

AGENTS: VETTING AND DUE DILIGENCE

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In the previous PDF we talked about where to find agents and how to start making a pool of potential ones you wish to contact. This was done by looking for agents who represent the type of genre your book falls into. Now we're going to whittle that list down to a more defined group, making sure your work is going to the right person in the first place. This means we're going to be talking about vetting and due diligence.

So, let's take that pool you have now and put a tighter standard to them over all. We do this but starting with the most obvious culling method first: genre. I know you did this already to your pool of potential agents but that was just the basic grouping, now we're going to get into the nitty gritty. Why? Because not everything that you read was 100% accurate.

Am I implying that the agents are lying when they state their interests? No. What I'm saying is that they have to define what they're looking for in a broad category sense that often makes it hard to see the trees for the forest. For example, one agent might list they are open to romance books but what you don't know is they prefer more inspirational romance or happy ending sorts of tales. So if you're one to write the more "down and dirty" sort of work you're already wasting your time in submitting it to them for consideration.

A big issue of confusion for folks who write fantasy is when agents list fantasy what they really mean is urban fantasy or paranormal romance or even young adult fantasy ((which is really a blending of paranormal romance and urban fantasy for the most part (which are really two sides of the same coin if you ask me, but that's another matter for another day).))

So if genre isn't exactly clear with agents then how do you know whom to send things to in your pool? The best way is to go to their agency website. Most agents will have an agency website now or a blog or even both. You could even do an internet search and bring up interviews and listings that way as well. The main idea in doing this due diligence is to find out just what it is they're looking for. Nine times out of ten they'd list it for you or give you a clear enough answer.

If this isn't made clear then check their blogs, twitter feeds, facebook page, and do some more online sleuthing. Yes, you are doing what amounts to a background check of sorts, but it is going to be helpful for all parties involved moving forward. If you still aren't clear make a phone call or send a quick email to the agent and ask them directly. Some might cringe at the thought of calling an agent but I've done it more than once and most of the time you get their assistant or the intern who can tell you what they're interested in more directly. No one is going to think less of you for making sure you get your facts straight before you send something off. Now if you call and try and make a pitch for your book while on the phone that isn't a good thing.

And this all ties into the next step in the process once you've vetted the agents via genre. The second pass now comes down to personal matters. What do I mean by that? If you haven't already gone through blogs and interviews and other listings you should do so now. Why?

Because you're looking for things that can help you better determine if this agent would be a good fit overall, not just on genre.

Why is this important?

You don't want to work with a jerk, nor do you want to work with someone who isn't honest nor doesn't really do their job. After all you're looking for a real serious contender here, someone who is going to do their best and take this seriously and do so in a professional manner. You also want to make sure the agent is active. Checking their website and seeing if it looks professional and has been updated recently are also good things to investigate.

Also check out who their clients are or were and see what they have been up to in the last few months and year. Have they sold anything? If so, what? If not, why not? And don't send anything to any agent who wants you to pay for something up front, be it reading fees or anything else they might try to put forth. Legit agents don't get paid until they make a sale.

This may seem like a lot of work upfront, and it can be, but it will save you so much time and headaches later on, not to mention rejection letters, since you never sent off those emails in the first place.

I can attest to saving lots of time on more than one occasion when I've put aside sending material off to agents who were just plain rude and arrogant in how they presented themselves along with their "agenting philosophy". Another helped me to not waste my time by literally typing up a "normal working day" for them on their blog and in the process showed me they don't really do anything, which showed in their lack of sales, clients, and results.

Finally, make sure you look at how long the agent has been doing what they're doing and what experience they've had before taking on the agenting gig. Some have been editors at publishing houses before, others have been or are writers, some have even worked at or managed bookstores—all of which are qualities that allow them to know something about the book business. Experience and backgrounds can vary but one of the more important things to consider is how long they've been doing this.

Are they just getting started or have they been around for decades? While you don't want to turn away someone out of hand simply because they're just getting starting, it is important to take a closer look at just what they are planning to do in the business over all—in other words: "where do they see themselves in five years." And while new agents are great opportunities to get your work before some fresh eyes they also have a high turn over rate. I've seen many new agents burn out after only a year or less and those that don't often move around from agency to agency as they look for their "right spot", even changing their genre list as they get a better understanding to what they are really interested in and wishing to go with in their career.

As you can see, this vetting will take some time, but as I've been repeating: it's worth it. And once you've vetted and cleaned up that pool you should have a real good list to start with, which is where we'll take it in the next PDF when we get into how to go about actually sending things off to agents for consideration.

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