



# 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.

## OCTOBERFEST

Maybe... in a manner of speaking.

At any rate, it has been a hugely busy month on a lot of fronts. In the light of global economic meltdown and what both sides are calling a "change" election in the U.S., even Frankfurt was by all reports subdued. Around here it has required effort to remember that taking care of business involves more than civic duty. That said, it's our firm belief that we're all going to come roaring back. (And if that sounds like vintage Pollyanna, we remind you that no one is more likely to suffer from congenital optimism than someone who decides to write for a living.) So based on that unshakeable conviction, a few bits of agent info.

The nominations for the U.S. National Book Awards were announced in the past week. As usual, esoteric and frequently "non-commercial" choices, but that's what this particular roster is about. In fact, it's hard to argue that this isn't a distinguished list. Sincere congratulations to all.

Here then the agents who sold some of the books, and a few words about their (the agents') track records. Contact data at the end of the piece. (Incidentally, we're including the publishers though we usually don't. It can be instructive to look at an agent's record from the pov of who he/she sells to. Particularly when you're in these rarified heights and offering material that isn't necessarily the easiest to sell.)

## FICTION

*The Lazarus Project* by Aleksandar Hemon. Publisher: Riverhead; agent – Nicole Aragi. Aragi is British born, has worked in the US for some time and first came to

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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 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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our attention when she was with NYC agency Watkins Loomis in the '90s. She was a lot more accessible back then. Since founding Aragi, Inc. in 2002 she has played the game by the old rules, i.e. keeps her cards very close to her chest, doesn't hype her clients or her deals, and a look at her database record would indicate she hasn't made a sale for three years.

Absolutely not true. Neither is it true that she won't take on new clients. Of course she will, but getting her to read your work requires that you somehow be fronted in. That said, if what you do resonates with her and she offers representation, she's a first class agent. Hard, however, to see her as likely for anything but truly literary work. The sort of thing that gets an NBA nomination. And it has to be said that in the minds of many in the business, hyping your clients is part of the agent's job. Something to think about if you have a number of suitors and Aragi is among them.

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*Telex from Cuba* by Rachel Kushner. Publisher: Scribner; agent - Susan Golomb. Another with a very classy list. Less interested, however, in flying quite so much below the radar. She represents previous nominees and winners. among her clients are Jonathan Franzen and Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum; not too long ago Golomb got a seven figure deal from Spiegel and Grau for two books by Janelle Brown, and she does some really interesting non-fiction that runs the gamut from mountain climbing to money-making. All the latter distinguished by superior writing as well as outside the box insights. We've known Golomb to turn down work she said was really good but too middle-brow for her, and we've heard from some writers that they didn't find her sufficiently focused on them and their careers to give them the comfort level they require an agent to provide. So there's a needle to be threaded in terms of what you do and what you want in terms of representation, but again a really superior choice for the right authors.

*Shadow Country* by Peter Matthiessen. Publisher: Modern Library; agent - Neil Olson. Olson, also himself a novelist, is a partner of Candida Donadio who before her retirement represented Matthiessen. Obviously the very distinguished writer believes himself well served by Olson, but with the exception of one non-fiction sale to Random last March, we've seen very little activity on the part of this agent. As for the book, it's a reworking of an earlier novel which in its present incarnation has garnered critical acclaim that likens it to Dostoevsky and Faulkner.

*Home* by Marilynne Robinson. Publisher: Farrar Straus and Giroux; agent - Ellen Levine. Now a partner at Trident after a long time running her own agency, Levine is the opposite of those colleagues mentioned above; she deliberately and successfully casts a wide net. Her network of editors has been cultivated over a good many years (she started in the business in 1971 according to our records), and while Levine has never entered the Miss Popularity contest, much less won it, a great many people in publishing trust her judgment and return her calls. She responds to good writing and a number of very good writers respond to her and keep asking her to represent them. Garrison Keillor has been a Levine client since at least the early '80's and she sold Pulitzer-prize winning Robinson's first novel in 1981. But Ellen Levine also

sells a lot of non-fiction, some of it celebrity biography and cook books, dabbles in YA's and vampire books, and is as willing to go to Kensington as to Holt, Norton, or Bloomsbury, or as above FS&G. In her circle, a force of nature.

*The End* by Salvatore Scibona. Publisher: Graywolf Press; agent – Bill Clegg. When he started with Kathy Robbins and later went into partnership with Sarah Burnes we were very impressed by Clegg's response to and willingness to represent truly challenging material as long as it was first class. He had over a short time shown a lot of ability to shepherd to excellent sales books that other agents were afraid to touch. Then we began hearing clients say his office was chaotic, that they were left hanging re deals, etc. We stopped recommending him and for a time heard nothing more about him. A few years later he surfaced with William Morris and since then has racked up some terrific sales and is building yet again a distinguished list. Meanwhile he has written a book, (sold by Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, co-head of the literary department at Morris) *A PORTRAIT OF AN ADDICT AS A YOUNG MAN*, a memoir about his past addiction and the path that led to his recovery. You've got to feel good about this nomination, as much for the agent as the author.

#### NON-FICTION

*THE DARK SIDE: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* by Jane Mayer. Publisher: Doubleday; agent – Rafe Sagalyn. Another agent whose been around all the corners in the business. Sagalyn operates in the DC area. Naturally enough he does a lot of political "inside the beltway" books and counts many journalists among his clients. Mayer, for example, writes for the *New Yorker*. *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius has for years taken his fiction to Sagalyn. Commercial fiction also gets a look in here. Sagalyn has sold Fr. Andrew Greeley's novels (which even Father Greeley's fans wouldn't call literary) as well as the priest's thoughtful and provocative works of Catholic sociology. These days it's probably fair to say that Sagalyn, who now seems to be working alone, takes on books that interest him.

*Final Salute: A Story of Unfinished Lives* by Jim Sheeler. Publisher: Penguin; agent – Simon Lipskar. Lipskar is with mid-size and admittedly frenetic but highly respected Writers House. At one time he was the personal assistant to the agency's legendary founder, Al Zuckerman (who shows no signs of slowing down), but Lipskar has had his own list since 1998. He's an agent for books that will be tagged the thinking man's whatever. Frequently, "the thinking man's thriller." But though Lipskar has probably built his reputation on novels, he is no stranger to non-fiction, and this deeply moving book is about those killed in Iraq by a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist who shadowed a Marine officer charged with bringing the news of a loved one's death to the wives and parents of the fallen. A paean to all that's best in USMC tradition, as well as a study of unthinkable grief, it's hard to imagine that Sheeler couldn't have had any agent in New York. Good thing to know then, if you're writing non-fiction of this caliber, that he chose Simon Lipskar.

And before the contact info for the agents, a reminder that if you are looking for an agent who's just that kind of hand-in-glove fit for what you do, check out our [Customized Fingerprint](#).

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**AND A FINAL NOTE FROM BILL AND BEVERLY**

None of us owe more to the right of free expression than we who write for our daily bread, or indeed hope some day to do so. If you're a US citizen and can walk or crawl to a voting booth – do so. Now (if you're in an early voting state) or on November 4<sup>th</sup>. As has been said many times by people a lot smarter than we are – democracy depends on an informed and involved citizenry. We happen to be big supporters of Barack Obama, and we urge you to consider his candidacy, but we know our free speech rights will be equally well protected should John McCain win the election (or Ralph Nader or Bob Barr for that matter). Those rights are only threatened by indifference. No writer or literary agent can afford to add even one tiny bit of momentum to such a terrible future.

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