



Talking Agents Ezine

Welcome to *Talking Agents Literary E-Zine*, the free successor to the hard copy/subscribers-only-online *Talking Agents* newsletter we published ten times a year for ten years.

HOLDING ACTION:

We went to this format – a free e-mailed e-zine rather than a hard copy monthly newsletter – back last March with the express intention of staying in better touch with our many clients and friends. Slightly shorter but more regular communication was the game plan. We have dropped the ball. No e-zine since early August.

The why is that while Bill puts the ideas together and does the research, Beverly does the writing. (There are other folks working here—though in a number of cases not actually here as in here, but here as in virtually here—and without them you'd never see anything, but creating the newsletter and now the e-zine has always been the responsibility of the two B's.) And Beverly is finishing a new book, the fourth in the City of Dreams series for Simon & Schuster. Meaning that she's at the end of a nearly two year process—big books, lots of research—and at the stage where the book truly fills her life and absolutely everything else takes at best fourth place.

That's the explanation if not the excuse, and since this is a publication meant for writers, hopefully it will be understood. So too, we hope, the fact that this issue is a holding action of sorts. It consists of this explanation that we have not died and that AR&E's regular business is still operating with customary efficiency, plus a couple of short pieces that were ready last August when we didn't know that madness was imminent and thought we'd get a late August/early September issue out to you. It brings as well a promise of more and meatier to come.

GETTING THE MOVIE DEAL

"I'm sure this book will translate well to film and I'm hoping for an agent who can make that happen."

Yes, oh yes. Aren't we all.

The truth is that any agent good enough to sell your book to a publisher (meaning does this for a living and

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Talking Agents Literary
Ezine is a complimentary resource for writers (and sometimes their agents) from Agent Research & Evaluation, Inc., the firm established in 1996 by Bill Martin and Beverly

sells plenty of other real books to real publishers; anything else is unacceptable and quite possibly a scam) can get you a movie deal. They are panting for stuff out there. What counts is that you write something Hollywood buys, and write it really, really well. If you think that's easy to do you haven't been at this very long. And even if you have and are good at it, if a movie deal is your goal you may be well advised to tailor what you're writing to what they're buying.

Here's a case in point, involving a story everyone in publishing already knows, except of course for writers who never know anything. Which makes it a tale worth repeating here.

Justin Cronin - represented by Ellen Levine, who had her own agency for many years and for the last five has been a partner at Trident Media - won awards for his literary fiction. Levine sold it steadily for what appear to have been modest advances to the likes of Dial and Bloomsbury. His oeuvre included short stories, a novella, a novel or two... Character-driven work that got mostly good reviews, (with the exception of one bitchy PW reviewer who hated his debut book, though it had already won a literary prize)...

You can starve to death while they're giving you these kinds of accolades. Writers in similar situations have been known to take jobs delivering pizza.

Cronin came up with a better plan. Write something else. And he noticed—as no doubt many of you have—that vampire stories are hot. Then, being a truly good writer, he applied real creative imagination to the idea. Instead of going off and writing something derivative of everything else that's out there, he came up with a new take. Vampires are real. They aren't made by the bite of a bat or something equally arcane and slightly silly, but by a medical experiment gone awry. Hoo-ha! A high concept. Once you establish it, you can go in a dozen different directions. Also, Hollywood loves high concept. (By which they mean an idea they can express in a single sentence, possibly two. Very important since they don't read.) Moreover, they are hungry for fantasy high concept because they recently had a bit of success with that Potter boy and those hobbits.

And Ellen Levine is a very good agent who has been around most of the corners in this business. Meaning she knows how the game is played.

Swerling Martin.

This Ezine is an occasional mailing meant to serve the interests of writers relative to (a) finding the right literary agent (b) understanding how to work with a literary agent (c) building a platform to assist in marketing via author's web sites, (c) staying abreast of web neutrality issues and (d) various developments in our business.

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She went out with a partial of fewer than four hundred pages (projected to be about a third of the book) under the pseudonym Jordan Ainsley. So she wasn't going to be clobbered by Cronin's past numbers as soon as she opened the negotiation, and she got CAA involved right away.

Levine got a reported \$3.75 million from Ballantine for North American rights only to a four book series.

Sony, Universal, Warner, and 20th Century Fox got into a bidding war for film rights, which—still on the basis of the four hundred page partial remember—went to Fox and Ridley Scott's Scott Free Productions for \$1.75 million. The point to note here being that the price includes film rights to this one book, not the rights to all four or the characters in perpetuity. (See what we mean about a good agent getting you a better deal?)

Full marks to the agents who marketed this property and brokered the deals (Levine has gone on to sell a bundle of translation rights for still more money), but don't miss the main lesson here. A really good writer came up with a really good idea and wrote four hundred dynamite pages plus an outline. That's the sine qua non folks. They can't sell it if you don't write it. And while in our view the talent to do what Cronin did is unquestionably a divine gift, the discipline and the craft and the intestinal fortitude to apply backside to chair and make it happen on the page are skills that can be acquired. They are not, however, cheap. Years of writing and rewriting and then rewriting again is the coin of that particular realm.

Here's the link to the [NY Times story](#) of the film sale.

THAT AUGUST QUERY WRITING STORY

We wanted to add a couple of points to what we had to say about query letters in the last issue. One is very 20th century, while the other is more or less 21st.

Here's the last century part: **Do Not use Formatting Gimmicks in a Query Letter.**

By which we mean do not design a direct mail circular. Put another way, don't pitch the pitchmen, it gets their backs up. State your case in Times New

Roman 12 pt, with perhaps some judicious use of italic for book titles and nothing else.

Here's what we wrote recently to a very accomplished motivational speaker who was setting out to find an agent using the same techniques he uses to present himself to groups he hopes will want to hire him to appear:

As a piece of advertising this is fine, it's even better than that, it's good. But it is not effective as a cover letter, the first thing the agent/agent's assistant sees. These people pitch and are pitched all day every day. A request for representation should not be one more gimmicky presentation of a project, but an instance of a professional requesting the opportunity to explore a business relationship with another of the same ilk. This [his proposed query letter] is many things, but it's not that. There should be no use of fonts or colors or clever folds and furbelows. Emphasis where required should come from ordinary use of punctuation and syntax. This is about writing.

As for the 21st century: **Should you query by e-mail?**

Maybe used to be our answer. These days it's becoming probably. But as we tell our [Customized Fingerprint](#) clients, the issue is still fraught.

Mostly, though not exclusively, it's the younger agents who live by e-mail and who are happy to have your well-written single page letter sent to them in that manner. You can even add at the end the single page synopsis you should be preparing as part of the hard copy submission. The agents who work in this way are likely to respond quickly with not for me thanks, or send me more. At which point you can send whatever part of the ms they've asked for (frequently the first fifty pages) as an attachment. No one, by the way, should be expected to open an attachment of material they did not request from someone they do not know. An agent that stupid is anyway not someone you want to have representing you.

So far so simple, but there is a but. Two in fact. The first is that agents of "a certain age" are less likely to check their e-mail seven times a day the way those of us do for whom, whatever our age, this is now the chief method of contact with the outside world. If the person to whom you're writing is not that tuned in to the medium, it's risky to let her or him read what you have to say on the screen. It's a different experience, even if we can't say how it's different.

As for the second "but", with an electronic message it's easy to say no and hit the delete key and then it's gone. Second thoughts are not easily accommodated in such a system. So for the moment we're suggesting that writers who approach an agent by e-mail also send a hard copy traditional query. One client we know sent the hard copies out first, then a few days later the e-mail queries. The idea being that maybe they would dovetail.

As for agents who insist they will look at only one or the other, and whichever they don't want is verboten on pain of death and a blacklist... We feel about these people much the same way we feel about agents who want exclusives

before they will even open the query (a practice that a lot of bad press, including ours, has caused to be less prevalent of late). There are plenty of effective agents out there, and a great many of them are really nice and pleasant people, as well as being good at what they do. Do you really want to be represented by someone with a Hitler delusion?

SELF PROMOTION

However short this mailing, we can't forego the opportunity to tell you that Beverly is taking part in the WNBA gala read-a-thon celebrating National Reading Group Month October 29th at the NY Center for Publishing, 20 W. 44th St. NYC, 6:30 pm to 9:00 pm. Other guests include Wally Lamb and Adriana Trigiani. More info [here](#).

FREE OFFER

The first six people to email beverly@beverlyswerling.com to ask for same will get a free ticket to attend the event mentioned above. Honor system. Please don't take the ticket if you can't be sure that barring an act of God you will be in Manhattan on the evening of the 29th and can attend.

THAT'S IT, FOLKS

At least for now. We're going to do better. These last-bit-of-a-book frenzies happen around here at most once every couple of years. Thanks for your understanding.

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