

Book Festivals and Literary Communities with Rebecca Wilkie

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New Writing North, literary festivals, regional talent, publishing industry, book festivals, literary programming, community engagement, accessibility, Northern identity, emerging writers, literary prizes, public funding, literary events, reader connection, literary landscape.

SPEAKERS

Speaker 6, Speaker 9, Speaker 2, Megan Dawson, Speaker 5, Speaker 13, Speaker 11, Speaker 3, Speaker 8, Speaker 10, Speaker 12, Rebecca Wilkie, Speaker 4, Speaker 7, Speaker 1



Megan Dawson 00:02

Welcome to this episode of Inside Publishing, the series where we interview industry experts on everything publishing. How book festivals connect writers with readers and the highs and lows of supporting regional literary talent. I hope you enjoy. Right. So, thank you for joining me today, Rebecca. If you don't mind, we'll start with an introduction, a bit of a background, your career journey, and how you came to work in literature, programming, and festival production at New Writing North.

Thanks for inviting me, Megan. So, how did I find my way into the sector that I'm in now? Nothing, nothing very groundbreaking, really. Simply, I really like books and reading. That was a big passion. I was encouraged to. I grew up in a house full of books with parents that were big readers for the internet, so there was many other distractions other than the telly. And I was really good at English at school, and you know I was good at writing stories and I was good at writing essays and was my favorite subject. So it was as simple as that. So I was really encouraged by teachers and my parents, I just went to my local comprehensive school in Liverpool. It was a really big rowdy school, but I was good at this thing. And I then went to my A levels at a community college in Mosley, and brilliant, brilliant teachers there who really who not only encouraged me to to to work with books, but also really encouraged me to to do my degree in London because they felt like I would make connections and that networks and and and all they also felt that that would suit me and my interests. I was very interested in big city. I grew up in a big city. I like big cities. I wanted that. I remember saying Liverpool's the best city in the world, but the only other place I could possibly consider living was London at that time. What 17 year old me, the only place that could possibly be a bit better. So I went to UCL and did English there, and that was all right. It was like a hard hard course that wasn't designed for comprehensive school kids, it was very much designed for privately educated kids who'd learned from sort of different in a different way to me. But it was it was great to be right in the center of London in the in Bloomsbury and live and work and studying kind of whilst in these this old university that was right in Bloomsbury, so doing the Bloomsbury sat in Virginia Woolf and things like that was really really exciting to be actually in that place or reading, you know, doing Sylvia Plath and then being able to walk to, you know, walk home past her the house that she lived in. All of that stuff was really powerful and kind of motivating. So that was how I got into it all, and you know, I'm a bit of an old, old person now. This is in the late 90s, early aught, so was a slightly simpler time. Nepotism was rife, and I didn't really have anyone that could get me into a publishing job. But it was also, I don't know, maybe it was it was a bit easier to live in London. There's not much money at that time. I wasn't riddled with student debt because student fees had only just come in when I was at university, so I didn't have the burden of great big student debt holding me back or anything. And I and I was able to stay and apply for a bunch of jobs to do with books. I didn't really know what they they were or what they meant, but I just used to get the guard the guardian every Monday. Used to have arts and media jobs. I just used to write up for those jobs. In the meantime, I got a job at Borders, which was a great big flagship Borders bookstore on Oxford Street, and I did that for about eight or nine months after I graduated. And that was actually a really working and book selling, even for a few months, is a really good thing to do if you're interested in in this sector because it gives you a really keen sense of what people actually read, what sells, trends. So actually, when I was I had loads of interviews of publishers and things like that, that and I was able that that that job, although it was really poorly paid, actually fueled me with lots of useful things to talk about in those interviews, and actually, lots of the people I worked with at Borders at that time are now quite important people in publishing jobs, big publishing houses.

So we were all there were lots of people who wanted to work in publishing, or lots of people that wanted to be actors, lots of art, visual artists. You. Imagine it was central London. We had Soho to go out in, and you know, it was just it was very exciting time to be a young person in London, learning all those things. So I got the job at the agency after applied for loads. I got lots of really good feedback from the interviews I went to. Really helpful, constructive feedback. Mostly, it was like you don't have enough experience, and I was thinking this stuff happens now. I'm sure, and I'm thinking, but unless someone gives me a job, I'm not going to really get the experience. Anyway, I got the job at the the agency, which is a still is a brilliant literary agency, which mostly does film and telly writers, theater writers, and directors. But there was a fantastic children's book agent called Jamie Delamere, who's just retired. Actually, who looked after writers like Michael Wong, Paddington, and Raymond Briggs, Mallory Blackburn, brilliant writers. And I ended up working for her for nearly four years in Notting Hill, and that was great. And I learned so much. And after that, I decided to try something totally well, not totally different, a little bit different, which was to move over to the subsidized arts, which is where I still am. By which I mean publicly fund a publicly funded arts council funded organization, and at that time in the arts, the the pay was kind of similar to the sort of pay that you'd get from working in publishing. That has now changed. We're now paid much less. We had new labor money pumped into the into the system. It was before austerity. It was a different time, and I think I felt my values aligned more with working in a publicly funded organization than than in what is you know essentially a commercial organization, and I'm not very romantic about publishing in that way because I've experienced it. It is ultimately a very commercially driven corporate world, even more so now I think. And I decided I'd like to try not something that wasn't that, so went over to Book Trust and worked there for a number of years. And there was it was really well funded at that time with New Labor money, and it had books the Bookstop scheme where the gift of books to every child that was born in England. I used to help choose the books for those packs. We ran things like the. It was then called the Orange Prize. It's now called the Women's Prize, the John Noelle and Rees Prize. It doesn't exist anymore. The Blue Peter Prize, Vanessa Children's Prize. Most of these prizes, sadly, don't exist. I think the only one left is the Women's Prize with a different name. But that was how much comparatively how much funding there was in the in the in the system then to to make these things happen, and I got really good experience sort of essentially working as the kind of in-house children's books expert and across all the different things that entailed. So coming to work at New Writing North, which is another Arts Council funded, subsidized charity, essentially was a quite a natural move, really, and I was bringing all that experience with me, like both the the private sector stuff and the public sector stuff. Although Book Trust was much much bigger than New Writing North, I was web book trust was like 80 people in New Writing North when I joined in 2012 was like six people, and it became incredibly apparent very very quickly that the North South divide was very very real. I couldn't believe how hard it was to get writers to agree to come up and do things. I'd been used to I hadn't known I was born. I was you could just pretty much get anyone to come and do anything at any time, and that is certainly still isn't the case, and certainly wasn't the case.

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Speaker 1 08:51

And I had a quite a steep learning curve as I realized I couldn't just invite you know whoever I'm trying to think of who it would have been in 2012, if you wanted someone to come up and do an event, and that they were going to say no, or their publishers were going to say no because we we we just weren't on the radar in the same way, and the shocking lack of geographical knowledge that I'd always been vaguely aware of as a northern person working in publishing and and London generally. I was always very aware that there was very poor sense of geography beyond Watford for a lot of people I worked with, but it really came home to me doing this job at New Writing North. So it was quite a steep learning curve, but but it was probably I always think the work that I've done at New Writing North is probably the most important work that I've done in the last sort of 25 years. There's a real North South divide problem in it, and we do kind of suffer as a as a consequence, especially for some publishers that Manchester's okay because the BBC is there and and it's not too far on the train. But I think beyond that, we have a lot of extra work. To do in in in persuading and and sometimes persuading an author agreeing confirming and agreeing to everything and then deciding they really don't fancy it near at the time of me spending hours talking to their agents and publicists and then trying to persuade them I've always managed to I would say that but it is quite a big it can be quite a big job and it hasn't got any better. In anything, it's possibly got worse since COVID because there's more of a sense that people can do things online and digitally, which they wouldn't have had before.

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Megan Dawson 10:30

Yeah.

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Rebecca Wilkie 10:30

So I think it's actually become harder.

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Megan Dawson 10:32

And there is obviously that value in the in-person events, and it's just not remotely the same. But talking about things whether you think they've got better or worse. You had said at the time that nepotism was rife when you were getting your first kind of jobs in publishing. Do you think that that's something that's got better or worse?

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Rebecca Wilkie 10:52

I think people have got better about recognizing nepotism and talking about it, whether it's particularly changed the demographic in a significant way of people that work in publishing. I'm not sure. I wouldn't be a I wouldn't be 100% convinced of that. I think that we have a new language that we didn't have when I was starting out to talk about things like that and acknowledge them. Social class and regional diversity are not things that many people are comfortable talking about, and there isn't a huge amount of intersectional understanding of those things because they're not straightforward. And as we know, in society as a whole, just zooming right out, generally people do prefer to maintain the status quo, don't they? Because it's easier. You can apply that to so many areas of the world that we live in. That's what I would think. I mean, certainly at New Writing North, we've done lots of work in the way we recruit, and we've really put lots of thought into that, and how we interview people, and how we advertise for jobs, and the ways that we advertise for jobs, and the places we do that, and the way you know the interview process, we've we've certainly put a lot of time and effort into thinking about how to do that and how to make that process as equitable as possible.

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Megan Dawson 12:10

That brings me on. I wanted as well to pick up when you mentioned that you think that your values aligned more with publicly funded organizations, and that's obviously what kind of attracted you to new writing law. What what are those specific values do you think that draw you to those kind of roles and organizations? I

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Speaker 2 12:29

think I wanted to feel that I was making a difference and was doing that without the constraints of a bottom a financial bottom line. Now that's not if you work in the subsidized art, you have a huge amount of responsibility for fundraising and finding money to make your work happen. And we're constantly fundraising at New Writing North, and the climate, the fundraising climate, is the hardest it has ever been for all of us across the sector, not just literature, for all of us who are working in the subsidized arts. So we are thinking about money, but it's not to make profit from. We're not profit making. I like the idea, perhaps because I've been brought up. My mum was a teacher in Liverpool, and I suppose my values sort of were aligned with that idea of putting something back into the world without corporate agenda. But there was lots of things I liked about about working at the agency. Lots of things.

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Megan Dawson 13:28

Yeah, when you work in cultural organizations, it's easy to get funding for the big sexy things. But if the the lights aren't working and the building's flooding, it's like nobody wants to fund that kind of thing.

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Rebecca Wilkie 13:40

An art is seen as a luxury at the moment because there's so many other problems that people people haven't got enough money to turn turn the heating on. Children are being sent into school hungry, so it becomes harder to make the case for funding art projects because they are seen by many as a luxury. You and I know that it's essential. You know, art arts are essential; that they're fantastic for well-being. But there's also a really strong economic case to be made. You know that the arts and cultural industry in this country actually generates huge amounts of revenue, but it's just hard to make that case when you've been living in austerity and when there's a scarcity mentality.

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Megan Dawson 14:21

If we can maybe look more optimistically, then we'll have a touch on what New Writing North does. It might be known by its name, but not always fully understood in the breadth of its work. So, would you possibly just be able to describe New Writing North? How you would introduce it to somebody who is just coming across it for the first time.

Okay, it's quite hard because we do so many things, and we're quite big now. I think there's 21 or 22 of us, so we've grown massively in the last decade. So it was one person, then it was two, and then it was six, and now it's 21 plus lots and lots of freelancers who we work with. I would say we operate with the belief that talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not. And we are constantly trying to find create opportunity for writers at all stages of their careers. So they might be a seven-year-old in a primary school in Gateshead, or they might be the late Tom Stockard who won the David Cohen Prize, which is one of the prizes we run, and they're most likely to be the huge pool of emerging writers that we have who might enter our Northern Writers Awards program, which is awarded every which is a host of Paul Young awards that my colleague Will came on and talked to you about. We may be supporting writers through events like the John Buck Festival or you know events we do in Newcastle throughout the year, we have a team that works in communities with children and young people in the north east. Our programs are open across the entirety of the north. So, if you want to enter the Northern Writers Awards, you could be living in Liverpool or Yorkshire or Manchester, and you're eligible. And our events program, which is Durham Book Festival, but also stands alone events in Newcastle. So, in the last few weeks, I've run events with Maddie O Farrell and Doug B. Stewart. We've got an event with a brilliant emerging writer called Louise Powell in a few weeks' time, and we're connecting them with readers. We're also really interested in readers because material is so intertwined; it's almost impossible to separate them. But we're also very keen on the idea of a literate society and all the manifold manifold benefits for our when when you do have a literate society, all the opportunities. So I think that's how I'd say that's what we do. And excitingly, our biggest project as an organization at the moment is a center for writing and publishing that we're going to open in the center of Newcastle. Hopefully, will be open to the public in 2029. But it's a big partnership project. We've got government funding, funding from Northumbria University. We have funding from the local authority and the mayoral authority. It's a really exciting project that will be kind of like a manifestation of all those things that I just talked about with this building to house a wall, which will have an indie bookshop in it and a cafe and an event space. Because currently, I'm popping up in other people's event spaces with my author events and our we run prizes. So I look after a literary prize called the Gordon Burn Prize that will probably happen in the building, and the David Cohen Prize for Literature. We have all kinds of things that will happen there. There'll be workshop space. There'll be hot desks for writers. There'll be offices for publishers. So we're hoping Hachette will come in there and have their regional office in there. There will be this hub of writing, creativity, reading. It's a really exciting time actually to be thinking about all of this. The words we've been talking to a lot of people about locally about what they would like the building to be, and the word that keeps coming back is this word community. They want a place of with community, and that's what books can bring. They want a place to be with like minded people where they feel safe and cozy, and I feel a sense of community, and I think that's so interesting.

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Megan Dawson 18:04

That is because if you think of a literary hub, and if you think of that in a lot of cities and a lot of places, I think that could initially sound really like excluding and a bit intimidating. And for most people, though, think, oh well, this is not the kind of place for me. But as you said, if you have community at the heart, and just based on everything else that New Writing North do, I assume with that community, it will be also like actually accessible and friendly and warm rather than prestigious.

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Rebecca Wilkie 18:37

That is exactly what we're hoping. And the one of my values that I try to thread through my work is joy. It's just an absolute sheer joy that I first discovered when I was really little, probably reading something like **The Worst Witch** by Jill Murphy or something like that. It's that absolute joy that books can bring in that sort of window or mirror or whatever you know, all the things that books can be. Having this place that represents that for all sorts of people of all ages and from all kinds of backgrounds. I think is so exciting.

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Megan Dawson 19:09

Yeah, when you said how like how do you transform the experience of like a seven year old and as well as someone like all throughout the lifetime? That's a really interesting perspective from the perspective of the writers that you come into contact with, what impact do you think that the work at New Writing North has on writers specifically?

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Rebecca Wilkie 19:32

Well, we're always told that the impact is really well for many people is really significant because we, going back again to this idea that we're this non-profit organization, so we don't have the agenda of we want people to be successful and do well, but we're not motivated by just you know getting people to a place where they're selling lots of books. We're kind of interested in working with people with a slightly different agenda, and we're not an agent. So we're not an agent, and we're not a publisher. So we're there to sort of nurture and develop people, and to

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Speaker 3 20:05

create the

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Speaker 4 20:06

networks that don't necessarily exist up here in the way that they do in London. So I think through the Northern Writers Awards program, there's lots of writers who have books out actually this year, debut Books, who we work with, who will provide it. My colleague Will Mackie provided mentors for, but then there's also other other things we've done through creating networks and connections. So it might be through events or conferences that we run where people meet each other and form their own kind of little cohorts. We have a novelist network that meet that network in in Newcastle, and loads of them have got books out this year. It's fantastic. There's several crime writers, really funny and exciting debut crime writers that have just come out of this small group, all encouraging each other, rooting for each other, giving and sharing advice and experiences. I think we're really good at being that sort of sort of connector at New Writing North.

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Megan Dawson 20:58

Yeah, that's very similar to what Will said when he came on. Yeah, interesting from your perspective as well. I think it'd be good to talk about the Durham Book Festival now. I think we've got a lot to get into with that one, as it's one of the biggest literary events in the north, attracting over 10,000 visitors. Is that right?

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Speaker 5 21:16

In its heyday, it did. Yeah, we the festival's run for many many years and pre dates New Writing North, and we took it. We were sort of contracted to produce it on behalf of Durham County Council in 2011, and I've done it since 2012, so for quite a long time. And certainly in those early years, it was a really big sort of 10-12 day event. It has grown smaller since COVID, which has happened to a lot of festivals and due to funding and changes in audience attendance. I think those audiences are coming back now, but it was quite tricky for years where people were really not keen on the idea of going into theaters and watching things. That wasn't just book festivals. That was for all kinds of things. As I mentioned earlier, the funding climate is very challenging, and so although the festival is now smaller, it still packs quite a punch. I like to think, and it takes place over a long weekend, so it has quite a boutique feeling. And we get to work with Durham University on that, which adds a sort of richness to it, I think, because there's lots of really interesting researchers and academics who are at that university who didn't have interesting books, or you know, you can share things for me. And yeah, I guess the other kind of interesting thing about the festival that I've always been really proud of is we've run a commissions program as part of it, so we've generated new writing and given opportunities to writers to share new work as part of it, which I think not. I don't think many other festivals do that. So over the years, that's ranged from years ago. We worked with Caroline Duffy when she was poet laureate, and we commissioned her to write a ballet of Rapunzel, and we put that on as part of the festival, and then it went on to Saddle as Wells, and we've actually Ballie Laura, who's a local dance company in Newcastle. We've we asked David Olusogato write a piece about growing up in Gateshead which he shared in this absolutely incredible event a few years ago. In the room, and it was before it was before it was pre traitors David Olusoga. It was pre interviewing Barack Obama, third touch, but we really were really proud of that. We've created podcast series. We did a podcast series as we commissioned. We worked with Fiona Hill, who's the Chancellor of Durham University, a brilliant, inspiring woman from County Durham, who has been a world expert in Russia and Putin and advised presidents of the United States. She's from Bishop Auckland. She's fascinating. We created this podcast series with her last year, and she interviewed Sting and Lee Hall and Peter Strawn and all these cool people who were from the northeast about how the north east had forged them. It isn't just a bunch of authors coming to talk about their latest book. There's another layer to it, which I'm always really proud of, and I think adds something a bit intra, a bit extra and interesting to the offer.

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Megan Dawson 24:08

I volunteered with the festival last year, and I was assigned Book of Crow.

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Rebecca Wilkie 24:14

Anna Barker, yeah, yeah.

M**Megan Dawson 24:16**

And that was it. Was one actor on the stage reading, and then I think there was an orchestra as well, and I was like, I didn't expect it to be like this at all. I thought it was going to be like one person at the front. Yeah, as you said, like traditional, just authors come in and and they talk, and I suppose in an ideal world you would have 10s of 1000s of people, but you wouldn't be able to do those kind of. It wouldn't feel as intimate.

S**Speaker 6 24:42**

Yeah, and over the course of the festival weekend, we have 1000s of people, but it's just not. You're never going to get the same numbers as if you're doing two of those weekends and every evening. Or, but you know, as we can see, as you'll see across the whole literary landscape, this is this is what this is sort of where we're at. The other thing that I'm really proud of is that we made this commitment to accessibility during COVID because we put the whole festival online in 2020. It's one of the most stressful things I've ever done. We didn't have a clue how to do it, but we all worked together from our bedrooms, our homes, because we were all lockdown and at home, and figured out how to record a bunch of events and like show them online. Our partners, Duham Council, and the university, and art council, they were all like, "Let's do it. We'll pivot. We'll do this. So we learned all this stuff. We we recorded all these events. They were really good, and we got so much feedback from the disabled community saying, "Thank you so much. I've never been able to attend literary festivals or events like this confidently before, and it felt like the whole world had opened up for me. It's really moving, so we decided that from that moment on, we were going to keep live streaming the events we did. So we've tried to do that. We haven't got the funding to do it for absolutely every new writing law thing, but we do it for most things now. I would say, so we live stream everything and we live caption everything, and a lot of festivals did that for like the year after COVID and then stopped. But we have continued. We have to fundraise for it. We have to write after different cluster foundations to get the money to do it. But we we are motivated because the numbers are massive, but the people that do engage send us such wonderful messages saying thank you so much, and it is therefore something we we're going to continue with as as long as we can.

M**Megan Dawson 26:29**

That's really good. So you're like obviously diverting funds that could be going elsewhere, but to making the everything more accessible, and it's just actually going to mean a hell of a lot to a smaller group of people, but it doesn't matter if yeah, if if everybody it's for everyone to enjoy.

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Rebecca Wilkie 26:47

It's not just disabled community; it's also people who have caring responsibilities and can't get out, you know, as much as they'd like to. County Durham has a very high percentage of disabled people, which is linked to health, you know, inequality and poverty. It feels right that we're trying to serve that community because there are always going to be restrictions to that people that can come into into the city center and attend an event.

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Megan Dawson 27:14

Yeah, even like geographical restrictions. I know maybe it's 20 25% of households in the north east don't have a car or something like that.

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Rebecca Wilkie 27:25

Durham has quite quite low car ownership. I know that, and as you know, working in County Durham as well, it's very hard to get from one side of the county to the other. The busses are quite infrequent. It's big, it's sprawling rural county with a small city that has a famous cathedral and university in it, which means people think it's perhaps something you know bigger than it is. So we're

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Rebecca Wilkie 27:48

always

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Rebecca Wilkie 27:49

thinking about that, and we're always we're always we work really closely with the library service. County Durham has lots of brilliant libraries that remain open. So we also, as part of the festival, work with those libraries to make sure there's things going on, whether that's creative writing workshops or story time sessions. We we're keen to to make sure things are happening not just in the city.

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Megan Dawson 28:12

When it comes to booking authors, you obviously said during COVID you were able to get some fantastic international authors because it was online. At the moment, how do you kind of balance those bigger names with supporting local and emerging talent? Like, how do you strike that balance?

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Speaker 7 28:29

So we need, we always need a handful of big hitters in order to subsidize the rest of the festival. So if we can get four or five famous writers or famous people that have written a book, and we feel confident we can sell those events. The box office that we make is, you know, means that we can do the events with debut writers and poets and smaller commissions and all of that kind of stuff. That is really important to that to emerging writers to get that their presence out there and connect with people, but it's very hard to do if you haven't got some big names in bringing box office. As New Writing North, we have our commitment to our commissions usually reflect Northern identity, Northern stories, Northern voices, and all their forms. That's always front and center in my mind when commissioning people. How do we? How are we amplifying voices in some way? And within that, are we are we representing writers that are otherwise under represented in in culture and society intersectionally? So always thinking about things like that as well. So it's it's and sometimes it's about pairing a a famous household name with an emerging name, it's nice to do that because people will go to see the the famous person and then come away having having met a new person. Like Jackie Kay did a fantastic redo a couple of years ago. We had an emerging poet, Romalyn Ante too, who who's fantastic, open for her, kind of like the wall. Pack, and that was a really nice way of doing that.

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Megan Dawson 30:03

That was going to be my next question. Yeah, how do you think about the visitor experience? And they go to see one thing, and then they end up coming away with something that they didn't expect. If we just zoom out one step, can we just just give an overview of what the year looks like? So the festival is in October. So what does your run up the year before that look like?

S**Speaker 8 30:28**

So the festival happens in October. There's then quite a lot of work, very dull administrative work we have to do that involves paying everybody that has appeared. So processing a huge number of invoices and deep diving into the evaluation that we do, and make and analyzing it, and thinking about it, and reporting on that to our board and to Arts Council and all those sort of partners. So in November, there's a lot of emphasis on that. Then we have a little lull festival-wise. Believe me, there are many other things happening at New Writing North North, but in terms of the festival, there is a little lull, sort of December through March, and then right at the start of March, sometimes late February, we have a bunch of meetings with all the publishers, all the publicity publicity teams, all the publishers, which we used to go down to London and do over the course of a week, and it was absolutely exhausting because you would actually forget your own name by the end of it because you'd had so many conversations with so many publicists. Now we do some in person, but we do a lot on Zoom, so we can sort of spread it out a little bit. It's a bit less exhausting for everybody. So we have those meetings. We create a huge wish list of names and take it from there, really. And as we were saying earlier, a lot of them say no, but some of them don't, and it's really joyful when you get a few big names. And increasingly, because it is hard to get you know big names to travel off, so we often think creatively about how to work with writers that might not have a book out, but might just be really interesting. So a couple of years ago, Helen Fielding came up and did an event about Bridget Jones. It was wonderful. We knew her agent, my our chief exec Claire, a better at a party. I think it was as simple as that, and said, "Would you like to come up? And actually, it was a really, really popular event, and it was actually really fun. And sometimes we'll work with the university on on ideas, so there's other there's other angles that we're we're quite good at taking, I think, that aren't just rooted in these sort of new books that are coming out.

M**Megan Dawson 32:30**

Yeah, that's refreshing because it does kind of sometimes feel like in a year there's the same authors, but yeah, you you kind of see the same names again and again. So then, when you think outside the box, you do find somebody slightly different, which is really nice. If you could just give one memorable, like from recent years, a memorable behind the scenes moment from the festival that kind of encapsulate your role specifically.

S**Speaker 9 32:59**

I mean, there has been there's there's been absolute highs and absolute lows because I've done it for a long time, and you know I have had absolutely incredible. One of my favorite things to do is just simply sit in the wings of the theater and just watch an event that you know I planned months previously, and watching it come to fruition, sitting in the wings always feels very special, and I have lots of loads of different events where that's happened. The first year I did it, we used to work with Durham Cathedral and do events in there, which is absolutely incredible, very special, very atmospheric space, and we did this event called we called it Murder in the cathedral, and we paired Ian Rankin with P D James, yeah, with P D James, and it was just the most magical. He interviewed her, and it was just in the cathedral with candles all around, 500 people in the nave watching it, and it just felt like this is what festivals are all about: bringing these two people together. They've never appeared at an event together before. Huge fans of each other's work. So all of those moments are the things that I hold on to and and remember. There's really difficult things as well, like when authors shout at you, or you know, in a bad mood, and something has maybe they had an awful journey, or you know, and and you have to navigate that, or only once as an author totally not shown up, and we've had to go on stage and apologize. That was very stressful and unexpected. Possibly not the punchy answer because it feels too it feels too vast, really, to sort of encapsulate.

M**Megan Dawson 34:41**

But there's highs and there's lows. There's the glamor, and then yeah, there's having to think on your feet.

R**Rebecca Wilkie 34:48**

Having to think on your feet. One time we had Grace Dent come a few years ago, and she was fabulous, and she wrote this book about comfort food, and Grace decided that brilliantly sponsored sponsored it. And they put like a pop up Greg's pizza ban outside the theater, and we all had these like trays of Greg's pizza, and it was you know very memorable. It was things you were not expecting to do as part of a book festival.

M**Megan Dawson 35:17**

So, what role do you think festivals play in helping people discover books they might not normally gravitate towards.

R

Rebecca Wilkie 35:24

I think it's that we talked about earlier this idea of pairing lesser-known writers with more established writers. I try to do that. We do. We have done over the years proof parties where we've worked with publishers to present books that are yet to be published in proof form and give those books to the visitors at the festival, and it's very I you know I'm very lucky because I get proofs all the time as a fine job. But for most people, that's such a treat to get a copy of a book that won't be published for another nine to 12 months. That's a really good way, I think, of reaching people. We do a big read. We've done a big read as part of Durham Book Festival. We paused. It's one of those things that we sort of paused after the COVID that we've talked about. We were bringing it back this year because it's the National Year of Reading, so we felt it was a really good moment to bring it back. And that was a really, really great project. That was we buy 1000s of copies of a book and worked with the library service to get it out across the whole of County Durham, and that that included the prisons. We used to work closely with the three prisons that were in Durham, with local schools, with the university, with all the branch libraries. That felt like a great project and a great way of reaching people that might not want to come in for an event, but we're still connecting with them and giving them something to think about and to talk about. I think all of those extra things are often the things that have the biggest impact. So I think that the festivals are great for that, and they're a moment, aren't they? They're different to just going to a stand alone event, which could be brilliant as well. The two events I just mentioned earlier with Maggie O'Farrell and Douglas Stewart that we've done in the last few weeks has been fun. I just keep thinking about them, the constant, the things they were both saying were just so fascinating, and that the audience was spellbound in both events, and it felt really special to be hearing about those writers and their lives, and for those for all those readers to meet with them and connect with them after after the event. But the festival is something slightly different because there's a sense of critical mass and there's a sense of lots of things happening and a bit more of a community feeling I think, and that's what you will get I think if you attend a festival. That's what separates it from just going to a one-off event.

M

Megan Dawson 37:37

And hopefully people come year after year and maybe people come and visit the county because I'm assuming yeah one-off events will be people who live not too far away. But do you think that a lot of people from around the country and even maybe other countries do they come to the festival?

R

Rebecca Wilkie 37:58

Most people are local people that attend the festival, and I think that is the case for most regional book festivals. I think there's a the ones that we know so well that are different, which will be Hay, Cheltenham, and Edinburgh have you know much more in the way of of tourist people and go to for that. I think our demographic is largely drawn from County Durham in the north east, with a with a small number of people coming from elsewhere, and in larger number, it's really fascinating to see where people are live streaming from, which is all over the world. So there's definite impetus to try and encourage people to come and have a nice weekend and enjoy all the county has to offer as well.

M

Megan Dawson 38:40

Yeah, but then if it's more local people, that's also nice in a way because it means that you can northeast writers, especially if there's a lot of local people putting on for a northeast audience, which in itself is quite special because it just kind of makes everybody feel a bit more understood and puts community at the front.

R

Rebecca Wilkie 39:01

I think so. That feeling of those that you know, with our commissions, which, as I said, are quite northern, usually celebrating the north in some way through voice or plays. Is

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Megan Dawson 39:12

it distinctively different the way that you attract younger audiences versus older audiences?

R

Rebecca Wilkie 39:19

Not really. The average attender of a book festival in this country is sort of 50 years older than older, and that's to do with things like having a disposable income and time. I think the October festivals, including our own, are not the best time to get students. For example, our festival happens like the week after Freshers' Week at Durham University, so it's it's not going to be front and center in the minds of of young people. We have a young programmers scheme that we run every year as part of the festival for 18 to 25 year olds who can come on board and program an event. They get to they're trained up as volunteers at the festival. They get. Insight into how it all works, and get to meet masterclasses from industry professionals. So, working with them is a really interesting way of of getting new audiences and getting their insights. Because we also ask them to think about marketing and how they would do that, and that's something we're hoping to do with the Center for Writing as well in Newcastle. We're really hoping that the program will that we'll have a young programmers group attached to that, and we'll do similar things. I think co-programming generally is a good thing. It helps, you know, helps as programmers. It helps us widen our gaze and make you, you know, make sure that we're sort of shaking things up a bit, really, and thinking thinking about things differently.

M

Megan Dawson 40:41

Definitely found that there's a distinctly older age group, but maybe that's not necessarily a bad thing. Obviously, it would be nice to have younger people, but if younger people are engaging with books in their own way, like BookTok, for example, that's still a community. It just takes a different shape, doesn't

S

Speaker 10 41:04

and I think those people will, you know, will will come along. And actually, we've had the certain events we've done that we've had really, you know, big groups of younger people. I'm thinking of when we had R. F. Kuang came to do an event a couple of years ago about the the paperback of Yellowface, for example, and there was a really young, diverse cohort of of audience members for that. Certain events like that do do really well with that demographic, but I think I think we all find it more challenging to to get that sort of 18 to 25 and then it starts they start sort of post 25 usually, but we're always looking for ways to get different people to our events at New Writing North. Always,

M

Megan Dawson 41:49

yeah, that makes sense. So I think we probably already covered this, but I was wanting to ask how you think the literary landscape in the north has changed since you joined New Writing North. We touch on that, but is there anything else you think you've noticed?

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Speaker 11 42:05

It's been absolutely fantastic to see some of the northern indie presses do so well in the last 10 years. There were always brilliant publishers like Carcanet and Bloodaxe poetry. You know, who are both poetry publishers, publishing really really important high quality work, but if you look at the success of Andover stories in the last few years, who were in Sheffield with these international Booker Prize winners, see also Bloom Moore and Hefton Bridge, who published Van Myers, have also you know since had other really really big successes from that small office in in Hudson Bridge, so I think what the North is doing with Indies and carving out that USP almost with these Indie classes, Dead Ink in Liverpool, and they're just you know you every you know we're always looking to see what they're coming up with, and obviously it's frustrating for them when they they discover someone like Influx discovering Eliza Clark, and it's difficult because those writers then move on to a to to a bigger, more established publisher inevitably. But the a lot of really interesting talent spotting is happening in those North and Indie publishers, and I think that's really heartening to see what they're doing. So that feels like it's been growing a lot over the last decade. I mean, we have the regional offices for Hachette now in the north. Certainly wasn't the case 10 years ago. These are changes. It's just quite slow change, and conversely, the the financial. financial sort of pressure we've all been under hasn't been helpful for the for the north of England and for for the arts. So there's been changes for the worse because of that lack of of funding and subsidy as well. Sometimes in those conditions, really interesting art is made, you know, and I think so. It's hard to it's hard to know, isn't it?

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Megan Dawson 44:05

Yeah, it's yeah, and I suppose as well that creates a certain identity. I know that in Will's episode he had touched on was it the author that wrote about greyhound racing, and I was like, that's

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Speaker 12 44:18

Louise Powell, yeah,

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Megan Dawson 44:19

so specifically north, and yeah, you wouldn't want, I suppose, in a way with more equity. Those those differences also start to get erased.

S

Speaker 13 44:29

That book is so. Louise is a brilliant writer, and that she's a Northern Writers Awards winner. And *Under Dogs* is coming out in the next few weeks, and is yeah, just this slice of it's written in Durham dialect, late 90s greyhound racing, totally absorbing, beautifully written literary fiction, totally rooted in place, and a totally kind of. True working class, you know, story that comes from the working class community. She she grew up in and is part of.

M

Megan Dawson 45:07

So, for anybody who is starting out, what skills and qualities do you think are most important for people trying to get into like literary events and festivals and programming?

R

Rebecca Wilkie 45:19

I think soft skills are incredibly important for this kind of work. It's it's it's human centered. It's a lot of it's face to face about having those skills, those good soft skills that mean that you engage with people well, that you're comfortable with that kind of face to face communication. Often, a lot of what you're doing is is you know making writers feel safe. For me, those soft skills are very very important. The programming attention to detail you need to be someone that has a really really good grasp on detail because you're usually spinning a lot of plates and you're trying to think about lots of complex timings, especially festivals, timings, logistics, and you need to have good systems in place to be able to do that. And I think imagination, of course, is really key because you need to have some sense of you need to have ideas and you need to be able to think outside the box sometimes, a lot of the time. And the biggest skill. It's the most obvious. Is it even a skill? I don't know. You need to read, and you need to read absolutely loads, and you need to read widely. And just you know, sometimes it is a bit annoying. And I think I would just like to read this really old book that has no relevance to anything I'm working on at the moment, but oh no, I'm going to have to read you know X, Y, and Z because these are writers I'm about to work with, and they're always great writers, and it's it's not hard, but you do have to read a lot and widely, and sometimes things you don't really wouldn't naturally want to read. It's why going back to what I said at the start, working in the bookshop is such a great grouting. It's the reading, and there's so many distractions on our time now. We've all got smartphones. We're all, you know, we can we're hyper connected. We're always we're all of us, me included, scrolling and all these reasons not to read. And you have to do the job well and to to know the to know the market, and if you're not up for that, it's probably not the job. It's probably not the job for you. You just have to accept that a lot, you know, evenings and weekends you are often reading stuff. I what I do is when I go on holiday, I'm I kind of like give myself a pass, so I'm like everything I want, anything, but I always have one book on the go that is something to do with something I'm working on always. But they're definitely skills I think that are very important. I think that if you have them, you're happy to cultivate all of those things. You're probably in a really good position.

M**Megan Dawson 48:00**

I think that's really uplifting because those all kind of soft skills, as you said, in a bookshop would be ideal. But a lot of those you can kind of get anywhere as long as you are actively aware and you go into a position thinking this is what I'm trying to get out of it. You can kind of hopefully get those anywhere.

R**Rebecca Wilkie 48:21**

Some of the best event managers have got hospitality experience because they know that they've worked in bars and cafes and restaurants, so they know how to talk to people. They've all had to deal with difficult situations and difficult customers, and had to figure out how to placate people. Or all of those skills are just as possibly even more valid than having gone on a course, or you know, that that to me, I'm always delighted when I look at CVs and people have hospitality, so they'll kind of have a sense of what it's like to run an event and the different things that you have to be thinking about and doing.

M**Megan Dawson 48:59**

So, just one final closing question: If you were speaking to someone who had never been to a literary event or festival before, what would you say to encourage them to go?

R**Rebecca Wilkie 49:10**

I would say we are living in a world at the moment in which we are not very. We're all a bit disconnected. We're all a bit stressed. We're all a bit solitary. We're doing a lot of things behind screens, and a lot of meetings, a lot of interactions are not face to face anymore. And I would say a festival is an antidote to a lot of those a lot of those things. It provides this moment of connection and community, joy, all my values. It provides all of those things, and it's this opportunity to actually be in a room. It might be a virtual room, but it can also be a physical room that. You can sit still for a minute. You can put your phone away. You can listen. You can ask questions, and you can be around people who also want to do those things.

M**Megan Dawson 50:11**

It sounds like bliss.

R

Rebecca Wilkie 50:14

Yeah, I think it's just that it's the anti. Let get let a human pick your book, pick a book recommendation for you rather than an algorithm. How about that?

M

Megan Dawson 51:20

A big thank you to Rebecca for joining me on this episode and for sharing her insights into virtual festivals in the wider publishing industry. Thanks for listening to It Talk Publishing. I've been your host, Megan. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, wherever you listen to your podcast, as it really helps us to reach more people. Please let us know your thoughts on social media or send any episode suggestions to podcast.syp@gmail.com.