

AGENTS: WHAT ARE THEY GOOD FOR?

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Since I've been engaging so heavily in dealing with agents in my own career these last few years—the last few months more so than ever before—I thought to take some time and share some things I've learned that could be of some benefit those searching for their own agents.

Each of these PDFs we'll focus on one topic of the process and go into a little discussion about it. Where possible I'll look to pass on links and other tools to help you but this will be in no way an inexhaustible source of knowledge you can draw from. A helpful respite on the journey, yes, but not a place to build a town.

With this in mind let's look at this PDF's topic, which will really cover the most basic of the questions we have to start with. That is, what do agents do and why do writers need them?

Let's tackle this backwards to forwards.

Do writers need agents? No. There are so many avenues open to authors today where they can find ways to get their work published without them. Now, this does not mean they'll have the same venues to see that work published (the big six are not going to pick up your work just on a whim) but you can locate e-book publishers, small presses, and other creative outlets to find a home for your work. And that work might be able to generate the big guys' interest who could in turn take a look at your work a part from an agent. But those situations are few and far between.

So if you don't really need an agent to get published what do agents do? The short answer is they're someone hire to represent your work to the most established presses and solicit deals with other places folks don't have ready access too (movies, apps, audio, and foreign rights, etc.)

And yes, you read that correctly, **you** hire **them**. There's a idea among those just starting out that it's more the other way around; that they are doing you a favor and you're more or less working for them. That isn't the case. Just like if you'd hire a lawyer, accountant, or any other professional to assist you in some task so it is with agents.

They work on commission and take a cut of your income (which we'll talk about in a bit more detail later on). This means they don't get paid unless you do. Therefore the pressure is on them to produce something so all can benefit. This fact is also part of the reason many agents now have become so selective in what they take on. After all, if they don't think they can make some money off a project then why would they want to take it on in the first place?

Another truth needs to be explained here as well. Agents are the gatekeepers to the gatekeepers. That is to say you have to get past them to get to the editors at a publisher to finally get your work published. There's more hoops involved but for good reason in that the idea is an agent vets the work before it gets to a publisher so editors are suppose to have "quality" work being sent to them instead of blind submissions.

I use “quality” in quotations because what I’ve found to be the case more and more as I keep up my exploration of agents is that for many it is more about looking to find books they themselves would want to read as a consumer and then look to make a market out of that. It sounds weird, and can be a bit selfish/myopic when viewed in such a light, but more and more agents I come across, particularly new ones, have this idea that they’re only looking for books they’d want to buy off the shelf and so, in a sort of wish fulfillment fantasy, they keep looking through submissions seeking for that book—even if it might not be the most marketable at times.

Sometimes this can get pretty specific: “I’m seeking dark, mid-century southern gothics” and “My ideal project would be a YA novel that deals with a teacher at a private school falling in love with one of their students”, are just two of the more recent examples I’ve found in recent agent searches. Now, if you fit that real narrowly defined niche then they might be the agent for you but if not, well then you have to keep looking and thus the journey continues.

So what can we pull away from all this? First of all, agents are people looking to do a job and make money from it. They aren’t going to take on something they don’t think will make money, nor are they going to necessarily take on something they aren’t open to or have an interest in (we’ll talk more in depth about that later on). They also are not your boss. An advisor and consultant, yes, but you shouldn’t feel like you are being employed by them and have to please them all the time to get paid when it is really the other way around. Some basic truths, but needful as we head into the topics covered ahead.

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