

AgentInsight: Who the (Bleep) Did I Sign With? by Nupur Tustin

Despite the many publishing avenues available to writers today, breaking into fiction—and making a career of it—is still tough. So it's not surprising that we writers pursue agents with the same zeal that Jane Austen's Mrs. Bennett chased down husbands for her daughters. But should you settle for just any agent?

Agent Sandra Bond's answer is an emphatic: "No!"

"If you don't have a good agent/author fit," Bond continues, "you'll have problems and stress on top of all your other problems... AND, most likely, none of the results you're hoping for."

Bond's fellow panelists for this issue—Jessica Faust of BookEnds, LLC; Christina Hogrebe of the Jane Rotrosen Agency; Lisa Gallagher of DeFiore and Company; Paula Munier of Talcott Notch Literary Services; Mandy Hubbard, author and agent at D4EO Literary Agency; and Lucienne Diver of the Knight Agency—agree.

"A bad agent," says Jessica Faust, "or one with absolutely no knowledge of the business can cause more problems than going alone." Mandy Hubbard, who writes romance novels, goes so far as to say, "There is absolutely NO case in which I'd allow a brand new agent with no background to represent me."

Faust, however, counters that a new agent isn't necessarily a bad idea. But she cautions that you do "need to know where your agent has gotten or is getting her knowledge. A lot of today's best agents started on their own and built a very successful business, but they also gained the knowledge needed to do the job the right way."

An agent's qualifications

So what qualifies an agent to represent your work? Unfortunately, responds Hubbard, "there are no specific credentials required for a person to hang up a shingle and call themselves an agent." Although this makes aspiring authors especially vulnerable, it isn't exactly impossible to determine whether an agent is competent enough to represent you.

"Finding the right agent," Paula Munier says, "is like finding the right partner." And the process, Christina Hogrebe adds, begins with understanding some of the traits that good agents have in common.

Needless to say, agents read your work for free, and never charge upfront fees. "We all work on commission," Bond explains. "If we don't sell your book, we don't make any money. Period. It's why we're so choosy."

And agents do more than merely submit your work to publishers. A good agent, Hogrebe says, must "read widely in your genre," which enables her to "offer constructive criticism," enabling you to polish your manuscript so it's ready to shop. Agents also need to

"know multiple editors across multiple imprints in each of the houses that publish your genre."

This knowledge, Hogrebe explains, enables an agent to "tell you who she'd target for your work, in what order, and why. Furthermore, she can advise you about the conditions in the market that might make publishers and readers receptive (or not) to a new idea."

Lucienne Diver agrees. "It's important to find an agent," she says, "who is well versed in your field, both in terms of what's been published in the genre and in the tastes of particular editors and imprints."

Look for a solid track record

Both Bond and Lisa Gallagher advise aspiring authors to ensure that the agents they query have a solid track record in the genre they write. "Make sure," Bond says, "you target agents who have clearly sold mysteries/suspense, and have sold them to the type of publishing house where you'd like to see your books land."

"I would also look at the crime fiction writers they have worked with in the past or currently represent," Gallagher adds, "in order to gauge their experience in the mystery marketplace."

"Beware of agencies," Hubbard warns, "where most deals are to digital, start-up, and small pubs. That can be a red flag."

Also crucial to an agent's success is her knowledge of agreements and licenses. In Hogrebe's words, she can "read royalty statements like tea leaves." This and her ability to "thrive on negotiation" enables her to get the best possible deal for you. Needless to say, an agent must also "know how to handle the worst-case scenario" and should prepare for that possibility in your contract.

"And when you talk to the agent," Hubbard adds, "ask who negotiates their contracts and who handles subsidiary rights—translation, film, etc. They should be able to answer that immediately."

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AgentInsight, continued

Extensive knowledge

Where do agents acquire this extensive knowledge of the publishing market? An agent who “comes from another literary agency or publishing house,” Faust replies, “will likely have the knowledge to negotiate a successful contract on your behalf. The same goes for a new agent working at an established agency. She has the support and knowledge base at her ready, and the contract boilerplates.”

Munier and Hubbard agree. In fact, any agent you consider working with should, Munier advises, be “part of an established agency.” Especially, Hubbard adds, if the agent is a new agent. And “the founding agent,” she continues, “should have been an agent for years first—or have worked at a major publisher.”

Doing the research

So, how do you ensure an agent offering representation is a good fit? “Do your research in advance,” Diver recommends. “Find out who the agent represents and what they’ve sold.” Munier advises authors to “Google the agent and the agency. Check out the agency website.”

“Study the agent’s page at publishermarketplace.com,” suggests Bond. Hoglebe agrees. “Publishers Lunch,” she says “is a free newsletter that lists recent deals.” Both resources enable you to find agents with a track record in your genre.

Additionally, says Hoglebe, “an agent’s bio, blog and social media posts, and interviews will give you a sense of her personality and skill set.” In fact, Faust goes on to say, “there are a ton of great resources you can tap to learn about an agent. Obviously, SinC and the Guppies, but also resources like AbsoluteWrite.com, QueryTracker, and AAR can get you started in your research.”

Hoglebe also suggests looking at the “acknowledgements section of a peer’s recent release to find that author’s agent. Or, if you’re lucky enough to have trusted author pals, ask for a few recommendations.” Bond has a similar suggestion. “Ask published mystery authors you meet at conferences for a recommendation,” she says.

“And,” she continues, “when you get an offer of representation, speak to the agent on the phone. You are interviewing them, so ask all the questions you have.” Hoglebe suggests using the phone call as an opportunity to “uncover some of the traits” that



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make for a good agent.

Some important questions to ask, Munier adds, include “the agent’s background in publishing, clients, projects sold, and publishers sold to.”

“Have the agent explain the submission process to you,” she recommends. “And when your project is ready to shop, ask to see the submission plan.”

“Feel free to ask any questions that aren’t answered in your research,” says Diver. “Particularly, your research won’t tell you what

they think of your work, how they feel it fits into the market, whether they have editorial suggestions that will make the work stronger.”

A good fit, personality-wise

“Make sure,” she advises, “the agent believes in your work, and that your personalities and visions will match.” Gallagher also suggests asking “to be put in touch with one or two current clients to get a testimonial.”

“Your agent doesn’t have to be your best friend,” Diver asserts. But “he or she does have to represent you accurately and professionally, and should be someone with whom you’re comfortable communicating.”

So, “pay attention,” Bond urges, “to any red flags that might pop up for you. If you have a bad feeling when the conversation is over, keep looking.” Hard advice to follow, it’s true, when you’re desperately seeking an agent. But, unless you want to enter the annals of “who the bleep...,” it is counsel you’ll want to heed.

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