honestly, I don't read a lot of Welsh books. And I the people that I've spoken to who are first language Welsh speakers, they don't either. And I do wonder, kind of like, what that gap is there. But kind of like, I mean, I'm not particularly drawn to Welsh language books, because sometimes they feel quite thick and heavy. Sometimes the covers aren't particularly attractive, and I do think the Welsh language publishing industry has something to learn from the wider industry, but maybe it comes back to funding and access to production things, but it's all kind of things I'm unknowledgeable about, shall we say. But I think it's really interesting that not a lot of Welsh language speakers read Welsh language books. Winter is a bit of a shame. So I'd love to see the development and how that happens over the next few years, and then just in general, I think hay itself could do with some more Welsh language events. It was really interesting. I was given the Welsh language events, and I think it was just the one that we had a translator for an interpreter. And it was really, really lovely how it was done. It was bilingual. So the Lisa, the speaker for Welsh, Welsh Book of the Year. She gave the whole thing in Welsh, and then spoke to those English speakers in English. And it was really well done. I really enjoyed seeing that on a stage and being able. Able to kind of help facilitate that. But then coming away from it, I was like, oh, I want more. I really, really want more of that. Specifically, talking about literature, bilingually. I thought that was really well done. And I think that there's room within hay for more of that. And whether I go back next year as in a capacity behind the scenes or just as an audience member. I would really, really love to see more of that, specifically, more Welsh literature, bilingually spoken about and celebrated, because that's what's on patent.

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Would you think behave festival is something worth going to

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definitely. Have you been,

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I've never been. I really would like to go. I'm definitely hoping next year I can go. You

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should definitely go. It's such an amazing atmosphere, like, it's not anything like I've experienced before. I've not been to many literary festivals, but just going and getting to kind of like, yeah, have that feeling of so much thought and amazingness going on all around you, and getting to experiencing that it's nothing that compares like it's so brilliant. And I would literally implore anyone to go just as an audience member, but if you are under the age of 25 and you are interested in the events management internship, definitely think about applying. I think applications open around January, February time, and there's about 20 slots, from what I remember from last year, even if you're thinking about it, you know way back in your brain, if you know, you can get two weeks sometime like end of May, beginning of June. If you know, you can get that little bit of time off from whatever rest of you you're doing in the rest of your life. Go for it, because it's such a good experience. You meet so many cool people. You get to see backstage, you get to sit in the green room, you get Stephen Fry to ask you for a favor. That was my biggest takeaway, drop a night in at the end. And yeah, it was just such a fab time. So if you're thinking about it, even in the slightest, definitely apply everybody there is really lovely. And yeah, you'll love it

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sounds incredible. You've definitely convinced me. Well, I think that would be a great place to kind of round off the interview for today. And thank you so much for joining us.

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Thank you for having me. Yeah, it's

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been great speaking to you. Bye, bye. Thank you for listening to inside publishing. I've been your host. Jessica Davis, if you've enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple podcasts Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts, it really helps us reach more people. Also feel free to let us know your thoughts on social media or send suggestions our way at podcast.syp@gmail.com, see you next time you.