INTERVIEW

Inside advice from TOP AGENTS

In a tough publishing market, here are some timely tips on how to succeed—and fail

By Sarah Anne Johnson

Finding a literary agent to represent the book you've probably spent years working on can seem like a daunting task, and you don't want to get off on the wrong foot. To help you get started, we sat down with some top literary agents to get the inside story on the best way to approach them with your work, and what to expect once you're signed on. Here's what they had to say.

What is the best way for an author to approach you? What should an author never do?

Julie Barer: The best way is to send a professional and compelling query letter either by e-mail or U.S. mail. A lot of the rules for what authors should never do are rules of basic courtesy and professionalism—never harass an agent or get angry if they don't like your work. Insisting that an agent is wrong or making a mistake, or that your work is better that anyone else's, isn't going to get you anywhere.

Recently I've noticed a number of writers posting correspondence be-tween themselves and agents (rejection letters usually) on their blogs. I have to say I think it's inappropriate (and impolite) to publish these kinds of communications without the other party's permission. While it's useful to share information with other writers about what individual agents are looking for, making nasty comments about us isn't wise—we read blogs, too!

Susan Golomb: If unsolicited, an author should first approach me by e-mail query. Because we receive a large number of queries, it may take a couple of weeks to request a manuscript, and we are usually only able to respond to the people whose manuscripts we would like to read.

It's fine for an author to follow up on a query or requested manuscript, but as for the latter, we do like to have a few months to consider the manuscript before hearing from the author. The exception is if an author has received an offer from another agency. We then bump the manuscript to the front of the queue and read it immediately to give the author the timely response necessary to make a decision.

Authors should never give a commitment to an agent without first notifying the agents who have asked for their material that they are about to make a decision. This gives the agents a chance to respond, or use their valuable time to read something else if the author's mind is made up.

Christopher Schelling: Knowing one of my current clients and getting a personal recommendation from them is best. Obviously that's not always achievable, so short of that, I like writers who have done some homework and are approaching me because they know the types of projects I represent and suspect our sensibilities might overlap ...

What should you never do? Don't send food as an enticement. I got a box of melted chocolates and something alarmingly and mysteriously homemade recently. Neither pushed me in the direction of signing the writers.

Eric Simonoff: Many authors underestimate the importance of a good cover letter and the indelible impression made by a bad one. Never tell an agent your book is sure to be a bestseller; never tell an agent that you've decided that she would be the person you would like to have represent your work (a modest hat-in-hand approach works better); don't mention the fact that you have four novels you would like the agent to represent—too daunting. Any letter that refers to a "fiction novel" is summarily tossed.

Do your research and determine which agents represent the kind of book you are pitching. If it is a thriller, don't send it to someone who does only short-story collections.

Lane Zachary: I'm rather old-fashioned because I've been in the business for a long time. I prefer a letter. Most agents will prefer e-mail, but I'm more likely to open a letter. I get so much e-mail that I sometimes only open e-mail whose address I recognize or if there is something in the

subject matter that seems urgent and important.

The cover letter should be short and sweet, with a couple of paragraphs about the book. Most important, the writer should let me know if he has studied writing or been published in any magazines. This is significant because we are inundated with letters and manuscripts by people who've never studied the craft and have no idea that it's a must. I'm amazed by people who think they can write because they have a Dell computer. No person would think he could play a piano without lessons. Proof that a writer has studied or been published is key.

What makes you likely to respond to a query?

Barer: A well-written query that manages to draw me into the story without giving too much about the plot away gets my attention. Gimmicks, queries that come with author photos or accessories or candy do not. I'm looking for authors who are serious about their writing, and those who are able to articulate on the page what their story is about are a step ahead of the rest. ... It's important to be able to describe your book in a compelling, intelligent way.

Golomb: A well-written query, whether regarding fiction or nonfiction, is discernible by a few things. An author should do his or her research as to what kinds of writer and projects we represent. Equally as important is how the project fits in with our list; why you've chosen the agency as the right one to query; what it is about the agency's list that leads you to conclude we'd respond positively.

Queries that start with "Dear Agent" or attach an entire proposal and take up server space are too general or too assumptive, respectively. A project description/plot summary and the author biography are other necessary elements to a good query. If you feel it would help your case, you can cut and paste the first few pages into the body of the e-mail. It's crucial to keep in mind that you are marketing yourself as well as the importance and timeliness of the project (especially if it's nonfiction).

Schelling: Again, the recommendation from someone I know and/or work with who has read the manuscript. Beyond that, a clear and concise letter that shows knowledge of the market and that gives an excellent, representative sense of the project.

Simonoff: ... I take on very few new writers these days. But in answer to your question, good writing in the query letter itself; a brisk, smart, brief synopsis (three lines or so) that piques my interest; legitimate reference to a recommender I know and trust (don't just make up a referral—I will call and check whether Jhumpa Lahiri told you to send me your manuscript); a credential such as publication in a serious periodical or an MFA or journalism degree.

What do you look for in a manuscript you'll take on?

Barer: I look for great writers who have original and compelling stories to tell. A sense of place appeals to me, which is why I'm particularly interested in international voices and historical novels. Beautiful writing is, of course, very important, but so is knowing how to structure and

OUR AGENT PANEL

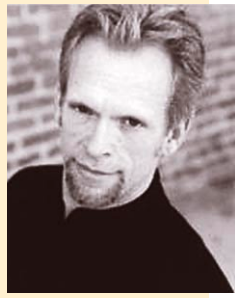
Julie Barer represents a wide range of fiction and nonfiction writers, including National Book Award finalist Joshua Ferris (*Then We Came to the End*) and bestselling historical-novelist Kathleen Kent (*The Heretic's Daughter*). Before starting her own agency, she was a literary agent at Sanford J. Greenburger and a bookseller at Shakespeare & Co. Booksellers in New York. She grew up in New York City and is a graduate of Vassar College.


Julie Barer

Susan Golomb founded the Susan Golomb Literary Agency in 1990 and since then has represented many award-winning and bestselling books, including Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* and William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central*, both of which won the National Book Award; *The Last Town on Earth* by Thomas Mullen; and *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* by Marisha Pessl.


Susan Golomb

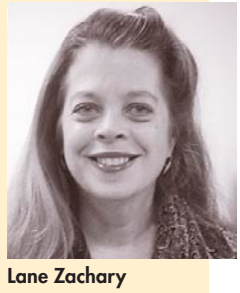
Christopher Schelling has been an agent since 1997 at Ralph M. Vicinanza Ltd., where his clients include Augusten Burroughs, Haven Kimmel, Louis Bayard and Cinda Williams Chima. He was previously an executive editor at Dutton and HarperCollins.


Christopher Schelling

Eric Simonoff is co-director of Janklow & Nesbit Associates, where he has worked since 1991. His clients include two Pulitzer Prize winners, Jhumpa Lahiri and Edward P. Jones; the writing team of Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child; Norah Vincent; Douglas Coupland; and ZZ Packer.


Eric Simonoff

Lane Zachary represents a wide range of fiction and nonfiction writers, including National Book Award winner Ha Jin and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Gail Caldwell, and Hazel Rowley, author of a book about the Roosevelts, *Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage*. Zachary is a founding partner of The Zachary Shuster Harmsworth Literary Agency and a graduate of Mount Holyoke College.


Lane Zachary

pace a story. Without compelling characters and a plot that moves forward, I can get distracted and frustrated. While I'm always willing to help an author work on a manuscript, it helps if the version you submit is as revised and polished a draft as you can make it.

Golomb: ... I look for, first and foremost, clear and compelling writing, a distinctive voice, and an identifiable reason to keep reading. I like fiction that has a fresh hook, something new to say about a period or that narrates a circumstance about which we haven't heard. With nonfiction I look for intelligent, thoughtful, provocative ideas that also are original and of interest to a general, educated reader.

Schelling: Those unbeatable, hard-to-achieve combinations—unique and familiar, literary and commercial, specific and far-reaching. It's hard to say what it is until it's there, so I end up with fairly useless generalities. "A book I like" doesn't give a hell of a lot of direction, especially when I can't even pin down my own curious tastes. When I find something I'm drawn to, I definitely think about the right editor for it. Agenting is a bit like matchmaking (something I'm loath to do elsewhere in life) ...

Simonoff: Good writing, of course. A sure hand, a feeling the writer is confidently taking me somewhere I haven't been before. A feeling of connection and excitement.

Zachary: If the writing quality grabs me, I'll read the manuscript. The story and character development are very important, but if the writing is unexceptional I'll probably put it down. If the writing is good, it's important there be a unique voice, a reliable narrator, and a story trajectory.

The two mistakes I most often see are overwriting and losing the narrative thread of the story. Manuscripts that I read often start out with a punch and then wander aimlessly and lose narrative drive.

What happens once you decide to represent an author?

Barer: Once we've agreed to work together, I spend anywhere from three to six months (sometimes more) helping the author get the material ready for submission—both line editing and helping shape the proposal or manuscript until I feel it's as close to perfect as I can get it. ... In this competitive market, everything has to be as polished as possible.

Golomb: Once we've requested a manuscript and taken the time to read it and feel we are a good fit for the author, I'll work editorially with the client to develop a project into its best shape [for submission]. When the manuscript is ready, we send it out to a carefully selected group of editors based on their acquisitions profile and our previous experiences [with them].

Schelling: At that point we've already met or spoken on the phone and had a few e-mail exchanges, so we know how we mesh. The agency has a straightforward one-page agreement, which we both sign, and I get ready to send the material out. I give the author a list of likely editors and houses I'll submit to, and ask them if they have suggestions based on [successful] books they think are similar.

Simonoff: I work closely with authors to ensure that the work we bring to market is ready for prime time. Once we agree it is, I draw up a proposed submissions list and run it by the client. Some clients are happy to sit back and watch. Others are more inquisitive ...

From the time a piece of material is submitted, it could be 24 hours (in the best of cases) or it could be a couple of weeks before initial responses start coming in. It is an intensely nerve-wracking time for an author ... and I try to be in touch as much as possible throughout the process.

Zachary: I let them know my vision for the book and the type of work I think it needs, and then I see if my vision matches theirs. If we're in agreement and we can work together, I then do heavy editing. The author and I work on several drafts before the manuscript ever lands on a publisher's desk. First, I write a conceptual editorial letter and ask for a rewrite. I examine very deeply all the threads of a manuscript—the plot, characters, pace and meaning. Once all those things are in place, I will then do a line edit. Hopefully, all these changes help the writer fully realize her vision for the book.

How much do you work with an author on revisions?

Golomb: Frequently I'll work in depth with an author on revising a manuscript if I feel it inherently has merit but needs work before being ready to be seen by publishers. I feel it's very important in this difficult market to go out with the best possible manuscript and look for writers who are committed and willing to do the hard work this can take. A writer really shows his or her chops in the revision process, and a solid revision to me is one that is thorough, meaning the writer has restructured and reimagined, if necessary, his story/concept to work to a greater degree, not just rejiggered a paragraph here and there.

Schelling: For fiction, I usually have them do one round of light revisions. As a former editor, I enjoy the process, and as an agent, I like to push a writer to fix things that might stand in the way of a good (or any) offer. And I also want to see how quickly, how easily, the writer works so I can tell potential editors ...

For nonfiction, I frequently do more hands-on work shaping proposals and sample material. But quite honestly, I don't take something on if I can only see a glimmer and it's going to take a huge amount of work to realize the potential. ... It needs to be fairly ready-to-market because of the time and energy constraints of the job.

Simonoff: It depends on the degree to which I feel I can help. I spend a lot of time editing nonfiction proposals because they are small, compact, and every line counts. As for fiction, I am better at macro-editing than micro-editing—that is, if I have a sense of how to fix a big, structural problem, I work with the author editorially, but I don't line-edit fiction. There aren't enough hours in the day.

"PUBLISHING IS A TEAM SPORT, AND THE BETTER YOU PLAY WITH OTHERS, THE BETTER YOU'LL DO."
Julie Barer

What are some challenges that come up with authors?

Barer: Obviously everyone wants their book to be a big success—what author doesn't dream of being on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*? But there are thousands of books published, and not every book can get that kind of attention. Sometimes my biggest challenge is helping authors adjust their expectations and stop comparing their books and careers to everyone else's.

In addition, the publishing industry now, more than ever, expects authors to be incredibly involved in the publication of their book by actively participating in promotion and publicity, and for those writers who are maybe shy or uncomfortable with this aspect, it can be difficult. Publishing is a team sport, and the better you play with others, the better you'll do.

"THE TWO MISTAKES I MOST OFTEN SEE WRITERS MAKE ARE OVERWRITING AND LOSING THE NARRATIVE THREAD OF THE STORY."
Lane Zachary

Golomb: Revision (sometimes conception), sale, the editorial process and publication. If a project does not sell on the first round, it's easy for a client to get discouraged, so the challenge, for both parties, is to re-evaluate and see what needs to be improved and adapted while still believing the project has merit.

Part of an agent's job is to never give up, but we need the same from our clients. ... Other challenges include keeping an author's spirits up and keeping publishers committed in this rough climate of fewer and fewer review pages, flat sales, etc. An agent needs to be both cheerleader and warrior in these difficult times.

Simonoff: An agent's job is to advocate for his client throughout the publication process, but that doesn't necessarily mean being a yes man. I always endeavor to give my clients my frank, honest and best artistic and professional (and sometimes personal) counsel. Common challenges include editorial disagreement between a client and her editor; an author who is presented with hideous and/or inappropriate jacket art; disagreements over the title.

But more generally there is the question of managing expectations, of counseling an author as to whether she should stay with her option publisher or sample the marketplace, serving as a sounding board when an author is choosing his next book idea, and generally keeping on top of publishers to ensure books don't slip through the cracks.

Zachary: My authors don't really give me problems. I love my authors. It's my job to make sure that we put their best work forward and to advocate for them with the publisher. There's a lot to advocate for, such as the book cover, the print run, the book tour. Every five years or so, the industry changes its mind as to what sells a book. Right now, the industry thinks front-of-the-bookstore space is most important. Publishing houses have to pay money for that space, so we advocate strongly for that.

What do you advise new authors on approaching agents?

Barer: Do your research—most agencies these days have detailed Web sites that specify what kinds of books they're looking for and how they prefer you approach them. ... Don't just approach the big agencies and the famous agents—consider trying younger agents who might be hungrier than someone more established, or boutique agencies that might have smaller but more focused lists. Look at the Association of Authors' Representatives Web site (www.aar-online.org) for good tips and information.

Golomb: Try to make your work as polished and distinctive as possible. Think who your audience might be. Be persistent but not pushy, and build up your publication credits and profile, such as in literary journals and print and online magazines, before submitting a manuscript for consideration, if possible. ...

Schelling: Be thick-skinned. This industry is about rejection as much as—or more than—anything. Agents aren't necessarily a gentle breed, so as hard as any of us may try to avoid it, feelings get stomped. Disheartening form letters, too-blunt rejections, non-response, unspeakable passages of time—I doubt many agents set out to crush writers through these methods, but given the sheer volume of words we confront, all of the above and worse can happen. Don't take it personally. Objects in the publishing mirror are not as [jerky] as they appear. Unless they are. And that's what voodoo dolls are for.

Simonoff: Do your homework, and I mean that in two ways. As I said before, send to the right agents, but don't jump into the arms of the first agent who responds positively. This is an entirely unregulated industry. Anyone can call himself an agent and *poof*, he is an agent. There are many, many agents out there, and as daunting as the process of finding one who will return your calls may seem, most of them are actively seeking good new clients. Keep plugging and if your book is worthy, you will find one. It would be nice to find an experienced and powerful one, but there is no substitute for raw enthusiasm. In the end, it is passion for the material that carries the day.

Zachary: Networking is really important. If your friend is a writer with an agent, that referral can be helpful. There are so many manuscripts coming in. We first read those recommended by one of our writers or someone we know. Secondly, we look at manuscripts by writers who have studied with another writer or at an MFA program, and writers who've published in journals or magazines. Another good way to make contact with agents is through a literary conference. You can also find the names of good agents in the Acknowledgements section of books you admire.

If you have the good fortune to speak to an agent in person or on the phone, I suggest you talk about your project in a few concrete, winning sentences. Don't run on and on.

The truth is, agents are always looking for new talent. However, you can't bluff or fake that. Your writing has to be unique, and your story meaningful and page-turning.

Sarah Anne Johnson
A contributing editor at *The Writer*, Sarah Anne Johnson is author of *The Very Telling* and other books. Web: www.sarahannejohnson.com.