

## **The Business of Writing: The Right Agent**

By Linda Rohrbough

In November of 2004, I wrote an article with a bunch of horror stories and solid how-to tips to check agents. That piece is still viable and you can find it on the PPW Web site. I have since discovered there's even more to hiring an agent than getting someone to send your work out. I've discovered that you can talk an agent into representing you who isn't the right agent. What do I mean by the "right" agent?

For one thing, the right agent will like your work as much, if not more, than you do. And that's worth something. At one of the first PPW conferences I attended, I met an editor for a major publisher. I introduced myself as an author of nonfiction for the same house, and told her my editor's name. I had a novel to pitch, and since I knew she only accepted agented work, I asked if she'd recommend someone. She wouldn't. Instead, she insisted I find an agent who loved my work and would fight for it.

I knew you could get an agent through a referral from an editor because it had happened to me: an editor of mine referred a nonfiction agent to me. This agent pursued me and even offered to fly halfway across the country to meet. But when I checked him out, he had different values than I did. For one thing, several of the titles he represented were porn. Not a good fit.

When I finally realized I needed representation, it took me about a year to find my nonfiction agent. We don't talk a lot, but when we do, we finish each others' sentences, have the same sense of humor, and she truly loves my work.

But a fiction agent—that was much harder to find. My nonfiction agent doesn't represent fiction. And every fiction agent she's recommended turned me down in a New York minute. If you know much about this business, you know getting a rejection the same day you put in a query is a compliment, even if it stings.

I go to a lot of conferences and have become friends with a number of fiction agents. One particular agent, who rejected my work but whose husband is a writing buddy of mine, said she was reconsidering representing my novel because her husband likes my work so much. I thought for awhile that might work. Now I don't think so. When an agent picks up writers because they like them, but not because they like the work, those writers wind up getting dropped. And if you think it's humiliating to be rejected by an agent, try being accepted but later dropped because the agent couldn't sell your writing.

Some of my *New York Times* bestselling author friends put in a word for me with agents they knew. Sometimes the agents rejected me. Sometimes I did the rejecting. I spent an entire evening with an agent introduced to me by a close writer friend. She was a Harvard graduate and she was selling. But she was born overseas, and I couldn't get the hang of her accent. I figured if I had that much trouble understanding her in person, how would it work long distance?

At one conference last year, my pitch appointment got shifted due to the agent's slip up, and I was assigned to another. This agent—whom I'll call M—interrupted me, then shot-gunned me with questions. When it somehow came up that I teach pitching workshops, she laughed in my face. Since I got my appointment with her in a weird way and we were the only two in the pitching room, I suspect M thought I'd snuck in and she was going to make sure I never did so again.

The next pitching appointment I had was one table over from M. Since she had no one to talk to, she didn't even try to hide she was listening. I was nervous but went ahead anyway. The new agent liked my pitch and got right away what I was going for. And now he's representing me. I'm so grateful I didn't give up.

The bottom line? This isn't an easy process. It took me much longer to find fiction representation than nonfiction. It was tempting to make a compromise, but I didn't do it. And I'd advise you not to either. You may have to kiss a lot of frogs, but you'll find your prince—the right agent—if you'll stay with it.

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