

## LitTea Episode 9: Michaela Whatnall - Part 1

- Sabrina Hi everyone! Welcome to the first half of episode 9 of LitTea! I'm your host, Sabrina Lotfi, and today I'm so excited to be joined by Michaela Whatnall, who is a literary agent at Dystel, Goderich & Bourret! If you're enjoying the podcast, please tell your writing friends!
- Sabrina Hello.
- Michaela Hi.
- Sabrina I'm so excited!
- Michaela Me too.
- Sabrina Okay, so the first thing I like to ask everybody, when we get started, is what book made you a reader?
- Michaela Good question. I don't know that I have a specific book. I just was one of those kids who read everything I could get my hands on. My mom very much taught me to be a reader. Like, she put books in my hand from a super young age. We would read together at bedtime all the time.
- Sabrina Cute.
- Michaela But I do - And I know I was voraciously reading, like, all through elementary school, but I specifically remember in 6th grade, the first book I got like, obsessed with, which was *Absolutely Normal Chaos* by Sharon Creech. Have you read that one?
- Sabrina I haven't read that one yet.
- Michaela Yeah, I loved that book for so many reasons. It's a girl's journal about what she gets up to over a summer. It's a class assignment and at the very front of her journal is a note begging her teacher not to read it.
- Sabrina Oh cute.
- Michaela She's turning it in because she wants to prove she did it. But, there's so much drama, there's so much personal stuff in there that she's like, 'Please don't read this.' And as a kid, that's so enticing, right? To pick up a book. And that's the first note. But I really connected to it because the main character just has a huge, chaotic family and my family is not as large as hers, but I come from a family where everyone's just like, moving and doing something all the time. Like, the house is never quiet. So I think I just really connected to her - yeah, chaotic family life. And she gets really into the book, *The Odyssey*. I think she has to read it for a school assignment and then that's kind of part of the story as well. And it prompted me to read *The Odyssey* as a 6th grader. I don't know. It was a very influential book. So yeah, it wasn't the first one that I fell in love with by any means. But it definitely is my biggest memory of a book that kind of had a really big hold on me -
- Sabrina And really kind of took control of your brain while you were going, and stuck with you afterwards.
- Michaela Absolutely. It also helped me get a perfect score on a spelling test because the word chaos was on there and everyone else thought it started with a K, but that was the title of the book, so I knew it was a CH. To this day, I remember this detail.
- Sabrina I love that. That's so fun. Yeah. Okay, I'm gonna check that one out. Is that middle grade? Is that YA?
- Michaela Yeah, it that's like old school middle grade.
- Sabrina Okay, cool.

Michaela I'm hearing a weed whacker on my end of things, so that's exciting.

Sabrina Oh, that's okay. We'll probably get a dog whining or scratching at some point. You've got your cat over there, I saw.

Michaela All good.

Sabrina Okay. So was there a particular book that made you want to become an agent?

Michaela I wish there was a really good answer for that. But honestly, like all the books, I was in middle school and high school truly, like, my role among my friend group was to be a book pusher, like before I even knew that term.

Sabrina Oh, I love that.

Michaela I got to know the, you know, kind of not even - I didn't know, like, who was the big author of the time or anything, but I was in the bookstore constantly and picking things of interest off the shelf. And then pretty much any author whose book I liked, I then wanted to read everything else they'd ever published, and whatever they were coming out with. So I actually got in the habit. Like, how many middle school and high schoolers know that all books are usually released on a Tuesday?

Sabrina I didn't know that, yeah.

Michaela I knew that because I was tracking when the new thing in my favorite series was coming out, and I would be hyping it up so much to all my friends that there would usually be a list of people that I was gonna lend the book to after I read it. So I was just like, walking library. Yeah, very much. I loved getting people hooked on the things I was hooked on because I was so into them that I wanted to talk with everybody about them. So if I was able to convince everyone around me to read it, then that meant I had a whole group of people I could book talk with. So that, honestly, from that age, I knew I wanted to work with books because it consumed me. And I was curious about the other side, too. I wanted to know how the books got made and be involved in that process. So I knew pretty early on that's sort of where I was headed.

Sabrina That is so cool. That's actually really funny about being the library at your school, too. You actually did school and library marketing -

Michaela This is true.

Sabrina as well. So you kind of just continued that as a job.

Michaela Yes! A lot of library connections. That's such a good point.

Sabrina That's so funny. Okay. That's really cool. Well, I saw your cat earlier. Do you have just one cat?

Michaela I've got two cats. They're little brothers. They are named after *Six of Crows* characters. I thought I was gonna have to convince my partner when we got them to name them after book characters, but this was about - they're about five years old, so we've had them for about five years - and the two of us were really into *Six of Crows*. I think the second book had recently come out, and as soon as we saw them, their coloring matched a couple of the main characters. So we've got Kaz and we've got Wylan, but their personalities don't match the characters. Kaz is super cuddly and sweet, and Wylan's got a bit of a personality on him, but he's the cat that's sort of imprinted on me. And my partner gets the sweet, cuddly one, so that's - that's just how it worked out. But, yeah, Wylan likes to sleep next to me, and he'll get grumpy if I don't have his bed next to my desk while I work.

Sabrina Oh, cute. Yeah, so does this one. She's just like, 'What are you doing without me?'

Michaela They're good company.

Sabrina They are.

Michaela And they're very entertaining. I'm lucky to have two cats that they were, like, the bonded pair in their litter. So they get along super well, and they cuddle, and they play fight, and yeah, they're good fun.

Sabrina That's super fun. Do you do anything else outside of agenting?

Michaela Let's see. I mean, as I think probably a lot of people say in answer to this question, you know, this job is pretty all consuming, but I like to make time for other stuff as well, mostly in other creative areas. So my partner and I met through doing creative projects, so we've always got something going on. Right now, we're working on a narrative podcast with our friends, so I help kind of story edit with - my partner writes it, then I get to kind of workshop the story, kind of like I do with my clients. And then I love project coordination. I was a stage manager in college for theater, so I'm the one getting all the schedules in order, making sure everyone's on the Zoom call on time, and then I actually get to direct the episodes, which is really fun, something I hadn't done before this. So I get to kind of run the show a little bit, which is something I wasn't used to. I had mostly been backstage before, but yeah, it's fun to work with really talented actors and hear them bring to life words that you helped get on the page. It's a really unique experience and really fun.

Sabrina That's so cool! Yeah, really fun.

Sabrina It's a fun outlet. What's this podcast called? Has it aired yet?

Michaela It is not out yet. No, I don't really have details to share quite yet. It's been, like, one of those very long processes that actually started during the pandemic. We've kind of done little bits of it beforehand, like workshops, things with our friends who are the actors in it. But when the pandemic hit and we were all kind of losing our minds stuck in our apartments, it seemed like a really good time to start it up again. So we're working on getting all of the stuff recorded before releasing it, but a long work in progress. Other than that, I'm a huge Broadway person, so even though I live in LA, I like to keep up on what the newest shows are in New York and the West End and listen to show tunes all the time. It's just another way, I think, of accessing stories in a different element.

Sabrina It is. Yeah. I like TV for it. I like movies. I like books. I mean, even songs.

Michaela Totally. Those are my favorite songs.

Sabrina Yeah, it's all different mediums. Yeah.

Michaela There's a theme running through, I think.

Sabrina Yeah. Theater and library.

Michaela Yeah. I'm a pretty simple person. Pretty simple person.

Sabrina I am too. Do you want to dive into some agenting questions?

Michaela Sure.

Sabrina Okay. So do you want to walk us through how you became an agent, aside from just knowing and handing books out down the middle school hallway?

Michaela Yeah, I know it feels fated in a way, but yeah, sure. I'm happy to talk through that a little bit. Like I said, growing up, everyone - I was a huge reader, and everyone always kind of assumed that meant I was gonna be a writer. And that was what all the adults in my life were like, 'Oh, you're gonna be an author someday.' And that never really felt right, and I didn't know why, and it was because I didn't really know that there were other options. And as I went off to college and started to learn about publishing, I realized that I'm not so much a writer as I am a reader. That's the thing that I love. I love engaging with the story and really thinking about it and the craft of that. So in college, I actually panicked a little bit because publishing felt like such an obvious path. I was like, 'There must be something else that I'm overlooking.' Like, 'Surely, surely there's some other, like, thing I should be considering.' But no, like, it was publishing. It was always gonna be publishing. So I did the thing that I think a lot of people do, which is take any and all internships that I could. I just wanted my foot in the door. I wanted experience. I didn't really know all the rules that there were yet at that time, so I just wanted to do anything. But the very first internship that I got actually was like a remote internship at an agency where over a summer, all I did was read queries. That was my entire internship, and I loved it.

Sabrina What was your role there? Were you sending out rejections, too, or were you just sending them to the right people?

Michaela No, as the intern, all I was doing was reading for one agent and just kind of looking for anything that jumped out that she might want to take a look at. That's the way I spent the whole summer, and I fell in love with it. I was like, 'This is so exciting!'

Sabrina It's treasure hunting. It is. You get to just kind of dig and find.

Michaela It's bad, but my favorite part of reading books is always starting them. So it's sort of like doing that with queries all the time. Just like every time it's the start of a new thing, like the promise of a new adventure. Every single email that you open. So anyways, that was my very first exposure to what a literary agent even did. And that's obviously just a small piece of it. But even as I went on to do other internships in other areas, I always remembered that experience, and what I had learned about agenting. And it just felt like it probably was gonna be the best combination of the things that I'm good at and the things that I'm interested in. So getting to be involved on the front end of the creative process, getting to work with creators. But also I'm just, I'm a naturally organized, you know, to a painful extent sort of person.

Sabrina It sounds like it. You've been talking about how you're running the podcast and everything, getting to direct and everything. That sounds like a lot of moving pieces to keep together.

Michaela Sometimes it's an annoying trait to have. But for better or for worse, I'm good at emails. I'm good at staying on top of stuff. Even if I hate being in my inbox most of the day, that's just kind of where I naturally thrive. So realizing that there was a job in publishing that was a mix of the creative part, and project management part, was super exciting to me. I did enter the industry in School and Library Marketing just because that's where the best job opportunity cropped up for me and I wasn't - You know, I had my hopes that I would find my way back to agenting but didn't really know what that path would look like. So I spent a couple of years at a little marketing company in Nashville, Tennessee, where we did the US marketing publicity for international children's publishers. So my very first experience in the industry was actually working with picture books and middle grade from countries around the world, and doing - kind of being their US arm, which was super cool.

Sabrina That sounds really cool.

Michaela It was a great experience. And the other big piece of that job was getting sent around to all of the teacher and librarian shows. So, you know, you might have heard of like ALA, the American Library Association, they have a couple of big conferences every year where all of the librarians descend and it's basically like ComicCon for librarians.

Sabrina I have heard of it and it sounds amazing!

Michaela It's a very cool atmosphere. But they've got a lot of conferences like that for librarians. There's a huge one for Texas librarians, there's one for English teachers, for example. And so obviously those have a lot of programming that authors will get sent to to speak on panels, things like that. But they also have just like a ComicCon, like a big exhibition hall where there are vendors trying to sell you the new types of library shelves, or like new things for your classroom. But also, book people are there. So a lot of the publishers will show up and have their own booths and promo their new stuff. So I was getting sent with my company to work in a booth for a full weekend, and just chat with teachers and librarians, find out about what they were looking for in their classroom, share books with them that were coming out, and see if I could find a match for them. And again, that was such a cool way to start my career, just getting to talk with people who had a lot more experience than me and find out what books got them excited and also hype up books that I really loved. So it was a very cool entryway into the industry.

Sabrina That sounds so fun. Yeah, I mean, it just sounds like you got to just talk about books all the time. And who doesn't want to do that?

Michaela Yeah, it was exhausting. To be fair, those weekends, I remember getting home one night and waiting for my partner to get back, and I was like, sitting there and I was like it was 8:00 p.m. Or so. It was so early. And I was like, 'I'm just gonna sit up in bed and wait.' And the lights were on and I was out. I was sitting up and just out because it takes it out of you.

Sabrina There's a lot of social, as well, in that. It's a lot of social.

Michaela So much. You are on the whole time. Totally. And you're setting up and taking down a booth too. So there's a lot of physical elements. Book boxes are really heavy, it turns out.

Sabrina Books are heavy. I love going to - they have like, Texas Teen Book Festival here and everything. I love going, but then I'm like, 'Yes, I do have a rolling suitcase. What?' [Laughs]

Michaela Yeah! No, that's the way to do it. That was my exposure, my first entry into the industry. And I ended up doing a similar role at Chronicle Books for a little while. Pretty much the exact same thing, like liaising with teachers and librarians, just at a bit of a higher level. But the whole time I knew I was like -

Sabrina You wanted back into agenting?

Michaela Yeah, I want to be an agent. And so I was reading for agents at the time. I had connected with a few agents through internships where I would be giving a read to some of their client manuscripts, or manuscripts they were considering, and writing up reports for them.

Sabrina Whole books or just the queries? Okay, cool.

Michaela Yeah. For full books, I think it was usually actually like, client manuscripts that they wanted a second opinion on. So then, that gave me great experience about reading a manuscript and coming up with suggestions for how to strengthen it. And at the same time, I was reviewing books as well for a publishing journal. So reading a lot of new YA and evaluating that as well. So all this to say, when a job opening opened up at my current agency, I came in with a lot of experience. At that point, I'd been in the industry for three years, so I had a decent - You know, my marketing background for my full time job, but I'd also been doing a lot of work writing about and evaluating books that gave me, I think, a bit of a leg up, and a good experience when I came into this role, which was awesome.

Sabrina Yeah, that's super cool. So now you're at Dystel.

Michaela I am.

Sabrina Okay. How do you say Michael's last name?

Michaela Bourret. I know, I know. Every name in our agency name is, like, a potential to slip up.

Sabrina        It is. I know as soon as I said Dystel, I was like, I should probably just clarify on all of these.

Michaela       Yeah. No, I know. It's a tricky one, but yes, Dystel, Goderich and Bourret.

Sabrina        Okay. Dystel, Goderich and Bourret.

Michaela       Okay.

Michaela       That's it.

Sabrina        I got it. Yes. I'm gonna have a great intro on this episode. [Both laugh.] Okay, so you started there as an assistant, not as an intern, correct?

Michaela       Yes, and I still am. I still assist Michael to this day.

Sabrina        Oh, okay, cool.

Michaela       Yeah, so it's a nice balance because I am able to work for the agency and get a lot of amazing experience by doing that, but also slowly but surely build up my own list at the same time. So I feel really lucky to be here because the mentorship is kind of unbelievable. I know that in a lot of other places, both in our industry, and just kind of work life in general, it can be hard to find the mentorship you need to grow and to feel confident. But I am so lucky to have landed an agency where literally every agent here is so ready to give me advice, to answer every question, to share their experience with me. So I have felt so lucky to be growing my career here.

Sabrina        That's so awesome. I love to hear that. Yeah, sometimes you do hear about just getting kind of thrown into it.

Michaela       Totally.

Sabrina        And, go - and we're here if you have any questions, but, like-

Michaela       Yeah, no, that hasn't been my experience at all. And also, in fairness, I am not afraid to ask questions. I much prefer - I want to feel completely confident what I'm doing for myself and for my clients.

Sabrina        You want to know what's going on, yeah.

Michaela       Exactly. So I always am, like, double checking with folks or getting second opinions or finding out, you know, 'What do you know about this editor? What's their wish list like?' Things like that. It's just so, so valuable to have a whole team of people who are ready, at any second, to answer those questions. And I mean any second. People are so fast on email and IM. It's pretty amazing.

Sabrina        Yeah. No, that's really awesome. What's kind of your role as assistant? That's kind of ongoing. Like, how does that work?

Michaela       I do all sorts of things. Working with Michael is great because it's very much like a teamwork thing. It's not like there are certain jobs that are just mine, and certain things that are just him. I just support him however makes sense, but that's in everything from looking through queries for things that might be interesting to him. Scheduling calls, routing documents, tracking where we are on all of his - he has a big exciting client list, so making sure that everything is - we're getting paid on time, that we're following up on everything we need to at different times. I help him track all of that. But then I also will help him sometimes craft pitch letters, or take a look at his pitch letters and offer suggestions, research submission lists and things like that. But again, it's very much he's extremely hands on with all of his clients. He works directly with them and I am just kind of the support on that. So it's really just me jumping in wherever it can be helpful to him, which again is great. It's like everything that I do with him, I'm learning for myself as well.

Sabrina Yeah, I was gonna say you probably learn a lot, especially since you're not in your own little bubble like, 'Here's your assigned tasks and I'm doing these things and then we'll meet up once a week or whatever,' yeah.

Michaela I think that would be so hard, exactly. I think it'd be very hard to learn that way. But instead when we're collaborating on a lot of stuff, where I'm working alongside him and watching how he does things, it's a great way for me to learn an agenting style, for sure.

Sabrina And then I think it said in your bio you started as an assistant there in 2019. OK. What year... Where are we in the world?

Michaela Where are we again?

Sabrina Where are we in the world? It's almost 2023.

Michaela Horrifying, horrifying.

Sabrina It's really close. Okay. Yeah, so you've only been there - not super long.

Michaela It's gonna be about three years this month, yeah.

Sabrina Yeah, I saw some of your recent deals on Twitter announcements and like yeah, you're getting your client list. You're building your client list up. That's so awesome.

Michaela Yeah, I'm so lucky. The authors that I work with -

Sabrina Do you love it so much?

Michaela I do, yeah. It's such a thrill. And I work with the coolest people, like the coolest writers who have incredible ideas and write stories that I adore. And my first few clients are coming out with their debuts next year, and it's just such an exciting time, and I love getting to be along for that ride.

Sabrina Yeah, that's awesome! I want to jump ahead because you do have a lot of debuts. It's so scary for a new author going in, having not sold anything before. You think you - you do, you do learn so much when you're querying and everything. But then once you get to that next step, you have an agent, it's just all new again. So yeah. Do you do a lot of, like, helping navigate their careers?

Michaela Totally. We are very much in communication on everything, as everything happens. So I am kind of like there to answer any question, or to even jump in and clarify a question that I'm assuming they're going to have if something comes up. Yeah, I like to be really involved in the conversation, and I'm completely looped into everything that's happening between them and the editor, and the publishing team. I'm part of all those conversations. So it's very much like a teamwork thing where I'm there to support, kind of in any way that they need. But yeah, once you sell your book, you're like, 'Oh my gosh, what now? What does this look like?'

Sabrina Yeah, there's a lot of little things that are involved that you don't even know happen, yeah.

Michaela Yeah, absolutely. So I like to... It's great for me to be able to talk my clients through things when we hit each new step, but also my clients have been really great at asking questions when they don't know something. And I think that's sometimes hard to be brave about that, and to put yourself out there, but there's just so much to know. And sometimes the people who have been in the industry a long time don't think about, 'Oh, they might not be familiar with what this process looks like.' So it's also, I think, really important to advocate for yourself as well. And that's something I've seen my clients do such a good job of being like, 'I don't know how this works, how does this work?' And I'm like, 'Oh, great!'

Sabrina What's happening right now? Like, this is new.

Michaela Yeah, exactly.

Sabrina Okay. Yeah, I love that. I love hearing that. Okay, so you said you're very collaborative. How often do y'all share submissions and everything?

Michaela Pretty often, actually, at our agency. I feel so lucky to be at an agency where a lot of people do many different things. And yet we all somehow seem to have a vibe to our list, or like certain interests that, even if maybe we all share the interests, we know that so and so, like, has it the strongest. Or like, I've kind of developed a reputation for kind of like, I don't know, nerdier books in a certain way, or like very specific tropey stuff that I almost feel called out sometimes. Like, my colleagues will be like, 'Oh, this is a you thing.' And I'm like, 'How did you know that?'

Sabrina Like 'What do you mean?'

Michaela Seriously, people will sometimes describe things that I want in a way that I've never even described before. I'm like, 'How did you know that? I didn't even know how to put words to that.' So I'll - just to say - yeah, we absolutely share. A lot of the times, if something doesn't feel like a fit for one of us, but we have a sense that someone else might like their eyes on it, we lean towards sharing. Just to make sure that everybody who could be a fit at the agency has got their eyes on it.

Sabrina Cool. You're a film coordinator as well. I didn't include that in my questions. And I'm really sorry because I want to hear all about it.

Michaela Oh, my gosh, I have so many hats here. But yeah, we've got a whole sub rights team. We've got an incredible audio and foreign director, and an assistant in that department, too, who just do incredible work that I don't understand.

Sabrina And that's their whole focus?

Michaela Yeah. That's what they handle, is getting awesome deals in the foreign and audio market for our clients. So I feel very lucky to be somewhere where that is like such a strong focus, and that I can feel confident that we're gonna be really aggressive in getting those deals.

Sabrina Not just you being aggressive, you've got other people being aggressive, too.

Michaela Totally. Exactly. Which is great. And then, yeah, I'm sort of, in addition to assisting Michael, I should just get three different hats and switch them on and off, but I -

Sabrina You should.

Michaela Yeah. I'm also the film rights coordinator here, which basically means I'm like the hub for film rights. So I'm the person that all the Hollywood people come to asking. There's something called a rights check, which is basically movie people all the time want to know if something is available. Usually it's like they're just checking in on it. They might pursue it, they might not, but they just want to - they just want to know the status.

Sabrina Film contracts are a lot shorter than publishing contracts, right?

Michaela No, no, no.

Sabrina Are they longer?

Michaela Yeah. Those are a whole other beast.

Sabrina I mean, not the actual contract -

Michaela But the deal?



Sabrina Like the timeline. The timeline. The options for them. Aren't those pretty short?

Michaela Oh, I see what you're saying.

Sabrina They'll have like a year, or something?

Michaela Yeah. So an option agreement is usually if they're putting down money to option a book, you work out all the terms of what would happen if they bought the film rights to the book. But what's happening in the first place is just them putting down a certain amount of money for them to basically call dibs on it for a certain period of time, which is what you're talking about. So that is usually somewhere between 12 to 24 months is usually what that period looks like. So they have the right for that period of time to develop for film.

Sabrina But they aren't obligated to actually do it.

Michaela They are not obligated to do it.

Sabrina But you still get paid for that option?

Michaela Correct, correct.

Sabrina That's so confusing.

Michaela Yeah, I know, it's a whole other world. But yeah, so then if it falls out, then that means that it's available again.

Sabrina And then you can sell another option and again, it could still go nowhere, but you could still make the money off of that. Okay.

Michaela Yes, yes. And so it's not the same as if they end up making the thing. They're gonna have to pay a purchase price, or something even bigger. Like more money if they end up actually producing the film or TV series. But that initial payment is still nice to have.

Sabrina Yeah.

Michaela So I'm the person people come to, to be like, 'Is this book available? Is this available?'

Sabrina 'Does one of those options exist?' Yeah. Okay.

Michaela Yeah, exactly, exactly. And I just kind of coordinate within my agency to make sure that I'm clear on what the status of everybody's books is, if there's a film co-agent attached, which is somebody whose entire job is to negotiate, like book to film deals. So we work with a lot of those people who we will team up with.

Sabrina Do those get assigned pretty initially once you get a publishing deal, or does it vary by book?

Michaela It completely depends. It completely depends, but it usually doesn't happen until after there's a deal in place. But again, it depends. Sometimes it happens before.

Sabrina I've heard of that, too. Yeah, that's all different. It's all weird.

Michaela Yes. It's a wild world. It really is. It's something I didn't know much about before I joined here. So it's been really fun to get to know the - yeah, the film industry as well as books. I definitely prefer the book industry, but it's not bad to also get to be, like, in on those conversations on the film side as well.

Sabrina And then you said the actual contracts are longer than the book contracts?

Michaela Oh yes. If not at least the same. But they are detailed.

Sabrina Okay, yeah, that makes sense. Well, and you also just said that they negotiate everything for if it moves forward, so yeah, that sounds really intense. That's a lot of work for possibilities. Okay.

Michaela Yes. For a maybe. Yes, that's true. But better to know.

Sabrina Yeah. You want to get all that ironed out beforehand.

Michaela Yeah. But it's been fun to have so many kind of different roles within the agency, because I feel like I'm just able to learn so much, and kind of understand so many different facets of what we do in publishing. So yeah, it's a unique role.

Sabrina You probably don't get bored either.

Michaela No. But it is funny when I'm flipping back and forth between emails to do with - I mean, all agents have this, right? Like, our jobs are so varied that you're on a call about a creative thing, and then you're on a call about a business thing, and then you're -

Sabrina Looking at a query.

Michaela Emailing about a different thing. Exactly. It's just which is - which I love. Like, I think I get yeah. I think I'm the sort of person who would get very bored with a job that looks the same every day. So that's kind of what I love about it.

Sabrina Okay. Yeah. Have you had any interest in writing yourself?

Michaela Not so much. I wrote for fun as a kid and stuff, but I've really come to realize that the closest I get to that is - I mean, I love writing pitches, but that's a little different. I don't think that's what you're asking about.

Sabrina It's good to know though. I think it's really helpful to get that help on the other end, yeah.

Michaela Yes. I really do love doing that. That's something that got - Yeah, my first job, so much of my time was literally just spent writing pitches for - especially for picture books, which sometimes it's really hard to know what to say about, like, a really commercial picture book.

Sabrina I mean, a pitch might be the same length as the book at that point.

Michaela Right, exactly. [Laughs] It was good training. It was good training, but no. Yeah. I think the closest that I get is working collaboratively and getting to - you know, with my clients, like, talk story and talk, like, plot ideas. And then with my partner, like I said, who's a screenwriter, I get to...I'll like, do line edits or will again. We'll come up with a story concept together, but then he'll go off and write it and I get to see it and edit it from there. I've figured out that that's kind of my favorite place to be.

Sabrina Okay. It's the collaboration stage, but not necessarily the putting the words down part.

Michaela Putting the words on the page. That's really hard! I don't know how you guys do it.

Sabrina You know, I don't know how we do it either. It is really hard. It's so hard.

Michaela Very hard. I'm always deeply impressed. And you know what one of my favorite parts of my job is? When I talk with a client about their manuscript and I see an issue and I suggest a potential solution, and then they come back and their solution is, like, 50 times better than my suggestion was. I'm just like, 'This is why. This is why you're the writer.'

Sabrina But they wouldn't have gotten to that solution without your suggestion, and without seeing the issue from you, so...

Michaela Right? I don't mind being the person who pokes the holes, but I have found that the writers on my list are the ones who are the best at coming up with the amazing solution. And sometimes I am able to come up with it, too. But for the most part, yeah, the most brilliant - the most brilliant things usually come from the writer. For sure.

Sabrina I love writers. They're so fun. So you talked about collaborating a lot, so we're gonna keep on this thread. And exactly how editorial are you? Because you were talking about idea bouncing and, like, do you do multiple rounds with your clients? Do you mind looking at stuff early? Like, all the good stuff.

Michaela Yeah. No, so I'm definitely editorial. Like I said, it's one of my favorite parts of the job. So when I sign something up, usually I'm pretty up front on my offer calls about what sort of work I see that needs to be done, so I can make sure that me and the potential client are on the same page, and that they're excited about my ideas for revision, and that it clicks with them. So then once I do sign someone, I go and write up my letter, and then go on to do usually multiple rounds of revision. And the way that I approach it, I think, is what most people do. Like, starting big picture and then getting smaller and smaller and smaller until you're at putting stuff in track changes level. Typically for me, it's like one or two big picture revisions. And then I might do a round that's, like scene level. Like maybe I'll have notes that are kind of chapter by chapter, or even just scenes that stick out that need some work, or that aren't quite fitting. And then from there, going into line edits, which I don't do super intensely, but I like to catch typos and things. It's just something that my brain does anyways. And then I'll also point out, like, 'Oh, you know, the flow here is not quite working,' or -

Sabrina Catch em when you see em, because they are real sneaky.

Michaela Yeah, it's so true. It's so true. But that stage mostly is just kind of finessing if like, 'Oh, you know, she said this in this scene, but it completely goes against the thing we were just told in the last scene.' And it's nowhere near as intensive as an editor is gonna be, or as a copy editor is gonna be. But it's just getting the project in the absolute best stage that me and the author can together, before we go on submission to give it its best shot.

Sabrina I mean, that's what you need to do, especially in today's climate. My goodness.

Michaela Yeah, absolutely.

Sabrina Okay. I love that. You're very editorial then. Okay, cool. So saying that - how there does a book need to be for you in terms of taking on a new client? And where's the line for you between an R&R and a new client and a no? And I know I'm sure it's hard.

Michaela These are questions I ask myself all the time too, I feel like. And these are questions I've actually, as I've grown into agenting, as a new agent, it's something I asked a lot of other agents a lot too, to be like, 'How do you know? When is it right?' And it's just something that really does depend - like project by project. For me, I have noticed the trend is usually that the project is pretty strong and that most of my notes tend to be strengthening things that are already working, like looking at the coolest or best parts of the book.

Sabrina So you're not typically asking for rewrites.

Michaela Well, I'm always asking for revisions, and like relatively big revisions, but not like overhaul...this book's gonna be unrecognizable. It's always like, 'This relationship is amazing, but how do we sharpen it?' Or 'This element of the world is awesome, but it gets totally forgotten. But it was my favorite part.' Like, how can we -

Sabrina Expand on it.

Michaela Yeah. And how do we bring that back? Yeah, exactly. I think a lot of times when I will - over email maybe - if I'm passing on a manuscript and I like a lot about it, but maybe don't have big ideas for how to improve it, I will mention to the person that I'd love to see their next manuscript or even a revision of that one if they end up doing that. I don't usually do R&Rs, but if I do, every so often if I really love something and I have a lot of big ideas, then I will get on a call and have that conversation and kind of share my big picture ideas. If it's something that really the manuscript feels like it needs a bit of an overhaul, or like a huge aspect of it might need to change in a way that feels like, I don't know if I have all the tools to offer the author at that point, to get it as far as it needs to. I usually have that conversation with them and just kind of see what my ideas are resonate with them.

Sabrina That makes sense. Yeah, I know that's a tough one. Sorry.

Michaela No, it's tough because it's like tough in every aspect. It's like I also don't know, it's really case by case.

Sabrina Yeah. What is your communication style like?

Michaela I think it depends on - I adjust to what each of my clients is kind of looking for I think. I'm definitely email forward. I'm an email sort of person, and I'm pretty fast on email, which is thanks to my whole agency, I think is relatively quick, so I've been trained to do that as well. I'm also - as I'm sure you have been able to tell over the past little bit - I'm a talker, so I love if there's something that would be quicker to explain over the phone, or if we're talking about a manuscript, or something creative, or bigger questions that aren't a quick email away. For my clients who are comfortable on the phone, that is something I'm always game to do as well. So yeah, but I try to be, I don't know, communication style positive, direct, friendly. Yeah. What are the adjectives? Yeah, that's sort of my style on that.

Sabrina Okay, cool. How quickly can your clients expect to hear back from you and everything?

Michaela Yeah, I tell them for normal emails within 24 hours on a business day, usually faster. And then in terms of reading and getting revisions back, it really depends on my schedule at that time, and how much is already on my list, but usually I aim for around between two to four weeks, I think might be a good thing. But I'm always upfront with my clients about when they can expect it, so they can plan on their end as well.

Sabrina Yeah. Okay. So it varies a little bit. Okay. And that makes sense. I've talked to a couple of different agents at this point. And they say that sometimes you'll get, like, a bunch of client manuscripts all at the same time.

Michaela Yeah. And the fact is, your working hours, at least for me, my working hours, I can't usually spend reading. Like, it's a very special case if I can. So that is usually set aside for after hours. Or I really like to do my reading and editorial notes on the weekends because my brain is really fresh in the morning. So I like to wake up and give my morning and afternoon to that. So then it's a matter of, okay, how many weekends do I have open to do this?

Sabrina Okay, yeah, that makes sense. So you have a lot to keep organized. How do you stay organized? And I'd love to hear how Dystel, as a whole, keeps track of where all the editors are, all the imprints and stuff, because everyone's - it seems like people are moving constantly and -

Michaela Everyone's moving. It's true, it's true.

Sabrina At this point, I'm like, I don't know how many big houses there are, or imprints.

Michaela I know, it's a lot. That is something you can lean on an agent for, for sure. Yeah, we've got a database, which is awesome. So we've got a database that keeps all that.

Sabrina Are you all just like daily updating, basically?

Michaela Yeah. No, absolutely. I mean, if anybody learns, 'Oh, so and so moved', they'll go into the database and update it. We've also got somebody on staff whose entire part of her job is she keeps track of, if certain publishing news announcements say, 'Oh, so and so moved here and there', like, she'll update it for us. And then we keep pretty on top of that. As soon as anybody hears about that, we share it with the whole team. So that's really handy. And then I've also got my own and in those, we also keep track of wish lists and if somebody's had a call with an agent or with an editor, what are they looking for right now? We share that with everybody so we all are on the same page and able to share that information, because there's a lot of editors out there.

Sabrina That's really nice, too. There's a lot of agents at your agency, so you've got a lot of people.

Michaela Totally. And we can even, like, we collaborate on sublists and stuff like that too, right? If I'm filling out a sublist, I'm like, who would be the perfect person at this imprint, I'm not really sure yet. I can go to a colleague who may have worked with a lot of people at that imprint, and they can give me that input. So, yeah, definitely again, that collaboration is great. But yeah, and I have my own separate notes as well, with my very detailed notes after calls or meetings with editors as well, that might not be as useful for the whole agency that I'm like, 'We both really like lighthouses' or something like that.

Sabrina I love that. That's funny. Okay. So we kind of jumped ahead. How do you personally stay organized? Like, are you a big spreadsheet person? Do you love a good spreadsheet?

Michaela Yes, I do spreadsheets. I'm kind of like everywhere. Yes, I do. For different things, I use different - Like on my personal I used to be very into sticky notes, which I've grown out of.

Sabrina I love a good sticky note.

Michaela Which I'm like, there was totally a time in my life where my desk would just be like, littered with different to do lists on different sticky notes, which is not good. So now I usually just have - I've got my one little sticky note that's my immediate reading list. Like the big reading projects I want to do in order, just so I have that because it's really satisfying to cross things off the list.

Sabrina It is, yes.

Michaela I think that's why I do that.

[check noise]

Michaela Yes, but for reading and stuff like that. Yeah, I've got Excel spreadsheets tracking reading and submissions. I've also got - I don't know why - at some point I set up a Trello to track full manuscripts that I had.

Sabrina What is that?

Michaela It's like virtual sticky notes, honestly.

Sabrina Oh!

Michaela Yeah, truly. You set up a board. I think it's just trello.com. You just set up a board and you can organize to do lists. And then it's nice because they're basically like a virtual tile and you can put text on, you can put comments, you can attach a document you can flag in different colors. So it's just a nice way to keep things organized, yeah.

Sabrina Okay, cool. It's always nice to put a little check mark on things.

Michaela Yeah, totally.

Sabrina I've been using Notion.

Michaela What's that? I think I've heard of that before, but I've never used it.

Sabrina It's - I don't know. Okay, so it's basically like this blank slate. Like it just looks like a blank page. And then you can do bullet point things, like little checklists. You can make little tables, you can do all kinds of stuff on there. You can put things with calendars and stuff. I don't know. I really like it, but it's probably only good for smaller stuff because I do spend a lot of time like, 'Okay, I'm gonna go make a new checklist.' [Laughs]

Michaela No, that's great.

Sabrina You made 30 checklists, but you need to go actually do the things on the checklist.

Michaela Making the checklist is half the battle, I think.

Sabrina It is. It lets me know what's coming up.

Michaela It is satisfying, at the very least.

Sabrina You were about to say, I think, another program that you use.

Michaela Oh, yeah, I was gonna say I use Microsoft To Do to organize some of my to do lists, which I was mentioning because you can check things off and it makes a nice little ding sound.

Sabrina Oh, it does, it dings it for you? Okay, cool.

Michaela Yes, it does sound really nice when you check something. I use that for mostly, like, my follow ups and things like that. If I just need to know because you can schedule things, right? Like, 'Oh, on this day, I'm gonna go look and see what I had wanted to check in on.'

Sabrina I'm the biggest dork, and I actually use the sticker method, and I get a sticker.

Michaela I love that. I love that. That's adorable.

Sabrina [Laughs] When I accomplish a big thing. Do you do the sticker method?

Michaela I don't. It's really funny you say that, though, because my partner has been trying to get me to do that, because I don't have as many, like, physical to do lists. But I do have, like, a planner. But so every so often he'll come home with a really cute set of stickers, and he's like, 'You should use these.' And I'm like, 'But they're so precious. I don't want to, like...'

Sabrina I know. Most of my stuff is, like, on digital stuff, too, but I have a wall calendar. And I'm like, 'You survived the day. You get a sticker.'

Michaela There you go. You made this. [Both laugh] I love that. Oh, my gosh. If I had a wall calendar, I would totally do that. Maybe that's what I should do. Maybe if I just make it through each day in my planner. I use Passion planners, actually. I've always been a planner person, which of course, I think going digital for planners probably makes a lot more sense. But I like the physical.

Sabrina I like the physical, too. Yeah.

Michaela Yeah. I like the Passion planners because they break down the day by hour, which is what I just like to be able to kind of be like, 'Okay, this chunk, and this chunk, and this chunk.' But I know it's a podcast, but I'm gonna show you the one I got for next year. It's blurry because of the way I'll put it in here.

Sabrina Put it in front of your face. There we go. Oh, it's cute. Is that a moon?

Michaela Yeah, it's like rose gold, and it's got a little rabbit looking at a moon. You can't see it for crap, but yeah, it's a nice little set up. Anyways, I like to talk about planners. They make me happy.

Sabrina I do too. I mean, I'm the one who got us on this, so it's fine.

Michaela We're in good company.

Sabrina It's like 30 minutes of this podcast is gonna be us talking about planners. [Laughing] So sorry.

Michaela Sorry, everybody. [Laughs]

Sabrina Okay everyone! That's it for Part 1 of episode 9! Don't forget to hop over to Part 2 for the rest of my interview with Mike, where we'll discuss how to know when you're ready to send your book out, their query stats, how they read through their inbox, and what they're especially grabby hands for right now. The content list for this episode and all the Michaela links can be found in the show notes pages of my website, linked below. Thanks so much for joining us!