

FOR WRITERS

Part II: The Business

Now that you've got this finished manuscript in your hot little hand - what do you do now? You go about whoring yourself to the highest bidder, that's what! No...just kidding. Writing is a business - and it has to be treated as such. You wouldn't walk into an operating room, slap on some latex gloves and dive into an appendectomy - so why is it that people look at the business of writing as these amorphous dunes of genius that cannot be harnessed by capitalism? Go into writing as you would any other career: respectful of the lingo, aware of the ins and outs of commerce, understanding the timelines and relationships that are important.

*Stop thinking about writing as a hobby.

Quick Overview:

- You have your manuscript
- You write your Kick-Ass-One-Page Query Letter

You make a list of agents who would be interested in your book, based on similar books they've bought

You query agents

- You give no "exclusives" - why? I don't see no rings on these fingers?
- You pay NO FEES
- You find an agent
- Agent may ask you to make some changes - a pre-edit, if you will (sometimes this happens even before they agree to take you on as a client. You need to weigh whether or not these changes are good - agent signing you or not)
- Agent tries to sell the manuscript to one editor per Publishing House

- You realize that you thought getting an agent was hard - but this...this is fucking horrible
- Editor buys book (timeline: from one day to several years)
- Editor who bought your book is now Your Editor (in most cases - editors do hop around a bit from House to House)
- Your Editor edits the shit out of your manuscript
- You question whether or not you've made a horrible mistake
- You and Your Editor finish editing

- After much in-house hullabaloo (covers to be designed, catalog copy to be written, back cover copy to be written, biographies to act like you didn't write yourself, author photos, copy edits, page proofs, galleys etc..)
- You get a few copies of Your Book - much celebrating
- Book is sold to The People
- And then it dawns on you that you have to start all over again.
- You vomit.

*In some cases, people have been known to query Editors directly. I think this is more a practice in genre fiction (Harlequin, e.g.) I know if you're not in genre fiction and you query editors and they pass, when you decide to find an agent -you have to disclose those editors whom you queried - because if they passed the first time, they might not want to take a look at it the second time around. (However, there is a chance that they won't recognize it...)

Finding an Agent

- Do your homework
 - Go to your local bookstore and find books that you think are similar to yours.
 - Check the acknowledgements - authors usually thank their agents.
 - Agents buy what they like - if the agent bought the similar book you're holding, they'll probably be game for yours. (you will also mention this similar book that they represent in your query letter...so, the agent knows you've done your homework and are not just shooting buckshot at the entire contents of Publishers Marketplace)

More often than not, people report this legion of rejection letters. The hitch is that they probably weren't querying the right people. You have to think of agents like lawyers - you wouldn't go into a Bankruptcy Attorney's office asking for a divorce - unless you're married to him/her. Focus your search on those who are looking for books like yours - it will greatly reduce your heartache.

- Find out who's selling what - you can find these deals on Publisher's Marketplace and Publisher's Lunch. It lets you know who's kicking ass and taking names...it also lets you know what kind of titles these people are selling and what relationships they have with editors.
- NEVER, EVER, EVER pay a fee.
 - Do your research - the writing community loves to keep tabs on agents who are cheating people. Do a simple Internet search and get the low down. There are a ton of websites devoted to just these matters (predators and editors, for one)

- Don't pay a fee for an agent to look at your work. Agents make money off of you, not the other way around.
 - When an agent says they have a great book doctor they want you to look into (can you say, kickbacks anyone?). Run don't walk far, far away.
 - IT'S A DEALBREAKER IF SOMEONE ASKS YOU FOR ANY MONEY.
There are certain instances where an agent will charge you for copies or something like that - but nowhere near a reading fee or like a book doctor or something.
 - The way to really prove this point? Go on Publisher's Marketplace or even Google for that matter, and see how many books this Charging Agent has sold. It will become plainly obvious that this person is actually making their money off of these 'fees' and not on their percentage from books sold.
- Writing a Query Letter
 - A Query Letter is the paper equivalent to 3 minutes in an elevator with Steven Spielberg. Your chance to pitch your idea - briefly, succinctly and with the lasting effect that they want to know more.
 - Think of your query as the Movie Trailer to the Film that the novel is.
 - Which plot points make it into movie trailers?
 - Watch film trailers with a discerning eye, see how they sell the movie to you...which movies do you want to see and why?
 - Plot, Relationships, cliffhangers, page turning threads...trailer=query.
 - When I was writing my Query Letter I was still working at the big Law Firm. So, every day I would bring the newest draft of my Query in and me and the attorney I was assisting would go to lunch with the Query and a Red Pen. He tore the shit out of that thing day after day after day after day. What started as this abstract outline (of the guidelines that will follow) slowly began to take shape into a kick-ass, to-the-point Query Letter which in the end got me an agent I had no business getting. I had written for no publications. I had no education. I had nothing that they say you **HAVE TO HAVE** in order to move forward. I can't help but think that by spending so much time on the Query Letter I evened the playing field just that much more. Set yourself up for success and really bang out a rocking letter.
 - To give you a little timeline - it took me 3 months to write the first draft (yes it was horrible, but...) of *Conversations* and 1 month to perfect the Query Letter.
 - A query letter is to be One Page. Period.

- Each query letter is to be tailored specifically for each agent you query. The worst thing you can do is send out a bulk mailing to 50 agents with a 'Dear Agent' header.
 - If you do your research properly, the agent's name will be spelled correctly and going to the proper agency. I can't tell you how many queries make this mistake.
 - Agents hop around a lot - make sure to have up-to-date contact information.
 - The internet is far better than those expensive Agent Books - they get outdated far too quickly.
- With my tax refund that year, I bought really business-y looking stationery. I didn't decorate it with anything. I didn't put glitter in the envelope. I just wanted it to look like I understood that this Query Letter was possibly the beginning of a business opportunity. This new stationery also had all of my up-to-date contact information. A must.
- You're also going to include a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope, an S.A.S.E. to those in the know. I wasn't in the know when I was writing my Query Letter, and referred to this mysterious item as a Sayse. Just as I thought DKNY was pronounced 'D-Eye-Keeny' (like in Willow). But I digress...when I finally caught on, it was too late. I had sent my four Queries out without the Sayse! So, I re-sent the queries (don't do this, by the way) including the beloved Sayse. In the meantime I had already gotten a rejection from one of the agents (her own handwriting scrawled across my query saying "Not Interested"). In the mail a few days later I got one of my own Sayses - same agent. But this time she had scrawled, "Wasn't interested in it the first time." Awesome. At least she used the enclosed Sayse.
- A Query should contain:
 - FIRST PARAGRAPH
 - Your opening line: "I'm seeking representation for my novel BlahBlahBlah complete at 999 pages."
 - A hook: This is so cheesy and capitalistic, but it's an undeniable truth that someone, who's read close to 10,000 queries that morning, needs to be pulled in right away. You need to stand out from the crowd. This is a one-sentence Whammo of a sentence. And it's absolutely based on your own personality, the book you're trying to sell and how you want to present yourself to these prospective agents.
 - SECOND PARAGRAPH
 - The Comparisons: This is not where you compare your book to Gone with the Wind. This is where you compare your book to contemporary titles. Why? Because it shows that you're up on the market right now as well as showing that you're not batshit crazy enough to think that you're the next

Margaret Mitchell - (even if you are, I'm just saying - a little humility goes a long way)

- E.g. - My book is like Blah and BlahBlah - but mine's different (and better?) because I shed this new light on the subject. This shows you know the market (again), you've read the competition, and you understand how you fit in.
- I interspersed some quotes from the book in this second paragraph - just a line or two here. To show that I could write and to give a little sample of the voice of the book.

○ THIRD PARAGRAPH

- The Official Pitch of the Plot: This is where you sum up your entire book in like 3 sentences. It sucks. It's the hardest thing in the world to do.
- This is that Movie Trailer part of the Query - the primary plot line, the primary relationships, the main themes of the novel, a cliffhanger perhaps. I interspersed a couple of quotes from the book here, too. Once again, showing voice. How I planned on telling this particular story.

○ ○ FOURTH PARAGRAPH

- Qualifications, Education, Prizes, Awards, etc...: Yeah, I didn't have shit. So, I used this Fourth Paragraph to elaborate on the plot and themes a little more. I played up the voice and the writing, thinking that this was my strong suit. Almost like a whole smoke and mirrors thing, as if the Prospective Agent wouldn't realize that I had nary a mention of any prior experience whatsoever.

○ FIFTH PARAGRAPH

- The Close: This is short and sweet really - you've done your pitch.
- "Thank you for taking the time to consider, BlahBlahBlah. I look forward to hearing from you. Sincerely, Me"
- Some people include things like they are capable of sending the manuscript/first three chapters/first chapter/first 10 pages at their behest, that kind of thing. I'm sure it doesn't hurt - but I guess it's like being told to wait for the tone on an answering machine...kind of a known thing, yeah? But...can't hurt.
- You could also close with, "I really enjoyed BlahBlah (a title they represented - from one of those books you found in the bookstore) and feel that my novel, BlahBlahBlah would be right up your alley. It lets them know you've done your homework.

- Exclusives:
 - No. Don't give them. Simply. Just my opinion, of course. But, if I may elaborate...
 - Ever heard of the term 'don't put all your eggs in one basket?' - yeah, this is that. Agents are going to ask for an "exclusive" - meaning, you're going to send in your query and then they're going to ask if they can be the only one to look at your finished manuscript for a certain amount of time (up to six months).
 - You can do one of two things:
 - Lie. Say sure, and then send the query out everywhere.
 - Say no. Inform the prospective agent that you've already had interest elsewhere and you need to respect those agencies who've already requested your work.
 - This does a couple of things. Everyone knows that people find something highly attractive when they think other people want it. By saying that you can't grant an exclusive, you're saying that your dance card is indeed full - and that they can get in line.
 - Bottom line: If the book is good, and something they can see themselves marketing, they'll want it. Exclusive or not. If they play hardball and get all weird - they're not the agency for you.
- Anecdotal
 - I sent out a total of Four Queries. The agent I'm with now is one of those Four. I think by doing my homework and setting myself up for success, I alleviated a lot of my own heartache over rejections that at the time I would have chalked up to my own shittiness. When in reality, it would have been about barking up the wrong trees - sending queries to agents who didn't represent my kind of novel, querying agents who were no longer at certain agencies, etc...
 - One of the Agents I queried was a Missy Miss Big Shot. She was my Harvard, so to speak. She responded that she wanted to see the full manuscript. I vomited and then promptly sent her the manuscript. She read it and offered some of those pre-edits I was talking about. They were good notes, so I changed some stuff and really saw the book go to a whole other level. I returned the manuscript. Missy Miss Big Shot then said that she wanted me to go a totally different way with the novel - like a really fucked-up, weird way. And it wasn't an ego thing either. She was just off. I told her I wasn't interested. The agent I have now emailed one month later and I couldn't be more thankful for her. When my agent sold Conversations to Warner one month later, I got a beautiful little card from Missy Miss Big Shot's assistant congratulating me. It's a small, small literary world.

- In the end, your agent is your champion. Your advocate at the table. This person has to be someone whom you trust and understand. And it's super specific...it's this intimate relationship that you have to wade through. Through negotiations, foreign rights deals, film options, insecurities surrounding your second book (hypothetically speaking, of course), new babies, new opportunities, and both of your careers.
- Choose wisely. Don't just choose the first one who comes a'knocking.

Recommended Reading

Books:

Stephen King - *On Writing* (if you can listen to it on tape, he's got an amazing voice...)

Strunk and White - *The Elements of Style*

Carolyn Wheat - *How to Write Killer Fiction*

Susan Page - *The Shortest Distance Between You and Published Book*

Anne LaMott - *Bird by Bird*

Lit Websites:

On each of these websites there are tons of other websites in their Blogroll (the little columns on the sides with links). Give yourself one afternoon and just click click click...finding other favorites

GalleyCat - <http://www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/> - this is where I get a lot of my information about what's happening in the Publishing World.

Kristin Nelson - <http://pubrants.blogspot.com/> - Invaluable advice about all things Agent Related

Miss Snark - <http://misssnark.blogspot.com/> - All Things Agent - but in the shroud of anonymity, she's definitely a tad more - well, frank.

Confessions of an Idiosyncratic Mind - <http://www.sarahweinman.com/> - All things Mystery.

Publisher's Marketplace/Publisher's Lunch - <http://www.publishersmarketplace.com/> Daily news about the Publishing World -

you should also subscribe to Publisher's Lunch - it will do a whole daily Deal Overview and Breaking News. Good stuff to know.

Great Screenwriters with Blogs

John August - www.johnaugust.com

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