

16. RESEARCHING PUBLISHERS AND AGENTS

Too many people submit manuscripts to publishers.

Simply to read enough of those manuscripts to judge them unworthy would take the full-time services of several salaried editors. Most publishers simply can't afford to plow through the slush pile in hopes of someday finding a Great Novelist.

So they indicate in *Writer's Market* that they will consider only "agented submissions" – work that a professional literary agent, who knows the market, thinks has some sales potential.

That simply draws fire onto the agents, who now find that they too have huge slush piles. And, like the publishers, the agents can't make money reading unsalable junk.

Where does that leave you?

In better shape than you think. If you've hammered out a credible but surprising plot about interesting people in a hell of a jam, and you're showing them in action instead of telling us what they're like, and your grammar, spelling and punctuation are first-rate – you're already ahead of 80 per cent of your competition.

Now the problem is finding the right market. Too many novice writers simply fire off their work to a publisher they've vaguely heard of, or one that's supposed to be prestigious, or even one that happens to be conveniently located right in town. (Those were precisely my three motives in submitting my first children's book to Parnassus Press. They bought it, which shows that sometimes even ignoramuses can get lucky. By rights I should have had to send the ms. to a couple of dozen houses before hitting the right one – if I ever did.)

Publishers tend to carve out special markets for themselves. A couple of sharp editors can dominate a genre; because they know how to reach a certain kind of reader, they attract a certain kind of writer. Or a publisher may be passionately devoted to supporting a certain kind of fiction, but is deeply uninterested in any other kind. A feminist publisher wouldn't have the faintest idea how to market a men's action-adventure novel, and wouldn't care to learn. A children's publisher won't care how well-crafted your murder mystery is. And so on.

So step one is almost embarrassingly obvious: *Notice which houses publish the kind of story you're working on.* Look carefully at the story elements in the titles they publish; Del Rey fantasy novels, for example, require magic as a major component, not just frosting or a gimmick to get the hero somewhere interesting. Out of all the publishers in North America, only a few are potentially yours.

Then consult those potential publishers' entries in *Writer's Market* and see what they have to say about their own needs and who their editors are in specific genres. You may learn that your work in progress is too long, or too short, or needs some particular quality like a heroine aged over 35. You may also learn how long it takes them to respond to queries and submissions. Don't take those statements as legally binding promises; responses almost always take far longer, especially for unagented submissions.

Writer's Market also lists publishers by the genres they publish. This list can lead you to houses you're not familiar with, but don't just rush your ms. off to some publisher in Podunk. Check out the entries of these houses also, and also track down some of their recent titles in your genre. If they strike you as dreadful garbage, avoid them. Better to stay unpublished than to be trapped with a bad publisher.

Another useful source of research information is the publishing trade press. *Quill and Quire* in Canada, and *Publisher's Weekly* in the US, are much more up-to-date than any annual can be. So if the top horror editor in New York has just moved to a new publisher, or a publisher is starting a new line of romance novels aimed at Asian women, you may adjust your marketing strategy accordingly. Magazines like *The Writer* and *Writer's Digest* supply similar market news.

If every possible publisher warns you off with "No unagented submissions," you then have to go through a similar process with literary agents. You should be able to find an annually updated list of agents in your local library or the reference section of a good bookstore. Some agents, like Scott Meredith and Richard Curtis, have even written books themselves about the publishing business; these are worth reading.

As a general rule, you probably need an agent in the city where most of your publishers are. That, as a general rule, means New York City. You also need an agent who knows the market for your particular genre, so your work will go as promptly as possible to the most likely markets. (Some agents may submit a work in multiple copies to all potential publishers; this can really speed up the process.)

But also bear in mind that the phone and fax can put almost anyone in close touch with the New York market, so an agent in Chicago or Los Angeles or Miami may be quite as effective as somebody in Manhattan—and may also be familiar with regional publishers.

Consider whether you want a big agent with scores or hundreds of clients, or a small outfit. The big agent may have clout but little stake in promoting you; the small agent may work hard for you, but lack entree to some editors. Talk to published writers, if possible, about their experiences with agents; sometimes a sympathetic author can suggest a good one.

No agent, however good, can sell your work to an editor who doesn't want to buy it. What the agent offers the editor is a reasonably trustworthy opinion about the marketability of a particular manuscript. It's in the agent's interest to deal only in work with serious sales potential, and to get it quickly into the hands of its most likely buyers.

You may therefore have to query a number of agents before you find one who's willing to take you on. And you may find that some highly reputable agents won't look at your stuff unless you pay them to.

This is not (always) a racket. If you agree to the agent's terms, the reading may give you a very frank response. Sometimes you'll get a detailed critique that may devastate your ego but teach you just what you need to learn. In many cases the agent will waive the reading fee if he feels you're a commercial possibility and you're willing to sign on as one of his clients. That should be an encouraging offer indeed.

Sometimes an agent will take you on but strongly suggest certain kinds of revisions, or even that you tackle a completely different kind of story. Listen carefully; you're getting advice from someone who knows the market and wants to share in your prosperity. At least one of my novels greatly profited from the advice of an agent who thought my proposed ending was a disaster.

Your agreement with an agent may take the form of a detailed contract, or a simple agreement over the phone, or something in between. Be sure you understand and accept the terms your agent requires: Ten per cent of what he makes you, or 15? Deductions for photocopying, postage and phone bills? Control over all your writing, or just your fiction output?

Once you have an agent, don't be a pest. When he's got something to report, he'll let you know. If *you've* got something to report, like the completion of the manuscript or an idea for turning it into a series, let the agent know. Otherwise, stay off the phone and stick to your writing.

In some cases, of course, you may find you've sold a novel on your own hook and then decide to go looking for an agent. Under these happy circumstances you should find it fairly easy to get an agent's interest. If the publisher's already offered you a contract (and you haven't signed yet), the agent may be willing to take you on and then bargain a better deal for you.

But you'll probably do all right even if you negotiate that first contract on your own. Most publishers are honorable and decent people; sometimes their integrity is positively intimidating. Even if they weren't honorable, your first book is likely to make so little money that it wouldn't be worth it to rob you.

Assignment:

Find a literary agent in New York, Toronto, or London. Then find one who lives near you. (Google should do the job very well.) Make sure the agents handle the kind of genre you're writing in. Some are very specialized, while others will take anything.

Notice who these agents' clients are. Find some of their books in your local bookstore or library, and read them carefully. Are they your kind of books? If so, and you enjoy them, consider approaching the agent.

Also notice the publishers of these books, and visit their websites. Do they take unagented manuscripts? If so, you may want to query them directly.

Repeat this process until you've found several agents who might be interested in your story, and several publishers who might consider it without an agent. You can then start writing query letters.

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