



Section Five

The Next Step



Preparing Your Manuscript

The Query Letter

The Synopsis

Finding an Agent

Self-Publishing



The Next Step: Finding an Agent

Well, we've finally done it. We've written our novel, we've struggled through the synopsis, we've figured out the query letter—now, who do we send it to? It is time to make some decisions. Your first decision: do you want to self-publish or traditionally publish? If you self-publish, you pay for all the costs of bringing your book to print, and you do all of your own marketing and sales. You also keep all of the proceeds. If you publish in the traditional sense, you give the rights (or some of the rights) to your manuscript to a publisher. In exchange, you may (or may not) receive an advance (a “down-payment” towards future sales) and you may (or may not) receive royalties (a portion of the sale of each book), depending on whether or not your book sells well. If you decide to self-publish, see our discussion following this one. However, if you choose to publish your book traditionally, you must decide if you want to represent yourself or if you want to hire a Literary Agent to represent you. Many of the larger publishing houses do not accept unagented manuscripts, which is one good reason for getting an agent. Another is that your agent can often strike a much better bargain for you than you could negotiate yourself. In return, you “pay” your agent ten to twenty percent of your royalties. I believe that fiction writers who want to be published by a major publisher will do better with an agent than without one.

Respectable agents do not charge fees. Nor do they recommend a particular editor or refer you anywhere where you will be charged fees. They are paid solely from commissions of sales. The Association of Author's Representatives (AAR) is a voluntary professional organization whose members agree to follow a certain standard of ethics. Membership in this organization is a good sign.

So where do you find an agent? Start with any one of the several comprehensive listings of agents in such books as *Writer's Market* (Writer's Digest Books), *Guide to Literary Agents* edited by Rachel Vater (Writer's Digest Books), *Writer's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents, 2003-2004: Who They Are! What They Want! and How to Win Them Over* by Jeff Herman (Prima Publishing), and *Literary Agents: What They Do, How They Do It, and How to Find and Work with the Right One for You* by Michael Larsen (John Wiley and Sons). In these listings, agents are usually first divided by fee-charging and non-fee-charging (go for the non-fee-charging), then in alphabetical order. Some agents only handle fiction, some only nonfiction, some both. Some agents do not accept queries from non-published writers. Some only represent certain genres. This is the time to do your homework. Do not waste your time, postage and paper on an agent who is not interested in your work. Also, pay attention to what the agent wants: query only, query and first three chapters, and so forth. Then, send exactly what is requested. (However: when an agent says “query only,” I still include the one or two page synopsis).

Also take the time to read the “insider advice” that comes in each of these books. They tell you what to expect and give you several suggestions.

Once you've found a list of agents who seem compatible with you and your work, address a query letter to each particular agent. In the envelope, include a one-page synopsis and, if requested, the first three chapters (or first fifty pages). Remember to include a self-addressed stamped envelope and be polite. Do not telephone the agent and do not write a nasty follow-up

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if you don't hear from him within a reasonable amount of time. Try to send out ten to twenty queries a month. It is always okay to query more than one agent at a time.

Some agents are now accepting email queries. This is fine; just be sure to read carefully their exact requirements. If they request the query be in the text of an email and not an attachment, send it as such. And be sure to follow the guidelines for a professional query letter—just because email is a less formal approach does not mean you should be less formal in soliciting an agent. Professionalism is always appreciated.

Finding an agent is not an easy thing to do. Neither is finding a spouse. But somewhere in this world lives the perfect agent for you. So look, watch, listen, and keep your mind open. Your agent needs you as much as you need him.