

FEATURE TOPIC: Finding and keeping your dream literary agent

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It takes more than a good manuscript to land a great literary agent. Many authors have torpedoed their chances for a contract by sending out danger signals that indicate to agents that the relationship may be more trouble than the book is worth.

What can you do to insure you're an attractive prospect to an agent? Here are some tips from Ginger Knowlton of Curtis Brown Ltd., Marcia Wernick and Linda Pratt of the Sheldon Fogelman Agency, and Susan Cohen of Writer's House, all of whom represent both big-name authors and newcomers to the field.

While agents and literary agencies will have individual preferences, these are some of the common things to avoid.

When first approaching an agent:

-Don't assume that an agent will represent you just because she has been helpful or given encouragement.

-Do take suggestions seriously and try to incorporate those you can.

-Don't think you have an ongoing relationship because an agent gave you feedback on your work

-Do ask if the agent would be willing to look at the manuscript again after it's revised.

-Don't expect her to be impressed that your kids loved the story, or that students at your local school are fans.

-Do say why you think the book is marketable and could have broad appeal.

-Don't say you were referred, but don't know by whom; or use the name of someone she doesn't know.

-Do mention a referral, if the person has given you permission to use her name.

-Don't have someone else contact the agent on your behalf (ie. a husband representing a wife) to negotiate.

-Do your own work. The agent wants to know what it would be like to work with you.

-Don't expect to get a contract based on an idea or concept, or on what you view as the story's merchandising potential.

-Do provide your best work in a manuscript that's been edited and neatly prepared.

Once you begin working with an agent:

-Don't provide elaborate directions about how the text should be illustrated.
-Do include an author's note if there's key information about the story that's not apparent in the text.

-Don't bad-mouth previous agents you've had.
-Do discuss your expectations and share any concerns you may have.

-Don't intrude on the agent's personal time or use private contact information you may be given.
-Do be respectful of her time and ask how she prefers to work.

-Don't redo the contracts the agent draws up, or repeatedly ignore your agent's advice.
-Do express your concerns, but if you have a good agent, you should value her expertise.

We also discussed the fact that agents are frequently approached by an author with a book that is a collaborative venture either between an author and an illustrator, or between two authors. Agents will consider taking on books under these circumstances, but inevitably having more than one person makes negotiation more complex.

Issues that may need to be addressed are:

-How would the proceeds be split on books and on any licensing or rights sales that may result?
-This can be a 50/50 split, or preference can be given based on reputation or amount of work to be done.

-What would happen if one party wants to quit the relationship or refuses to revise work past a certain point?
-This might require bringing in a third party or scrapping the project.

-Will one person's name be more prominent on the book cover and in marketing material?
-Often the idea to work jointly comes from the person who is less well known. It's to your advantage to do what's best for the book.

-Will work schedules be compatible and are the people involved considerate of each others' process?

-This has to be thought through up front to insure work gets done.

These are just a few of the ways that you can help a skilled agent do their best to represent your work.

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