# Poets&Writers

Guide to

# Literary Agents

he essential guide from the authoritative source on everything you need to know about literary agents, including information on what agents do for authors, what they look for in a manuscript, how to approach sending proposals, and how to find the right agent for you and your work.

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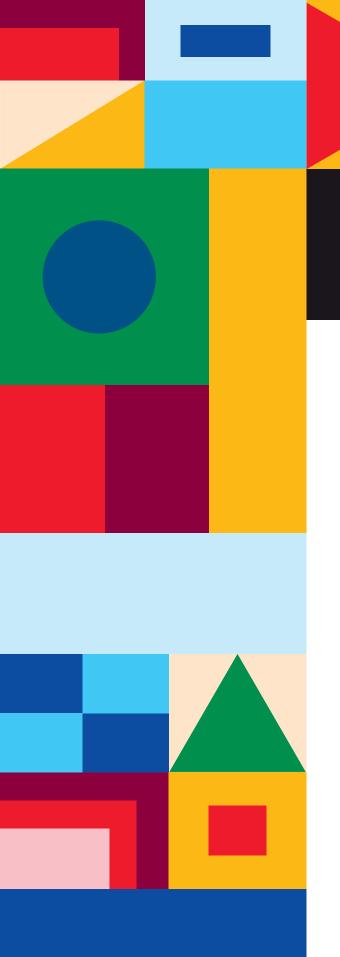
Visiting Writers Include: Kaveh Akbar, Nuar Alsadir, Jericho Brown, Sandra Cisneros, Ama Codjoe, Adam Dalva, Hernan Diaz, John Freeman, Isabella Hammad, Richie Hofmann, Melissa Febos, Edwidge Danticat, Nick Laird, Lisa Lucas, Valeria Luiselli, Nadifa Mohamed, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Adrian Matejka, Coco Mellors, David Mitchell, Maggie Nelson, Claudia Rankine, Brenda Shaughnessy, Tracy K. Smith, Zadie Smith, Craig Morgan Teicher, Ocean Vuong, Michael Wiegers, Monica Youn, Kevin Young



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### Poets&Writers

hope you enjoy *The Poets & Writers Guide to Literary Agents*, which includes a selection of articles that offer a behind-the-scenes look at literary agenting, Q&As with literary agents who answer the most commonly asked questions about publishing, plus insider tips and resources to help you find the best agent to represent you and your work.

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We hope you find our guide informative, and, as always, we appreciate your interest and your support.

The Staff of Poets & Writers, Inc.



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# Agent Etiquette 101

By Jade Wong-Baxter

REAT news: You finally finished your manuscript or proposal and you're ready to start querying. But how do you handle the interpersonal parts of talking to or e-mailing an agent? What etiquette should writers follow, and what should they avoid?

Despite some of the trepidation writers feel around communicating with literary agents, there's no secret trick or code involved in querying or talking to us. We just want to be sure that any writer we work with will be a communicative, respectful, and consistent partner throughout the long, long business of publishing a book together. With that in mind, here are some tips to consider:

#### Research agents' interests and tailor your query letter.

This isn't just about etiquette, but also about crafting a convincing query. "Agents always like to know why

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you queried them specifically—what books have they represented that are similar to the one you've written? What about their bio or wish list spoke to you?—and what you respect about the agency as a whole," says Natalie Edwards of Trellis Literary Management. Every agency has a website listing its agents and their interests; online databases like Manuscript Wish List (manuscriptwishlist .com) or the Poets & Writers Literary Agents database (pw.org/literary \_agents) can also give you lists of agents' preferences.

You'll want to double check that an agent represents your book's genre and age group—I don't love receiving high fantasy or kid lit, neither of which I work with. I can also tell when an author is doing some gymnastics to make their book's premise "fit" into my wish list. For example I often call for stories by marginalized voices; if I receive a query arguing that a book about single people or people with glasses counts in that category, I'm immediately put off by the reach. Rather than twisting your book to fit into an agent's mandate, pick agents whose tastes fit with what you're already writing. I'm always excited when querying authors have clearly looked into my past work or cite comparable titles that I've mentioned loving on Manuscript Wish List or even X (formerly Twitter).

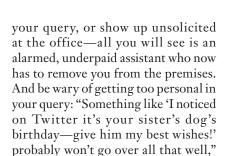
Once you decide which agents to

submit to, send your query according to their guidelines. "Writers sometimes e-mail ahead of sending an actual query to ask if their project feels right for my list," says Iwalani Kim of Sanford J. Greenburger Associates. "Unless it's a genre that falls outside my wheelhouse, which you can double-check online, the answer is usually that I don't know until I see the full query. Save us both the e-mail and be decisive about whom you're enthused to share your work with."

### Treat the query like a cover letter, and your querying process like a job interview.

Your query letter should tell me three things: why you're querying me, what your book is about, and who you are. That's really it! Keep your tone direct, polite, and professional in your query and in all communication during the query process. "If you wouldn't do it in a job interview process, don't do it to the agent you're querying. This is the beginning stage of what is effectively a business relationship," says Ayla Zuraw-Friedland of the Frances Goldin Literary Agency. "It's one that can, and often does, develop into something more collegial and personal, but in the beginning phases, keep it professional."

This also means avoiding any tactics that would cross professional boundaries. Don't send gifts to an agent's office, call several times to ask about



#### Follow up with agents when you have updates.

says Edwards.

Writers often ask when it's appropriate to follow up on their query: a week, a month, a year, never? There's no one-size-fits-all rule: Some agents reply to every query, and some reply only if they're interested. Preferences

and time lines for response are usually (though not always) on the agency's website. In general, if you have not heard back from an agent within the allotted reading period, or within a few months, you can assume they have passed on your query, and you don't need to follow up. If an agent has requested a full manuscript, then you can gently follow up, but give it at least a month or two. "Agents know the waiting is so, so hard, but if a writer checks in after only two weeks or so, that is often simply not enough time for us to have read the full manuscript yet, given our volume of reading," says Edwards.

If you receive an offer of representation from an agent, you should send brief and courteous follow-up e-mails to all the agents you've queried. "It's absolutely in your best interest to do so and gives us the opportunity to prioritize your submission," says Kim. "Even if the offer is from a dream agent of yours, it doesn't hurt to have options, and you never know who else might throw their hat into the ring." In those follow-up e-mails, you should also include the time line on which you're hoping to make a decision about representation. It's polite to give other agents at least two weeks from the first offer, so that everyone has enough time to read.

Treat agents like people, with human limitations and needs.





Almost every agent has a story of being pitched in person at an inappropriate time or in an inappropriate way. There are the infamous stories of agents being cornered in the bathroom of writers conferences. I've had colleagues who've had writers pitch them at nightclubs or parties or once (unfortunately for me) in the back of a very long, awkward cab ride.

I understand that meeting an agent feels like a rare opportunity, and so there's a strong temptation to shoot your shot. But agents are also people who, as much as we often love our jobs, want to be able to separate ourselves from our work and live in the world without worrying about

#### ALMOST EVERY AGENT HAS A STORY OF BEING PITCHED IN PERSON

AT AN INAPPROPRIATE TIME OR IN AN INAPPROPRIATE WAY.

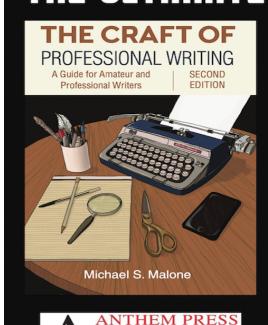
being on as an agent all the time. With that in mind, please keep your pitching to the times and venues when an agent says they're open to them: during pitch sessions, or scheduled meetings, or if an agent asks you to specifically talk about your project. If

you meet an agent by chance in a personal setting, then great, we're a fun bunch, say hi and have a normal conversation—you can always follow up via e-mail later.

Ultimately a lot of the etiquette advice here is just about each party treating the other with respect, kindness, and clear communication.

Book publishing can be a long, slow, process—what makes that process tenable is building a relationship of trust between an author and an agent. And when you have that trust, your work and your publishing career will be all the better for it.  $\infty$ 

### THE ULTIMATE WRITER'S HANDBOOK



"Ever helpful, practical and inspiring, Mike Malone offers a friendly, nutsand-bolts approach to craft writing that makes professional writing seem wonderfully possible as a career."

- Ron Hansen, Novelist and Professor at Santa Clara University

""This is a dangerous book. Once you've read it, there's no going back. You'll get why most writing is bad: Lazy craft. The poverty of facts. Laughable logic. Boredom bordering on torture. Walk away! If your bureaucratic job demands you turn out crap, just walk away. This book is not for you. Rather, it is for writers who strive to be read and remembered. Whose job it is to inform, motivate, entertain, and delight. On my desk are George Orwell's Why I Write and Stephen King's On Writing. It is now joined by Michael S. Malone's The Craft of Professional Writing. Yep, that good." — Rich Karlgaard, Former Publisher, Editor-at-large, and Futurist, Forbes; Author of Late Bloomers

"From blogging to tech writing to news reporting, Michael S. Malone understands that behind all the words has to lie humanity and understanding. He writes from the perspective of someone who's been there and knows that writing is about creating trust and relationships. This is a very important book and will no doubt improve the career opportunities of anyone who reads it."

- Scott Budman, NBC Television Tech/Business Reporter

"This is the defining book for professional writers at every stage of their careers. I wish I had this book when I started out; hell, I wish I had it a year ago."

- Tom Hayes, Paramount Pictures Executive, Author, and Screenwriter

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Our carefully curated database contains information, including submission guidelines and client lists, for more than 200 agents.

#### **Agent Advice**

More than two dozen top agents have responded directly to readers' questions in this regular column dating back to 2010.

#### Agents & Editors

This series of in-depth interviews with book editors and agents offers a look at the past, present, and future of the book industry and what writers can do to thrive in today's publishing world.

#### **Agents & Editors Recommend**

Industry professionals offer tips, insights, suggested reading, and more in this regular series.

#### **Other Resources**

#### **Publishers Marketplace**

(publishersmarketplace.com)
A members-only community that offers listings of the latest book deals, including the names of the agents and editors involved.

#### **Manuscript Wish List**

(manuscriptwishlist.com)
A website that features details
about what agents and editors are
looking for from writers.

KATE MCKEAN is a literary agent and the author of a book about the facts and feelings of writing and publishing, forthcoming from Atria Books in 2025.

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Anyone who has tried to write and publish a book will tell you some absolute truth they learned along the way. Editors don't edit. You must have a big-name agent to succeed. Their certainty leaves you feeling discouraged, dissuaded, or downright despondent.

As a literary agent and writer with nineteen-plus years of experience in the business, I'm here to debunk these harmful publishing myths, if not with publishing certainties, then with solid reasons not to believe the naysayers. Everything is not sunshine and best-seller lists for everyone—or even many—in publishing, but hopefully this will assuage some fears so you can get back to writing and reaching for your goals.

First myth up: You must have a bigname agent to get a book deal. I'll admit, this idea made me nervous as a young agent lo those many years ago. How was I going to get any clients if they wouldn't take a chance on a newbie like me? Would I forever lose out on projects to agents with more name recognition? (Yes, agents also have this worry, not just writers.)

But it wasn't long before I realized this was a myth. I am not so naive as to think that all agents are equal in the eyes of editors; there are indeed very recognizable names in this industry that make editors sit up and take notice. But that supposed list of "big-name" agents is much larger than writers think, and who's on that list varies from genre to genre. Someone who's a big name in science fiction might elicit a *Who's that again?* from a children's book editor.

Even if you're only looking as far as your own genre, you'll find that there are many more books published each year than those few "big names" could ever have handled. Publishers Marketplace reported over 7,000 domestic transactions in 2021—that's a lot of deals for those chosen bigwigs. They must have a million assistants and never sleep! Of course they aren't all brokered by the same handful of agents. That's just impossible. And don't forget: All those big names were small names not so long ago.

Myths like this are a defense mechanism. People throw them around to explain away the intangible, unknowable, or ambiguous reasons a given book didn't succeed. Instead of facing hard truths—that publishing is not a meritocracy, that sometimes the timing is off, that we don't always get what we want—we look for external reasons to blame. It lets us off the hook. We aren't sending out more queries, because why bother? When we think the deck is stacked against us, the problem isn't our book; it's the industry. (Our beloved industry has many problems, but I personally think this one is lower on the priority list.)

If you heed this myth, you may miss out on newer agents with energy to spare, or a midcareer agent who truly understands your book. You should query all kinds of agents who represent your genre to find the best match for your book. In the end, thinking that you can only succeed along a narrow path in an already challenging field will only make your individual journey harder.  $\infty$ 



# Agents & Editors Recommend Publishing profes anecdotes, insigh for books, movies

Publishing professionals share advice, anecdotes, insights, and suggestions for books, movies, music, and more. Read the full series at pw.org /agents\_and\_editors\_recommend.



It's important for writers who aspire to be published by a mainstream house to have an understanding of where their work fits in relation to like-minded books and authors publishing today.

Some writers find this notion intimidating or even demeaning, but I don't see it that way—not if we

engage thoughtfully with these comparisons. Every accomplished writer is also a reader, and all writers learn and develop thanks to an amalgam of teachers and influences, from the "old masters" of a genre or subgenre to breakout hits and under-discovered gems. Publishing relies at every stage on word-of-mouth, a mixture of enthusiasm and positioning that invokes existing writers and books. Agents pitch editors. Editors pitch their publishers. Imprints present titles to the sales team. Sales teams present titles to buyers. Publicists pitch material to reviewers and media. Booksellers make recommendations to customers. And readers talk to each other about the books they're reading. Understanding one's own work in this light allows a writer to engage constructively with how their books make their way into the world and into readers' hands.

This isn't about simply citing writers whose work you love and admire, but understanding which writers are working in a similar space to the one your book will occupy. When you were figuring out how to write your current book, what did you read and think: Yes,

*like this!* With which contemporary authors and books might your book realistically share a bookshelf, a review, a conversation (it's best to avoid lightning-strike comparisons)?

Taking the time to make explicit your silent teachers, influences, and, most especially, your competitors, can prove enormously helpful—whether you're just starting to query, working with a publisher to position your book for launch, or strategizing with your agent about what your career might look like in two years, five years, or beyond.

—Dorian Karchmar William Morris Endeavor



The thing I recommend most often to authors is to focus on the writing, on the work. As an agent, I know there are a lot of questions about navigating the industry, about how to pitch, but ultimately what's most important to agents—and the thing that we're all working toward—is find-

ing great work. It is also the one thing that's in a writer's control. The rest is noise.

On a practical level, I would recommend thinking about urgency and necessity in your work. A book is a portal; stepping into a book is the ultimate escape. In a world that's increasingly distracted, in which time is the most precious thing we possess, readers are looking for a

world they want to spend time in—whether that means a distinctive voice, a perspective they haven't seen before, or a fantastical world. Sometimes I think writers misinterpret this as a demand for lots of action or drama, but I can feel the same amount of escape in the opening of an Anne Tyler novel.

And so, consider whether your work is an invitation. Are your opening pages as precise and immediate as they can be? Does your narrative have a compelling rhythm or throughline? And remember that agents are book lovers: We do this job because we remember that magical feeling of falling in love with a story, and we want to share that feeling with others. We want to find writers. We want to say yes.

#### —Catherine Cho Paper Literary



I often encounter developing fiction writers and memoirists who have voice in spades but who haven't yet acquired full control over their story and characters. An inimitable writerly voice is the holiest of holies for all of us. But voice without accompanying mastery over the story is not enough,

whether your work is a commercial thriller or capital-L "Literary." A reader can sense when a writer is still puzzling out the meaning of the story they're telling and, as a result, when the characters aren't as dimensional and rich as they should be. Books with narrative threads that crisscross and meander without ever cohering—peopled by underdeveloped characters held from the reader at a distance—lead to passes from agents and editors in the following vein:

One piece of advice I often find myself giving is that before you query or share your work with agents, you should make sure you have read it like a reader. It's easy to get caught up in what it is you want to express or in finding the perfect image, while losing sight of how the work is reading experientially for the person on the other side. Keep hold of what experience you are trying to deliver for a reader. That's not to say one should write cynically towards the market, not at all. But in a way, with a novel you are giving the reader a gift, something of value that will stay with them—an idea, a voice, a feeling, a story, or, ideally, all of the above!

And I do mean "value" literally: I often talk to my clients about the "twenty-seven dollar test" (adjust for inflation as needed). A book is an idea, but it's also an object on a shelf in a store. You need to give people a reason for your book to be the one they spend their money on. An amazing voice or singular style can be just as "valuable" as the perfect hook but it's worth trying to imagine encountering your work in the wild. Does it earn a claim on your time and attention? Has it enlarged your world in some essential way?

So, before you send out your novel: Print it, curl up with it on the couch as you drink a cup of coffee, and see how it feels to read when it's more than just a Word document on your computer.

#### —Amelia Atlas Creative Artists Agency



As you read books by writers you admire in a wide variety of categories, make note of who you think does specific things beautifully. Which author uses perfectly placed details to make a character feel real or a scene resonate? Which author writes the kind

of snappy dialogue that carries you away in its brisk current? Which author unpeels the onion with an apparently effortless touch? Which author writes the kind of gorgeous sentences that make you break out your highlighter? Keep a running list noting titles and what specifically you admire. When you're writing your own work and feel stuck or unsure about something, go back to these authors' books and read for fifteen minutes. Admire what they've done, appreciate their skill, and remember that everyone needs a little inspiration from time to time.

—Faye Bender The Book Group



# I'll Read What She's Writing

By Jade Wong-Baxter

#### Advice for Agent Speed Dating

EW events create more stress at writers conferences and workshops than agent speed-dating sessions. These short one-on-one meetings can be great opportunities to discuss your literary work with literary agents and have personalized, specific conversations about your writing career and book publishing. But the prospect can also feel daunting: Trying to summarize your creative work in five minutes or less to an agent while you both shakily balance cocktails on your knees in the over-air-conditioned ballroom of an airport hotel is a rough task.

As a literary agent I also approach these events with trepidation partially because the writers who

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come in tend to be anxious, which makes me immediately want to spill my drink on myself so they can feel less awkward by comparison. But it can also be unclear to writers what they should expect from these sessions and how they should navigate conversations with agents, which causes unnecessary stress on both sides. With that in mind, here are some of the points agents would like writers to know about speed dating and pitch sessions *before* they enter the room.

what you'll get from speed dating. Writers often think the in-person pitch is their One Big Shot at success: If you come in and rattle off your dazzling pitch, our eyes will light up; we'll whip out an agency agreement and sign you on the spot. That's an incredible amount of pressure to put on a meeting that will last only a few minutes. It's also highly unlikely to happen (and if it does, that should be a big red flag for you about that agent). Counterintuitively, using all your minutes purely to showcase

Reset your expectations about

personalized advice and feedback on your project, not trying to sell the agent on your work.

That's because I will almost never be able to make a decision about whether an author's project is a good fit for my list until I read some pages, no matter how strong the pitch is. Ninety-five percent of the time my response to a pitch will be: "This might be a good fit. Why don't you send me pages and we'll see?" A book can sound fantastic, but unless the manuscript lives up to that premise, I'm not going to sign it. Similarly, some pitches I've received that have elicited "Eh...maybe?" reactions have turned out to have compelling manuscripts attached that changed my mind. The pitch is just one small part of my overall assessment for whether to sign a project.

Which leads to the question: If every agent is going to answer your pitch with "Maybe," then is speed dating even worth it? Why not just query us?

To my mind, speed dating is most useful as an opportunity for work-shopping rather than showcasing your pitch, as well as asking any questions you have to a knowledgeable publishing professional. Instead of thinking

your work is not the best use of your

time. The real value of a conversation

with an agent comes from asking for



of this as being your one chance to land an agent, I advise writers to treat the session as a chance to get some honest thoughts on their pitch; it can be valuable to get feedback from an agent before you start the querying process, since you're unlikely to get any feedback while actually querying. The speed date can be a tool to help you refine your query and have a productive discussion about it with professionals who are intimately familiar with the business. In brief: If you just want to tell an agent your pitch, then you might be better off querying them directly; if you want to have a discussion with actionable feedback, then speed dating might be worthwhile.

#### Keep your pitch brief and engaging.

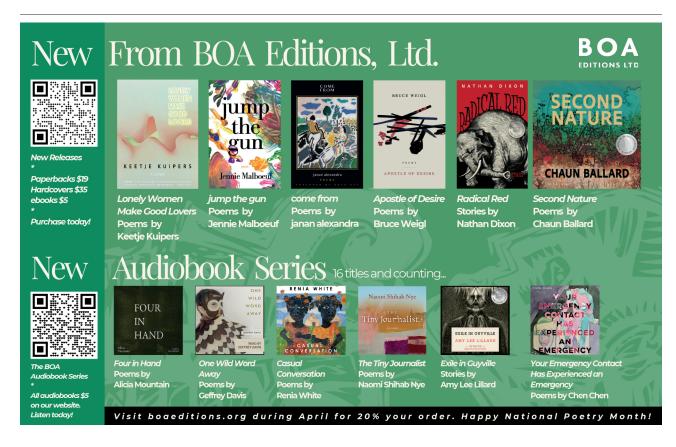
A surprising number of writers come into these sessions winging their pitch. That's not the best use of your time. For any project you want to publish, you're going to want to think about how to describe it succinctly and briefly: the characters, the setting, and the main stakes of the book, as well as comp titles, but more on that later. Practice beforehand so your pitch sounds conversational. (I've had some writers simply read their printed-out query letter to me, which isn't wildly compelling.) And above all, keep it short—a minute or less—so that you can:

Ask for feedback or ask questions.

I love giving feedback on pitches. Feel free to ask if I understood all of the plot, or if it seems like you explained events in the correct order. Also come in, if you'd like, with some questions you might want to ask a publishing professional about your project: What are some of the challenges of this genre that you've seen? Is there a particular hook from my pitch that interested you? Or anything else you'd like to know.

Think about the market and comps.

By far my most common question to authors, post-pitch, is about their "comps," or comparative titles. Tess Weitzner, an agent at Frances Goldin, agrees. "I'm often surprised at how many authors have never considered





comps before when I ask, 'What do you picture this sitting on the shelf next to? Who might be a fan of this?' So either come prepared with comps in mind, or questions on how to think about comps," says Weitzner. As agents we are always thinking: What books published in the past five years does this title feel similar to? If you'd like your book to sell, you need to think about the same—and if you're not sure, you can always come with questions about whether your chosen comps are appropriate for your query letter.

Keep the speed dating to the speed date. My evergreen feedback for conference attendees: Stay business-appropriate, and keep the pitching

### AS AGENTS WE ARE ALWAYS THINKING:

WHAT BOOKS
PUBLISHED IN THE
PAST FIVE YEARS
DOES THIS TITLE FEEL
SIMILAR TO?

to the allotted time, please. We love having these conversations during the event, but we're usually being pulled in a million different directions throughout the day. Every agent has that dreaded "I was pitched in the bathroom/elevator/getting into my car at a conference" story—don't let that overstepping writer be you.

Hopefully these tips have given you a way to think about how and whether agent speed dating is right for you, as well as some tools to prepare if you decide to do a session. Remember that this event is for you to have your questions answered

about the publishing industry as much as it is to talk about your work. Approaching it this way will let you have honest and productive conversations with agents.  $\infty$ 









Areas of interest: Adult upmarket and literary fiction, literary memoir, cultural criticism, narrative nonfiction

On her bookshelf: Luster (FSG. 2020) by Raven Leilani, Sabrina & Corina (One World, 2019) by Kali Fajardo-Anstine, Salvage the Bones (Bloomsbury, 2011) by Jesmyn Ward, and Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls (Bloomsbury, 2019) by T Kira Madden

Looking for: Ouery letter and the first few chapters in the body of an e-mail

Preferred contact: E-mail ikim@sjga.com

#### Agency contact:

Sanford J. Greenburger Associates 55 Fifth Avenue, Fifteenth Floor New York, NY 10003 greenburger.com

Read every installment of the Agent Advice series at pw.org.

I have finished a rough draft of a novel. As someone who knows no one personally in publishing or literary circles and has no following (even though I've worked in publishing), how do I get an agent?

#### S.C. from New York, New York

While connections to publishing or literary circles can work in a writer's favor, neither a referral nor a significant following will win over an agent if the project isn't right for their list. In fact, the "slush pile" is meant to level the playing field, and most of our agency's clients have come to us by querying. Make sure you understand the genre in which you're writing and submit your work to agents who are passionate about and understand the market for that genre. Research the agents who represent books that share similarities with your novel or authors you admire. Some free resources include the databases at Poets & Writers (pw.org) and Manuscript Wish List (manuscriptwishlist.com), and agency websites.

#### When you address an agent, what is an effective and proper way to get the attention of the person who reads it?

#### Jenya from Canton, Massachusetts

The most effective and appropriate way to get an agent's attention in a query letter is to appeal to their tastes as a reader. Any meaningful connections you can draw between their stated interests and your manuscript will help you—perhaps your book is similar in style or theme to a book they sold, or it fits the bill for a dream project on their #MSWL. Do your research: Look at their bio, their list of clients, their online presence, interviews, etc. Then tailor each query letter thoughtfully to

the agent. A few "attention-grabbing" strategies that will likely backfire: being overly familiar in tone, citing details from an agent's personal life, and marking your e-mail "urgent."

#### What advice can you provide about submitting a book of short stories to an agent? Is it wise to compile samples from each story?

Catherine from Fairfax, Virginia

Before submitting your collection to an agent, it's a good idea to first submit some—but not all—of the stories for publication in established, highly regarded literary journals and magazines. Publication credits are especially important for writers of story collections, as they demonstrate the strength of each stand-alone story and indicate an existing audience for your work. You'll want to be sure that at least half of the material you're submitting hasn't yet been published. Once you're ready to query, choose one or two complete stories to

#### If, after sixty days, you have not heard back from a queried agent within an agency, should you send the query to another agent within that agency?

submit as a sample, based on the indi-

vidual agent's submission guidelines.

#### Leonard from Santa Fe, New Mexico

This depends on the agent's policy. Check the agency's submission guidelines and those of the individual agent. These guidelines usually specify whether the agent responds to each submission and, if not, the amount of time after which you can safely assume the agent has passed and whether you're welcome to query another agent within the agency.



# The Art of the Comp Title

By Mariah Stovall

#### Positioning Your Book for Success

RITING is an art; publishing is a business. Every author who hopes to be published through traditional means needs to ensure their manuscript both stands out and fits into a seriously crowded marketplace, and smartly chosen comp titles are one way to do so. A "comp title"—short for "comparative title" or "competitive title," and also called a "comp"—is a small but important part of the sales pitch for your book. Comp titles are used to compare your book to similar books that are already in the marketplace, and they're used at several stages in the publishing process. Comp titles will affect how people think about your book from querying to publication, and learning to use them to your advantage will better connect your book to its

MARIAH STOVALL is an agent at Trellis Literary Management and the author of the novel I Love You So Much It's Killing Us Both (Soft Skull Press). Prior to becoming an agent, she worked at Farrar, Straus and Giroux and Gallery Books.

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audience at multiple steps along the way.

A comp title can signal plot, but the best ones also capture the elements of a book that are more difficult to explain without reading it: themes, style, tone, structure, and target audience. The basic plots of *Hamlet* and *The Lion* King are quite similar, but they'd have wildly different comp titles if they were novels being pitched to agents or publishers. The best comps for Hamlet would be moody works full of probing philosophical questions and aimed at mature audiences. The best comps for The Lion King would prepare you for a family-friendly story about power and redemption that's also full of singing warthogs and wisecracking meerkats.

As you pitch your book to agents, you'll use comp titles to draw in publishing professionals who will be a good fit for you and filter out ones who won't. (Nonfiction writers: In addition to including comps in your query letter, you'll go more in-depth on comps in your book proposal). Once you have an agent, they'll use comp titles in their pitch to editors, who'll use comps to assess whether they believe they can publish your book successfully and how much they should pay for it. Comps then help your publicity and marketing team pitch your book to the right media outlets and advertisers,

and help your sales team pitch it to the right booksellers, who in turn get your books in the hands of the right readers.

Here's a formula for choosing comps: Aim to use two or three books in your book's genre that were published within the past five years to moderate critical and commercial success.

Why two or three? Too few or too many might make your book sound derivative or incohesive.

Why in the same genre? All products have multiple audiences, but they also have core audiences. Compare your work to books with the same core audience as yours. If your book truly straddles genres and/or age ranges, compare it to other books that also do that.

Why in the past five years? Tastes evolve, and trends come and go. There's no telling how a best-seller from ten years ago would fare today.

Why moderate success? Everyone wants to compare their work to that of the most successful writer in their genre or the most critically acclaimed genius, but in reality most books fall somewhere in the middle. "Moderate success" usually means a book has at least a few hundred reader reviews and a few thousand reader ratings between Amazon and Goodreads. The book will also have garnered a handful of critical reviews and other major media

coverage, including interviews, podcast appearances, and bookstore events. These books are in stock at your local bookstore or available at your library; you can ask booksellers and librarians for recommendations of books that are popular with their clientele.

Now, to find your comps: Read and research other contemporary books and where they fit into the market. I assume you like to read, so this should be fun.

Read the "Best Books of the Year" or "Best Romance Novels Coming Out This Summer" or "Ten New Books to Get Your Dad for Father's Day" lists compiled by the media outlets that you'd like to cover your book. Go to your local bookstore and ask what's selling in your genre or for recommendations of books that have important elements in common with yours. Look at the best-sellers on Amazon in your category and the Goodreads Choice Awards nominees. Look at "readers also loved" suggestions. Look at which books your favorite writers are posting about on social media or providing blurbs for. Ask your beta readers and writers group for suggestions. Now, narrow down your list: Rule out the mega-best-sellers, household names, and repeat prizewinners. (I know sales figures—which would be so helpful in all this-aren't public, and I'm sorry! Trust your instincts and do your best).

If, after all that, you still feel like you don't have the perfect comps, that's okay. If it isn't obvious why you chose your comp titles, or you feel like they're not quite perfect, you can succinctly communicate that in your query letter like this: "My Murder Mystery is like if Author A wrote Book B by Author C, shot through with the attention to setting that makes Author D successful." Or: "I've struggled to find a perfect comp, but the plot of my book is in

conversation with *Book W* by Author X, with a tone like *Book Y* by Author Z."

If you're tempted to use a comp that is not a book—a movie, play, video game, news story, and so on-and you're sure there's really no book that could serve the same function, then proceed accordingly. But use at least one book as a comp if you can. And whatever you do, please don't say there are no comps of any kind for your book. This can come across as arrogant and make you seem alienated from the industry you're trying to break into. I'd rather read a query with no comps than one that announces itself as a wholly unique, peerless product, free of any influences. Lastly, read your comps (or at least skim them or read reviews). You want to know what you're comparing your work to.

Even after all that narrowing down, there are still so many books to choose from. Agents aren't asking you to find a single correct answer among endless possibilities-we're asking you to find one of many possible correct answers. In the end, it's your job to write and your agent's job to help you navigate the industry. If an agent, editor, or other publishing professional truly loves your book, it's unlikely that the comps you or your agent did or didn't choose will stand in your way. An editor preparing to make an offer on a book will use the sales of its comp titles to help determine how much they should pay for it. And it's an open secret that editors play around with comps until they make the numbers work in their favor. However, they can't always pull it off. Your book might get rejected if your potential editor can't get the rest of their team on board, for reasons that could include reservations about how your comps performed—but that's not your fault, let alone the fault of the comps you chose. That's the fault of a risk-averse industry. Plus, this is more

likely to happen to a newly promoted assistant editor than to an executive editor.

Take all of this with a grain of salt: I'm not convinced that comps work as straightforwardly as publishers insist they do. I'm willing to bet that if you compared the sales of every book a press published in a given month with the sales of their comp titles, the correlation wouldn't be statistically significant. But I don't want publishers to stop using comp titles; I want them to start using them differently. If a book wasn't published successfully, rather than rejecting any books that comp to it, they might instead use the specific circumstances of that first book's publication (when it was published, its cover, where it was advertised) as an opportunity to plan how they'd publish a similar book differently and ostensibly yield different results. If comps are used too narrowly or reductively, certain types of books or writers can be dismissed as "unmarketable" without ever getting a chance to enter the market. For instance, a memoir by a disabled writer might only get compared to other memoirs by disabled writers, regardless of whether the prose styles are similar, while a book by a nondisabled writer may have more varied, holistic, and appropriate comps.

At the end of the day, everyone in the industry knows that every book published is mostly a gamble, with a little bit of business acumen thrown in. It's an imperfect system. But, if nothing else, the mix of research and luck that goes into selecting comps will start to prepare you for the wild ride of publication. It will also introduce you to the work of other writers you admire. Who knows—they might even write a blurb for your book or interview you at your launch party.  $\infty$ 



# I Look Forward to Hearing From You

By Kevin Larimer

The Art of the Query Letter in Real Life

OU can read as many articles about the process of searching for and securing an agent as you can find, absorb all the helpful advice of agents as well as authors who have blazed the trail ahead of you, then turn back to your own search for representation and still feel anxious, unprepared. This is understandable, of course, considering this critical step in the writer's journey requires drafting a unique e-mail that introduces you and your work to a professional who can help you realize your dreams of becoming a published author-and you get only one shot at making a good first impression. No pressure, right?

The typical query letter includes five essential elements: an opening that

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establishes your connection to the agent and why you've chosen that particular person to query, including the name of anyone who has referred you; a project description that gives the agent a compelling reason to read the book; some context for your book, commonly known as *comps*, or comparables, that help an agent place an unknown book (yours) within the context of well-known books or authors; a bio; and a coda, which includes details such as word count and, of course, a hearty thank-you.

But no two query letters are exactly the same. Just as you wouldn't want to read a book that is unoriginal, an agent won't be compelled to read a queryand almost certainly not an entire manuscript—if it doesn't stand out. The project description alone should be at least as compelling as the book you're trying to publish, and very often the language a writer uses in the query letter shows up in some form or another in the pitch letter your agent will send to editors with your submission. So it would be a mistake to take a cookiecutter approach to this personal document. To illustrate this point, I spoke with two authors about their initial communications with their respective agents, then asked each agent to comment on what it was about those e-mails that got their hooks into them. What lessons did they impart? For starters, let

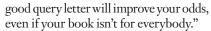
your true nature—and the true nature of your manuscript—shine through.

"Don't feel the need to be too dignified, or self-deprecating, in a query letter," says Beth Morgan, author of the debut novel *A Touch of Jen*, published by Little, Brown in 2021. "You're pitching your book. So don't shy away from making it sound fun, or using zippy language. Be confident!"

Morgan started writing her novel "in fits and starts," she says, in February 2018. Two years later, in January 2020, then a student in the MFA program at Brooklyn College, she was ready to contact agents for representation. So she did her research and identified nine agents she thought would be receptive to her novel, which is now being described, in the lead-up to its publication, as "Ottessa Moshfegh meets David Cronenberg." But back in January 2020, in her query letter, Morgan herself described it as "Sally Rooney meets Stephen King."

According to agent Alexa Stark of Writers House, those comps were less than perfect. "For the purposes of [her] query, these comps definitely get the point across, but they're both rather overused at this point, which makes them feel less effective," she says.

In retrospect, Morgan says, "Sally Rooney meets Stephen King' feels a little goofy or arrogant, but it gets your attention, doesn't it? Even if I recognize now that these weren't the best comps, I have no regrets." And why would sheregardless of the comps, she heard back from every agent she contacted, and all but one requested her manuscript (the outlier was about to go on vacation). "One agent who [eventually] passed on the book told me it was the best query letter he'd read in a long time," Morgan says. "It just goes to show—it's tough out there, even when you do manage to get your book in front of agents. But having a



Of course at this stage of the game, your book doesn't need to be for everybody—it just needs to appeal to the right agent (who will, admittedly, be looking for a book that appeals to a wide audience). For Morgan that agent was Stark, who quickly requested the full manuscript, read it within a week, and set up a call with the author. "I offered representation and asked her to get back to me within a week or two and put her in touch with a couple of my clients, so that she could chat with them about their experience working with me," she says. "After about a week she wrote to say that she'd be thrilled to work with me."

Stark, whose other clients have

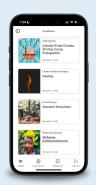
included then-debut novelists Gabriel Bump, Joseph Cassara, and Alexandra Chang, typically does two or three rounds of edits on a manuscript before sending it out, but in Morgan's case, A Touch of Jen was strong enough to send to editors without revisions. Just a few weeks after signing the author, and after a light line edit, in late February 2020 Stark submitted it to about fifteen editors, accompanied by a pitch letter in which she updated those iffy comparables. "When I submitted the book to publishers, I used comps that felt a bit more specific to the market and closer to Beth's work—Halle Butler, Mona Awad, Ottessa Moshfegh, Carmen Maria Machado—although a year later these comps are now starting to feel a bit overused as well."

As it turned out, Jean Garnett, a former senior editor at Little, Brown, wasn't one of the editors on Stark's submissions list. Instead, Garnett got in touch with Stark herself to request the manuscript after hearing about it through book scouts—consultants who give editors the early word about books they think have potential—and the agent was more than happy to send it along. "I had strong interest right away from multiple editors and set up calls between Beth and interested editors for the following week," she says. "Two weeks after I sent it out, we had an auction with multiple bidders." Garnett eventually prevailed, acquiring A Touch of Jen for six figures.

And it all started with a simple

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From: Beth Morgan

Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 11:55 AM

To: Alexa Stark

Subject: A Touch of Jen: MS query

Dear Alexa Stark,

I hope you're well! I was referred to you by Tony Tulathimutte and Josh Henkin, my professor at Brooklyn College, where I am currently completing an MFA. I have work forthcoming in the *Iowa Review* and the *Kenyon Review* online, and I'm currently seeking representation for my first novel, *A Touch of Jen.* It's ~83,000 words long.

Remy, a cynical, financially precarious server at a Manhattan health-food restaurant, is obsessed with a girl he worked with two years ago—Jen, a globe-trotting surfer with freckled boobs and adult braces who sells homemade jewelry from her Instagram. His girlfriend, Alicia, is nothing like Jen, and she knows it. Alicia has a weak chin, is socially awkward, and is eager to please Remy by role-playing as Jen in the bedroom and wearing crocheted halter tops.

After a chance encounter in the Apple Store, Jen invites Remy and Alicia to go surfing with her and her friends in the Hamptons. They meet Jen's do-gooder boyfriend Horus and a slew of artistic types, including a self-proclaimed psychic who introduces them to the self-help philosophy of guru A.B. Fisketjon. Remy's surf-related concussion and the reemergence of Alicia's sleep-walking problem bring the trip to a disastrous conclusion, unleashing dark forces that turn Jen against them.

Reading Fisketjon's book, Alicia comes to believe that she will be able to undergo the ultimate transformation. But when tragedy strikes, Alicia and Remy's relationship takes on new and sinister dimensions. It becomes clear that the noises coming from the walls aren't just squirrels, and as Remy himself follows Fisketjon's path to self-realization, his reality becomes a fantasy of cinematic beauty and horror.

Sally Rooney meets Stephen King in this genre-bending tale of sexual obsession, class resentment, male violence, and image culture. Equal parts millennial social comedy and psychedelic horror, *A Touch of Jen* answers the question, what are the costs of manifesting your desire? Who loses in the struggle for self-actualization?

Looking forward to hearing from you,

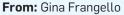
Beth Morgan

e-mail, which Morgan and Stark have generously shared here.

Note the quick name-dropping of those who referred her—by no means necessary, but if you have a name to drop, you'd be crazy not to do so—and the engaging description of not only the main characters and the plot, but also the central themes of the novel and the motivating questions that propel them forward. "I love that Beth's voice comes through and gives us a sense of the novel's tone right off the bat—clever, darkly funny, coolly observant, and downright twisted," Stark says. "It is a wild novel, and I love that Beth leans into the strange with these unexpected details: the awkward role-playing, the adult braces! We also get a good sense of the novel's central themes—envy, desire, obsession, toxic relationships, all against the backdrop of image culture and millennial precarity."

"I also like that Beth didn't give too much away here," she adds. "I had plenty of questions, but that only made me more eager to read the manuscript."

Morgan offers the following tips for those who are approaching their own query letters: "My main advice would be not to write your query letter on your own—get as much help and feedback as you can, even if it's painful," she says. "My partner helped me do many, many rewrites of my query letter. Fiction writers are often great at writing fiction but struggle more with stuff like e-mails, cover letters, and other straightforward communication in their own voice. I definitely struggle when it comes to writing something not in the voice of a character. So if you have friends who are great at written communication—even if they don't consider themselves to be writers-enlist their help."



Sent: Monday, February 7, 2011 11:44 AM

**To:** Alice Tasman **Subject:** A question

Hi again, Alice! It's so nice to connect with you in more depth, as I'm in a writing group with both Elizabeth [Betsy] Crane and Emily Gray Tedrowe, both of whom sing your praises constantly. As a longtime independent press editor, whose first two books came out on small presses, I have been especially impressed by your versatility with Betsy's career, as depending on the book she has been published both by major corporate houses or, alternatively, fab independent presses like Punk Planet, and you have been in her corner cheering her on and advocating for her every step of the way.

I am currently represented by \_\_\_\_\_, who has been representing my new novel, A Life in Men. Although she has been very supportive of the project, recently while spending a month in Kenya (I won the SLS contest judged by Mary Gaitskill, one of my longstanding literary idols!), I had a breakthrough about A Life in Men that broke it wide open for me, solved some aspects of the novel that I didn't feel were working, and made me strongly wish to revise it significantly. \_\_\_\_\_had already started sending the novel out, and though we have had interest we have not yet made a sale. However, when I told her of my new ideas and sent her a large chunk of my revision, unfortunately we did not have a meeting of the minds on my new creative direction. In her opinion, there is no need to "fix what isn't broke" as we have come close to selling the novel a few times and she believes a sale will yet be made. Perhaps that is true, but the thing is that I am no longer interested in selling the novel in its original incarnation and feel passionately about my revision as the book I want to go into the world. As a result of this creative impasse, the manuscript is no longer being shopped for the time being and it seems clear that and I will likely soon part ways. Based on Emily and Betsy's raves of your keen eye, advocacy, and loyalty to your clients across multiple books, I would be interested in your reading the novel's new version and letting me know if it would be something you'd be interested in representing.

I look forward to hearing back from you—

Gina

INA Frangello, whose sixth book, the novel Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels: Bookmarked, was published in July 2024 by Ig Publishing, has plenty of experience working with agents. While Alice Tasman of Jean V. Naggar Literary

Agency has been representing her since 2011, she is, in fact, the author's fourth agent. Frangello's "long and weird career," as she calls it, got off to an unexpected start in the early 2000s with her first agent, then her second, who, after unsuccessfully placing her work with

major publishing houses, essentially "stopped coming to work" for various reasons.

"One of the agents, after the first ten submissions, was like, 'Okay, we're going to put this on ice-write another book.' And I was like, 'Surely there have to be more than ten places you can send it.' And he was like, 'No, not more than ten places that I want to send it." So Frangello, who launched Other Voices Books in 2005, ended up placing her first book, and later a second book, with micro presses on her own: Her debut novel, My Sister's Continent, was published in 2006 by Chiasmus Press, and the acclaimed story collection Slut Lullabies came out in 2010 from Emergency Press. Those deals, such as they were, would not have made either of Frangello's first two agents any money, so she understood their hesitation to put a lot of work into something that wouldn't immediately pay off, financially speaking. Still, she couldn't help feeling like something was amiss about their approach.

Eventually she was able to sign with a third agent, who, in addition to being highly professional and successful, was also supportive of the book Frangello was working on at the time, the novel A Life in Men. But that author-agent relationship didn't last either. Why? One way to put it is that they didn't share a creative vision; another way to put it is the author's own description of the situation in an e-mail she sent to Alice Tasman, after having made the unconventional move of contacting her on Facebook to see if she would be open to an e-mail exchange. In the correspondence below, note how Frangello includes some of the same details of a standard query letter but in her own voice and style, omitting the typical plot summary and instead focusing on the personal referrers and the intrigue



of a recent breakthrough in the writing of her novel.

Based on the appeal of that e-mail, Tasman requested the manuscript, read it, and, within a couple of weeks, contacted Frangello to talk. "She loved the book," the author says. "So then we talked on the phone, and she was amazing. She's got such a down-to-earth and vibrant personality. I really connected with her. My last agent prior to her had been kind of all business. And she was a successful agent—you know, she has a great reputation. She sold a lot of books, but we had just really never clicked on that level, where the agent also felt like a friend."

Tasman ended up working with Frangello on the manuscript and, four months later, sent it out on submission to a number of editors, one of whom was Chuck Adams at Algonquin Books. This would end up being a turning point in Frangello's "long and weird" career—not because she suddenly saw the light and started to change her writing projects to conform to the tastes and trends of the industry, but rather because she found an agent who wouldn't ask her to do such a thing. "I don't see myself as being, you know, a writer for everyone," she says. "I think that I have a certain type of audience that is not necessarily what the really big houses are going to be like, 'Oh, we're going to sell a million copies of this book; let's just throw money at this chick.' I think that my writing is not necessarily of that niche, but I needed an agent who was going to figure out where I would be nurtured and where my work could really be marketed well. And other agents I had, when I didn't sell immediately to the big-name editors at the big-name houses, were like, 'Oh, I guess this book isn't marketable.' And Alice didn't see it that way."

Algonquin published A Life in Men in February 2014 and sent Frangello on a twelve-city author tour. (Charlize Theron's production company, Denver & Delilah Productions, in conjunction with Universal Content Productions. currently holds the option to the novel, with Kristen Stewart attached.) But Frangello and Tasman were just getting started. After A Life in Men was published, they placed Frangello's next novel, Every Kind of Wanting (2016), with another medium-sized indie publisher, Counterpoint Press. The Chicago *Tribune* praised the novel as "powerful, provocative, multilayered," and it went on to be named a finalist for the 2016 Chicago Review of Books Award.

Two years later Tasman sent her pitch of Frangello's memoir, Blow Your House Down, to Dan Smetanka at Counterpoint, and in it the agent fully embraced her author's independent spirit and artistic vision—and used it as a strong selling point. "The vast majority of women's memoirs in the marketplace center on the lives and misadventures of girls and young women, even though women in middle age are the largest reading demographic," Tasman wrote. "Usually such memoirs focus on turbulent youths that are ultimately 'resolved' through marriage and children, with the implication that change stops and sexuality remains forever static after women come of age and settle down. In the rare instance that a middle-aged woman writes candidly about such topics as extramarital desire, the stakes usually end with flirtation, imagination, or maybe a kiss, with heteronormative marriage and monogamy ultimately being reaffirmed in the end.

"This is not that book."

The agent went on to describe the narrative arc of the memoir, in which Frangello writes about living through an extramarital affair, a separation and a divorce, a diagnosis of breast cancer, and a father's death. Then Tasman laid out the book's underlying theme: "Blow Your House Down is about what happens when a woman who has been very good at playing all the roles society expects of her suddenly refuses to continue being the person her family and friends think they know."

It's an effective pitch that perfectly illustrates what can happen when an author finds just the right agent—one who is aligned both artistically and even temperamentally with the author. A lot of time, effort, and communication go into strengthening that connection, and it typically starts with an e-mail. Whether it's a more traditional query like the one Beth Morgan sent to Alexa Stark, or a rather informal message like the one Gina Frangello sent to Alice Tasman, the goal is to introduce yourself to a professional partner who you can be honest with and who will help pave the way forward, no matter the twists and turns that may lie ahead.

As Frangello says about her agent: "I didn't have that stability of relationship anywhere in the industry before Alice. I was going from press to press and agent to agent, and it had been very unsettling. I knew right away when I talked to her—she just sounded like somebody who I would be able to be very friendly and honest with and that it wouldn't be this kind of weird formal, like, you-sit-in-her-waiting-room-for-a-meeting type of relationship. It would be more like you go out to lunch and are regular people."

Blow Your House Down was published in April 2021. In a starred review, Publishers Weekly called it a "searing memoir" in which Frangello "describes this bold and tumultuous period of her life in intimate and remarkable detail, and despite the tumult celebrates her own resilience."

# Your Career on the Line

By Laura Maylene Walter

F THERE is one milestone in a writing career capable of launching a thousand daydreams and anxieties at once, it's when a literary agent calls to discuss representation. Known among writers as simply "the call," this phone conversation could potentially change a writer's life by leading to representation and, if all goes well and the stars align, a book deal.

The call has attained such mythic importance that authors who have experienced it can often recount, with perfect clarity, where and when it all went down. I fielded my first agent call for my novel, *Body of Stars*, published in 2021 by Dutton, during my lunch break at work, where I reserved an entire eighty-person conference room to ensure I'd have

LAURA MAYLENE WALTER is the author of the novel *Body of Stars* (Dutton, 2021), an Ohioana Book Awards finalist and a U.K. Booksellers Association Fiction Book of the Month selection. She is the Ohio Center for the Book Fellow at Cleveland Public Library, where she hosts *Page Count*, a literary podcast.

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### Writers and Agents Discuss "the Call"

privacy. Vera Kurian, whose debut novel, Never Saw Me Coming, was published in 2021 by Park Row Books, invited two writing friends to her apartment so they could listen in on her end of the conversation. "Like we were in middle school and I was talking to a boy," she recalls. And when Julie Carrick Dalton, author of the debut novel Waiting for the Night Song (Forge Books, 2021), received her agent call on Halloween, she fixed her gaze on a bowl of Kit Kats to ground herself. "It felt like the earth was moving under my feet for a few seconds," she says. "It felt like all my dreams might really come true."

As momentous as this call might seem, a lifetime of literary dreams is a heavy burden to place on a single phone conversation. In practice the call is not about a godlike agent plucking a writer from obscurity. It's a conversation, a way for both parties to determine whether they have the professional chemistry and shared vision to establish a productive working relationship.

"When I'm setting up a call to reach out, it's with an eye to talk more about the writer's work—to tell them what I love about the manuscript, get a sense of their vision and expectations, go over some editorial thoughts, and gauge our general compatibility," says Sonali Chanchani, a literary agent with Folio Literary Management.

So how do such calls come about? The process usually goes like this: A writer gets a manuscript into the agent's hands, whether through a query, referral, solicitation, or by connecting at a conference. The agent reads the manuscript (or the proposal, in the case of nonfiction), falls in love with it, and contacts the writer to set up a phone call. If the chat goes well, the agent may offer representation right there on the phone. Hooray! At this point, aside from celebrating, the writer takes some time to contemplate the offer while informing other agents in the mix to give them a chance to consider the manuscript too. If additional agents are interested, the writer might end up with multiple phone calls and offers of representation.

Not every call leads to representation, however. The agent's editorial vision might not align with the writer's, or perhaps the call was more exploratory to begin with. Regardless of the outcome, this phone call is not a unilateral process or a test for writers.

"Don't enter into the call thinking





you need to impress me," Chanchani says. "It's more about compatibility, seeing if we have a shared vision, and mutual respect."

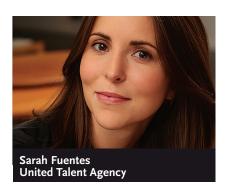
Still, some nerves are to be expected during these conversations. In fact I've yet to speak to a writer who wasn't nervous when taking the call.

"I was sweating buckets," admits A. Natasha Joukovsky, author of *The Portrait of a Mirror*, published in 2021 by the Overlook Press. "Because the agent offer is the first official step [in publishing], it felt of titanic importance."

Joukovsky prepared for her calls by researching each agent thoroughly and preparing questions. First on her list was to ask how each agent would position her novel, which she says straddles the literary-commercial line. "As writers we're focused on the editorial side, but publishing is also a business," she says. "How your book is positioned is going to determine whether it reaches the readers it will resonate with the most."

Joukovsky received several offers of representation and narrowed her decision down to two agents. While this is an enviable position, fielding more than one call can bring its own stress and challenges. She says her decision came down to something intangible: instinct. "Both agents I spoke to were amazing, and I'd be super lucky to have either of them," Joukovsky says. "A friend told me that finding an agent is like dating. Ultimately you have to just trust your gut, and it's usually right."

Her instincts led her to Sarah Fuentes, a literary agent at United Talent Agency. When I spoke to Fuentes, she recalled reading Joukovsky's manuscript for the first time in one sitting. Then she read it again.



"I was that excited about it and Natasha's writing," Fuentes says. "I was just excited to get on the phone and talk to her, to hear about her inspiration, and to gush about how much I loved the book."

Just as Joukovsky was anxious for this phone call, Fuentes had some butterflies of her own. "When I'm on the phone with a writer I really want to sign; I feel those same nerves. So just know you're not alone with that," she says. "It's such a personal relationship, and you want to be sure you'd like working together. My hope is to communicate in a way that shows I am the right partner for the book. I want [writers] to feel that sense of trust and security."

While Fuentes often initiates a phone call after falling in love with a polished manuscript, she sometimes calls writers at earlier stages of the process as well.

"For nonfiction it's really the idea we're talking about. A lot of those calls are speculative more than anything else," she says. "I'll get on the phone with writers to hear ideas or hash them out together, even before they have a proposal. I find that having that initial conversation is a mutually valuable experience. It gives writers the chance to ask some questions about the publishing process,

and when the manuscript is finished, hopefully I'll be one of the first agents to read it."

In an ideal world, the call leads to not only an offer of representation, but also a long, successful partnership. In reality these relationships might not last forever. Agents retire, authors explore new genres, or artistic visions diverge. In any case it's not unheard-of for authors to seek new representation, which means going through the call all over again.

Amin Ahmad is one of those authors. Earlier in his career Ahmad secured representation and a two-book deal for his crime fiction. Eventually his agent for those projects moved to a new agency, and he began working on a more mainstream novel that signaled a departure from his previous work. Then it was time to find a new literary agent.

"The first time, I just wanted an agent," he admits, "but this time I was a little pickier. I'd been exposed to the industry and knew how it worked. I started going to conferences and meeting with as many agents as possible."

Ahmad developed a relationship with Erin Harris at Folio Literary Management, with whom he eventually signed (full disclosure: Harris is also my agent). Before he made this decision he fielded additional phone calls with three other literary agents, a process he approached with methodical preparation. He researched each agent by reviewing their past deals listed on Publishers Marketplace and looking up their interviews online, and he came to each call with the following list of questions:

How would you position my novel?

What are your editorial suggestions?

What might your submission strategy look like?

Does this offer apply to just this book or my larger career?

Finally, Ahmad assessed a less quantifiable quality: the agent's enthusiasm for his book.

"We spend all our time as authors trying to pitch our books, but at this point the agents are pitching *you*," he notes. "They're selling you. This is the courtship phase, and if we're not feeling the chemistry now, what's going to happen when things get tough?"

As a writer of color, Ahmad noticed an additional development during his second agent search. This time agents were more willing to initiate conversations about how the publishing industry positions writers of color.

"Everything is a little different when you're a person of color. You're looking at additional layers of the editorial feedback and wondering if this person is in tune with the story and if they're taking it on its own terms," he says. "Where publishing often fails is because the majority-white publishing industry can't imagine a market for stories by people of color—and this time around, I was hearing agents explicitly discuss that, which was heartening."

When a writer has multiple offers, as Ahmad did, agents might naturally feel a bit competitive about showing why they're the best person to represent the work. In the end, however, it's not about winning; agents want to ensure the relationship feels sound for both parties in the long term.

"We want to make a good impression too," says Erin Murphy, president of Erin Murphy Literary Agency. "But we don't want to sign people who

don't want to work with us. That connection is so important, and it goes in both directions."

So what questions should writers ask during the call? In general, open-ended questions about working styles and strategies are useful. Murphy advises writers to ask about the agent's editorial feedback, preferred communication style, how the agency functions, and whether the writer will be in contact with other agency staff. Finally, if an offer is on the table, writers should feel free to ask to speak to other clients as references.

Questions that tend to be less help-ful often surround money. No agent can predict the advance a manuscript might garner, and writers should be wary of any agent who makes promises surrounding financial compensation at this stage. (It should also be said that no agents should ask for money from a writer, ever—agents are paid a commission only on work they sell to publishers. Asking writers to pay an up-front fee is a sure sign of a scam.)

The call is also not the time to extract a detailed submission list of editors and imprints. Writers can certainly ask about an agent's submission strategy and editorial contacts, but this might not be the time to demand



a formal submission list.

"If we have a longer editing road ahead of us, this can feel a bit like putting the cart before the horse," Chanchani says. "I do think it's a fair question to ask, but it wouldn't be the time to go over in depth. It's more about positioning: Are we aligned on where the book sits in the marketplace?"

Murphy also advises writers to take some time to mull over an offer of representation, no matter how excited they might feel in the moment.

"If someone says they want to work with me on the call, I say stop and sleep on it—I don't want you to make a decision that you're going to regret," Murphy says. "It's also perfectly fine if you don't understand something I said and want to follow up by e-mail later or set up another call."

At the end of the day, writers should feel comfortable asking questions of the professionals who might represent their creative work.

"If an agent wants to sign you, this is a business relationship. You would be partners who are both trying to make your career successful," Kurian, the author of *Never Saw Me Coming*, reminds writers. "If an author is afraid to ask their agent a question, that is an issue."

"Getting an agent is a huge deal, but don't lose sight that it's about selling the book," Ahmad adds. "That should be the goal—it's about having a common vision of selling the book, and hopefully selling many more books down the line."

That's something to daydream about: a fruitful career with multiple books ushered to publication with the help of a savvy agent. And to think it all starts with a simple phone call.  $\infty$ 



## Fair Expectations

By Michelle Wildgen

#### What Can a Writer Expect From Their Agent?

RITERS expend so much time, energy, and sanity trying to land an agent that they often forget to consider what happens if they succeed. Sure, the basics of the business arrangement—the percentages, the exclusivity, and so on—are right there in the contract. But other conundrums inevitably arise. Are you bugging your agent if you ask for an update on submissions? Should they be doing more to transform a recalcitrant publicist into an eager advocate? Will they fire you if you e-mail a follow-up about the revision you sent in two months ago?

The answers, a cohort of generous and savvy literary agents told me over Zoom calls and through e-mails, depend on the specific agent, and writers are forever trying to discern what they should and should not expect. "Publishing has been, for a long time,

MICHELLE WILDGEN's fourth novel, Wine People, was published by Zibby Books in August 2023. Her work has appeared in O, the Oprah Magazine; the New York Times column Modern Love; the New York Times Book Review; and other publications.

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shrouded in mystery," says Joanna MacKenzie of the Nelson Literary Agency. "I think people are becoming a bit more open about how agenting works."

The most arduous part of collaborating with your agent is often the process of readying your proposal or manuscript for submission. Your agent won't take you on if they aren't confident the work has a shot in the marketplace; still, all the agents I spoke with expect to be involved editorially before they send it out.

"An author has one chance to have their work cut through and rise to the surface from the sea of submissions an editor gets each week," says Heather Jackson of the Heather Jackson Literary Agency. "I will go back and forth with an author, line-editing and margin-noting their work, whether it's a novel-length manuscript or a nonfiction proposal, until I think/we think it sparkles and shines as brightly as it can." Just how much editorial guidance can you expect? For context, Jenni Ferrari-Adler, an agent at the Verve Talent & Literary Agency, estimates working through two revisions as a fairly typical collaboration and five as more of a rarity.

The flip side is that everyone has limits—both you and your agent. "It's a very different calculation when you're the agent versus being an editor," says Anjali Singh of the Anjali Singh

Literary Agency about how much she expects of her clients. The agent "can push but not with the same authority as an editor." Agents try to be mindful of when the writer has done all they can do, and when the agent is too close to the material, too. "After a point," says Linda Camacho, an agent at the Gallt & Zacker Literary Agency, "I become useless." Don't spam your agent with every partial or exploratory draft; use their expertise judiciously.

Turnaround time is a major stressor, but know that an agent probably cannot read your revision immediately. "I try for two to four weeks," says Jackson, "but I think four to six weeks is actually more reasonable." Chris Parris-Lamb, vice president and literary agent at the Gernert Company, gives an estimate of his turnaround time and communicates any delays but "really [doesn't] like being nudged" if he is within the time frame. Your agent should acknowledge receipt of your manuscript, and if they don't give an estimate, ask politely about how long to expect it to take. Give the agent a week's grace period after that, but at that point, it is perfectly reasonable to send a friendly e-mail to check in.

"Ideally," says Singh, "you're in a relationship with your agent where you can have an honest conversation and say, 'Hey, I haven't heard from you in a long time. I know you have a lot on your plate. Is it that you are losing

steam? Or are you just busy?""

If the weeks become months, you are justified in asking for more information. Several agents thought that more than three months might signal either a lack of enthusiasm or an overworked agent. Either way, it's time for a polite check-in.

"Politely checking in," by the way, is your most ubiquitous tool. Being respectful and friendly smooths over any number of difficult moments.

Writers make it beyond this fraught and exhausting time, of course, but it's far from the finish line: Publishing has more fraught and exhausting times in store, just for you! Consider the submission period, when the writer is most tempted to pelt their agent with desperate e-mails, knowing that *every single second* could be the one when an offer is delivered. Getting through submission requires proper communication and practical strategy.

While an agent owes you a committed, thoughtfully

developed effort to sell your book to an ideal publisher for the largest advance they can get, agents are unable to promise particulars. MacKenzie sets her writers' expectations carefully, saying, "There is never a moment that I can guarantee a certain type of advance or a certain level of something. The market will dictate how that works. ... I can never go out there and be like, 'We're going to sell it for a million dollars."

Request an overview of your agent's plan for submissions before the book goes out. You need to know what to expect in terms of process, timeline, and communication style. Your agent will likely take a week or two

to generate their submission list and write a submission letter. The ideal number of editors for a good-faith submission list will vary. "I love to go to around twenty at once with a debut that is commercial," says Ferrari-Adler. She has done smaller submission lists with more literary projects for various reasons but always lets the author know. Most agents share all of this information, but some choose to shield writers from everything except good

WHILE AN AGENT OWES
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news. This approach naturally leads to periods of silence, which can make a fraught time even tougher. It also leaves the writer with no idea where the book has been. Should the project move to another agent, that's necessary information.

Most important, discuss how your agent will communicate with you while the book is out there—which could be a few weeks or six months. What information do they typically share and how, and are they willing to tailor their approach if your preferences differ? Most agents default to weekly updates, or more often if things move toward editor meetings or auctions. Few send each rejection,

unless the author asks for them, or if they think that some recurring criticism might prove useful. Singh takes a radically transparent approach that allows the writer to have control over their information without always requiring the agent as intermediary: She creates a spreadsheet containing everything she does on behalf of that client, which the author can check, or not check, or keep open twentyfour hours a day and refresh as often

as their fraying nerves will allow. Whatever approach they take, your agent should be transparent about the info you request. Trouble signs, says Ferrari-Adler, include an agent who is unresponsive or won't share information about editors' feedback, or one who is unreceptive to reasonable suggestions, like adding a smaller press or pulling back from the submission process to revise.

No matter how you prepare for the waiting that is inevitable during the sub-

mission process, you will get squirrelly. Sometimes all the feedback is disheartening—or there's so little that writers fill the silence with e-mails and texts. The agent can wind up being the lone voice calling from the publishing void, and as a result writers may ask more of them than they would ask of any other professional relationship.

Some agents maintain more distance, but Camacho is happy to get close to clients. That said, while she may joke that agents are "armchair therapists to an extent," she occasionally catches signs of deep depression that lead her to suggest an actual therapist. She encourages her writers not to lean solely on her



for emotional support during submission but on friends, family, and community as well. "I can always tell when my clients have kind of gone into that zone where they've isolated themselves and they're relying on me a bit too much."

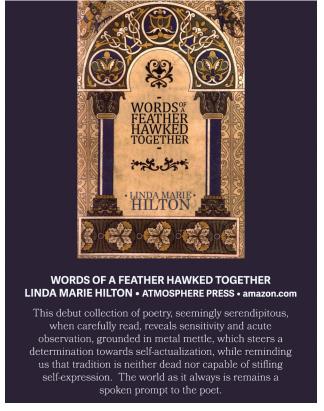
"I personally don't really do drama," says Parris-Lamb. "I'm not your therapist. I'm there to support you and empathize with you. But I think it's important for writers to have an emotional support system, of which their agent is a subordinate node.... I have really firm boundaries around office hours. When there's an emergency of some kind, I'll respond to an e-mail or a text on the weekend. But there's almost nothing that

can't wait until Monday. And if you really need to send something at that moment, Gmail has a schedule-send function." Camacho concurs: "I don't mind the occasional call or text after hours, particularly if an issue arises that warrants it. But that's rare. When it becomes a habit, like a client texting after hours over and over and expecting an immediate response, I try to train them out of it."

Several agents recommended a common sanity-saver during the submission process: Get to work. MacKenzie says this is a great time to embark on something totally different and reconnect with the pleasure of creative work. If you also write shorter pieces, this may be a time to turn your attention there.

Your agent's primary job is to shepherd books into the world, but is it reasonable to ask that person to submit stories and essays to magazines, or to request an eye on ancillary projects, like grant and award applications? "Agents will send out short [work] occasionally," says Singh, but only to the eight to ten places "that really move the needle, in terms of establishing platform and helping to sell a book project." She might occasionally handle "small paid speaking engagements or illustration deals" but not grant and award applications. Parris-Lamb agrees, adding that unless an agent has personal connections at a journal, the response time won't be any faster than it is for the writer.





T GIVES me no joy to bring this up, but many projects do not sell. You may wonder if that is the nature of the market or if your agent did all they could. Did your agent ask for smart, insightful revisions before submission? Was the submission letter polished, wellconsidered, and true to the book? Did it go to a wide range of editors, or a smaller range with reasoning the agent explained? Did they follow up? Are they willing to have an honest postmortem with you about the process? Transparency is the only way the writer can know that even if a project did not sell, the agent did everything one could reasonably expect.

Let's assume your book does sell.

The agent's role remains significant even then. For a time the agent will step back, particularly editorially, but most want to be copied on all communication between publisher and author. Don't worry if the agent isn't chiming in; they simply want to be in the loop so they can step in if the author asks the agent for a private check-in or if the agent sees something amiss.

"The writer probably isn't going to have a sense and isn't going to be able to read the signs to know when not everything is happening that could or should," says Parris-Lamb about letting your agent eavesdrop via e-mail on these exchanges. An agent may have gone through this process a hundred times, which means they're your first

resource when you need help with an inhuman deadline or an editorial letter that seemed harsher than expected. Don't keep your agent out of the loop in hopes of being a good client.

About six months before publication, expect your agent to step forward again, ready to be part of the conversations about cover design, marketing, and publicity. Some publishers are collaborative with the cover design process, and some present the writer with a finished design and an implicit demand that the writer like it as much as the sales team did. In other words, you may need your agent's diplomacy. Running this kind of interference is exactly what an agent is here to do.

That said, writers may cherish a







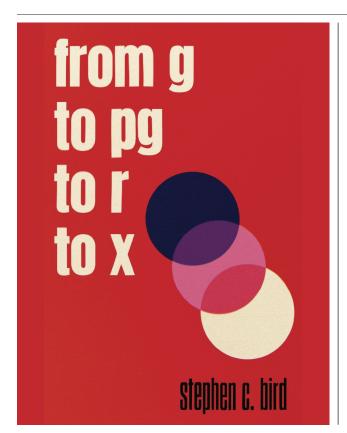
fantasy of releasing an agent like so many hounds to force the publisher to bend to their will. The reality is less one-sided. Ferrari-Adler describes an agent's high-wire act, that ongoing assessment of what's worth asking for on a client's behalf and what must simply be lived with: "It is my job to push the publisher to deliver on what they promised and to stretch maybe a little past where they're comfortable and to encourage them along. And I also think it is my job to go to the authors to say, you know, book tours aren't what they used to be, and this is the reality of how much your book sold in hardcover, and paperback is very hard to get publicity for.... You have these long relationships with editors, and

you have your relationships with your authors, and you're sort of in the middle of it, trying to be tough when you need to be tough, but also reasonable."

As publication nears, your agent may help gather blurbs or make suggestions about where to send ARCs, but don't look for them to be your publicist. For one thing, at this point, they are more likely to be thinking about your next book. But this is also because agents are as busy as everyone else in publishing. Many of the people I spoke with wondered aloud where the industry is heading when it has for so long expected superhuman work in exchange for the glory of being part of a rarefied world—and, as Singh says, there is a

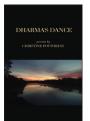
lot less glory now. Editors' burnout spreads to agents and then to writers.

Faced with this landscape, writers understandably want a literary agent who is a bespoke mix of sage, hustler, and god. You won't find that, but you should feel justified seeking a fellow traveler and trusted adviser who communicates clearly and loves your work. It's not crazy to want an agent to reply to a polite check-in e-mail—if you have not sent three that week already. "I think trust, mutual respect of each other and each other's boundaries, and kindness are incredibly important," says Jackson. "We want what's best for our clients and will work toward that goal happily when the above are part of the pact."





### **New Titles**

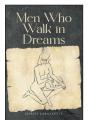


#### Dharma's Dance

By Christine Poythress Finishing Line Press

In *Dharma's Dance*, Christine Poythress' debut chapbook, she traces her journey in search of love or a Mr. Right from the repressive South to her free-loving twenties in 1970s California, and to New York, culminating with the wisdom of age and a sense of where the soul resides. This New Age collection is at once serious, filled with wit, and grounded in the mystical.

www.finishinglinepress.com/product/dharmas-dance-by-christine-poythress/



#### Men Who Walk in Dreams

Stories by Marisa Labozzetta Guernica World Editions

The award-winning author of A Day in June presents a world where reality is blurred by delusion as men and women, fueled by passion and desire, dream to reinvent themselves, seek revenge, foresee the future, recapture what has escaped their grasp, or merely survive."...Artistic, curious, and with an arsenal of emotional gut punches..."—US Revieu. "...An exquisite set of stories steeped in humor, humanity, and grace."—Kirkus Reviews.

www.marisalabozzetta.com



#### Revolution

By Chris Helvey Wings ePress

From one of today's truly realistic fiction writers, an honest, exquisitely detailed novel of a revolt of oppressed people in a small Latin American country. Revolution pulls no punches and takes no prisoners. A novel you won't want to put down, and one you'll never forget. Not for the faint-of-heart. Paperback & ebook.

www.amazon.com



#### **Finding Splendid Shelter**

By Dee Bowlin

Dee's memoir is the backdrop for her collection of traditional poetry and light verse. She vividly recalls life events that inspired each piece, writing across genres, weaving prose and poetry into one story. Walk with her through a life riddled with challenges. Rejoice with her as she finds fulfilling friendships, inspiring adventures, and new love in search of *Splendid Shelter*.

www.mysplendidshelter.com/book/

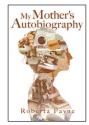


#### From G to PG to R to X

By Stephen C. Bird Hysterical Dementia

Death, dreams, dystopia, hallucinations...abuse, rebellion, political turmoil, gender confusion, morphing identities...secret ceremonies, sacrifice, epiphanies, transformation...inform the chaotic worlds of this tragicomic novella.

https://amzn.to/45IQ97d



#### My Mother's Autobiography

By Roberta Payne Jaded Ibis Press

"Payne, whose 2013 memoir Speaking to My Madness described her path through schizophrenia with stunning elegance and lucidity, now tells the same story (fictionalized) through the eyes, sensibility, and voice of her mother...I have seldom found a character simultaneously so exasperating and deserving of good fate."—David Dobbs, New York Times and Atlantic contributor.

www.robertapayne.com

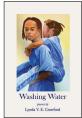


#### A Buried Plot on Legacy Road

By John Michael Heuer Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

A reincarnation saga of the wealthy Braintree family, who, in 1930's Depression, turned to murder and theft, but were never caught. Reincarnated as Hammilson, and acquiring in 1990 the old raintree mansion, they meet the fatal impact of their crimes when they were the Braintrees. "Faulkner meets Stephen King... terror painted with grace and skill...haunting...a novel not to be missed."—Charles Asher, *Phi Beta Kappa Reviews*.

www.amazon.com



#### Washing Water

By Lynda V. E. Crawford World Stage Press

This collection is about girls and women who've lived the fat belly of life and understand its joys and imperfection. The poetry vignettes move from 'girl into woman' where resilience is gathered and given in laughter, ancestor-dance, and talk of rain while washing water. Voices in this collection move through the journey, at times with a Caribbean lilt.

www.worldstagepress.org

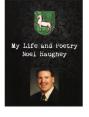


#### Dragstripping

By Jan Beatty University of Pittsburgh Press

Dragstripping takes us to the literal dragstrip, the strip club, and the dragstrip of the body where the ecstatic is rescripted, where women disappear/reappear in the crosscut of gender. In these transgressive poems, Beatty writes the fractured landscape of the unknown woman, rewriting this crime scene of the body in war—with the missing or murdered as her own investigator.

www.janbeatty.com



#### My Life and Poetry

By Noel Anthony Haughey Allpoetry.com

This book includes the life story of Noel Haughey and his remarkable poems. From his history as a basketball player, to meeting movie stars, to his chronic pain from a botched surgery—Noel has lived an interesting life, and buckle up because his story and poems are going to take you on a fascinating journey.

www.allpoetry.com





# What Editors Want You to Know About Agents

By Katie Arnold-Ratliff

### Advice From Insiders on the People Selling Your Manuscript

T's a common fantasy for writers, up there with the starstudded movie adaptation and surprise Nobel: the dream agent who thrills at your brilliant query, clears their schedule to chat, and, enchanted, signs you on the spot. Then you become best friends, traipsing to lunch when they can get away from their docket of auctions (selling your future best-sellers, of course).

Maybe that's how it happens for some, but for most of us, finding an agent is a bit like dating, with promising prospects that fizzle out, long-term commitments that end in tears, and, ideally, a perfectly imperfect partner who gets you, waiting at the end of all that searching. But how do you tell the difference between an agent you'll fall in love with and one who'll break your heart (i.e., ghost you, manhandle your work, or otherwise fail to be there as an ally and advocate)? You can start by taking advice from the

**KATIE ARNOLD-RATLIFF** is the author of the novel *Bright Before Us* (Tin House Books, 2011).

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folks who know agents best. Editors see agents' handiwork day after day, receiving their pitches, learning their tastes, and getting a unique perspective on what makes an agent a trusted collaborator versus someone whose e-mails tend to gather dust.

To mine their wisdom on the subject, I spoke with several editors about what they value in the agents they work with. Some of what they shared was in line with expectations (nobody likes working with rude people), and some was quite surprising. But every word was helpful to writers ready to go out and find the agents for them. Here's what to prioritize.

#### A Knack for Matchmaking

Some agents go for breadth, submitting manuscripts to a vast array of editors. But time and again editors revealed a preference for agents who take a tailored approach. Yuka Igarashi, executive editor at Graywolf Press, says, "Because I work at an independent press with a selective list, I'm intentionally looking for what other presses might not publish." Which means the same pitch letter sent to the publishing behemoth across town likely won't cut it. And, yes, the editor will likely know they're being spammed, says Igarashi:

"It's pretty easy to tell if an agent is sending a manuscript to every editor they think might be interested."

It's not just a matter of knowing the publisher's ethos—it's crucial, editors say, that agents be deeply familiar with the publisher's list. Agents often get this part wrong, thinking that because a publisher has just had success with, say, a memoir by an acrobat that they're now in the market for acrobat memoirs. In fact, it's the opposite: The acrobat quota has been filled. Igarashi explains: "Every new book we add to our list changes our list; it changes the relationship that our books have to each other. So my criteria for what constitutes an exciting submission is constantly evolving." Ergo, the most successful agent will be one who keeps a close eye on recent releases and areas of market saturation and then pitches accordingly.

When you meet with prospective agents, ask how they craft submissions. Do they write bespoke e-mails to each editor? Do they earmark certain manuscripts for editors or publishers based on taste and past titles? These are both good signs.

#### A Spirit of Partnership

Megan Hogan, an editor at Simon & Schuster, says she's most excited

to get submissions from agents who view her as a colleague. "We can be honest with one another, solve problems together, and think through together how to strengthen a manuscript. When things don't go as we'd hoped, we can mourn together." Hogan says she's looking for a partner with a collaborative mind-set who shares her passion for the text and can work well alongside her. "In short," Hogan says, "I think it's often interpersonal skills that make agents really great." Hilary Redmon, vice president and editorial director of nonfiction at Random House, indicates that a major part of collaborating well as an agent is grasping the dynamics at play: "A great agent is someone who sees themselves as working in partnership with you, the author, and the publishing house." Just as important, the agent explains these dynamics to the author, who may not have a strong sense of how the industry works, Redmon says.

A strong collaboration requires enthusiasm-and when an agent represents work they're truly jazzed about, it shows. Christine Stroud, editor in chief of Autumn House Press, says that is precisely what she wants to see. "I love being able to tell that the agent is excited about the work," she says. "A reliable agent is one who knows what kind of work they enjoy representing and can likely place." Elizabeth DeMeo, an editor at Tin House, agrees: "I always appreciate when the agent demonstrates enthusiasm for a project that feels genuine that energy comes through, even in an e-mail.'

Luckily you can gauge that enthusiasm for yourself when an agent sends *you* an e-mail. Do you sense their excitement about the project, even in writing? Or is their response to you more perfunctory, even if it's positive? If an agent likes your book and thinks they can sell it, that may be enough for you. But if you want to know that your agent is out there shouting your genius from the rooftops, you may want to look for someone who's more vocal in their admiration for your work.

#### **Decency**

Sure, this should go without saying. But once you've met a few agents from the "cutthroat shark" end of the spectrum (miles from the "upbeat cheerleader" contingent), you know that basic human kindness isn't a given. Says Julia Cheiffetz, publisher of One Signal, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, "I often jokingly tell writers they can get an agent who will maximize their advance or an agent who will return their phone callsbut that's not entirely a joke." You'll have to decide which is most important to you; indeed, many opt for the former.

However, if an aggressive agent just isn't your style, it's not just the fast-talking dealmakers you should avoid. An agent's poor handle on the interpersonal aspects of the job can be more subtle, according to editors, who list major turnoffs as "trying to renegotiate a no" (Stroud), "pointing fingers" when something goes wrong (Hogan), "approaching the editor or publisher with suspicion" (Redmon), or "asking for something that's unreasonable and continuing to push back" (an editor at a Big Five publishing house who'd rather not be named, perhaps because of personalities like these). If in your dealings with an agent you experience similar ickiness, you can be sure they're treating others in the industry the same way, and that's no good for anyone.

Something else to keep in mind: Your agent won't always be bringing you good news, and the way they handle delicate situations matters big-time. Says Hogan, "I really admire when agents are comfortable telling authors when something just isn't realistic or isn't in a book's best interest." It's never fun to hear that the umpteenth editor has passed on your manuscript, or a revision didn't fix the draft's problems—but it's easier to hear it from someone who's got compassion to spare.

#### A Good Fit—in Both Directions

In these conversations, several themes emerged, perhaps none so often as the importance of viewing publishing as a team sport. Says Cheiffetz: "The best agents are long-term thought partners for their clients, and they understand that a book's success can be highly dependent on its editor." In other words, there is no *I* in *book*.

But only one editor, herself a writer with representation, pointed out that looking for the "perfect agent" is a fool's errand. What is worth hunting for is an agent who's perfect for you. Until recently, Leigh Newman, author of Nobody Gets Out Alive (Scribner, 2022) and books director of Oprah Daily, acquired her share of fiction as an editor in chief at the publisher Zibby Books, which she cofounded in 2021. Her advice? Think about the role you want your agent to play. Do you want them to edit your work before selling it? Some will, others won't. Do you want them to shop around stories or articles on your behalf, not just book projects? Again, some agents will while others won't.

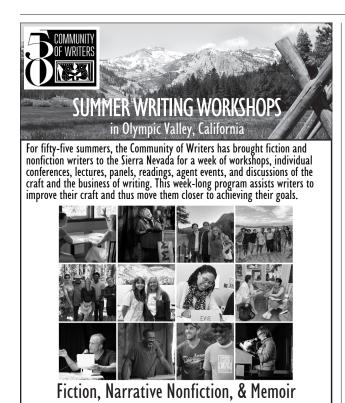


As a contributing editor at the literary journal *One Story*, Will Allison is a recipient of many agented short story submissions. (He's also the author of two novels, including *Long Drive Home*, published by Free Press in 2011, and has had the same agent for years.) He echoes Newman's sentiment about agents selling shorter works: "They make almost no money doing this," Allison says, "so if an agent is willing to, it shows a commitment to building an author's career long-term."

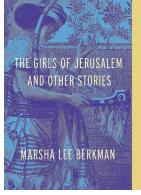
And that brings us to one of the most important aspects of the agent search: How long do you want this relationship to last, and what do you want it to look like? "Will you

exchange intimacies—is this going to be a friendship?" Newman asks. "Do you want them to be your agent for the rest of your life?" Of course, it's not always up to you, Newman concedes: "Some agents will go sell the shit out of something, but they don't want to have lunch with you, and some agents like one project but opt not to take on the next." Whether you're cool with that arrangement is up to you. (Newman wasn't: "I don't have the self-esteem for that. I want to go to mama, and she'll take care of everything." You have to admit, that does sound nice.)

The takeaway is that you do get to be picky about who represents you which may feel antithetical to the way vou've been approaching your agent search to this point. For many writers the anxiety of landing an agent is intense, and that heightened worry can lead to flawed decisions. "A common one," says Newman, "is going with the first person who says yes, then finding out they didn't read your work or have too little pull in the market or are profoundly disorganized." In other words, just because an agent wants to sign you doesn't mean they're worth signing with. Think of evaluating prospective agents the same way you might think of a job interview: Yes, you're there for the employer to judge whether you're a fit, but you're also there to determine if the job is a fit for you. <table-cell-columns>



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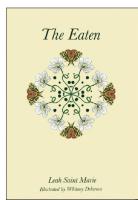






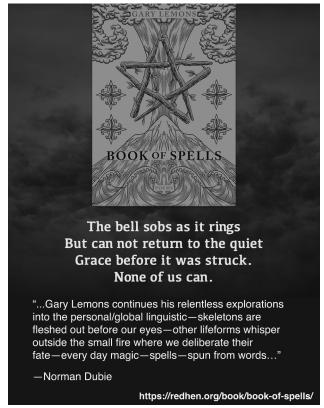






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# How to Read a Literary Agency Agreement

By Kate McKean

HOPE you are in the lucky position to say yes to an agent's offer of representation. You've worked so hard to get here: writing and editing and editing again. Fine-tuning your query letter. Waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting some more to hear back from agents. (We're sorry it takes so long!) But when you finally get The Call (or more likely, The E-mail) and you have The Chat, and you're ready to say yes—do you know what you're saying yes to, exactly?

At the outset of your work together, your new agent will typically send you an agency agreement or contract that outlines the parameters of your agentauthor relationship. Just as with any legal document you sign, you should read your agency agreement and understand it. You can absolutely discuss it with your new agent, and they will be glad to explain it to you (and if the agent is not, consider that a red flag). Don't be afraid to ask questions. To prepare for that, though, here is an

**KATE MCKEAN** is a literary agent and the author of a book about the facts and feelings of writing and publishing, forthcoming from Atria Books in 2025.

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overview of what agency agreements cover, so you'll be ready when you read yours. Please note: I am not a lawyer, and this is not legal advice. If you have any legal concerns, contact a lawyer.

IRST off, let's talk about the format your agreement might take. An agency might write its agreement as a letter, a list of responsibilities or services, or something that looks more like a standard contract, full of legalese. A contract doesn't have to include herewith or notwithstanding to be a legal document, so any of these formats will work. If it clearly outlines what both parties agree to, then however it's written is fine.

The purpose of an agency agreement is to make sure that each **Party** (i.e., you and the agency) understands what the other will or won't do. It sets out the basic tenets of the relationship so that if any questions arise, the answers are written down. This document doesn't answer every question that might pop up, but it definitely covers the big ones. Take note I said that the agency is one of the parties the contract represents, not the specific agent you're saying yes to. That doesn't mean you can be handed off as a client to anyone else working there without your consent, but that does mean that if your agent leaves, your

agreement isn't automatically voided and you won't automatically follow your agent to their new job. To follow your agent, that person would have to offer you representation under the new agency and you would have to agree.

Next, your agency agreement will specify how long it will be in effect, or the **Term** of the agreement. This tells you the minimum length of time your author-agent relationship will last. Don't worry! This clause is not generally used by agents to quickly ditch their clients. It is not a ticking clock. It does not say if the agent doesn't sell your book in two weeks you're outta here. It's common to see a term of one year in an agreement, which means that if your project isn't ready to go and/or an agent doesn't submit your work to editors within a year of signing you up, then either party has the option to end the agreement. I promise this sounds scarier than it really is. There isn't a mechanism at the agency that triggers a red flag and all clients whose books haven't sold in X amount of time are unceremoniously dumped. Contracts need a defined term, and this part of the agreement will stipulate how your prospective agency defines it. Some agreements forgo the specification of a time period for collaboration and are instead made on a book-by-book basis, while some say the agreement is in effect until it ends under the termination clause (see below) but in essence are intended to last for the author's whole career.

You will likely find another section that defines the Agent Services. These are things the agent will do for you and include developing and editing your work, sending your work to editors, negotiating deals on your behalf, exploiting (that's just a fancy, if scary, word for "selling") foreign and subsidiary rights, reviewing royalty statements, and processing payments. You won't find "get author on New York Times best-seller list" or "guarantee \$1 million advance" on this list because agents cannot make such promises and would never put that in a contract anyway.

It is likely the agency agreement will cover their services in broad terms. They don't necessarily say your agent will provide specific editorial services, like "will absolutely lineedit your whole book." Agents make personal decisions about the specific types and levels of editorial services they provide, and sometimes that still varies from client to client, project to project. If you are looking for a specific kind of "editorial" agent, this is a conversation you'll want to have before you sign the agency agreement and not one that will be necessarily put in writing.

Agents vary, too, in the types of projects they will represent for you. For example, if you frequently publish short stories, talk to your prospective agent about whether they want—or don't want—to send out those stories for you. It is less common these days for agents to send out short fiction or pitch articles for clients. If this is a big part of your publishing life, you'll want to have a conversation about this with any agent with whom you

consider signing.

Every agency agreement will clearly outline what happens with the money your work earns, and it usually starts out by defining Commission rates. This is how your agent gets paid. The industry standard commission rate for U.S. agents on domestic deals is 15 percent of the gross amount earned which means advances, royalties, licensing fees, any way the work your agent sells for you earns money. Gross means off the top, before any deductions, such as foreign tax withholdings, any (rare) deductions from the publisher, etc. If your agent is not in the United States, this rate could vary. For example, it's 10 percent in the U.K. This rate applies to your primary book deal and any subsidiary rights like audiobooks and movie rights as well as royalties. This section of the agreement will also include the commission rates for foreign deals and translation rights, which typically range from 20 to 25 percent. These are higher than domestic rates because many agents use a co-agent to sell work abroad, and the commission is split between them. For example, your agent may use another agent in France to sell your book to a French publisher, because the French coagent knows the market best. Commission here is likely to be 20 percent: 10 percent to your agent and 10 percent to the French agent. This clause will also tell you how quickly you can expect payment once the agency receives any payment on your behalf (usually seven to ten days).

Speaking of money, your agency agreement will also tell you if you ever owe the agency **Reimbursement** for fees or expenditures. Before we get into that I want to note that if there's ever mention of an up-front payment

to an agent—for a "reading fee" or "processing fee"—run. Reputable agents do not charge clients a cash fee for their work to be considered or sold, or for any other service of representation, and the Association of American Literary Agents (aalitagents.org/canon-of-ethics) prohibits its member agents from doing so. Money at a reputable agency flows from the publisher to the agency to the author. Not the other way around.

Your agency agreement may indicate that the agency can ask you to reimburse it for routine office charges like shipping or photocopying or buying physical copies of books to send to foreign co-agents, and this clause will cover that, too. I'll admit this part of the agency agreement is a little dated and comes from a time when submissions required dozens of copies of a manuscript to be shipped in boxes to editors' offices. (I know! We used to do it that way! In my lifetime even!) Now that most transactions, even contracts, happen by e-mail, agents rarely need to recoup these kinds of expenses, but it's still in the agency agreement just in case. It's a general practice that you're notified before any large expenditure is made, so you're not likely to see some big surprise deduction on your next check.

To me the most important clause in the whole agreement is the **Termination** clause. This is the part that tells you the procedure for ending your relationship with your agent and how the agent can end it with you. It very often states that either party—that's you or the agent—can terminate the agreement by writing a letter (even an e-mail) stating as much, and the agreement is terminated thirty days after it is received. That letter usually says something like: "Thanks



for everything, but I think it's time to move on," and, after thirty days, that's that. Termination is generally that straightforward but not necessarily that simple.

Even if you part ways with your agent, they are still the "agent of record" for any projects they have sold for you. This means the agent may collect commission in perpetuity and will also continue to send you statements and checks and anything else relevant to their work on your behalf in perpetuity. If you part ways with your agent while your book is on submission (which I would not generally recommend), and you later sell that book to an editor your now-former agent sent it to, that now-former agent is entitled to commission. Since agents don't get paid until authors get paid, this is to protect them from authors who use their services right up until the book sells and then fire them, thinking they won't owe commission. I've never been in this situation, but as my boss and mentor Howard Morhaim of the Howard Morhaim Literary Agency has always said, "Contracts are scar tissue": If you see something like this in a contract, it's probably because it happened to someone somewhere.

Regarding termination, it also matters who is due commission on unsold subsidiary rights. Yes, I know that sentence is confusing, so let me explain. Let's say you amicably part ways with your agent after your first novel comes out. You sell your second with a new agent, and the new agent wants to see if anyone will buy the unsold audio rights to your first book. Can they? If they do sell them, do you owe your former agent commission? Your agency agreement will make this clear, and if it doesn't, it's important

to have this enumerated. It doesn't have to be a contentious issue, but it is worth ironing it out from the beginning. Don't worry—your agent will not think why is this new client worried about what will happen if we break up? They will give you kudos for advocating for yourself and thinking ahead. That's what contracts are for!

Some agency agreements stipulate that if you terminate the agreement, you can't get another agent or send out any project you worked on with your now-former agent for a period of time, perhaps six months or so. This is to deter an author from taking a submission list or the edits an agent provides to another agent for them to sell, not that the overwhelming majority of authors would do this. (See? Scar tissue.) This is not in every agreement, but it's important to know if it's in yours. If you're ever in the position of ending your relationship with your agent (it happens), be sure you understand your termination clause.

There are very often other more contract-y sounding clauses in agency agreements such as a Warranties and Indemnities clause, which outlines what happens in the event of lawsuits, a Venue clause that specifies which state's laws govern the agreement, and more. These are generally straightforward and a routine part of many contracts. You'll probably see them again in your book contract. They're diverse enough that it would be too difficult to explain the nuances here, but if you have any questions about them, ask your agent.

HE most frequent question I get about agency agreements is "Can I negotiate any of this?" It's possible, but in seventeen years of

agenting, I haven't had a client ask to do so. Whether that is a function of our agreement, my clients, both, or neither, I don't know. I can say this: You won't get very far asking for a reduced commission rate, as 15 percent is industry standard. You won't get very far offering an increased commission rate either. as I have seen used from time to time as a ploy for writers to make representing them more enticing, mostly in query letters. (Sorry, this doesn't work.) But if something in your agency agreement doesn't work for your specific circumstances, talk to your agent about it. The agent is there to answer questions and certainly understands the need and desire to tailor an agreement to fit the situation of the author. That's an agent's whole job! That doesn't mean they can or will say yes, but it's okay to ask. If you don't feel comfortable talking to your agent about a detail of your contract, look into the legal services provided by the Authors Guild (authorsguild.org/ legal-services), a professional organization for writers that advocates for the rights and well-being of its members.

Contracts are meant to outline what both writer and agent can expect and to account for what happens when something goes wrong. Mercifully, contracts cover things that you'll almost certainly never have to deal with; you'll see this clearly when you sign a book contract of your own. But it's important to understand what you're signing before you sign it, and I hope this gets you at least some of the way there. When in doubt, ask questions. Your agent is there to answer them and to support you from here on out.  $\infty$ 

# When an Agent Says No (or Maybe!)

How Agent Feedback Can Help Diverse Writers Get Published

By Chaya Bhuvaneswar

and out of their heads and not even think about the opinions of agents, let alone signing with one, as they create their work. Yet when it comes time to sell that work, what agents think very much matters. An agent's role is that of gatekeeper: They are often the

CHAYA BHUVANESWAR is a practicing physician, a writer, and a PEN America Literary Award finalist for her debut story collection, White Dancing Elephants (Dzanc Books, 2018), which was also selected as a Kirkus Reviews Best Debut Fiction and Best Short Story Collection. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, Salon, Narrative Magazine, Tin House, Electric Literature, Kenyon Review, the Millions, Joyland, Michigan Quarterly Review, the Awl, and elsewhere. She has received fellowships from MacDowell, Community of Writers, and the Sewanee Writers' Conference.

This article was originally published in *Poets & Writers Magazine* in 2022; it was updated for this guide in 2025.

first readers of manuscripts, the first brokers of publishing opportunities, and the first advocates on a book's behalf. In a practical sense, writers need agents. Writers cannot typically submit unpublished manuscripts to the Big Five publishers or to their imprints without first gaining representation by an agent, who is the one to directly engage with editors at these publishing houses. An agent's reputation and power to sell future books rests on that agent's ability to form and sustain relationships with editors, relationships that are a mix of camaraderie and the editor's trust in the agent's judgment of what makes a book good. In making these judgment calls, agents are driven by what they think makes a given manuscript "work"—its marketability and potential to be a best-seller, certainly, but also its merits and pleasures simply as a piece of storytelling, in terms of structure, characterization, forward momentum, and sentence-level language, among other elements that a successful piece will execute beautifully. When a writer sends out their work to agents, they hope of course to hear the agents praise these elements of their craft. But a pass from an agent can sometimes provide

insight into what's working—and what's not—that may be even more valuable.

So how can writers put an agent's words to use, especially if these words are part of an "I'm stepping aside" rejection e-mail? From a practical standpoint, when does it make sense to metabolize agent critique and move on, versus trying the same agent after revising? Perhaps most important: How can writers use what agents say to make constructive changes to their work, without ceding their own artistic judgment to agents, or indeed to anyone connected with publishing? To answer this question, I spoke with several writers at different stages of their careers as well as agents themselves. Here's what I learned:

Trends in agent feedback (i.e., multiple agents telling you the same thing about your work) can help you better understand your goals for a given book—whether or not you ultimately decide to incorporate those agents' advice. The hurdle preventing agents from connecting to your work may be that you've created a character some reject as "unlikable." Or perhaps the way



you experiment with genre makes some nervous, or the format or length of your manuscript causes some to worry (it was a brave agent who took the leap with *Ducks*, *Newburyport!*). You may be disheartened, and understandably so, but it is still worth taking a moment to simply reflect on agent feedback rather than dwell on disappointment or fear. As Greg Marshall, author of the debut memoir *Leg: The Story of a Limb and the Boy Who Grew From It* (Abrams Press, 2023), knows, agents can offer invaluable information about the commercial con-

text in which your book will be read and "how the scope and scale of a project might be expanded to become sellable in a competitive market." But what you do with that feedback next is up to you. It may inspire you to revise—or it may underscore your own belief in a bold choice you've made.

Writer and librarian Corey Farrenkopf describes his own journey using agent feedback to clarify his goals: "When I first started out I was forcing my weird genre work into a more literary mode than it naturally wanted to be in, and that was one of the major issues agents commented on.

Because it came up again and again, I had to...give myself permission to write the strange horror/dark fantasy/sci-fi that I really wanted to." Farrenkopf's example illustrates the value in noticing patterns, without being unduly buffeted by any one piece of advice. Novelist John Vercher, whose books include *After the Lights Go Out* (Soho Press, 2022), agrees: "I didn't make changes until I saw consistency in the feedback.

Otherwise I would have been playing whack-a-mole to suit different agents and not holding true to my vision for the book." Similarly, young adult novelist Lilliam Rivera (*We Light Up the Sky*, Bloomsbury, 2021) encourages writers to use, but not be ruled by, agent feedback. "I look at [it] like I do any feedback given to me: It is a way to check on the spots I might have missed in revision," she says.

If many different agents pass because they're wary about how publishers will react to something risk-taking about your work, while

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also acknowledging your work shows talent and craft, it may be time to prepare yourself for a longer or less traditional road to getting published—even after you find that agent who loves your book. Novelist and craft essayist Matt Bell, author most recently of *Refuse to Be Done:* How to Write and Rewrite a Novel in Three Drafts (Soho Press, 2022), speaks to this experience of pivoting to plan B: "I did at one point come to

believe I wasn't going to get an agent for my first novel, so I started submitting the novel to the bigger indies on my own, where I could," says Bell of shopping the manuscript for *In the House Upon the Dirt Between the Lake and the Woods* (Soho Press, 2013), a dark and sometimes grisly fable about marriage that uses elements of myth. "The week or so after I finally signed with my agent, the novel was accepted from one of my own submissions." Short story writer Chris Stuck, author of *Give My Love to the Savages* (Amistad, 2021), concurs: "My advice

is always to write what you're interested in whether it fits the publishing world's taste or not."

If a reputable agent gives you very specific feedback and asks to see a revision of your work with a view to representing it, do consider sending the revision back to that agent if the comments resonate with your own artistic intentions. The revise-and-resubmit scenario can be perilous for writers, either when engaging with agents or eventually editors; as novelist Lydia Kiesling, author of Mobility (Crooked Media Reads, 2018), says: "I have

heard of writers making big structural changes requested by an agent/editor as a prerequisite of signing or buying the book and then having the agent/editor pass anyway, so I would make sure it's an edit that you truly agree will make the book stronger." But when agent advice does ring true, it can be well worth your time to try an agent again. Agent Maggie Cooper of Aevitas Creative Management explains: "It's not uncommon for me

to offer feedback when I see a path for revision—and if the writer does make changes in keeping with my notes, I'm always happy to take another look, although sometimes it takes me longer than I wish it did! There has been at least one case in which I've offered representation based on a strong revision-and I can think of several other cases when I haven't been the right fit, but the writer has gone on to find representation elsewhere. Even if we don't end up working together, I always feel extra invested in the success of writers who choose to engage with me in this way, although I also have a lot of respect for writers who know when not to revise, if the feedback doesn't fit their vision." Novelist Belinda Huijuan Tang, whose book A Map for the Missing, was released in 2022 from Penguin Press, adds, "Something worthwhile I did, before querying, was identifying what the nonnegotiable aspects of my novel were. When agents came with offers where there was a mismatch between those expectations, that became an obvious sign to me that perhaps we weren't the best match."

Cleyvis Natera, whose debut novel, Neruda on the Park, was published by Ballantine Books in 2022, describes how she ended up doing a "revise-andresubmit" for agent PJ Mark of Janklow & Nesbit: "When I queried agents, two responded with feedback. Both passed, but one offered to take another look after revisions. It just so happened that at Bread Loaf I had already signed up for an agent meeting with the one who didn't offer to take another look. Talk about awkward. Ay dios mio! But PJ Mark was an absolute delight. His feedback was specific and actionable. I completed those changes and sent him the book and he signed me."

Remember that literary agents, like other publishing professionals, reflect both the strengths and the weaknesses of the industry, including a relative lack of diversity among gatekeepers. Feedback may reflect an agent's limited ability to "relate" to characters very different from them, and taste is highly subjective. It's important to remember that agents who seem "all powerful" now may leave the field in a few years, change agencies, become specialists in a genre you're not interested in-or, conversely, become newly interested in your "niche" market (for example, memoirs and fiction by authors from BIPOC, queer, and disability communities) that many agents and editors weren't all that interested in just a few years ago. Seek out agents whose commitment to your work and the communities it represents feels genuine and substantial.

**GENTS** know that with skill and experience they will catch some large \_percentage—but not all of the most promising manuscripts that come across their desks. It's important to remember they are also individuals, not only possessed of their own idiosyncratic tastes, but subject to larger market forces that can be mercurial. Agents, in other words, while often invaluable allies who put in long hours to prepare books for submission, help clients navigate contracts and options, and act in good faith to open doors for diverse writers, are nonetheless part of a shifting landscape—while the impulse to make art that you hold inside of you, that brings you to the page day after day, is a constant.





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#### TANYA MCKINNON

worked at Mary Evans for nine years before starting McKinnon Literary in 2014. Her clients include Brittney Cooper, Bettina Love, Mark Siegel, and Salamishah Tillet.



#### **ANNIE HWANG**

began her career at Folio Literary Management, and joined Ayesha Pande Literary in 2020. Her clients include John Paul Brammer, Franny Choi, Carson Faust, and Cleo Qian.



#### CLAUDIA BALLARD

is an agent at William Morris Endeavor, where she has worked since 2008. Her clients include Marie-Helene Bertino, Marjorie Celona, Amelia Gray, Eddie Joyce, and Emma Straub.



and Celeste Ng.

#### JULIE BARER

spent six years at Sanford J. Greenburger Associates before starting her own agency, Barer Literary, in 2004 and then cofounding the Book Group in 2015. Her clients include Ayad Akhtar, Rumaan Alam,



and Philip Schultz.

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with his wife and daughter (who joined Georges Borchardt, Inc. in 1999), has built a staggering list of clients over the past half century. They include Robert Bly, T. C. Boyle, Rafael Campo, Robert Coover, Ian McEwan,



#### SETH FISHMAN

started his career in publishing at Sterling Lord Literistic in 2005, and has been an agent at the Gernert Company since 2010. His authors include Kate Beaton, Anna Bond, Ann Leckie, Randall Munroe, and Téa Obreht.



#### MOLLY FRIEDRICH

worked at the Aaron Priest Literary Agency for twenty-eight years before founding the Friedrich Agency in 2006. Her clients include Melissa Bank, Jane Smiley, and Elizabeth Strout.



Straub.

#### DAVID GERNERT

was the editor in chief of Doubleday, where he edited John Grisham, before starting his own agency, with Grisham as his first client. His other clients include Stewart O'Nan, Chris Pavone, and Peter





SUSAN GOLOMB

is a senior agent at Writers House. She founded her own literary agency in 1988, with Jonathan Franzen as her first client. She represents Rachel Kushner, Imbolo Mbue, and William T. Vollmann, among

many others.



#### **ALIA HANNA HABIB**

became an agent at what is now McCormick Literary in 2010, after working for five years as a publicist at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. She joined the Gernert Company in 2017. Her clients include Hanif Abdurraqib, Nikole

Hannah-Jones, Lauren Oyler, and Clint Smith.



#### JENNIFER JOEL

is a cohead of the literary department at Creative Artists Agency. Her clients include Ian Caldwell, Evan Osnos, Shonda Rhimes, and Dustin Thomason.



#### JEFF KLEINMAN

was an agent at the Graybill & English Literary Agency for seven years before cofounding Folio Literary Management in 2006. His clients include Robert Hicks, Eowyn Ivey, and Garth Stein.



#### PJ MARK

has been a literary agent since 2002, first at International Management Group (IMG) and now Janklow & Nesbit Associates, where he moved in 2010. His clients include Cathy Park Hong, Andrea Lawlor, Kiese

Laymon, and Namwali Serpell.



#### MARIA MASSIE

worked as an agent for twelve years before joining Massie & McQuilkin as a partner in 2004. Her clients include Peter Ho Davies, Roxane Gay, and Robin Romm.



#### LYNN NESBIT

started the agency that would become International Creative Management in 1965, and in 1989 joined forces with Morton Janklow to found Janklow & Nesbit Associates.

She has worked with authors such as Joan

Didion, Jeffrey Eugenides, Jayne Anne Phillips, and Tom Wolfe.



#### JIM RUTMAN

has been an agent at Sterling Lord Literistic since 1998. His clients include Charles Bock, Eleanor Henderson, Sheila Heti, Alissa Nutting, and Rowan Ricardo Phillips.



#### **ERIC SIMONOFF**

was an agent at Janklow & Nesbit Associates for eighteen years before joining William Morris Endeavor in 2009. His clients include Edward P. Jones, Jhumpa Lahiri, Jonathan Lethem, and ZZ Packer.



#### **NAT SOBEL**

former vice president and marketing director of Grove, founded his eponymous consulting firm for indie publishers in 1970. His wife, Judith Weber, joined in 1977, when the company became a full-service literary agency. Today Sobel Weber

Associates counts Viet Thanh Nguyen and Richard Russo among its clients.



#### ANNA STEIN

is a literary agent at Creative Artists Agency. Previously, she worked at six other agencies including Aitken Alexander Associates and ICM Partners. Her clients include Ben Lerner, Maria Semple, and Hanya Yanagihara.



## RENÉE ZUCKERBROT

was an editor at Doubleday before founding her eponymous literary agency in 2002. She currently works as an agent at Massie & McQuilkin, where her clients include Kelly Link, Deborah Lutz, and Eric Sanderson.

# Poets Writers

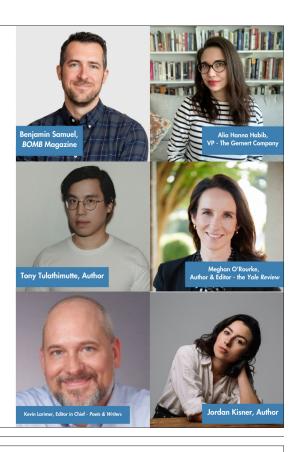
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# AgentAdvice Monica Odom of Odom Media Management



#### Areas of interest:

Narrative nonfiction, prescriptive nonfiction with a narrative component, essay collections, graphic memoirs/nonfiction, literary fiction, upmarket commercial fiction, graphic novels, author/illustrator picture books, illustrated middle grade, illustrated YA

#### Representative clients:

Maisy Card, Tyrese L. Coleman, Tyler Feder, Da'Shaun L. Harrison, Rachel Ignotofsky, Sharee Miller, Sonya Renee Taylor

#### Looking for:

Please include a query letter in the body of an e-mail. All queries are reviewed within four to six weeks; authors will receive a response if there is interest. Currently not accepting queries.

#### Preferred contact:

querytracker.net/query/querymodom

#### Agency contact:

Odom Media Management 26 Park Street, Suite 2202 Montclair, NJ 07042 odommediamgmt.com

Read every installment of the Agent Advice series at pw.org.

Do I need to have my novel copyrightprotected before submitting it to an agent/ publisher?

#### **Drew from Cincinnati**

This is an easy one but also something I am sure many writers want to know. The answer is no. As part of your publishing agreement the publisher will register the book for copyright in your name.

I'm an incarcerated writer (unarmed bank robbery). I have had moderate success getting published in various literary journals, was featured in a segment of an NPR program, and am almost finished with a memoir. Will my current "living situation" discourage any agents from taking up my case? What, if anything, can I do to improve my chances of attracting the attention of an agent willing to work with me?

#### Dan from United States Penitentiary, Canaan, Waymart, Pennsylvania

In my experience an author cannot write a book for profit about a crime for which that author was convicted. But in your case the crime committed might just be a part of your life story and not the story itself. It sounds like you've done a solid job in getting your work out there and engaging with publicity channels. I suggest presenting yourself to agents the same way you do here and acknowledge head-on the context from which you're writing. Think about any logistical roadblocks that might stand in your way, and be prepared to speak about solutions. Will your incarceration affect how and when you can communicate with your editor and agent? Will you be able to participate in publicity for the book? I suggest researching authors who were incarcerated when they published their book—proof that it is not impossible.

I write because I enjoy it and it's something to do while caring for my disabled wife. I have a website, self-publish my books using CreateSpace, and sell my fiction on Kindle and in print formats. I'm one of the little guys with a dozen tales. How would I entice an agent to even take a look?

Fred from Virginia Beach, Virginia The first thing to ask yourself is: Do I want an agent? Once you have an agent, writing becomes less of a hobby and more of a business. You are then beholden to many other cooks in the kitchen, with money in the mix. If you're successfully self-publishing your books in a way that works for you, you need to ask yourself what you want in a publishing career and decide how/why you'd want to work with an agent and subsequently a publisher. If you decide to seek out an agent, be sure to define the genre you're writing in, describe the book you'd want the agent to represent, and be prepared to share sales data on previously self-published titles.

Many agents ask for outlines or summaries for nonfiction manuscripts and writing samples for fiction. My manuscript is a collection of memoir-based nonfiction. I want to pitch my writing sample instead of a summary. Am I shooting myself in the foot?

#### Jim from Westminster, Colorado

The good news is you get to do both! With memoir we expect to see both a chapter outline and chapter summary for the book along with substantial sample pages (more than you'd include in other nonfiction proposals because much of a memoir is in "the read"). In addition you should write a summary to show you know exactly what your book is about and how you'd describe it to potential readers.  $\infty$ 



#### MORE RESOURCES ON AGENTS

**AgentQuery** (agentquery.com) is a free database of agents and publishers that also provides sections of advice on querying agents and formatting submissions.

**Association of American Literary Agents** (aalitagents.org) features a free database of nearly three hundred agents with a wide range of interests.

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Book Proposals & Query Letters (Alpha Books, 2011) by Marilyn Allen and Coleen O'Shea uses the same guidelines an agent uses when submitting clients' books to publishers to provide in-depth information on composing query letters and crafting elements of a proposal.

The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile (Touchstone, 2000) by agent Noah Lukeman offers advice on how to hook an agent with the first five pages of a manuscript—and how to avoid certain pitfalls of weak writing.

#### The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers

(Riverhead, 2010) by agent, author, and editor Betsy Lerner, who shares her insider's perspective on the ins and outs of publishing and writing, from manuscript submission, rejection, and writer's block.

How to Get a Literary Agent (Sourcebooks, 2006) by Michael Larsen, an author coach and former agent, covers how to find and query the right agent, how to work with an agent, and a summary of the book business.

Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, and Literary Agents (New World Library, 2018) is a popular resource that contains tips from nearly two hundred agents.

Poets & Writers' Agent Advice (pw.org/content/agent\_advice\_the\_complete\_series) is an online feature,

drawn from *Poets & Writers Magazine*'s popular column of the same name, where literary agents answer writers' most frequently asked questions about how to land an agent and publish a book.

Poets & Writers' Literary Agents Database (pw.org/literary\_agents), available for free, includes agents who represent poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction, plus details about the kind of books they're interested in representing, their clients, and the best way to contact them.

The Poets & Writers Complete Guide to Being a Writer: Everything You Need to Know About Craft, Inspiration, Agents, Editors, Publishing, and the Business of Building a Sustainable Writing Career (Avid Reader Press, 2020) by Poets & Writers editor in chief Kevin Larimer and former editorial director Mary Gannon offers advice and resources for finding an agent, writing a query letter, and more.

#### Poets & Writers' Top Topics for Writers: Literary Agents

(pw.org/content/literary\_agents) offers an overview of the best practices for finding and contacting agents.

Publishers Marketplace (publishersmarketplace .com) includes a database of more than eight hundred members looking for work representing a range of genres. Access for registered members costs twenty-five dollars a month. Non-registered members can purchase one-day access with Ouick Pass for ten dollars.

**Writer Beware** (sfwa.org/other-resources/for -authors/writer-beware) provides warnings about scams and tips on how to tell a reputable agent from a questionable one.

# **CLASSIFIEDS**

# CALLS FOR MANUSCRIPTS: ANTHOLOGIES

#### INTO READING AND WRITING

top-notch short

stories? Want to be published in the anthology that readers nationwide are ranking higher than **BEST AMERICAN** and O. HENRY? Then read COOL-**EST AMERICAN** STORIES 2025: https://amzn .to/4958AFN. Let its 13 "unputdownable" stories inspire you, then write a new story and submit it to us!

**SEEKING** WRITINGS ON **DIVORCE AND** BREAKUP for the anthology, "When We Two Parted," edited by published poet and teacher, Magdalena Montagne. Poetry, any length, style. Prose, two page maximum. Word or pdf documents please. Email submissions to magdamontagne@ gmail.com with "divorce" in the subject heading. Submit by April 30, 2025.

#### **CONFERENCES**

JOIN US FOR SOMOS' 9th Annual Taos Writers Conference, in beautiful Taos, New Mexico, July 25-27, 2025, featuring keynote speaker, memoirist, playwright & poet, Nick Flynn (*An*other Bullshit Night in Suck City, This Is the Night Our House Will Catch Fire). He is also the author of 5 collections of poetry, including I Will Destroy You (2019). Over 20 workshops in every genre, including poetry, fiction, memoir, creative nonfiction, YA, & essays. Conference includes receptions, keynote reading, lunch roundtable discussions on publishing and working with agents, faculty reading, and book sales. FYI: somos@ somostaos.org, call (575) 758-0081, or e-mail somos@ somostaos.org.

#### **CONTESTS**

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Short Story Award
for best previously
unpublished literary story in English
(stand alone, not
from a novel), approximately 5,000 to
15,000 words. Prize:
\$1,000, publication
on website. Reading
fee: \$25 per story
submitted. Deadline:

August 8. Details: www.givalpress .submittable.com or www.givalpress.com. Address: Gival Press, P.O. Box 3812, Arlington, VA 22203.

## 24TH ANNUAL GIVAL PRESS

Oscar Wilde Award for best previously unpublished poem in English that best relates GLBTQ life. Prize: \$500, publication on website. Reading fee: \$20 per 3 poems submitted, any form, style, length. Deadline: June 27. Details: www.givalpress .submittable.com or www.givalpress.com. Address: Gival Press, P.O. Box 3812, Arling-

#### MURIEL CRAFT BAILEY POETRY CONTEST

ton, VA 22203.

April 1-July 15: \$1,350 in prizes. Judge: Carolyne Wright. Anonymous judging. Guidelines updated annually! Submit 1-5 poems, 12-60 lines per poem (including stanza breaks); maximum 70 characters per line (including spaces). NO previously published or AI-assisted poems. If submitting online, give author's name in cover letter ONLY.

Submit online (\$25 + fee for up to 5 poems) OR by mail via USPS (include check or money order for \$5 per poem; put poet's name on back of poem): The Comstock Review, 4956 St. John Dr., Syracuse, NY 13215. Complete guidelines online at Submittable: https:// comstockreview .submittable.com/ submit.

#### RENTALS/ RETREATS

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# CLASSIFIEDS

ear and her perceptive questions and suggestions were right on the mark as I worked towards the completion of my memoir Beyond This Harbor (Knopf). Jan is terrific. I highly recommend her.' -Rose Styron. Website: www.jan freeman.net/ editing-services. Email: janfreeman editorial@gmail.com.

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#### **WORKSHOPS**

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Writers Workshop, August 1-3. Pitches. Queries. Craft. Spend a weekend in shared interactive sessions with Storm Literary Agency owner and agent Victoria Selvaggio and multi-published romance author Iuliette Hvland. Mills Park Hotel in the unique village of Yellow Springs, OH. Registration closes July 25. Website: www.intothesprings writersworkshop.com.

MULTI-DAY WRITING WORKSHOPS with Galiot Press for novel and memoir writers. Small-group workshopping, craft talks, writing time, guided opportunities for outdoor exploration. April 2-6: Eastwind Workshop in Wellfleet, MA with guest instructor Grace Talusan (Brown University professor and author of The Body Papers), and Henriette Lazaridis and Anjali Mitter Duva (Galiot Press editors and cofounders). Website: https://tinyurl.com/ yc6jcn44. July 12-18: Krouna Workshop in Epirus, Greece with guest instructor Catherine Elcik, and Galiot editors/cofounders. Website: https://tinyurl.com/ y8rv9f3n. Applications accepted now on a rolling basis. Visit www.galiotpress.com/ learn for details.

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