

Finding an Agent – Maybe

For my third novel, *Empty Luck*, I decided to see if I could find a traditional publisher, rather than self-publish as I had with my first two books. I thought I would have a better chance of getting my work into bookstores, as well as getting an advance and maybe getting some help with marketing. That was the hope.

The experience, so far, has been both unnerving and disappointing. I immediately discovered that nobody simply finds a publisher (unless you want a vanity publisher where the author pays the publication cost. A traditional publisher does not charge the author for publishing his work.) I learned that getting a traditional publisher requires first getting an agent.

And getting an agent is no small task. First it requires writing a query letter. This is a very specific document which is supposed to include certain sections and characteristics. It should be about 300 words long. It should explain why you have written the particular agent, how your work falls within their areas of interest, and why you are the right person to write the book you are offering. In addition, it should include a concise “pitch,” a longer synopsis, and your background mentioning other relevant books you have previously published.

Those are the general guidelines for a query letter. But it turns out that every agent has their own criteria. For example, not everyone wants to read a “pitch.” Some want the first chapter, or the first ten pages, or the first fifty pages. Others want to understand the theme of the book. The requirements are all over the map. So much for the one unchanging query letter.

Back to the process... I developed a list of potential agents. To do so, I Googled phrases like “suspense literary agents,” and “agents seeking new authors.” I found directories of agents through venues like *Writer’s Digest* and *Poets and Writers*. I also found a website called “Manuscript Wish List” (<https://www.manuscriptwishlist.com/>) which lists many agents and the kinds of work they are seeking. Eventually, I set up a spreadsheet with 143 agents who were listed in these sources as interested in adult suspense stories.

I picked out a subset from my list and began contacting them. One thing I learned was to save my best prospects for later in the process. Simply put, I got better at presenting myself. I think it took me about forty query letters before I felt my efforts best described myself and my work.

I’m still in the midst of this project. So far, I have sent fifty-six queries. I doubt I will send many more. Each submission takes at least an hour to compose, some as long as three hours. I’m exhausted. So far, I have heard back from 14. All said no. At best they wrote “Your concept sounds intriguing, but I’m afraid it is not quite a fit for me.” I’m still waiting to hear from the rest. Some stated on their websites that they would not write back unless they were interested, so I know there are more than 14 rejections already. I get it. This is a numbers game, if it is going to succeed at all, but it can feel pretty discouraging. I think if nothing comes of this round of queries, I will go back to self-publishing.

*UPDATE: About two years after the above process ended, I actually landed an agent. She came from none of the efforts I described. Instead, she was a friend of a friend. As a favor to my

friend, she agreed to read some of my work, one chapter at least, of the book I have been working on. She read the first chapter and loved it. She wrote “When you fall in love with a debut novel, you don’t let the writer get away. Welcome to the agency, Paul.” That was more than a favor to my friend. She genuinely loved my writing. Needless to say, I was thrilled. We’ll see how it works out. I have to finish writing the novel now.