

## AgentInsight: The Return of the MS by Nupur Tustin

It's a scenario you'd rather not imagine: your agent has such a tough time placing your manuscript that she stops believing in you. What do you do? More importantly, what happens to your manuscript? Is it dead in the water? Or can you persuade another agent to take a chance on your work?

That's the question I put to our panelists for this column: Rebecca Scherer of the Jane Rotrosen Agency; Jill Marsal of Marsal Lyon Literary Agency; Stephany Evans of FinePrint Literary Management; Dawn Dowdle of Blue Ridge Literary Agency; Melissa Jeglinski of the Knight Agency; and Paula Munier of Talcott Notch Literary Services.

The answer—quite surprisingly—was not an unequivocal: “No!”

“As a lawyer once told me,” Rebecca Scherer says, “the answer to almost every question is, it depends.” The other agents on the panel agree with this sentiment, but differ quite widely in their willingness to accept a manuscript another agent has already unsuccessfully shopped.

Jill Marsal, for instance, sees no reason to reject such projects out of hand. “I think agents are quite willing to take on a manuscript that's been previously shopped,” she says.

Paula Munier, however, expresses quite the opposite view: “This is a very tough challenge, and usually one I will not take on.” As far as she's concerned, “once the marketplace has spoken, the best thing the writer can do is listen and learn and write something new.”

Like Munier, Dawn Dowdle, too, will “rarely take on a manuscript that's been extensively shopped around.”

But these differences aren't merely a consequence of individual quirks. The decision to take on any client, Scherer explains, is a result of complex decision-making. The agent needs to have a vision for both you and your work. “I see a lot of submissions that I love and enjoy,” she says, “and a lot of writers I think are talented, but beyond that, when taking on a new author, an agent has to



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—Literary agent Rebecca Scherer

come up with a list of potential editors and imprints they can envision buying the book and publishing it well. Agents have to be not only a fan of your work, but also a champion for where to position it. Previous submission history can complicate this list, but isn't a deal breaker.”

In fact, every agent on the panel admits to having taken on and sold at least one such project. Their reasons for doing so vary quite as widely as their willingness to consider previously shopped manuscripts.

“It would really depend on how deeply I loved the project,” Stephany Evans admits, “and whether or not I feel the

first agent had done a proper job.” The manuscript she took on had already been shopped by a “newbie” agent with “very little idea of where the book belonged. So, it had been shopped, but not to those editors who might be likely to offer for it, so no critical bridges had been burned.”

Melissa Jeglinski, however, says her decision would depend upon “how widely the project was shopped. If it was to a select few houses, then I would probably take it out again....If the project was shopped heavily, I would suggest the writer put it aside and work on something else.”

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## AgentInsight, continued

The extent to which a manuscript has been shopped weighs quite heavily on every agent's decision-making. Munier, for instance, will only take on projects that were "shopped very sparingly or haphazardly by another agent."

"Most editors," Dowdle explains, "won't reconsider a manuscript they have rejected unless a major change has happened. So if it has been extensively shopped around to the larger publishers, I would only be able to shop it with middle and smaller publishers. Most authors want their agent to shop their manuscript to the larger publishers. This can be a real problem."

Knowing which houses and imprints have seen a manuscript, and communicating these to the new agent, Scherer adds, is extremely important. The information, she explains, can help the new agent formulate an appropriate game plan. "Maybe the list was small and the agent gave up early. Maybe there was a very close call with an editor who loved it but couldn't get their team on board at the time. Maybe everyone in town has seen it. If that's the case, it would be difficult to see a new vision for where to take the book."

### Revisions may be in order

Like Dowdle, Scherer thinks that "significant edits" are the only way to sell an extensively shopped manuscript. Marsal and Jeglinski also agree on the importance of revisions. Jeglinski, in fact, thinks that even a manuscript that's been sparingly shopped should be "revised using any comments or critiques it received on its first go-round."

And Marsal goes so far as to say that revision is the "key to successfully selling a manuscript that didn't sell the first time around." She has worked with two authors who were only able to place their work after making substantial changes. She advises authors to be "open to revisions if they want to find an agent to re-shop the manuscript."

Munier, however, only reluctantly concedes that a revision might help. "The novel would need a new title, a new hook, and new characters' names," she points out. "That is, you are talking about a significant rewrite that addresses all the issues that kept the project from selling the first time."

"If you really believe in the project," she adds, "and you have taken the marketplace response seriously and addressed all of the issues that caused the project to be rejected the first time, then you could repackage and repitch and see what happens."

But as far as she's concerned, the best thing the author can do at this point is to simply move on to another project that "incorporates all that you have learned thus far and making sure you don't make the same mistakes."

The rationale behind her advice? "While many writers will say that it's the agent who failed, honestly that is often not the case."

### When reworking doesn't help

"The agent's job," Munier goes on to say, "is to get the work read, and if it's been read by editors in the position to buy but who have passed on the project, then the agent has done her job. If a project is read, and doesn't sell, then odds are there is something wrong with the project—not the agent."

Evans is inclined to agree with Munier on the matter of revisions. "A revised manuscript that has already been seen by the true 'likely suspects' (i.e. appropriate editors) would be much harder and I would probably not take this on. Unless an editor really loved something about the original manuscript you just can't go back to them with reworked material."

Jeglinski, however, says there's no reason to give up hope entirely. "There's always the possibility that the first project could be sold at another time." She has gone on to do just this: moving on to and successfully placing a client's second manuscript when the first one didn't sell.

"The first book was then sold as their option material. Sometimes it's just not the right project at the right time. Once an author finds an editor and publishing house who really 'gets' them and supports them, they could be open to seeing their prior work."

### Other options

Dowdle recommends another strategy for authors who find themselves in this position. She suggests that authors "look at smaller publishers and determine whether they want an agent at this time." Agents, she goes on to say, can "help navigate the contract and work with [authors] on future books that can be shopped to larger publishers."

Another suggestion Dowdle has is to self-publish and "grow your readership."

Scherer points to yet another factor that might influence whether an agent can successfully place an unsuccessfully shopped manuscript: Time. "If a project was shopped five years ago," she elaborates, "many of the key players have likely changed by now. Editors change houses frequently and new blood comes on the scene, not to mention market changes for the types of books in demand."

But even if a project never sees the light of day, the time spent on it is not wasted, says Jeglinski. "Every project a writer completes," she says, "is important, whether it finds a home or not. They are learning experiences, ways to hone your craft and improve storytelling. Finishing a manuscript is always a successful endeavor."

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