

Let's Do Lunch

Up close and personal with literary agents

By Herb Boyd

Writers are extremely lucky if the only troubling moment between them and their agent is who picks up the tab at lunch. Of course, there are no hard-and-fast rules about this piece of decorum—usually the agent pops for the meal—as there are none for other matters of business between the writer and agent. It can be, and often is, a relationship so casual that it is formed on a handshake or a verbal agreement.

Then, there are the horror stories. You know, the ones about the “agent from hell,” if you listen to the plaint of some writers. Or “the writer from Erehwon,” a disgruntled agent might counter charge.

Long gone are the days when a literary agent was scarcer than hen’s teeth; when all the writer needed was good enough arm—and manuscript—to toss through the transom of some eager editor. At least this is the way I saw it happen in a movie or two.

Nowadays, it’s almost a prerequisite for a writer to have an agent, particularly for novels, screenplays, and nonfiction work. And some publishers and editors even insist that short-story authors and poets have their works submitted via an agency.

To the degree that a work is perused by more eyes, carefully vetted by the agent, the editor, and the copy editor is something devoutly wished by all writers. And over the years, I've been lucky to have as one of my agents a person who was once a topflight editor; so my manuscripts have been fortunate to pass her scrutiny, to say nothing of getting it approved by my wife, my live-in editor.

Did I say agents? Well, for several years now I've had two agents, and on two occasions—if I remember correctly—they have shared the duties and royalties. This is probably not a common practice, but if an agent can have more than one writer, then a writer should have the option of having more than one agent. Okay, I know this isn't customary, and I can already here the screams of "exclusivity!" Agents want writers they can bank on for many years, but shouldn't writers want agents they can bank on—and certainly count on to shepherd their projects to fruition.

What's good for the goose ought to be good for the gander. "Sounds fair and democratic, but it just doesn't work that way," says an emerging agent who asked that her name not be used. "I plan to devote a lot of time and attention to my writers and I won't have them running off the first chance they get with someone else. Yes, they have the right to move on, but there should be some

basic understanding about the relationship, and what's expected by both parties.

Otherwise, what's the use?"

When you've been in this business as long as I have it's hard to be surprised by ugly stories between writers and agents. One writer, who also wishes to remain anonymous, charged that his agent was the "laziest son of a gun under the sun," and ended their arrangement almost before it really began. "It seemed to take him forever to get back to me. I'd call and leave message after message with no response. Clearly, I was not among his upper-echelon writers. I got sick of it and we parted company," he says.

On the other hand, there are agents who rightfully beef about a delinquent author, one that repeatedly misses deadlines and consequently places a project in jeopardy, to say nothing of the possible forfeiture of the advance against royalties.

The results from polling a very small pool of agents and writers indicate they have found a comfortable meeting ground where the two parties can commiserate about the deplorable publishing industry. They appear to agree that this is not a time to be berating and criticizing each other, but to find some way to mutually survive, to discover fresh channels of literary explorations through collaboration. If doomsday for writers and agents is on the horizon, the pact they've apparently made is to hang collectively, rather than separately.

Working closely with her writers is a touchstone for my agent, Marie Brown of Harlem. There isn't a facet of the publishing industry that escapes her; that she doesn't understand. At one time or another, she has navigated and negotiated practically every conceivable contract, down and around the legal contours where most writers rarely venture. Moreover, they have no idea the extent of haggling, insults, and impertinences she has endured. "It will take someone three years to finish their manuscript, and they call me in three weeks asking, 'Did you get any responses yet?' The time factor is probably one of the most difficult things I face, besides launching someone's career and having them leave you. It's not that I'm looking for the ultimate payoff, but I *am* looking for returns on my investment, and not have other people reap that benefit," she told a reporter a few years ago. "Thankfully, I've been very blessed with wonderful new people who always come along, good solid writers, and we work hard on their careers."

Brooklyn-based Regina Brooks hasn't been around as an agent as long as Brown, but she has been just as wise and judicious as she builds and nurtures her stable of writers. "When an agent decides to take on an author it's more than just about being able to sell the author's book to a publisher. It's about making a commitment to the author's writing career," she said in a recent e-mail reply. "When evaluating whether I will take on a writer, I'm looking for a certain

synergy in thought and vision. I always want to know the author's motivation for writing so that I can be sure to guide the author and to sell his or her work with that in mind.

"Authors come to the publishing world for different reasons," explains Brooks, who recently published her own book, *Writing Great Books for Young Adults*. "For some it's about creativity—the MFA student; for others, it's about extending their brand and/or platform—business writers. And still, for others it's about the lure of making lots of money."

Like Brown, Brooks is a multifaceted agent with a tool kit full of literary skills. "As an agent today," Brooks continued, "I'm much more a literary manager because I'm not only selling the manuscript to publishers, I'm also editing, developing marketing strategies, helping authors with publicity and a host of other tasks that have traditionally been fully outsourced to others. Because of this newfound focus with three-hundred-and-sixty degrees of responsibility, authors and agents are closer than ever before," Brooks says.

Merging and clinging together may be the only answer for struggling writers and agents, who, for the most part, are inextricably linked, joined at the spine. If writers are not making headway, then the agents are equally bogged down.

Out of this mutual dependence, some other options have gradually emerged; though the more alert and innovative agents are not exactly in the dark about these developments. And these include packaging, outsourcing of publicity, and publishing consultants, each having its own particular impact on the world of books.

“As a publishing consultant,” says Harlemita Krishan Trotman, who has worked in various sectors of the publishing industry, “I extract the ideas from the literary agent and author to create a strong proposal that showcases the author’s expertise and/or experience, as well as create a sellable marketing package that will appeal to publishers. A publishing consultant has diverse experience in editing, writing, marketing, and selling projects that is useful to the author, agents, and publishers alike.

“Publishers are playing it a little safe, which means proposals should be strong and as tightly put together as possible, but there still are deals being made,” Trotman concluded.

Yes, deals are being made, but what kind of books are being published? A proliferation of smut is not the answer for serious writers of fiction or nonfiction. And far too many of these writers are doing it without the assistance of an agent. Why give someone 10 or 15 percent of your profit when you can go it alone? Why share your profit margin with a publisher when you can self-publish?

The above option might have eliminated headaches for Cato Douglass, the protagonist in John A. Williams's 1982 novel *!Click Song*, given the exasperation he had with agents. Here is an example of the troublesome encounters he had with one of several agents:

A couple of days later I called Alex Samuels [the agent]. He came on the line with a rush. "Cate, listen. I'm in the middle of something big for Paul [one of Cato's rivals]. I'll call you this—"

"Don't." I was suddenly so angry that I felt it possible to squeeze the phone into fragments.

"What?"

"You're fired, Alex. Shit. I call you and you can't talk to me because you're busy doing something for my friend, something more than you ever did for me, right?"

"Okay, Cate, if that's the way you want it." He did not seem to be distressed. Rather, he sounded relieved.

I dialed again. "Maxine? You've got yourself another client."

"Really, Cato? Great! But what did you do with Alex?"

"We're finished."

"Wanna have lunch?"

"Sure. Soon. And it was done."

I'm not sure who paid for the lunch, but Cato had himself a new agent.

A Select List of Literary Agents Who Work with African-American Writers

Janell Walden Agyeman

Marie Brown Associates
6640 Akers Mill Rd., SE. #5801
Atlanta, GA 30339

Audra Barrett

Barrett Books
12138 Central Ave., Suite 183
Mitchellville, MD 20721
<http://www.barrettbooksagency.com>

Regina Brooks

Serendipity Literary Agency LLC
305 Gates Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11216
<http://www.serendipitylit.com>

Marie D. Brown

Marie Brown Associates
412 West 154 St.
New York, NY 10032

Faith Childs

Faith Childs Literary Agency, Inc.
915 Broadway, Suite 1009
New York, NY 10010

Marlene Connor Lynch

Connor Literary Agency

2911 West 71st St.
Minneapolis, MN 55423

Sha-Shana N.L. Crichton

Crichton & Associates
Literary Agency, Inc.
6940 Carroll Avenue
Takoma Park, MD 20912
<http://www.crichton-associates.com>

Brenda Feigen

Brenda Feigen Literary Agency
2934 ½ Beverly Glen Circle, Suite 425
Los Angeles, CA 90077
<http://www.feigenlaw.com>

James Fitzgerald

James Fitzgerald Agency
80 E. 11th St., Suite 301
New York, NY 10003-6000
<http://jfitzagency.com>

Jacqueline S. Hackett

Literary Works
639 Thornton Rd., Suite 102
Lithia Springs, GA 30122
<http://www.literary-works.com>

Lawrence Jordan

Lawrence Jordan Literary Agency
231 Lenox Ave., First Floor
New York, NY 10027

Gloria Loomis

Watkins/Loomis Agency, Inc.

P.O. Box 20925

New York, NY 10025

<http://www.watkinsloomis.com>

Claudia Menza and Manie Barron

Menza-Barron Agency

511 Avenue of the Americas, #51

New York, NY 10011

Rita Rosenkranz

Rita Rosenkranz Literary Agency

440 West End Ave., #15D

New York, NY 10024-5358

<http://www.ritarosenkranzliteraryagency.com>

Tracy Sherrod

Tracy Sherrod Literary Services

2034 Fifth Ave., Suite 2A

New York, NY 10035

Krishan Trotman

Trotman-Ink.

Publishing Consultant

265 West 136th St., #3C

New York, NY 10030