



FTHRW Online Workshop – June 2008

The Great Agent Search

Presenter: Jenna Petersen (aka Jess Michaels)

Course Description:

Whether they have finished their first manuscript or their tenth, many authors are overwhelmed by the daunting task of searching for an agent. This workshop breaks the agent search down and discusses common issues.

Part One: Who Needs An Agent?

In this section, I discuss the pros and cons to having an agent. I also talk a bit about what most agents do, both for an unpublished client and one who already has a contract to negotiate.

Part Two: How Do I Find An Agent?

This part deals with the actual searching portion of an agent search. I discuss, in detail, several methods of finding an agent, all based on my own experience (from personal agent searches and information garnered for my industry website).

Part Three: How Do I Attract the Attention of a Good Agent?

We will discuss how to write a good query letter (for an agent or an editor), by breaking down each paragraph in a query. I will provide several examples.

Part Four: What Do I Do Now That I Have An Agent Interested In Me?

This section will help a potential client handle agent interest in a professional manner. It discusses everything from asking the right questions to following their gut when it s right.

Part Five : What Do I Do Now That I've Hired An Agent?

Even after the Agent Search is over, many authors are still lost. So this section deals with what they should expect from most agents and how the relationship between author and agent shifts once they've hired someone.

Part Six: What If I Want to Fire My Agent?

This is one of the concepts I get the most questions on. Discusses reasons why you might fire your agent and how to go about doing it so that you don't burn bridges.

Part Seven: But What If I Don t WANT An Agent?

A final discussion on how an author can still pursue a romance career without dealing with an agent. Discusses approaching editors on your own and resources available to deal with your own contracts.

About the Instructor:

Jenna Petersen started writing full-time in 1999 when her husband said, "You're only happy when you're writing, why don't you do that?" In 2004, her dream came true when her literary agent called to say she'd just sold two books to Avon.

Her releases include: *Scandalous* (October 2005), *From London With Love* (August 2006) and *Desire Never Dies* (January 2007), *Seduction is Forever* (October 2007) and the upcoming *Lessons from a Courtesan* (August 2008). She also writes erotic romance as Jess Michaels, and helped launch the Avon Red line with her novella in *Parlor Games*. Her next Jess Michaels release is *Something Reckless* (May 2008). She's been a Bookscan and Waldenbooks Mass Market bestseller.

In addition, she has run *The Passionate Pen* since 1999. This popular site for aspiring authors gets nearly 200,000 hits per month and contains information on literary agents, publishing houses, articles about writing and the industry, links and Jenna's Diary toward and beyond publication. You can find her at <http://www.passionatepen.com> and at <http://www.jennapetersen.com>.

LESSON 1: WHO NEEDS AN AGENT?

So, you're done with your book (or two or three or four or ten) and now you're ready to submit. Probably you're asking yourself, do I need an agent? This lesson will go through some of the reasons you might want an agent and some things to remember as you try to make the decision if hiring an agent is right for you: Reasons to hire an agent: For an unpublished author, an agent can:

1. Get your work in front of the best editor for it -- Because agents (GOOD agents) are insiders in the publishing business, they have insider information. Yes, St. Martin's Press takes historical manuscripts, but are you sure which editor likes a really dark hero like yours? Or which one is about to go on maternity leave and will have manuscripts languishing for two months? Or the one who really hates the name Robert (your hero's name) because her ex-husband... ROBERT... ran off to Sweden with a legal secretary?

You don't? Well, a good agent WILL. She (for the purposes of this class, all agents will be she) should have a relationship of some kind with the editors at the houses where she'll be submitting your work. Part of her job is to put your dark hero Robert in front of an editor who loves dark heroes, has no problem with the name Robert and will be sitting at her desk for the next two months reading and analyzing work.

2. Follow up without flack -- Your manuscript has been sitting on the desk of Editor A for six months. Your nails are bitten to the quick waiting to hear if your hero and heroine have hit a chord in her heart. You want to know if Editor A has passed your work up the line? Is she negotiating with the marketing department? Or is your manuscript being used to prop up the picture frame that broke last week?

Still, six months isn't all that long in our business. What if you call and interrupt some really important meeting and you forget your name and she gets annoyed and sends you a form rejection? I can tell you, the editor won't do that to your agent. The relationship between agent and editor is strictly business. An agent can call where you'd have to send a letter. If she emails, she's going to get a response somewhere down the line. She can nudge without looking like she's difficult, and she can tell you when it's waaaaay too soon to be nudging.

3. In the world of agents and editors, my reputation is your reputation -- Having an agent sends a message to editors. It says that your work was good enough that a respected member of the publishing world thinks it will sell. It means another set of eyes has looked over it and cleared it, hopefully meaning it's a cut above the slush pile. If your agent has a good reputation, your work will be treated with an elevated level of respect. Editors who have a relationship with your agent, or have authors in their stable also repped by your agent, will look at your book and say, "Well, she sold me Suzy Bestseller, I'm sure this will be good." Having an agent will often mean a faster read and the respect of a more personal rejection, even though it doesn't guarantee a sale.

But this is a double edged sword. If you agent has a bad reputation in the industry, or sends out your work using questionable practices (reading fees, bulk submissions, sending to the wrong editor at the wrong house), the editor's regard for your work may actually drop. They may not even look at it, even if you are the next Nora Roberts. Which is why it's important to do your homework (to be covered in this workshop farther down the road).

So that's all fine and good, but what if you're already a published author, or you've just had an offer from your dream publisher? Should you rush out and get an agent now that the hard work of selling is done? **Maybe, if the following things are important to you:**

1. The only clause I know is Santa. -- Your agent will never say this (or she shouldn't. If she does, run away... screaming). The ins and outs of entertainment law and publishing contracts are very complicated. A good agent can help you understand what you're signing on the dotted line.

2. My friend's enemies are my friends. -- Let's face it, kids. Publishing houses... ALL publishing houses, aren't exactly known as being fair to their authors. There are things in contracts that we don't like. Things we want to change. But how tough is it to call the nice editor who just told you she loves your book and wants to buy it and tell her you think Section C of subclause F is unfair?

Having an agent allows you to have a buffer between your complaints about your contract and your editor. Negotiations between agent and editor, while sometimes tough, are generally friendly and rarely personal. These are two business people hashing out a deal, versus an author who is attached to her work taking each thing personally. With an agent in the mix, you can love your editor through thick and thin and never fight one battle with her personally over money or other contract issues.

3. Knowing what battles to fight. -- We're back to those clauses we don't like again. Some of them are bendable. Some of them are cast in stone. Unless you know the difference, you may want to consult an agent. If she's worth her salt, she can pick and choose between them. There's no use fighting endlessly on a battlefield that can't be taken. A good agent will tell you when to fold on a small issue and maybe win you points on something more important in the end.

4. Insider information. -- Once you're 'in' at your publishing house, you may think your job... and your agent's job is done. But that isn't always true. Sometimes internal opportunities arise that you might not be aware of. Like being part of an anthology with a best selling author, getting a better slot because someone dropped out, or being part of a popular continuity. Your agent will have her ears open for those opportunities and might be able to get you in.

The final distinction you'll have to make before you decide to hire an agent is between category and single title writing. Should what you write determine what kind of representation you want, if any?

Category Authors

Is it all about the money-honey? -- Many times, we authors are told that Harlequin contracts are set in stone, non-negotiable, thus making paying your agent 15% pretty useless. Some of that is probably true. For ANY new author, many points in any contract are going to be standard. After all, the publishing company is taking a risk without anything that guarantees return (like sales numbers, etc). But still, there are other issues besides money.

Pen names. Publisher support. Cover issues. These are things an agent may still be able to tweak, as well as your ability to write for other houses.

So, now YOU have to decide. Do I want to pursue an agent?

I'll post the next lesson Thursday, How To Look For An Agent. In the meantime, feel free to ask any questions.

LESSON 2: HOW DO I LOOK FOR AN AGENT?

Now that you've decided if you want an agent, the question becomes, how do you get one? There are hundreds of literary agents out there who represent romance (though only a certain percentage of those hundreds are actually "good" and not rip-off artists... which we'll get to in another lesson). How do you approach them in a way that will give you the best chance to end up an agented author?

1. The Search:

The Blitz versus the Very Specific List.

The Blitz: The Blitz is just what it sounds like. Take a very large list of potential agents and query them all according to their guidelines, of course). That may mean you'll be sending out 30-40 query letters (or query with synopsis or query with first chapters... guidelines again) at once. What are the benefits of this? Well, you'll cover all your bases at once and you'll have a lot of options. If someone does make you an offer of representation, you'll have a lot of other agents to call who have material.

The Modified Blitz: The Blitz is fine, but I prefer the Modified Blitz. Make a list of all the agents you would consider querying. Then you want to split that list into A, B & C. Your A-list are your dream agents. They represent your favorite bestselling author maybe. They got another author a six figure deal on her second book. Whoever. They are the best of the best agents. Agents we'd all give our eye-teeth to get. Send your queries to them first, in batches of five at a time. If you get a rejection, send out another query to your next A-list agent until you've run out of A-list possibilities.

Your B-List is filled with agents who you'd really like to have. These are agents who have success in your particular subgenre. They may have several recognizable clients, as well as some new and upcoming authors.

You may know of them through friends who are represented by them and give them high marks. As you run out of A-list, start querying this B-list, repeating your process from above. Got a rejection? Send out a query or two.

And then there are the C-List. These are agents who you'd like to have. They have good reputations, you haven't heard bad things about them, they've had some success in your subgenre. C-List goes next as rejections come in.

By doing this A, B, C process, you will go through a large stable of agents, but you will give yourself first shot at the agents you want the most first. You will be rewarded with feedback throughout the process that may help you strengthen your query letter or submissions. And the rejections won't all come in all at once.

The Very Specific List: The final way to do your agent search is with the Very Specific List. Perhaps there are only a few agents, less than ten, who you are interested in. Maybe you've had good experience with them during past searches. Maybe they represent a friend who is encouraging you to submit. Maybe you just don't want to spend a lot of time looking for an agent. Whatever the reason, you make your Very Specific List, you send out all your queries at once and you wait. If you don't get an offer from any of them, you move on to editors with the project.

The benefits of this is that you only spend your time on a few agents who you like the most. The disadvantage is that if you are rejected by them all, you may have to go it on your own for that particular project.

2. Where do I look, though?

You may be saying, ok, so now I know how to search, but how do I search for agents who are the best ones? There are tons of iffy agents out there, hanging out a shingle and waiting to take advantage of authors just like me.

How do I make a good list to send material to?

Luckily, with the internet and other sources, you have a lot of information to help you with that very question:

RWA (Romance Writers of America) approved agencies – With the changing rules for who can and can't be listed, this list may not be as selective as it used to be, but it is a good start. And at least you'll know that the agents on the list do represent romance and have made sales in romance. You can find

the list at <http://www.rwanational.org> Know that it isn't always completely up to date, so be sure to double check everything before you send.

The Passionate Pen List -- At my site, The Passionate Pen, I have a list of agents who both have a website and take romance clients. <http://www.passionatepen.com/agentlist.htm> Though not all these agents are RWA-approved or AAR members (more on that a bit later), I have checked them carefully to determine if they are doing legitimate business. You'll want to do the same before you query any.

The agency websites are a HUGE way to tell a lot about what an agent is all about, so don't just look at their submission guidelines. REALLY check out their whole site. Read about them if there are bios, check out their client and sale list, if there are articles, read every one. If there are any red flags to you after you're done... don't add the agent or at least do some additional research on them.

Once you have a list compiled, big or small, you'll want to double check the agents you've chosen for their legitimacy. Here are some good places to do that:

AAR -- The Association of Author's Representatives is a professional organization for agents. To belong, an agent must follow a certain code of ethics and there's a hefty membership fee. If you go to their website <http://www.aar-online.org> you can search their database with agent names to see who is a member. I personally dislike their new database, but it gets the job done.

Preditors and Editors -- This website <http://www.anotherealm.com/prededitors> has a listing of agents, agencies and publishing houses and gives recommendations and "not recommended" scores. Though their system isn't perfect, and you probably shouldn't base your entire opinion of an agent on their site, it is a good reference during your search.

Writing email lists -- Email lists like WOW (Women of Writing), the national RWA lists, Charlotte Dillon's RWCList, and your local RWA chapter are great places to ask about specific agents. If you ask politely and have a modicum of discretion, most of the time people will be pretty honest about their experiences with agents or editors.

Google search -- Google is a great search engine! <http://www.google.com> Type in the agent's name or agency name you are interested in and it will list any occurrence where they are mentioned. This is a good way to find out

who the agent you're interested in represents, read papers they've written lately or see what conferences they've been a part of.

To close this second lesson, I'd like to give you my personal tips for The Great Agent Search. They worked for me and maybe they'll help you:

1. Pitch to agents first, then publishers. -- Even for single title writers, there are very few mainstream options. If you've pitched your work to a bunch of editors before you start looking for an agent, you've significantly reduced her options for pitching your book. My suggestion would be to pitch to agents first, then if you come up empty, pitch your work to editors yourself. That way you don't end up in a situation where an agent loves your book, but ends up unable to do much with it because you've already tapped out her options.

2. Have more than one project. -- This is just good advice in general. When you type The End on your first manuscript, Type Chapter One on your second. Because very few people sell their first book (it happens, but it isn't as likely), you'll want to have another option out there. Aside from which, if you pitch book one to an agent and they reject you, but with a glowing rejection, being able to send them another proposal right away is just good business. It keeps your name out there and softens the blow of rejections.

3. Set a time limit. -- Though they are better than editors most of the time, you aren't going to get an immediate answer from an agent. And since there are so many agents to choose from, it's easy to send your material out to agents and just look for an agent forever, instead of moving to editors where your work can actually sell. My advice? Set a time limit. When you start your search say, "I'm going to send material to agents for six months (or nine months or a year), then I'll pitch to editors." Obviously, if your six month time period ends and you have two agents looking at a full manuscript, you might want to give yourself a little leeway time (because of tip 1), but if you feel like there's nothing on the horizon, put that project out to editors on your own.

4. Keep track of what you send. -- And not just what book you send, but how much of it, to which agency? To which agent at that agency? And what date. Because you're going to get back form rejections that you'll look at and say "Huh?" And you'll want to follow up if your partial has been on an agents desk for six months, just like with an editor. Having a tracking system of some kind, any kind will help. I have an example of my own tracking system at The Passionate Pen

<http://www.passionatepen.com/trackitarticle.htm>

LESSON 3: HOW DO I ATTRACT THE ATTENTION OF A GOOD AGENT?

Now, before we start this lesson, I'd like to say that this is MY version of a good query. There are many others. In this business, it often comes down to finding what works for YOU.

Why is a query so important?

You may not realize it (or want to accept it), but sometimes your query can be more important than your book... at least initially! It's the gateway, the first thing an agent or editor reads. And while a 400 page manuscript may start shakily, some industry professionals will look past that and decide to work with you regardless. However, with a query letter, you give them one page to make a first impression. Based on that first impression, they will either ask for more materials, or turn you down flat. So having a strong query can be the difference between a request for a full manuscript and a form rejection.

What goes into a query?

There are three parts that you should have in every query.

1. Basic intro -- This is the part where you give an eye-catching intro (usually one line), the title of your story, the genre/subgenre, the word count and any info about your previous experience with this agent or editor (such as, they requested the manuscript, that you met them, that you're the one who retrieved their lost credit card at the bar during the last National conference, whatever will make you stand out if you have it... do NOT make stuff up if you have no connection to the editor).

2. Story Blurb -- One to two short paragraphs that describe your story. I usually put a brief story summary in one paragraph and a one sentence line about hero motivation, one sentence heroine motivation in another. Try to make this paragraph lively and give it a little of your voice.

3. Author info -- Here is where you're going to tell a little about yourself. If you have been published in the past, make sure you put that info in. If you have finaled or won contests, that goes in. If you are a member of RWA or another writing organization, put that in (including how long you've been a member). If you have volunteered for anything writing-related, put that in. If you have a website, mention it. Finally, here you can put any info about your life that PERTAINS to your book. If you are a trauma nurse and you are writing medical mystery, put it in. But if you're writing character driven erotic romance, it doesn't pertain to the book and you should probably leave that out.

Now that you know the ingredients, you may wonder what order to put them in. Well, that depends on where the info will have the most impact. Before I was published with Red Sage, I put the info in the order I've placed it in above. Afterward, I often put the information about myself first and then 1 and 2.

Here are a couple general tips about queries:

1. Always address a query to a person if you can. Dear Agent or Dear Editor is like saying Dear Rejection Slip. There are a couple of exceptions. Online forms are one. You might not be able to direct your query to a specific person if you submit via an online form. And Avon's email submission process goes to a general query address and then any editor can pick them up. You might still try picking a specific editor to query there, but if you don't your query will likely still be read.

2. Never go over one page. If you go one line over one page, edit some more. You can fix that. Play with the margins a little, cut out a line. Whatever you have to do to make it one page.

3. Always include an SASE.

So now you know about queries in theory, but you probably want to see a few, right? In a few moments, I will be posting several examples from my own collection that were effective for me. Read over them and take what you will from their organization.

LESSON 4: WHAT DO I DO NOW THAT I HAVE AN AGENT INTERESTED IN ME?

So now you've decided you want an agent, done your search and you have an agent who is interested in representing you (or maybe two or three). What do you do now? Well, first, jump for joy, yell and scream. There are so many disappointments in this business and very few big happy moments (until that one big moment of THE CALL and then you just start playing on a different field, same ballgame). This is a happy moment, because catching a good agent's interest is not easy. But after you've jumped and screamed, there are several things to think about, so here it goes.

1. What? When? Where? Why?

The first step when you get the call from an agent is to ask questions. Listen to what the agent says, and take copious notes. Then, when they've finished talking, ask your questions. Up until this very moment, YOU were the hopeful writer. Now they are the hopeful agent, hoping YOU'LL hire them. That's right. Your agent is your employee from the moment you say "yes" to their offer of representation. And they should be treated as one from this point on. If you were going to hire someone to work for you in your home or office, you would interview them. Do the same for this agent. This is your career after all.

There are two kinds of questions you want to ask. Business practices questions and personality questions. You want an agent who will work in an upstanding fashion, and one who knows their stuff, but you're also going to want to know about the relationship you're going to share. Going into this relationship with your eyes wide open is a way to minimize disappointment and misunderstanding. If you think you're going to talk to your agent once a week and their general practice is to contact clients once a month, you're going to be pretty upset after a couple of months of this. But if you lay out needs up front, you can negotiate a happy solution.

For a list of possible questions you'll want to ask, check out:

<http://www.passionatepen.com/agengandaarticle.htm>

Both personality and business question are included on the list which I compiled from my own experiences, suggestions from many author friends, and the AAR website. Add your own to fit your own circumstances and needs!

2. Don't say yes or no just yet!

It's so tempting, especially if you're an unpublished author, to jump at the very first offer from an agent. After all, this is a big step in moving forward in a career. This is a professional who WANTS YOU and that is gratifying. But you may want to take a step back for a few days before you say yes (a caveat about this is at the end, so bear with me). It's ok to say, "Thank you so much, and I want to take a couple of days to consider your offer carefully. Can I call you on Friday and discuss this again?" An agent who has expressed an interest wants you to make the best business decision for yourself. They won't mind a small delay while you consider your options.

3. Kiss and Tell.

Now that you have a bit of a breather, this is the perfect time to notify any other agents with a full manuscript under consideration. Calling or emailing

is perfectly acceptable. Just tell them you've had an offer from another agent and wanted to give them the chance to consider your work. Most will quickly read over your submission and be able to give you a decision. You should notify agents with partials or queries, as well, but in all honesty, this is more out of professional courtesy so that they don't waste time reading a partial that is no longer available.

4. Oh man, More Homework???

Yes, Virginia, it's time to do some more homework. Now that you've had an offer of representation, you'll want to do a little more checking up on the agent in question. Go back to the email links if you haven't explored those avenues. Email or talk to other authors the agent represents and find out how they're doing, how they feel about the progress this agent is making on their behalf. Check warning sites. Because a bad agent can be much, much worse than no agent at all (as was discussed in the second lesson). You can lose money, time and even reputation with an agent who isn't acting on the up and up. So be smart and you'll end up a lot happier in the end.

5. Or Maybe Not.

The caveat to all this advice is my biggest suggestion. Go with your gut. If you've done your homework before you submitted, you know which agents you want the most. If you get that call, you ask your questions and you feel, beyond the euphoria, that this is the right decision for you, say yes.

That advice also has another side to the coin. If, while asking your very good questions, the agent says something that makes you uncomfortable, don't say yes. Your gut is telling you something and you shouldn't let desperation for an agent to rule your head.

LESSON 5: WHAT DO I DO NOW THAT I'VE HIRED AN AGENT?

Congratulations! You've hired an agent, which can be a big step toward publication and moving up in the publishing business. But perhaps you're still unsure about what you've gotten yourself into. Well, here are some tips about your agent and what kind of relationship you may or may not have with her:

1. What DO agents do?

a. Editing suggestions -- Now this one has a few caveats. First, not every agent will do editing on your manuscript. This is one of the questions you ought to be asking during your interview process. And not every author will want editorial input from her agent. As you grow as an author, this may also

fade away. Or as you work with an editor, your agent may no longer need to put in her two cents. But your manuscript will pass your agent's eyes first, and she can be a great sounding board and have some good ideas as an industry insider about improving your work.

b. Pitching to editors -- Your editor will pick editors and publishing houses best suited to your voice, tone and type of romance. Her pitch will make your book sound as marketable and fabulous as possible. She may pitch your work over the phone and send full manuscripts. She may send partials. But she ought to sending out work on your behalf.

c. Being a sounding board/support system -- Your agent is not at your beck and call, and you shouldn't trouble her with every writing hang nail, but when you are having problems, your agent can be a sounding board before and after publication. My agent has even helped me brainstorm ideas (for EVERYTHING FORBIDDEN, which has been a finalist in half a dozen contests this year and was awarded Best Erotic Historical Romance of 2007 from Lifetime Television).

d. Negotiate your contracts and help mediate your problems if any should arise with your publisher. As described earlier, your agent is a buffer between you and your editor. She's the one who calls to say you just can't accept a term, or to work out the differences between two different publishing houses you write for. She'll deal with your complaints about a slow-arriving check or ask why you haven't received revisions yet on an MS that your editor has been holding on to for weeks and weeks. Your agent is the one who can mediate problems and help you get the very best deal you can get.

e. Advocate on your behalf. This is on a variety of issues from when you get your author copies, to who should get top billing on an anthology, to scheduling of your release. Your agents job definitely isn't done just because she gets a sale.

2. What SHOULD agents do?

a. Keeping you informed on submissions. You should always know when your submissions have gone out and to whom. You should know when there's been follow-up, requests for more material and rejections.

b. Giving you copies of rejections. You knew I'd say the "r" word eventually. Yes, you will get rejections, even with a great agent representing you. She should be telling you about them and sending you copies for your records.

c. Keeping in touch with you. How often and how you talk to your agent is something you should lay out from the get-go (during your interview), but you should hear from her on a semi-regular basis. Whether it's a weekly email or a monthly phone call, you want to know she's out there, working for you. And you want her to know that you're plugging away on your latest project, the revisions she requested or the synopsis you've been struggling with.

3. What should an agent NEVER do?

a. Charging fees before you sell. You shouldn't have to pay reading or editing fees to your agent. She shouldn't be recommending "editing services" to you. She shouldn't be charging you for information and feedback. Be wary of any fee you pay before contract. After the contract is when an agent should make her money.

b. Bulk sending your work along with other people's. Your work should be going out all by itself. Your agent shouldn't be sending your work thrown into a box with ten other writers and sent out to some random editor. This is a sure-fire sign that you are getting ripped off.

c. Give your ok on anything before you see it and sign off on it. Your agent is negotiating contracts ON YOUR BEHALF. You should always get the final say, the final sign off on everything. If she doesn't fill you in on something she's doing, run like the wind.

LESSON 6: WHAT HAPPENS IF I NEED TO FIRE MY AGENT?

It's not something most of us want to think about, or may even be aware of when we hire someone to agent our work, but not every agent/author relationship works out. In fact, most authors go through more than one agent in their careers and most go through more than two or three (I am personally on my third agent). There are lots of reason this may happen.

Why in the world would I ever fire my agent??

a. The agent can't sell your work and eventually stops trying. That's right. Even with a successful, legitimate agent, you might not sell. And since your agent shouldn't be making ANY money until you do, some agents might stop reading or pitching your work (it happens more than we'd like to think). If your agent isn't reading your work and actively sending it out then what's the point of having one?

b. The agent may not be following up to your satisfaction. Even though an agent may be gung-ho about sending your material out, if they aren't following up, than you won't get anywhere. Part of the great thing about having an agent is that they can follow up at in weeks or a few months at a house where you might have to wait a year before calling. So if your agent ISN'T following up... then you could easily be doing this on your own.

c. The agent's vision for your career may veer from your own. Since agents are in the business of selling, I've heard of agents who have encouraged their writers to change their type of story to fit the current market. If the agent suggests something you've always wanted to write, that change may be okay. But what if she suggests something you aren't really interested in? If you did sell that work, you'd be expected to produce several more in the same vein before you could move on. So if your agent is really pushing you to change your style, you might want to reconsider.

d. If the agent's practices ever turn questionable. If you ever stop receiving rejections or get the feeling that something stinks in Denmark... consider firing your agent.

e. Your career goals change from your agent's capabilities. Even bigger published authors change agents from time to time. You might outgrow your agent. Or you might move into an area where they have no expertise. Or you just might not feel like they can get you to the next level at the point where you are ready to get there.

So how do you fire an agent if you feel like your best interest is not being protected? The answer is in the agent/author agreement. Most agents have a "contract" of sorts. Be sure you read it carefully before you sign and discuss any parts your don't understand or make you uncomfortable. This contract will outline what to do if you ever want to fire your agent, including how much time passes between notification of termination and the actual physical termination and how long the agent has rights to her 15% if the book sells due to her efforts.

If you don't have a contract (which is also completely legitimate), you'll want to write a letter and send it certified mail. In this letter, you'll want to lay out how much time the agent will receive her commission if the work she's pitched sells due to her efforts. It sucks, but if you fire your agent on Tuesday and your book sells the following week because of her pitch and her negotiation, she's going to get her 15% for the life of that contract even though she won't be negotiating your contract terms or any other work on the book.

Firing an agent is not easy. It may feel like a step back in your career to let go of one you already have, but you have to ask yourself this question:

Am I better off alone?

If your agent isn't using all her resources to get your work in front of editors, keep them reading it and keep them interested... the answer may very well be yes. So don't be afraid to let go of a relationship that isn't working, especially if you've explored all the avenues of keeping it together to no avail. This is a business and you need to protect your interests and know what's happening to your career at all times.

LESSON 7: BUT WHAT IF I DON'T WANT AN AGENT?

So you've read all this stuff, thought about it, talked about it and you've decided this is not the time for you to get an agent. Or you've tried to get one and you can't find the one that's right for you. What now?

Can I sell my book without an agent?

The short answer is yes. Of course you can sell without an agent. It has and does happen every day. But I won't lie to you. The current market is really tough. The 'midlist' is shrinking. Publishers are getting more and more concerned with the bottom line (like all businesses), they worry about taking risks on unknown entities (such as unpublished, untried authors). But if you present a good pitch and a good story to the right editor at the right moment, you can still get that magic 'call' and hear that magic 'yes'.

So How Do I Do That?

Use that toolbox again. Make sure you have a kickin' query letter and a strong synopsis. There are many houses that no longer accept unsolicited partials and full manuscripts, but some will still take a query letter or query and synopsis for review. If that is the case, those tools have to be as strong as your book. Take your time writing them, get advice and critique on them.

Another great way to burst into the line of an editor's vision without an agent is through local conferences. Many Romance Writers of America chapters host conferences (and for many, you don't have to be a member) and the National organization hosts a yearly National Conference. Nearly all these conferences include opportunities to take appointments with editors (and agents). If that editor asks for your MS after your pitch, you will have a leg up. To learn more about pitching your manuscript at an editor appointment,

try this link:

<http://www.susannacarr.com/articles/editor-agent.htm>

Susanna Carr was the QUEEN of appointments (she once got four requests from one appointment) and has some great tips!

Finally, you may want to think about entering writing contests (which we talked about earlier), also hosted through many local RWA chapters (I don't know if other organizations have them for unpublished authors). I never found them to be a very valuable tool, but if you get the hang of the system and finally, your work will often be ranked by an editor. This can result in a request and another jump over the slush pile.

Educate Yourself

If you are going to attack the world of publishing on your own, though, make sure you're prepared. Do your research on publishing houses, editors and contracts. Keep up on who is buying what and from whom. There are a lot of great resources out there that can help. Here are a few:

1. The Passionate Pen <http://www.passionatepen.com>
2. Brenda Hiatt's "Show Me The Money" <http://www.karenafox.com/money.htm>
3. Charlotte Dillon's Resources <http://www.charlottedillon.com>
4. Preditors and Editors <http://www.anotherealm.com/prededitors/>
5. Lunch Weekly <http://www.caderbooks.com/> and Publisher's Marketplace <http://www.publishersmarketplace.com/>
6. "How To Be Your Own Literary Agent" by Richard Curtis (a book)

Don't jump blind and realize you have no parachute. Treat the business like a business and you'll have much more success on your own or with an agent.

That's it! I hope you enjoyed the class and got some good information out of it. :) Please feel free to ask any questions about the information I covered... or if there was something you wanted to know and I didn't cover it, speak up! I'll do my best to answer!

Jenna Petersen

Lessons From A Courtesan (Avon), June 24, 2008

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