

LitTea Episode 9: Michaela Whatnall - Part 2

Sabrina Hi everyone! Welcome back to part 2 of episode 9 of LitTea with special guest Michaela Whatnall! I'm your host, Sabrina Lotfi, and if you're just joining us now, be sure to check out the 1st half, where we discuss film coordinating, how Mike got into agenting, how editorial they are, and all about planners, checklists, and the motivational powers of stickers.

Sabrina Okay, I think we're getting into some querying questions. Are you ready?

Michaela I'm ready.

Sabrina Okay. Do you have any stats off the top of your head? Did you want to do that?

Michaela I looked at my numbers, which I don't usually do because I was curious.

Sabrina Okay, so do you want to do monthly or weekly or what are you happy with?

Michaela Monthly, yeah, I looked at my monthly stats. Yeah.

Sabrina Okay, so how many queries roughly do you get monthly? This is so exciting to me.

Michaela Yeah. According to Query Manager, it seems like I get about between 350 and 450. Which I think it seems like it varies a lot looking at the little charts, but yeah, that's about average.

Sabrina That is so many.

Michaela It's a lot.

Sabrina And you request pages as well, don't you?

Michaela Yes. My agency always - yeah.

Sabrina You don't just - is it 20 pages?

Michaela I think it's 20. It used to be 25, but Query Manager I think, sets us at 20.

Sabrina Oh, that's interesting.

Michaela Yeah. I hope I'm not lying, but I think it's the first 20 it says on the form.

Sabrina You know what, though? It's on the form.

Michaela On the form.

Sabrina Do your research and look on the website, too.

Michaela I should really know this off the top of my head, but I'm pretty sure it's 20.

Sabrina Well, you don't have to know the exact number. You just have to feel like it's not too long or too short from that.

Michaela Well, and that's the thing. Like with Query Manager, it's just dropped into a form, so it's not like an attachment where it says, so if people send a slightly different amount, I don't know. So I read what's there.

Sabrina But be respectful.

Michaela Yes!

Sabrina Be respectful. Send what you're supposed to send.

Michaela Correct. If it's bizarrely long, I will notice that.

Sabrina But find the best line to end it on, around that spot though, because that's key.

Michaela Absolutely, yeah. End of a paragraph, something like that.

Sabrina Yeah, don't cut it off. Yeah. Usually it's around chapter marks, I feel like, or we've seen where it gets really tricky is when people are like, 'Send me your first three pages,' and you're like, 'Really? Three pages?'

Michaela It's gonna come up in a sentence. Oh my gosh, that's so funny.

Sabrina It's such a tiny little spot to look around.

Michaela That's a short little window.

Sabrina It is. Okay, so about how many of those do you request typically? Probably depends.

Michaela It totally depends. And again, I didn't even know the answer to this until I looked at my Query Manager, but apparently, according to Query Manager, I request between five and 20 per month, which is an interesting range. So it really depends on - you know, I'm requesting things that I feel good about, that I feel, like, excited to keep reading and that I feel like has a lot of promise for my list. So I am pretty picky when it comes to that, just because I don't want to waste the querying writer's time. And I also know, like once I request a full, I'm gonna be spending quite a lot of time with that project. So if I'm already feeling like it's probably not a fit, then I usually won't request it.

Sabrina Then it's probably not a fit. Yeah, that makes sense. And typically - you're newer, so you might just be as you feel comfortable growing your list and everything, but - how often do you take on a new client or about how many of those turn into offers?

Michaela Yeah. I wish I had a really useful stat. I know when I -

Sabrina That's okay.

Michaela When I started out as an agent, I listened to a lot of agents' podcasts and people are always like 'eight per year.' And I was like, 'That's so specific. I don't know how you landed on that.' So no, it really is. I'm lucky because I'm at a time when I really am growing my list. So if something sparks and is really exciting, I'm in a position where I can take it on and not worry too much about being overloaded. That being said, I do have a lot of other kinds of work on my plate, so I am always thinking about making sure that I am signing things up when I'm gonna be able to give them my full and complete attention. But so far I've never hit a point where there's something I really want to sign, but I feel like I don't have time for it. Right now, I'm at a really cool place where I'm able to grow my list at the rate that I find things that I love. So, yeah, that's where I'm at. And I just double checked and it is 20 pages, so my instinct was correct.

Sabrina Yeah. Okay. I looked at it too recently, I think I pulled up here as I was getting querying and stuff, questions.

Michaela I got thrown off, I don't know, half of Dystel's on Query Manager now and some of us aren't. And so before we made the move, it was 25 pages, but then when we moved over, I think Query Manager like their set levels. I don't know that there was a 25 page option, so we went to 20.

Sabrina Okay. How much do you love Query Manager? Has it been a lot easier?

Michaela It has, yeah. It's definitely a great tool to stay more organized. It's really nice. Again, even for sharing queries between agents, like, there are ways for us to do that.

Sabrina Okay, cool.

Michaela Yeah, it definitely is. And it's nice to have it removed from my Inbox, honestly, because my Inbox is its own creature, so to be able to visit somewhere else and honestly, it helps me have a different mindset when I go to queries because reading queries is one of my very favorite parts of the job. That has not changed since that first internship. It is like exciting. Unless I have a weirdly busy morning, I like to start my morning taking a quick look through, just because I'm excited, because I want to know what came in. Yeah, it's just a feeling of discovery whenever I go to do it. So it is nice to be on a different platform that's not connected with my Inbox.

Sabrina Yeah, and probably it's a little easier too, because if you have that open and another email pops up, you're gonna probably go check it.

Michaela Yes, it's a lot and it's also just a lot when people are following up, or you've got just all the coordination of requesting manuscripts and all of that, to have that in amongst your Inbox, it's a lot to manage. So it is, it is nice to have a different program, for sure.

Sabrina Yeah. There are a lot of little messages that get sent, I think. So, for you personally, because I know this is different for everybody, but what do you like to see in terms of personalizations and bios in queries?

Michaela That's a good question. I think for personalization, my main kind of thesis statement on this is that I think people get really stressed about it, and people feel a lot of pressure to find some connection point. And my feeling is that it's not necessary. I'm pretty sure I'm not lying about this. The query I have, the project my client Jenna is coming out with next year, I don't think she personalized. I think she just jumped right into the query. But she could tell from my wish list that the book itself was a good fit. So she didn't need to find some strange connection to me because the book itself was the connection, right? Like the subject matter was the connection. So I think the only times when I'd really recommend personalizing at the top is if you've met the person before, you heard them speak at something. Something like that. I think it's always welcome to mention you heard them on a podcast. I think that's fine to mention.

- Sabrina Everyone listening right now. You can use this in your personalization.
- Michaela You can be like, 'I listened to you on that podcast. You talked super fast, but it's okay.' I hope it's what you'll say. But no, the other thing that does work for me and that I get excited about is if your book does have something that is matched with something very specific on my wish list. So I don't think it's very useful if you say, 'I see that you represent fantasy books, so I hope that you'll like my fantasy.' It's so general, it's not really telling me much. When I see a fantasy query come in, I know why you sent it to me. It's because we both know I represent fantasy. But if you say, 'I see on your wish list that you love found family stories, my book is a found family story, so I hope that you love it,' you know, something like that, that is a bit more specific. And I think, again, I just encourage people to not stretch, right? So if you have - if there's like half a sentence that mentions a found family in your book, I don't think that's worth including. But if the book truly does fit that, then I think that's worth mentioning. But yeah, again, I really think don't freak out. Don't stress about including a personalization. It's not necessary. We're gonna read your query no matter what. I am excited to find out about what it is, whether or not we've met in person before. That's not what it's for. All of my clients are people I had never connected with before, had not met at a pitch thing, had not, you know, they just sent me a book that sounded up my alley, and that's all it was. So that's my feelings on personalization. And then yeah, for bio, what was it? Just general things to include in bio?
- Sabrina Yeah. If you don't have any writing credentials, what do you like to see in a bio?
- Yeah. I think you can really include what you want to. It can be super short and sweet. Like it can be a quick little sentence, and there's nothing you have to include. Ideas for something you can include is what you do for work, where you live. And again, if this doesn't apply, that's totally fine. But if you so happen to have a connection or an interest that relates to the book, right? So if it's a book about a kid who wants to be an actress and you've been an actor before, mentioning that, it's kind of fun. I'm like, 'Oh, I understand why they wrote this and what their connection is to the material.' If you don't have that, completely fine. And then the other thing, I really like to see that. Again, no pressure to do this, but a lot of queries, I think when writers include one little detail about their personality, or about their hobbies, I think that's so much fun. It just gives you a little peek into what they do, or if they have a ridiculous pet, or if they like to spend their time in tea shops, or whatever it is. It just lets me know a little bit about how they spend their time, and makes me curious to get to know them. So that's something that I like. And it's like a little peek of your personality. Again, not necessary, but when I see it, it usually makes me smile.
- Sabrina And it's helpful too. I mean, you're there for the book. Ya'll are both there for the book, obviously, but you're gonna be working with the person. You're not talking to the book.
- Michaela This is true. This is true. But no, it is really nice to just get a little bit of a sense of who you are. Yeah, and like you said, the query is about the book itself. That's really what I want to get to know. It's not as useful to have like a whole paragraph about who you are. We'll have time for that on our calls later, but just give me a little bit of who you are. Just a little bit of personality. I think it never hurts.
- Sabrina In personalizations too, kind of matching it to wish list specifically. If your query kind of nods to it anyway, then it's not necessarily necessary. But if you mention an element, well, you don't see that in the query letter, and you don't see that in the first 20 pages.
- Michaela Yes. Or if there's, like, a really good hook or, like, very specific. I don't know. I want a pirate book. I haven't found it yet. I want a pirate book. And if you're queer, you're talking about the plot, but it's not clear immediately that it's a pirate book. If you want to put that right at the top, like, that's a great way to really grab my attention from the first sentence of your query.

Sabrina Pirate book.

Michaela Or nautical!

Sabrina I love pirates. Have you seen what is that show? Oh, my gosh.

Michaela Our Flag Means Death'.

Sabrina Yeah. Okay, thank you. It's been a minute since I watched. It's so good.

Michaela I might have gone to the Ren Faire with a group dressed in cosplay for that show.

Sabrina Yes! Oh, my gosh. I haven't been to a Ren Faire in forever either. Okay.

Michaela Oh, my gosh. Ren Faires are so much fun.

Sabrina They're so much fun. Okay. That's awesome. Okay. Who were you dressed as?

Michaela I was Lucius. Have you seen the show? So he's the only one who can write. He's a really sassy one. I am.

Sabrina He's so sassy. I love him.

Michaela I have a hard time choosing a favorite, but he might be my favorite.

Sabrina Oh, that's really fun. Okay. Do you always read, like, all of the sample pages, or do you -

Michaela In a query?

Sabrina Yeah.

Michaela Yeah, I wish I could. There is not enough time. There is not enough time to do that. So I read as much as I need to read to know if it's something that I want to keep reading. So I read until I'm losing momentum or feeling like it's not a fit. And honestly, you know what? Even for things I request, I don't usually read the whole thing because if your first five pages are blowing me away, I want to know. I want to see what your full looks like.

Sabrina And you're attached to the query as well.

Michaela Yeah. And if I'm feeling really good about the query. Exactly. If I'm more on the fence, if I didn't connect as much to the query, but the writing is pretty cool, like, I might read more. Or if I loved the query, but the writing's not totally convincing me yet I might read all of it, but yeah, it really depends.

Sabrina That actually makes a lot of sense too. I mean, you're probably - odds are you're probably not gonna get it immediately. And even if you got it immediately, you're probably not gonna start reading it immediately, so it's probably gonna be good to refresh on that first chapter when you're actually ready to sit down and read the book.

Michaela Oh, totally, right. If I request a full, I'm gonna reread - I'm starting again from page one. Yeah. I'm not like, 'Oh, yes. Three weeks ago. I remember the first three pages.' I want the refresh. I want the full experience.

Sabrina Do you do the query before you do the sample pages always?

Michaela Yeah. Query Manager has it set up that way. Yeah, I almost always do that. I get a sense of what the book is and then I'll dive in.

Sabrina Yeah, that makes sense. My brain's pretty organized that way. I don't think I could dive fully into pages without, like, having a general idea of what it's about. Yeah, sometimes they don't necessarily marry.

Michaela Yeah. And sometimes I'll read the pages and then I'll go back to the query to be like, 'Oh, wait, how does this connect to the thing that I was told about?' If the story starts in kind of a different place from what the query was about, then I might be double checking, like, 'Who's this character again?' Or that sort of thing, if it doesn't tie in directly.

Sabrina Okay, so what are some things, aside from it just not being a good fit, or not just screaming at you, 'Please be my agent' that'll make you stop reading in the sample pages?

Michaela I mean, beyond like, if something is really offensive or something like that? That might be a gimme, though. I don't know that there's any specific things that will make me stop besides kind of the opposite effect. Is it pulling me in? Like, is it asking me to keep reading? Is it creating a sense of intrigue of some kind? Like, is it making me ask good questions? Like, what's gonna happen next? Am I curious? I always want to connect with a character pretty fast for most things. Am I engaged? Do I want to get to know who this person is? Is there a sense of voice? I think the only things that might kind of lower my motivation is if we have very - there's all the kind of cliché story opening. So if somebody is waking up, then they better be really unique in how they're waking up, or I better get a really strong sense of character or voice in the way that they're waking up to get me into it. But if it feels pretty standard, then I'm not asking a lot of questions about what might happen. Also, this is a very specific one to me, but I found I have a hard time connecting with stories that open with a character who doesn't remember anything. Like, they don't know who they are. I know people who love those books, so that's very much a me thing. But a lot of times because I want to get to know the character, if they don't know who they are, then I'm like, 'Neither of us know who you are.'

Sabrina That makes it hard. It does.

Michaela That's a trend. That's a whole type of book, I think. And I do get a lot of Sci-Fi fantasy, so that's usually where that tends to live. Something strange has happened and all their memories are gone.

Sabrina Yeah, that's fair. There's a lot of weird stuff going on in Sci-Fi.

Michaela And I haven't put that on an anti-manuscript wishlist or anything, because I'm open to something surprising like doing that and surprising or compelling me in that way.

Sabrina Yeah. Any of these things that we say are used a lot, they can also be used really well and be magic.

Michaela Totally.

Sabrina Doesn't Katniss wake up? On page one? [Laughs]

Michaela Oh, my gosh, I was talking about this with somebody. But she wakes up, and you know what she does? She reaches for her sister who's not in bed, and she wonders where she is. She's waking up, sure. But you're learning so much about her and her priorities from the first sentence, and that's gonna shape where the book's gonna go. So if you're doing that with your opening, and you're telling me something really specific about your character who's just waking up, then you might have my attention.

Sabrina Okay, cool. Yeah. Make it a little different. Make sure we're getting to know your character and we aren't just like, 'I'm sleepy and tired, and why is the sun out?'

Michaela Yes, that's something I always come back to is specificity. Make this opening. Like, no other book could start this way, right? Like, only your story could start this way.

Sabrina And why? Why does your story need to start specifically at this wake up moment, too?

Michaela Right. You're setting the stage for the whole story, so you should be telling us something really important about the world, about the character, about the things they're dealing with, that are gonna be important later on. So all of that should be coming into that opening scene.

Sabrina Yeah. Okay, so we just kind of talked about some things that make you stop with sample pages. What about when you're going on, like, a full read? I'm assuming you probably, if you don't read through all the samples, sometimes there are times that you stop reading a book.

Michaela Yeah. With the fulls. Again, if I could read all the fulls, like the full of all the fulls, that would be awesome. But timewise, it just doesn't - Books are long, guys.

Sabrina They're real long.

Michaela Like 'Why is this taking me so long to read? I thought it'd be faster' then I'm like, 'You're reading 350 pages.' It's a lot.

Sabrina A speed reader I am not.

Michaela No, I know. I think I'm faster than the average person, but not as fast as some of the fastest publishing people. There are some people in publishing that are, like, deeply impressive.

Sabrina There's some real fast people out there.

Michaela Yeah. No, it's wild. The thing that usually makes me stop when I read a full, and a piece of feedback I give a lot, is if I'm not feeling fully grounded in the world of the story within the first few chapters. And again, I get a lot of - and this can be for contemporary - but a lot of times for fantasy especially, I want to know who our main character is, who they are in the context of this world, and then also how does this world work? What are all the things that I need to know? And I'm not saying to info dump, but through the scenes that are playing out, I want to get to know what's important. And I want to be asking only the questions that I should be asking about - you know, if there's a mystery being set up or if our character wants something.

Sabrina And not like, 'How did they do that?'

Michaela Exactly. You're like, 'Why does this work this way?' Or like, is this - the confusion is not something I want to be feeling. So that's, a lot of times, feedback that I give to people on their first, maybe three chapters, five chapters, I wasn't feeling totally grounded. I wasn't feeling, like, in the boots of this main character, right? So I wanted to know more about - I wanted the world to feel completely, like, filled out, so that I could be completely invested in whatever our main character is getting up to. And I think one way to kind of look at that is if you have a critique group or readers, friends who are readers, having them read your opening few chapters and listing out anything they were wondering, or any confusions they had. And if they were wondering things you want them to be wondering, like one or two big things that they should be thinking about and wondering, because that's where the story is going -

Sabrina Then leave it alone! That's perfect!

Michaela Yeah, that's perfect. But you don't want them wondering ten things, right? You want them wondering like a kind of a manageable amount of things that they can really focus on. And if they're wondering things that they really should know at that point of the story, looking at how you can build out what you're telling the reader early on.

Sabrina That's great advice. Okay, what is your best advice for querying writers?

Michaela Oh, man. I have two, and they're both cliché, but they're what I really believe. One is read, and I know everybody says it, but it's true. You should be reading in your category, you should be also reading outside. But especially if you're writing for an age group or a certain genre, it is so important because you're trying to enter the business of publishing, right? It's not just about the creative part. It's also about where is this book gonna fit in the market. I mean, that's something that I, as an agent, am gonna be asking and trying to find avenues, right? So if you can understand how your book is in conversation with the other books that are coming out in this category right now, that's gonna give you a huge leg up, right? Like thinking about, it kind of get into comps and things like that. But what are readers of my book - what else are they reading right now? What else do they love? And when you read these other books, you're getting into the sense of what's the general style of these books right now, right? What is the feeling of a YA book at the moment? In fantasy or in thriller?

Sabrina It changes, yeah.

Michaela It changes. If you read a YA book from ten years ago, it doesn't feel like ones right now. Same with middle grade. So it's not as helpful. It's great that I love *Absolutely Normal Chaos*, but if all that I had read in middle grade was just like old Sharon Creech books, it's not helping me very much to understand the current market. So even just familiarizing yourself with what's in Barnes and Noble right now, what's at your library's new shelf in your category is great. And then keeping up on reading things that are in line with your book, I think is huge. And then the other one is to revise, which seems obvious. It's like I was saying how when I work with my clients, we're both working together to make it the best possible book we can in order to sell it in a pretty competitive market. Same thing goes for when you're trying to get an agent. We're looking at so much stuff, so it's so important that you get that book to the best place you can get it, so it has its best fighting chance. And that means getting other people to read it, getting other people to give you input. Also maybe getting experience reading other people's work in progress and giving them feedback, because that helps you grow as well, right? So really - yeah, finding your community of writers that you can lean on and get valuable feedback that you can trust from. I think that's huge.

Sabrina I agree. And then put in the work on it. Put in the work. Because if you know that there's reasons for people to say no, if you know that there's issues, other people are gonna see them, too.

Michaela Yeah. The piece of advice I've heard that I like is 'Revise until you're just moving words around.' If you're at a point where you're literally just shifting words around -

Sabrina Moving sentences around, yeah.

Michaela It's like, 'Okay, this isn't doing anything.' So now that's the time.

Sabrina That's fiddling.

Michaela Exactly, exactly.

Sabrina Yes. Take it as far as you can get it.

Michaela Yes.

Sabrina With your people.

Michaela Exactly.

Sabrina Yeah, that's great. Do you want to do some wish list questions?

Michaela Sure.

Sabrina Okay. Did you want to do a broad overview of your wish list for people, or do you want to just kind of point them at your manuscript wish list?

Michaela I can do a very brief broad. Yeah, I think my manuscript wish list is pretty detailed.

Sabrina It's really good!

Michaela Oh, thanks.

Sabrina There's a lot in there. So if you all haven't looked at it yet, get on the manuscript wish list. I'll have a link to it as well, but broadly...

Michaela Broadly. Yeah, very broadly. You know, I've definitely started out on the children's side since that's my background. So I'm always open to everything from picture book through YA. YA has my heart, so that's my very favorite, but I'm really looking to build in both middle grade and YA right now and very select picture book projects, also open to graphic novels. And then I'm really excited to be expanding in the adult space as well. That's something that's a gap in my list right now that I don't have a lot of projects on that end. So I would love to find more really exciting adult projects. When we're looking at middle grade and YA, pretty much every genre. Like, I really am not picky. I love everything.

Sabrina Okay, you'll take it all.

Michaela I'll take it all, yes. I really love everything. As long as there are strong characters and beautiful writing, I am in. In the adult space, I'm looking for something that kind of splits the difference between commercial and literary. Like that upmarket space where we've got a really hooky plot, like a hooky concept and a propulsive plot, something that's really like moving us along. Stuff is happening on the page, but also, you know, that's really character driven and that has themes we're exploring or, you know, messages we're kind of unpacking that are gonna stay with me beyond the last page. So I like something that's fun to read, but I also want it to have some substance as well.

Sabrina And some growth.

Michaela Yeah, absolutely. So I'm really open in that space as well. I really am looking to build, whether that's contemporary fiction, whether that's historical. I love a good genre as well, so I know that's pretty broad, but I really am kind of hungry and looking to build in a lot of different directions right now.

Sabrina And you take some nonfiction as well, yes?

Michaela I'm open to nonfiction. Right now, it's not as much of a focus on my list, so I'm open to, subject matter wise, looking for stuff that's like cultural subject matter. I'm interested in the sort of like nonfiction for the millennial set, like whatever that may be. I'm interested in queer history or queer memoir, that sort of thing. But again, there are people at my agency, I think that are building more aggressively in nonfiction than I am. So I'm only gonna take things on in that space if it's really particular to my personal interests right now.

Sabrina And are you only in the adult space in terms of nonfiction, or are you...?

Michaela Oh, no, I'm super open to middle grade and YA as well. Yeah, absolutely. Again, because my background was talking to teachers and librarians, I love finding things that feel like an obvious fit for the classroom, but that are still fun, right?

Sabrina Yeah. So you sound like you lean more commercial. Is that true in young adult and middle grade?

Michaela In adult, yeah, I'd say yes, I do love literary writing, but I tend to want something that feels more - a little - has a bit of pace to it. But man, and I wish I could be more specific in middle grade and YA, but I truly will read it all. I will read something super literary where we're just in a character's head for pages and pages if the writing is strong enough, truly. But again, I love to have fun. So I love - just like I was talking about an adult. I think I'm open to a really broad range, but my sweet spot is things that are fun, but also have a bit of heart to them, or a bit of emotions we need to unpack, or whatever that is. I like that combination.

Sabrina Okay. What are you the most greedy for currently?

Michaela Currently?

Sabrina Yeah. What are you most grabby hands on?

Michaela Because I'm kind of billed as the Sci-Fi fantasy person, so I get a lot of that, and I'm always open to that, but I haven't seen as much contemporary because of that. And I love contemporary, so, like, I really would love to find some more really lovely, interesting contemporary with its own kind of hook that's a little different. That's something I'd really like right now. I also am still looking for, like, really good spooky stuff. I'm not a huge horror person in general when it comes to, like, movies and stuff, but I've found that I especially love supernatural. Like, when I do love horror, it's usually supernatural of some kind. Something weird is going on, something eerie. So I'd love - especially in middle grade and YA - I would love to find something that's either like a supernatural thriller, or a horror, or suspense, something like that. And then yeah, like I mentioned before, I'm on the lookout for my nautical novel.

Sabrina Yes.

Michaela 'Master and Commander' is, like, my favorite movie. So I need something that gives me, like, characters on the high seas. That's something that I would love to find.

Sabrina That sounds so fun. Okay, I want to read it when you get it. Oh, man. Are there any topics that you're not typically drawn to, or that aren't typically right for you?

Michaela Not so much. I do have on my manuscript wish list that I got a lot of, like, virus novels, and I'm not necessarily opposed to something that deals with Covid on the side maybe, like that, maybe it takes place during that time or something. But books that are, like, about either Covid or a deadly virus just are not for me. Yeah, are not for me right now. It's kind of wild how many of those I've seen. And not just like, Covid, but, like, fantasy books that are about, like, deadly viruses. And I think there are people who want to read that right now, but I also think there are a lot of people who don't. So for me personally, because it's not something that's something that is kind of emotionally heavy for me to deal with. And knowing that the market is a little, like, wibbly on that right now, I think that's one thing that when I see it, it's really got to convince me. If I'm gonna get into it. Otherwise, I'm probably gonna pass. And I do think - I think it's a really important thing to grapple with in our fiction. I really do believe that. So something that is really, like, unpacking our cultural response, I think is interesting to me. But something that's more just like about the misery of it all. I'm not ready for that.

Sabrina So like a really character and plot driven within that world?

Michaela Totally.

Sabrina Okay. Yeah, that would be really fun. Oh, you take graphic novels too?

Michaela I do.

Sabrina Okay. I know nothing about graphic novels, so help me out here.

Michaela It's a fun world.

Sabrina Are there authors that are just graphic novel authors that don't illustrate? Is that a thing?

Michaela There are.

Sabrina Do you take subs for that? Do you take just illustrators as well, or I don't know.

Michaela Yes! I am open to projects that are just a script and also ones that are author - the person is an author and an illustrator. The projects I have on my list, the creators are author/illustrator. So they've done both. I think scripts, like, pitching just scripts is totally doable, but it is harder. Basically, if I'm looking at a script only project, I really need to understand why it needs to be a graphic novel, rather than a prose novel. Like, what is it about this script that is delivering something that must be - that demands to be visual, right? So that tends to be what I'm looking for on the script side of things. And then, yeah, I love to see things that are one creator who has written and illustrated. And that comes down to, 'Am I connecting with the illustration style?' Like, does the idea feel fresh, all the same things that you ask for normal queries. That's how that tends to go.

Sabrina How polished are those? Like, the drawings that you'll get on your graphic novel submissions? Are they usually like pretty close to...

Michaela Yeah, it's sort of like with picture books where you might have a few pages that are the finished art, so that the agent can see, like, 'Oh, this is what the finalized style is gonna look like.' But then you can also include some pages that are just sketches, right? So it's like, this is how the page would be laid out. But you don't need to put in all the effort of illustrating completely a full graphic novel, or anything like that.

Sabrina Okay. Yeah. That's really curious. Are those on a Word document? I really know nothing about these.

Michaela No, it's an area of publishing that's still kind of finding its legs, I think.

Sabrina There's been a really big graphic novel boom recently, I feel like.

Michaela Totally, yeah. But on the submission side it's hard, because I think a lot of our submissions processes are set up just for word based things. So I try to be open, I think, on my wish list and on our website about like 'If you're running into issues like submitting via Query Manager, just reach out.'

Sabrina Okay, cool.

Michaela So, yeah, it tends to be when people submit graphic novel projects, it's still a query, but then they'll have what's called a pitch package. So it's usually, like I said, some sample pages. If it's an author/illustrator, a lot of times they'll have a full synopsis. Sometimes they'll have the full script. Sometimes they'll just have maybe 50 pages of a script, something like that. It can depend. And then they might do, like, some character illustrations, things like that, to give you a feel for the style. But there's not yet a very specific 'This is the exact thing you need to include in a pitch package.' It's more about getting the agent, like, the general sense of the project, and then if they want to see more, they can request more.

Sabrina That is so interesting. I have no idea how these are. Can you tell I'm not an artist?

Michaela No. It's a really cool world. No, I'm not an artist either. So I love when people can bring these worlds to life in a visual way because it feels like magic to me. I'm like, 'How did you do that?'

Sabrina Do you collaborate with your artists in terms of the illustration?

Michaela Not so usually because I don't have an illustration background, I usually am working with them more on the story structure, and then they're brilliant artists who can bring it to the table. So I trust them to do that.

Sabrina No, that makes sense.

Michaela Yeah. And then that'll be a thing, right? When - if they set up a project with an editor, the editor is gonna have the experience to work with them on 'Okay. How are we laying out all these pages,' all of that stuff?

Sabrina Yeah, I feel like it's probably gonna have a lot more input to get it into submissions. So, would you? Is that exactly how it would go when you send to editors, too?

Michaela Yeah, it depends. It depends on the creator and what their background is, right? If they have a ton of credits, maybe that influences how much material we need to share. If there's somebody brand new, then maybe we need to include a lot more materials just to prove, like, 'Hey, this is like, this person's got this great project.' And here is like, a lot of it essentially... not finished pages, but 'Here's the full script, and here's a lot of information for you to be able to see how cool this is gonna be,' basically.

Sabrina Okay. Yeah, that's super interesting. Okay, so what are some of your favorite tropes?

Michaela Okay. Oh, my gosh. It's like the sort of thing where, like, I think I do have a lot of favorite tropes, but when I think about it, I'm like, what are my favorite tropes? This is one way I will say one that is one my colleague called me out on that I didn't realize I loved. Which is - it's not necessarily enemies to lovers, but it's like two people who meet each other and are deeply annoyed with each other for some reason. Maybe one's acting very standoffish and the other one's not into it, but then they slowly are forced through proximity to get to know each other, and to understand that they both have complexities to them and softer sides. And then they like maybe they become best friends or maybe they get together, I don't know. But I love the electricity there, or the like, yeah, I've just been fascinated by character dynamics of basically any kind. So any character relationship where there's tension for some reason, and then we get to slowly see that kind of unravel, I adore.

Sabrina I adore that too. That's always so fun. I love seeing character growth.

Michaela Same. But that's literally one where a colleague of mine passed along a query and it's like, 'Look, it's the relationship dynamic that you love.' I was like, 'What do you mean it's the relationship...' Hold on. I looked at my list and I was like, 'Oh yeah, I guess you're right.'

Sabrina That's so funny. Called out.

Michaela Called out. Completely called out.

Sabrina Okay, what about settings? Do you have any favorite settings?

Michaela Like I said, anything with the ocean makes me happy. I grew up in like a coastal town, so I love the beach. Like, I'm not a beach person, but I like things that have that vibe that like...

Sabrina It's different when you're reading it.

Michaela Yeah. I don't want to sit on the beach, but I do want to walk along the beach, and think about things, and look at the fog, or whatever. And then in terms of fantasy, I always like it if we're in a world where the world has some really strong hook of some kind, like you can describe the difference in the world, whether it's one very strong magical power or concept that everyone has or something like that, that's a really specific world. I always like that. This isn't really a setting thing, I guess, but something I like to mention is I like books to do with subcultures in our world, but it's like the world - I don't know, people who are really into basketball, or card trading, or weird stuff like knitting.

Sabrina Yeah, like niche hobbies and stuff. Okay.

Michaela Niche hobbies exactly. Where that consumes them. For example, my client Jenna, whose book is coming out in February, is all about a girl who's really into online roleplaying and so, so much of what consumes her mind is like the story she's online telling with her friends, and that shapes so much about her and how she moves the world. Like I love stuff like that.

Sabrina OK, cool. Yeah, I like those too. It's really helpful for bringing out really unique and interesting voices, I feel like.

Michaela Absolutely.

Sabrina What about some of your favorite themes?

Michaela It's so cliché to say coming of age, but coming into identity, I guess. I like stories where people are - this can be YA, or middle grade, or adult - like, really grappling with who they are and what their values are. It says this on my manuscript wish list. But I love a story where you can look at where the character is on page one and then on the final page and see how they've changed. Like, see how the events of the story have turned them into - shaped them and turn them into a different version of themselves. Like, hopefully a better version, maybe not a better version. If you're in certain genres. Usually, hopefully they've grown in some way that we can admire.

Sabrina It's fun if it's the other way.

Michaela If it's backwards sometimes.

Sabrina Yeah, they're really fun. Maybe not help you with personal growth as much, but they're really fun.

Michaela It is true. No, I do love a good ending where it feels like there's no turning back. Where you're like, 'Oh, crap, we've turned a corner,' and like, 'Things are darker than they were before.' So, yeah, I like both versions of that, where somebody has really changed. And I love, like I mentioned, I love found families, so I love things where there's kind of a discovery of community, or like, a feeling of a loner who finds their group. I also love family of any kind, like found family or blood family. Like, I have two brothers and we have such interesting relationships, and I get so fascinated by pretty much anybody's relationship with their siblings. Like, it's always so specific, yet so relatable usually. Like, you can see dynamics where you're like, 'Oh, that looks familiar,' but also, like, 'You guys are being weirdos together and no one would ever understand that dynamic that these two people have.'

Sabrina Except them.

Michaela Yeah. So I really love stories that deal with siblinghood and how you're stuck with this person in this way that you can never get rid of. And even when you are very different people, maybe, you have this bond that kind of ties you together, and what do you do with that?

Sabrina Yeah, I love that. It's a beautiful - it's a beautiful relationship, yeah.

Michaela It's really cool, yeah. I have another client book coming out next year that is a big aspect of it is a sisterhood story. The main character does not have a good relationship with her older sisters, and it really shapes the story and the decisions our protagonist makes. So, yeah, I think that I always am fascinated by that.

Sabrina Yeah. Okay, well, since we're talking about client books, do you want to give some shout outs to some upcoming or recently announced or released books?

Michaela I would love to. I can never shut up about my clients' books because I love them so much. So, yeah, I've mentioned very briefly, but I'll give the full details of Jenna Miller's debut is coming out in February from Quill Tree. It's called *Out of Character*, and it is a fat positive, queer, YA romance about a girl who escapes, like, the stressors of real life by retreating online with her online friends, and ends up falling for her online bestie and role playing partner, and has to figure out what to do then. It's so much fun. It's really sweet and full of great banter and awesome character dynamics.

Sabrina Oh cute!

Michaela Yeah, I'm such a fan. And then Kika Hatzopoulou has her debut called *Threads That Bind*, coming out in June. It's inspired by the Greek Fates and it is a fantasy noir, which I love, genre mashing. And Kika's done such a good job of it. And it is oh, my gosh, it is a fantastical murder mystery. It is a sister story, it is action-adventure, and it's also a heartwrenching romance that subverts the soulmate trope.

Sabrina This sounds so good. It sounds so good.

Michaela It's really cool. Yeah, it's really brilliant. And then I have a client whose book just got announced, so it's not gonna be available until like, early 2024, but I can't help but mention it because it's so wonderful. So it's another debut, but in the adult space this time. And her name is Sophie Wan. And the book is called *Women of Good Fortune*. And it is exactly what I was describing before with a combination of a hooky plot, but also character driven. And it's about three women living in Shanghai who are considered, like, leftovers by the government, which is a term the government actually coined in China to pressure women to leave the workforce at a certain age and get married and settle down. So they've all sort of taken that term on themselves in an ironic way, like, 'Yeah, whatever. We're leftovers, we own it.'

Sabrina Okay.

Michaela But, at the beginning of the book, one of them gets proposed to by a really rich guy, and everyone is like, 'Great! You're gonna get married to him. It's gonna be great.' And she's like, 'I don't want this. I don't want this. What do I do?' So they all think, 'What if we plan a heist? Like, what if we heist the wedding?' So it's a friendship story between these three women, but it's also a heist novel, so it's super fun.

Sabrina That sounds incredible, too. That sounds really good.

Michaela Yeah. So, yeah, that is not coming out for a little while, but it did get announced recently and we're super pumped about it.

Sabrina Okay, cool. Yay. Oh, my gosh, you have such great projects that I've been seeing.

Michaela I'm so glad to hear that. Yeah, I'm very lucky to be working with the folks that I am.

Sabrina Oh, yay. Okay, last one. I can't believe we made it. Do you want to tell everyone where we can find you?

Michaela Sure. Yeah. So I'm on Twitter. I'm not like, super on Twitter, but I am there, which I think my handle is @mwhatnall. My first initial, Whatnall. And that's where I tweet out announcements and stuff for my clients. Every so often, I'll drop a miniature wish list item if there's something I'm feeling at the time. And then I did recently get an Instagram, too, because I realized I wanted a place to be sharing my clients' information there as well. So it's my full name on Instagram, Michaela Whatnall. So if you want a couple of aesthetic book photos and also covers and announcements and things like that, I'm over there too.

Sabrina Okay, cool. Yeah. Awesome. And then also on Dystel, on the Dystel website.

Michaela Yeah. The website is the best place to go for updated information about what all of us are looking for, for submission guidelines, all the rest. And then quite a lot of us, including myself, use the manuscript wish list website, which is great because it lets us expand more into what we're looking for at the moment. And we do keep that updated. I'm actually gonna update mine, hopefully sometime this month.

Sabrina Okay, cool.

Michaela Fresh information. It will be very similar to what's up there, but just making sure that everything is accurate and maybe adding more stuff on there.

Sabrina Awesome. Oh, my gosh, I can't believe we did it. Did you want to add anything? I feel like we covered so much stuff in this.

Michaela Yeah, it was a lot of fun.

Sabrina I had so much fun chatting with you. You brought so much knowledge. And I love learning about fun stuff with you. That was really cool.

Michaela Thank you. Yeah, no, this is great. Thanks so much for having me on.

Sabrina Thank you so much!

Sabrina Okay everyone! That's it for episode 9! As always, I've got a content list and all the Mike links in the show notes page of my website, linked below. Thanks so much for joining us! Okay Ginny, say goodbye!

Ginny [Barks]