

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 9: Mystery Date....er, Agent!**By Cathe Jones, (cathejones.com)**

All dressed up, you find there is more dirt in your fingernails than should be in a farm girl working the pigsty. As you brush the picked out mush off of your blouse, you look around to see if anyone has noticed the attempt at grooming. You smile one more time into the napkin holder, to ensure that the lipstick has remained on your mouth, and not on your freshly brushed teeth. In walks a kid, about fifteen, wearing a Metallica T-shirt, carrying a briefcase, and holding up your photograph. This is your new agent.

This was my first experience in my quest to find the fearless leader for my manuscript. I wanted someone who could champion my words, stare down an editor, and perhaps, just perhaps, bring me a check for an ungodly amount of money as my advance. It never happened quite that way. Instead, the one person who finally responded to my chapbook turned out to be an Emerson dropout who was dabbling in his father's agency. He was unseasoned. He was barely out of braces. But mostly, he was just the wrong person to represent poetry, as he only spoke in grunts and "ya, I know's".

You don't look for editors, agents, or publicists; you HUNT them out of the jungles of literary confusion. Remember how it felt, as a young girl, looking out at the bakery case of teen-aged boys, and wondering if ANY of them would call you, or ask you to a dance? This is the same feeling most writers get when seeking a partner for their projects. That is the goal.

Agent is a partner, but not necessarily a friend. When seeking out someone to represent your words, you have to keep in mind that an

agency is also a business. With the vast improvements in Publish on Demand and Self-publish options, publishing companies rely on the sharp eyes and instincts an agent has in selecting books that will bring profits. No longer do they seek work from those who are talented storytellers. Instead, publishers implore agents to find projects that will turn the heads of the media darlings, attract cash from film production houses, and possibly pull in enough sales to invite offers of sequels. Agents do not have to be lovers of literature, and sadly, many are not.

How do you find the right agent? You may need to decide if your work needs representation. Many writers do well by approaching editors directly when they seek out smaller publishing houses. There are several books on self promotion, and in a later article, I'll explain the reasons why self-publishing, small publishing houses, and Print On Demand can be better options for new writers. Penguin, St. Martins, Doubleday, and other larger houses discourage authors from directly contacting their offices. It's wise having someone professionally demonstrate the best qualities of your manuscript.

Writer's Digest Guide to Literary Agents and Herman's Writer's Guide Book are good first steps to finding the right person with whom to work. These books give descriptions of agents by telling you where they work, how they prefer to receive information, and the type of work sought. Books may be out of date the day they are published. Jane Smith, from Joe's Literary Agency, NY, NY, might have been hoping to find the best cowboy poetry in 1999, but in 2004, she was more interested in reading hamster romance novels. In 2003, she was still at Joe's, but in 2005, she moved over to Mark Twain's House of Books. Keeping your library up to date will improve your chances of finding the right agent.

The local library may carry Publisher's Weekly. This periodical is the ultimate literary trade magazine. Each week, you can find out who has moved to what publishing house, what type of books are selling, and even read job listings, so you can determine if an agency you are considering has an unusually high turnover. It's rather pricey to subscribe as an individual, but there are free newsletters available on the site, listed below, that offer much of the same information, albeit with far less detail.

Writer's conferences can open doors that are assumed ironclad and cemented shut. Sitting quietly in the back will give you as much information as actively participating in the front of each panel. But, you will find that those who ask well-investigated questions stand out in the eyes of panelists, and conference leaders alike. Agents tend to tune out the apparently naïve hyper-enthusiastic audience members who lurch out of the shadows waving manuscripts, half in crayon, half in dot matrix print. They do seek out those who have an appearance of confidence, and courteous demeanors. They are, after all, your peers, there to learn, and understand trends of the literary world. Treat them as such, and you may find yourself holding the card of the one person who can walk your book into the right editor's office.

There's a school of thought that if you read your favorite books, you will find the author has thanked an agent or an editor for his work. I don't know if you've tried this method of seeking that compatible partner, but it's not as a common practice as some writer's magazines would lead you to believe. In fact, in researching this very article, I went through twenty-six fiction books on my shelves, and found NONE mentioning anyone other than a wife, and a family dog. I did find the page that carries the publishing information does list an editor, at times. By doing a search

online, I was able to determine agents who have partnered with some of these editors. The Internet can be your skeleton key.

As a fan of Tom Robbins, I wrote to the editor of one of his books, via the publisher, and asked if he could recommend an agent who would look at similar works. A few weeks later, a short card arrived, with the names and numbers of three agents in California. On the bottom of the card, he wrote, "If any of them like your stuff, have them send it to me." When I wrote, I kept the note short, and included a SASE, as is habit every time I send **anything** to **anyone** involved in **any** form of publishing **anywhere**. Make SASE's a habit, and you will get responses back most of the time.

Recently a New York agent let me know that she enjoyed my query for "I'm Just as Screwed Up as You Are", a spoof of all things self-help. I visited her website, and learned about her clients, and her style of communication. I went the sites of her current clients, and saw how they approached their own work. After three days, of learning absolutely all I could about this woman, I sent her the book proposal. A month later, my large envelope was returned with a nice note saying, "This isn't what I had hoped it would be. Good luck. I hope you find the right agent." Despite the research, and the comfort I felt with her abilities, what attracted to her to my query wasn't available to her in the prospectus read. The lesson here is, even if you think you and an agent will hit it off great, the agent's priority is business first. Her instincts will tell her yes or no, no matter how much you think you'd get along with her at a coffee shop.

Meeting other writers can put you face to face with the agent of your dreams! That mystery agent behind door number three, carrying your work in her valise, is waiting for you because of smart networking. A librarian friend who lives in New York has been a fan of my writing for

quite some time. She gushes over silly tales, and gets sentimental over memoirs. Last year, she came to Las Vegas, and brought with her the husband whom I hadn't met. It turns out her husband is a world famous young-adult science fiction novelist, who has written for Star Trek, and even Dr. Who television scripts. Although we write for different demographics, he gave my name to some agents who worked with him in the past. Two of them and I are still talking over proposals. Every person you meet is a potential lead.

If you've watched BookTV on CSpan2, (booktv.org), you get a free weekly lesson in agents and publishing. Charlie Rose on PBS meets with authors nightly. Television will put a face to a name. Dr. Cornell West mentioned an editor who had selected one of his essays for a literary journal. I made a note of the name, and found out the contact information from Publishers' Weekly. In less than three weeks, my own essays appeared in another journal recommended by the same editor. Unlike movie stars and television celebrities, writers, journalists, editors, and agents often have personal links on the websites of the shows on which they appeared.

Beware of a few red flags when searching.

- If an agent spends more time on conferences, or writes and publishes at least one book a year, chances are she isn't spending quality time with her authors.
- Any one calling himself an ethical agent will NOT charge a reading fee.
- An agent should have a listing of current clients, and will tell you where she is sending your manuscripts.

- An agent shouldn't be contacted at home EVER, but if you need to reach him, you should hear back in at least one week. (Hounding an agent is a huge no-no, and shows you as an amateur.)
- A person who served as an editor can be a GREAT agent to have. Don't discount an agent who has done this. BUT, if the agent has never represented anyone, doesn't work in a family run agency, nor served in any position in the publishing field, steer clear.
- Agents who require marketing plans before reading your query or book proposal are self-serving. They are more interested in how much money you will bring them than the other way around.

Finding the right agent who matches your personality doesn't mean you've found the right agent for the book. If you are writing a medical journal, it makes little sense to contact that very funny representative who handed you a card during the comedy writers' forum. Only reaching out to ONE literary agency guarantees failure. Simultaneous queries to agents is a given. Securing the right agent for each project makes all the difference in the world. As I type, I have three agents stewarding three projects: Nonfiction; Young Adult nonfiction; Adult Fiction. My comedic nonfiction book is still on the shelves, waiting for just the right touch. Which reminds me, do you know a name of a good humorists agent?

To find YOUR agent for your project, you can visit the following sites.

- Predators and Editors: THIS site will give you an idea of the ethical vs. the vulture in the literary world.

<http://www.anotherealm.com/prededitors/pubagent.htm>

- Writer's Market: A pay site that gives updates on registered editors and agents
<http://www.writersmarket.com>
- First Writers: A database of agents, not sure when it's updated
<http://www.firstwriter.com/Agents/>
- <http://www.authorlink.com/> Pay services
- Publisher's Market Place: Sign up for the FREE weekly or daily newsletters; Pay service for more advanced information \$20 monthly
<http://publishersmarketplace.com/>
- Jeff Herman's new site is under construction, but his older site is:
http://www.writersservices.com/agent/us/Jeff_herman.htm