

AGENTS: What's Their Game? Can Anybody Play?

by Andrea Boeshaar © Copyright 2004

Literary agents are as much a part of today's publishing industry as editors. Since more and more manuscripts flood the slush piles, agents are becoming a necessity. Many editors won't even consider unsolicited proposals. "Unsolicited" is a name given to manuscripts that are sent to editors without prior contact and/or consent. While it's true that writers can solicit their work at conferences; they are still no match for well-known agents who can get their clients' work noticed more promptly.

Joyce Hart of [Hartline Literary Agency](#) states, "Most publishers will not work with an author directly. They require the author to be represented by an agent. Multnomah Publishing has just made that decision. All the major ABA (secular market) publishers work this way and many of the CBA (Christian market) publishers are requiring agents. Agents build relationships with editors and therefore the manuscripts will be placed on the top of the TBR (to be read) pile. Agents also work very hard to keep up with the ever-changing trends in publishing."

Janet Benrey, also of Hartline Literary Agency, adds, "An agent can help writers obtain the best deal possible and point out the minefields buried in publishing agreements."

What's more, agents can step in if problems arise once contracts are signed. This takes an enormous amount of pressure off the author.

So what else can a literary agent do for a writer's career?

Top-notch literary agents give their clients' manuscripts thorough readings. While agents are NOT critique partners, they will point out any weak areas that need tightening and revising. This is not to say that a writer should hand his/her agent anything less than quality work. Simply, an agent can serve as another set of eyes and will spot problems such as inconsistent characterization and sagging plot lines.

What about fees?

Watch out for agents that charge reading fees. Years ago I ran a business called DanAn Literary Services and I charged reading fees. In return, I provided authors with a detailed critique, even if I didn't take them on as clients. Back then, this practice was accepted. Nowadays, because of gross abuse in the industry, charging fees is frowned upon. Many writers have been swindled out of thousands of dollars, believing the fees their prospective agents charged would ultimately result in getting their work published. Unfortunately for many authors, those dreams were never realized.

There are some web sites designed to help authors investigate agents. One such site is: www.agentresearch.com Ironically, the site charges a fee for its services. Two other sites that might prove helpful are found at: www.aar-online.org and www.sfw.org/beware/agents.html

How does a writer contact an agent?

AGENTS: What's Their Game? Can Anybody Play?

by Andrea Boeshaar

www.andreaboeshaar.com

Usually agents want a proposal, similar to what editors ask for – a cover letter, synopsis, and sample chapters. To submit to one of Hartline Literary Agency's agents, please go to www.hartlineliterary.com and do some research. Find out which agent seems like a good match for you and submit only to that agent, not all of them.

How does an agent differ from a publicist?

Joyce Hart explains that a publicist specializes in promotions. "They get the author interviews on the radio and television. They send review copies to media, send out press releases, and arrange book signings and tours."

An agent, on the hand, is the liaison between the author and the publishing company. As Janet Benrey terms it, "An agent 'sells' your work to publishers Period."

So when is it time for a writer to hire an agent and how much do agents charge in commission?

Agents generally charge their clients 15% on all monies earned. That said, the best time for authors to query an agent is as soon as they have viable ideas for books. My suggestion to yet-to-be-published authors is finish the manuscript, get it critiqued (preferably by a published author), and then contact an agent. Writers with publishing credits need to be sure to let the agent know in their initial query.

For listings of writers groups, critique groups, agents and publishers, purchase Sally Stuart's [Christian Writers' Market Guide](#)

Will an agent write an author's cover letter to prospective editors?

You betcha! However, agents expect their clients to write their own synopses/outlines and bios.

What about reprints from POD (print-on-demand) publishers and small presses? Will agents represent those?

Some agents do and some don't. That's a topic for writers to address when they contact the agent.

What is the difference between hiring an agent to go over book contracts and an attorney?

The difference can be colossal. A lawyer just looks at the contract and figures out the legalese, while an agent does that AND negotiates better royalties and advances. An agent can also ask the publisher for more free books for the client as well as higher percentages. Moreover, the agent is experienced and will know when and where to press the editor and when to back down for the sake of the deal.

Does hiring an agent mean a writer loses control over his/her career?

AGENTS: What's Their Game? Can Anybody Play?

by Andrea Boeshaar

www.andreaboeshaar.com

Page 3 of 3

Absolutely not. The agent works for the writer and will help plan an author's career. Agents help their clients set goals and stay focused.

Tamela Hancock Murray of Hartline Literary Agency, states, "the agent/writer relationship is a partnership, which means that the author is guided but maintains control. I work with a high level of contact, which has proven successful with my clients. However, some authors would rather not think about the marketing process at all, and want to hear from an agent only when absolutely necessary. Both styles are positive as long as the agent and author are a good match." To minimize misunderstandings and to enjoy the greatest level of satisfaction in any author/agent relationship, Tamela recommends that writers let their agents know how much contact they prefer.

How long should a writer stick with an agent if they aren't landing any contracts?

Joyce Hart says that the timeframe varies and she suggests writers give their agents at least 12 to 18 months in which to prove themselves.

What happens if a writer signs with an agent then decides he doesn't like her?

At Hartline Literary Agency, the agreement between author and agent is open-ended. This means it can be terminated by either party at any time. Some agencies ask their clients to sign on for a year at a time – or longer. I once hired an agent with a similar clause and for that entire year, she did nothing to further my writing career. I wanted to end the relationship, but couldn't. In a word, I was stuck.

As an author and literary agent, my parting advice to writers is do not pay an agent any money to read your initial submission, proposal, and/or manuscript. Be sure to read over the terms of any agreement carefully. Ask around – ask other writers – are they happy with their agents? Why or why not?

Agents are rapidly becoming must-haves in today's publishing industry. However, the wrong agent can frustrate and fizzle out a writing career while the right one can help launch it and make it shine.