



# Talking Agents Ezine

Welcome to the latest edition of the *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.

August has slipped by with no e-zine from us. Blame it on the torpid heat of summer, a book in the final stages of production (S&S will start shipping *City of God* by Beverly Swerling in mid November for an early December pub date), another in the works, and a vibrant US presidential election (we're political junkies and you couldn't make this stuff up). Here's the September entry.

## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR AGENT

A couple of weeks ago Mark Liam Piggott blogged on the UK's [Guardian](#) site on the subject What's the Point of Literary Agents?

Piggott's new novel *Fire Horses* is out in the UK from small publisher Legend, and he explains that he sold it directly after two agents gave him bad advice about what to write (something more commercial) then didn't manage to sell the results.

Piggott then went back to writing what he loves – a literary novel – and three agents were interested but said his writing needed "smoothing out." All advised him to go after a writing based MA (usually called an MFA in the US). Two wrote references to help him get in. He did so, and comments that such courses essentially teach you to edit yourself. (We agree.) He then sent the newly polished novel to the above small press and they snapped it up.

Next he tells us he queried three "agencies" – he cites PFD, Curtis Brown, and United Agents – and was told to send a synopsis, writing sample, etc. Which made him feel aggrieved because his published "well received" novel has not, it seems, made the process of finding representation any easier. Not to worry, he says, Legend wants first refusal on his next book.

End of blog in question, except that it's worth mentioning that there have been approving comments

## September 10, 2008

**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 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.

You are welcome to pass these mailings along; simply forward this email.

from other debut novelists who cite similar experiences.

Folks, we mean absolutely no disrespect to Mr. Piggott when we say there are lessons to be learned here. Mostly about what not to do and how not to do it. That said, the thing that is most obvious from his writing history thus far is that the guy has real talent. It's why the two dud (for him) agents took him on, why the course enrolled him, why Legend published his book, and why they are anxious to see/possibly publish what he does next. The next most obvious thing is that he has not a clue about how to go after a literary agent, and less than no clue about what the agent is supposed to do.

Here's a bullet list of points to be learned from the experience he relates. (And in this case they're absolutely the same whether you're on one or another side of the pond.)

- Never go with an agent until you ask what the agent has sold recently: author, title, publisher. Piggott's duds may not have been selling anything else either. That's the first thing you must establish and no legitimate agent will refuse to give you that information.
- Always check that list to be sure the books the agent is selling are not a million miles away from the book you're writing/hope to write. In the case of Piggott, he needed (and still needs) an agent who deals with literary fiction. God alone knows what he actually got, but on the basis of reported advice, not that.

- Be aware that the agent who takes you on may very well offer revision advice – frequently quite valuable – but that the agent is not the writer. You are. And the answer to the question posed in the title of the blog under discussion is that agents negotiate with publishers and offer career/business advice. That some are also really savvy editors/first readers is a bonus, not the main event.
- Staying with the issue of negotiation: Option clauses are part of almost every modern contract, but the term "first refusal" will cause an experienced agent to pale. It is not in the writer's best interests for the clause to be so worded. (Might not be in Piggott's contract either. He might simply have used the phrase as blog shorthand. But be warned.)
- It may be that Piggott is listing agencies rather than agents simply out of a feeling that he should protect their privacy and perhaps his, but never, never, never, query an agency. Always insist that your request to open a discussion about representation be presented to a particular agent in the agency.
- Finally, if you have a published book (not self-published or pod or any

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other substitute form of publishing) from a respected house, whether it be large or small, there are better ways to leverage that achievement into decent representation than the kind of approach that would garner the responses Piggott describes.

## WHO WE ARE: THE E-ZINE EDITION

There's a substantial section on our website called Who We Are and it really gives you chapter and verse. This much more brief and admittedly self-serving explanation seems justified because in the past couple of months we've heard from three people who signed up for the free e-zine, and were surprised (even outraged) to discover on clicking through some of the links we provide that we offer paid services to writers looking for agents. Okay, that's three out of a few thousand, but we're not used to being cited for our ethics, an area where we usually get full marks.

We're a business and selling our services is what we do. We've been doing it for twelve years. Agent R&E is a consultancy that helps writers find the right agent. We do so in a very hands-on manner, and we bring to the task better than a quarter century of research on literary agents in the US, UK, and Canada. That's Bill's input. Beverly has spent a similar number of years writing and publishing. First as a journalist for major publications, then as a novelist whose books are for sale all over the world. Our Customized Fingerprint, the core of our business, calls on both skill sets and is a good deal more than a "list of agents." The more experienced the writer (some 60% of our clients are previously published), the more likely they are to opt for that service.

That does not change the fact that *Talking Agents* is a FREE e-zine. Back issues are also free and are archived on the News page of the site. We do not sell our mailing list to anyone, ever, for any purpose, and we ourselves use it only to send out these e-zines.

## BEVERLY'S BLOG – REPRISE

Recently a client and debut author got a million dollar deal. We bannered the event on our website's homepage and Beverly wrote a blog about it. In the light of the discussion above, it's worth repeating that blog here, with an added comment or two:

A couple of months ago Ellen Horan called AR&E to get some advice. Happens I answered the telephone (very rare – the line rings in my office, but I work at home so seldom am the one to answer it). Thus I was the one who heard the story. She had written a debut novel, an historical mystery called *31 Bond Street*, and junior agents at two quite good firms – one, however, not good for fiction – had gotten in touch with her after seeing a chunk of the book. Both expressed enthusiasm and asked to see more. More back and forth followed with each. Including a meeting with one. Now she was, she told me, conflicted about which of the two to go to for representation.

Neither I told her immediately.

She obviously had a hot property and junior agents were simply not going to be in a position to get her the best possible deal. Anyone can sell a terrific book. How well they sell it is frequently a matter of how much experience the agent has. And the agency that was good for fiction was not prepared to promise her that one of their senior agents (in fact I told her which one she should have) would actually represent her.

I went into huckster mode. You need our [Customized Fingerprint](#) I told her. Then I'll give you chapter and verse on the seven or so agents you should go to with this, and tell you exactly why, how to go, and how to distinguish between them. Trust me, I insisted, who the agent is and how they do the negotiation is enormously important. "Money," Ellen said, "was tight." She had made enormous sacrifices to cut out the time to write this book, and while she knew our fee was probably worth it, she couldn't see her way clear to making a further financial commitment. After all, there were those two other agents... I pressed her (Bill and I really care about our clients, but this is, after all, a business). In the end she made the investment.

After she sent back the questionnaire and we talked more about the book, I produced a report with Marly Rusoff my top pick for her. It's now less than two weeks since that contact was made and Marly – who did everything right – has just done a deal for a cool million with HarperCollins, who pre-empted Marly's auction to get *31 Bond Street* plus one more. World English rights, so Ellen has translation rights sales to look forward to as well. And Lynn Pleshette has the movie rights.

Pretty good investment of \$369.00, no? (But bear in mind the stipulation above: an absolutely terrific book.)

Since we've been discussing what the people who work for you (literary agents in general and us sometimes) should do when they're good at their jobs, a word or two more about how agents run auctions is warranted.

First the definition of terms: An auction is when an agent submits simultaneously to a group of editors and tells them she's closing at such and such a time. Until then she'll entertain bids. Another term frequently seen in this regard is "preempt of an auction." Meaning an editor who loved the book called the agent and said I'll give you X if I can have it right now. (Otherwise I won't being either stated or implied.)

An agent has a fiduciary responsibility to pass a pre-emptive offer on to the client, and while the agent will usually have strongly worded advice about whether or not to take it, the final decision rests with the author. For an interesting permutation on how this can play out see an earlier [blog](#) of Beverly's about another auction. It's dated 8/31/07 and headed SWEET SMELL OF...

Both auction stories make the point that the process makes great demands on the skills of the agent. Years ago someone called it doing the agent dance, and that's a pretty apt description. The best agents really know how to jive.

And finally, a nice postscript to Ellen Horan's million dollar story: Marly Rusoff accepted the offer late on a Friday afternoon and since her office is in Bronxville and the author lives in NYC, immediately insisted that her client join Marly and her colleague Michael Radelescu for a celebration-blow-off-the-steam dinner. Leaving Ellen, as she told us, running around the house looking for cab fare.

## NET NEUTRALITY: AND NOT FOR THE LAST TIME

The September 5<sup>th</sup> *New York Times* has a [story](#) worth reading. "Comcast has appealed a ruling by the F.C.C. that objected to the way the cable company had slowed down the connection of some users who were trying to share video and other files." You can read our previous discussions of the Comcast kaffuffle in the e-zine [archive](#).

## AND THAT'S IMPORTANT WHY?

After many, many years the UK's [Publishing News](#) is no longer publishing news in hard copy. They retain a web presence on which the following is prominently displayed: **Although the print issue of Publishing News is no more, you can still access many of the online services on this site.** So far [The Bookseller](#) is hanging in with a hard copy edition, but it has an active and growing web presence. The parent company of the US's *Publishers Weekly*, Reed Business Information (a division of Reed Elsevier) is for sale and there's much speculation about *PW's* likely fate under new ownership. That magazine, too, has a growing [web presence](#).

Diversion: Here's something for every author who ever smarted over a bad *PW* review: In June it was revealed that the magazine had reduced the price paid to reviewers to \$25.00 per, with the sop that they (reviewers) would henceforth get a byline. Perhaps a dubious honor. And you have to have gotten an advance bigger than that.

Back to the main event: Put the above together with the constant tales of newspapers that either go out of business entirely or reduce or eliminate their book review sections (latest in the latter category being the *LA Times*) and the argument that if publishers are going to sell books they and their authors have to promote them on the web carries more and more weight. A system that pits the individual author, or even a big name publisher, against the deep pockets of the likes of GE, or Toyota, or Nestle, or dozens of other huge international corporate entities will make that all but impossible.

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