

## Interview Questions

Time for another installment of *Brain Pickings*. This time I've managed to speak with the Lara Allen, a foreign rights agent with over ten years of experience in dealing with a wide variety of work with an established collection of publishers and agents during that time. She currently is part of the team at the Chris Lotts Agency, helping to represent their good-sized client list to publishers and people all over the world.

Since many people aren't familiar about foreign rights in general I thought it would be a good idea to start picking Lara's brain about that first, moving on from there. So without further ado, let's get picking...

**For those who might not be aware of what it means to be a rights agent, could you be so kind as to perhaps walk us through a typical day and/or share what you do in general?**

To start, let's define 'rights'. There's the basic right you grant to a publisher when you sell a book—the right to publish a paperback, in English, etc.—and then there's what's called 'subsidiary rights'. These are rights in addition to the primary rights. They include audio, e-book (though sometimes that's granted as a primary right), first serial (publication of an excerpt or short story in a magazine before the book's publication), second serial (publication of an excerpt or short story in a magazine or newspaper after the book's publication), book club, braille (usually granted for free), and translation. There's all kinds of crossover with these—audio books in translation, etc.—but for our purposes let's stick with those.

My specialty is translation. I work for a literary agency, and, with our list, we tend to refrain from granting translation rights to a publisher. Translation rights essentially are the right to sell a book to a publisher in another country, to be translated into the language of that country. I've done sales for everything from Swedish to Indonesian, and even pidgin Hawaiian. Like any agent, I start with a manuscript. I read it, type up a summary, do research on the author (if they haven't been published before), and write up a list of editors I know who would be interested. The only difference is, the editors I'm listing are all over the world, not just the U.S. I write a pitch letter to them. Editors are notoriously busy, so I also update them with any news about the book, like a review, a new sale, or bestsellers. The thing with rights people is they're never done with a book. Agents in general are like this. Once it's published, they still continue to track the sales, working with publishers to keep the book in print and on the market, as well as trying to find new outlets for it.

Publishing is constantly changing. New editors come along, new publishers, and trends change. A book that might not have sold ten years ago might be interesting to someone in Germany now. For example, I work with an author whose novels are set in World War II. No way that would work in Germany 5 years ago. But now there's enough interest that the German people are becoming curious about that time in their history, and there's a new chance for the author there.

**So is being a rights agent something you always wanted to do? I'm sure there might be some kids that wake up one day and think: "I want to be an agent", but more often I'm finding it's a process that can have some pretty interesting steps along the way.**

I didn't even know what a rights agent *was* until I started looking into publishing as a career. I was working at a Borders, and one of my responsibilities was the reference section. This was in Richmond, where I moved not long after college. I was born and raised in Massachusetts, so Richmond is about as far from what I was raised around as you could get. One of the reasons I worked at Borders was to learn the book business and then transfer somewhere else. The reference section had a book called 'How To Get a Job in Book Publishing'. I figured everyone and their brother wanted to be an editor, and I wanted to see what my other options were. The book said rights was a good place because you see how a book gets made all the way through—from acquisition to sales, and beyond, including things like contracts and marketing—and hence was a good way to learn the business. That's what I aimed for. They were right, by the way: it is a good way to learn the business.

**I did a bit more digging on your background and saw you started your career over at Trident, a rather good sized agency, but now hang your shingle at the Lotts Agency. So you haven't come into this as a newbie. What are some trends taking place in the rights markets and what do you see for the future?**

Technically, I started at HarperCollins. I'm really glad I got the experience of both a publishing house, book store, and agency. I know a lot more hands-on things than I would otherwise.

The thing with rights is it's a case-by-case basis. I notice that e-books, for example, are a constant discussion, even though in most markets they aren't selling. Poland, for example, sells maybe 400 a year, yet all publishers want the rights because they know that's where things are headed. And of course everyone is scaling back on advances. Worldwide recessions tend to do that. In general, foreign markets have the same trends we do. A few years ago, everyone wanted *Twilight*. Now they want a *Song of Ice and Fire*. It makes me a bit sad—the world gets smaller and in the end we should be trying to make trends, not follow them. Then again, the thing I like about this business is that people look for those things, but every publishing person I deal with is at their heart a book person, so if you are enthusiastic about a book, they'll want to read it, too, and sometimes, fall in love with it.

**You bring up an interesting point. Do you think the market is getting into more of a fishbowl vision now days? It seems there is an ever shrinking number of gatekeepers that have begun perhaps to make the filter a bit too refined for anything other than "the next trend" or their own personal preferences to come through.**

Well, here's my theory on it. I think we're at the end of a time where a lot of publishers were owned by big media companies—HarperCollins by NewsCorp, Simon & Schuster by Viacom, Random by Bertelsmann—and big companies mean big budgets to meet. They want a sure thing; not something they'd have to take chances on. But within that are people who, when they

love something, go to bat for it, and find a way to sell it. If you're good at your job you know how to position something so that it sells. I think it's the same all over the world. You need to find the people for the book. It's targeting the right folks to read your stuff, and then getting them to read it.

I think if the editor who wants a book knows how to market it, and can get the marketing people on board, they can get it published. I think it requires more thought. There's more convincing the money people to make a move on something, and less just throwing money at it. I've also noticed that agents and authors have to do more marketing themselves. Publishers aren't putting the money toward it that they used to. I think, with the decline of bookstores, they don't know *how* anymore. But I think the readers for a variety of books are out there. It's connecting the work with the reader that's the challenge.

**With that in mind, how important is it for authors to be aware of and take advantage of foreign rights in today's market?**

I think it's very important. It's something authors don't think of, often. But there are authors I've worked with who couldn't find an American publisher, but did very well in Australia, England, Canada, etc. We tend to be very ethnocentric in the U.S. We think we're the end all and be all. But foreign publishers track Canadian books, or French, or German, just as thoroughly as the U.S. A lot of them have more in common with a U.K. audience than U.S. We speak the same language, but have distinct cultures. Australia's really more like the U.S. than the U.K. is. So is Germany. Which is to say if you broaden your horizons about how and where your book could be published, you're opening up more possibilities for your career as a writer.

**So might this be an option for some authors to explore a "test market" for this books and perhaps gain some notice for being picked up later with a US publisher? I'm aware of some advice being put forth that this is what people should do with self-publishing: get your name out there and a following with sales and then go to a publisher. Is going the foreign rights route a comparable option?**

I'd say so. Also, with the large publishers there's the idea of 'synergy'. That is, if Harper UK has a giant author, then HCUS will be pressured to do them as well. It's an entry point. And a lot of publishers have first look requirements with other publishers in English-language countries. So, for example, a small Australian publisher may have a deal where a UK house gets first chance at a book—two weeks to either turn it down or make an offer. Something like that.

**You also have done some work with subsidiary rights (audio, media, etc.) for some of your clients. Given the new, and constantly changing publishing dynamic, what would you advise writers to be aware of with these rights for their own work?**

Whether you have an agent or not, you have to be very careful about contracts and contract terms. You should understand what you're signing. Audio is mainly audio download now, but

there's also library that's still traditional cd's. Download audio goes through Audible. Their contracts can be tricky, and by that I mean their language is a bit more 'legalese' than some other places. Also, take the time to learn about e-books and the markets. A lot of publishers are coming up with imprints dedicated to e-books. These are good if you don't know or have the time to market them, but if you've got a dedicated fan base, you'd make more putting it up yourself.

I also think you should understand the whole process, and I'm thinking of the role of marketing, publicity, and also contracts. For example, a big part of my job involves tax forms, both U.S. and international. Any income coming from another country is up for double taxation. Sometimes that means as much as 25% of your advance. Each country has different laws about how to confirm your citizenship, and whether the U.S has a treaty with it, etc. I mention this because I think you need to take the time to really think about an offer before jumping on it. Do you want cover approval? Do you want to know something about the translator?

**Some of the people who are reading this are interested in getting their own work(s) to publication. And for some, that means getting an agent. Since you also deal with submissions at the Lotts agency what advice might you pass on to writers who are seeking out an agent? What are instant turn-offs or things that have you pushing the "thanks but no thanks," button as you read?**

Please don't tell me you've written the great American novel. Nobody's ever written the Great American Novel. There is no such thing. There is a novel that gets critical acclaim, a novel that people love, a novel that survives to become part of the literary canon. Most of those have had a really good writer, and a really good editor. It's a collaboration. I also have a pet peeve about people who submit and compare their works only to the most well-known authors. Agents really are book people. They've read a lot. So, it's more interesting for us if you compare yourself to someone lesser known but well loved by a certain group. That gives us more information about your writing, and who you are, then any comparison to George R.R. Martin could ever do.

Really, really think about your query letter. Summarize it well. It's the first piece of your writing we're going to read. It should follow all grammar rules, be polite and short, and give us a taste of what to expect from your manuscript.

Finally—double check everything. I can't tell you how many submissions I've gotten that are addressed to a different agency, or, worse, to about twenty agents. Not every agent is the same. We all represent different types of books. Before you send something to us, you should take a look at our clients and see if it matches up. If I've never represented literary fiction, I'm not going to have a clue how to \*sell\* literary fiction. I don't know the editors. I don't know the writing, the influences, etc.

What I recommend is to look at the dedications of your favorite authors. Authors usually thank their agents. That will give you an idea about who to send things to. Even if you send it to a major agent with a full list, that agent has an assistant who probably does the reading, and is being groomed to be an agent themselves. You could be signed by them.

Thanks to Ms. Allen for being willing to let me pick her brain for a bit. I hope after this discussion you've been able to get a better understanding of some of the basics with foreign rights—I know I have.