



CHAPTER ELEVEN:

what a literary agent does—and why

When asked what I do for a living, the answer, “I’m a literary agent,” draws as many puzzled looks as it does knowing nods. To the question “What does a literary agent do?” the simple answer is, “An agent helps a writer find a publisher for his book.”

An agent has two primary duties: to oversee his clients’ careers and to know as many people as possible in the business. Why does he need to know so many people?

Because, while anyone aspiring to write a book might know the names of different publishing houses, like Doubleday or Penguin, and might even have some idea of the kinds of books that come out under those imprints, the reality is that each publishing house is staffed by (among many other people) a cadre of editors, each of whom has different tastes and interests and publishes different kinds of books. The job of the agent is to know as much as possible about each editor, so that when, say, a book on rock climbing crosses his desk, he’ll be able to come up with a list of editors who might find it interesting. The more he knows about them—not only their tastes but their career histories, their relationships with their colleagues and

their bosses, their successes and failures and future ambitions—the better he'll be able to match them up with the right writers and books.

THE THREE-HOUR LUNCH AND YOUR CAREER

Since fiction doesn't fall as easily into specific subject headings as non-fiction, the job of knowing an editor's tastes is a little more complicated. Agents encounter editors in many ways, from e-mail and letters to meetings, parties, conferences, and lunches, and at each encounter they can learn something about the editor that they'll be able to put to future use.

Publishing people are famous—or notorious—for being the last ones to leave a restaurant—usually a nice one—at lunch. During the course of the two- or three-hour meal, the agent and the editor get to know one another. The agent might try to draw the editor out on a number of different levels. First, he might find out where the editor has worked before and how long she's been at her current position. This gives him a basic idea of her level of experience.

Then he might ask the editor about the books on her current list that she's most excited about publishing. Through the way she describes them, he can learn something about her taste, what fascinates her, what kind of writing or story grabs her, and how well she talks about the book. Because the editor is a book's primary advocate and champion within the publishing house, the agent wants to find out if she can communicate her enthusiasm—make him feel that the book she's describing is a book he must read. If she can do that, it follows that she'll be good at conveying her enthusiasm to the rest of the staff, like the sales representatives, the publicists, the marketing and advertising departments, the people who sell rights to book clubs and foreign publishers and, above all, to her boss—the person who must okay any financial offer the publisher makes.

The agent might try to move the conversation to more personal topics as well, such as where she lives, where she grew up and went to college, whether

she's planning a vacation this year and where it will be, and whether she's married and has children. He wants to uncover any surprising nuggets of information that might lead to a match with a certain kind of book or a certain kind of author. He might want to find out if certain kinds of cultures fascinate her—does she love the South and fiction set in the South?—or if there are certain things she has an aversion to. For instance, if an editor has very young children, it's unlikely she'll be able to read a novel about a child in dire jeopardy with any degree of comfort.

MAKING THE APPROACH AND FOLLOWING THROUGH

Putting all these bits of knowledge together can lead to obvious matches, but sometimes it's just food for intuition. At one lunch, I decided to bring along a first novel I hadn't been able to sell after a few months of submissions. Set in Jerusalem, it was the story of an unmarried woman and her struggle to find not only the right man but the right relationship with God. My lunch date was someone I'd known for years, and I knew she had four children and was raising them in an observant Jewish home. Yet I also knew her tastes were more commercial than this novel.

At lunch, the editor handed me a copy of a book that was to be published that week and told me the story of how she'd bought it, and all the prepublication signs that seemed to be pointing to a big success. (It later became one of the year's biggest bestsellers.) I put the manuscript I'd brought off to the side of the table so she could see it, but I didn't mention it. Instead, we caught up with each other's lives until the coffee came. At that point, I told her that I'd brought a book that was probably not right for her list at all, but there was something about it that made me think of her. She agreed to take it with her and get back to me soon.

When I called the editor early the next week to follow up, she told me she'd liked the novel, but she thought it needed work. We embarked upon a forty-five minute discussion of the novel, its strengths and weaknesses, its

potential audience, what the author was like, and whether she would be willing to revise. At the end of the conversation, the editor said, “Wow, that was like a reading-group discussion! I’m going to get a few other people to read the book and get back to you next week.” Naturally I told her of the handful of other editors who still had the manuscript under consideration, and she promised to be quick.

Later that afternoon, the editor called again and got right down to business: “Listen, I don’t want to wait. I want to buy the novel today. I talked to my boss about it and she said to go for it. Here’s the offer. It’s only good for today, so talk to the author and call me back.” Even though the book needed editing, the editor was confident she’d be able to work with the author to get it into good shape. By the end of the day, my client, who had worked hard for several years and through many revisions on her first novel, had a publisher.

CHAMPIONING YOUR WORK OVER THE LONG HAUL

As you can see, many factors went into that sale—the relationship between agent and editor, the editor’s proven ability to publish well, her professionalism, her ability to move quickly when she found something she wanted to publish. But none of those factors would have meant anything if the book hadn’t been wonderful. The fact that I believed it to be a good book committed me to selling it and made it easy for me to keep trying to sell it even in the face of several rejections. What you will want to find in an agent for your first novel is a person who believes in your book, believes in you, and isn’t swayed by the opinions of others.

Here’s another example of combining commitment to a writer’s work with knowledge of an editor’s personal interests. I once invited an editor of children’s and young adult books (neither of which I represented) to my house to watch a football game on television with me and my husband. Although this editor is one of publishing’s true intellectuals, completely

steeped in books and writing, literary criticism, and the history of publishing, he was also, I had discovered, a major Giants fan.

When he arrived, he told me he had a new job: He was going to start up an imprint to publish multicultural literary fiction for young adults. As it happened, I had in my office a novel about a young woman in Japan whose mother had committed suicide. The prose was incredibly poetic and beautiful, yet thirty adult-book editors had already turned the collection down because it was “too quiet.” In the meantime, several chapters had been published in literary magazines, so at halftime, the editor read the one that had just come out in the *Kenyon Review*. When he finished, he said, “This is exactly what I’m looking for. Send me the manuscript.” He bought the book within a couple of weeks, and when the book was published a year later, the *New York Times*, in a long and glowing review, called it “the kind of novel that comes along once in a generation.” Titled *Shizuko’s Daughter*, the book won numerous awards for young adult fiction and is still in print fifteen years later. It’s been published around the world, most recently in China, and the author has since published four other books.

The author of that book, Kyoko Mori, had first approached me over the transom—meaning she hadn’t been referred to me in any way but had simply sent a blind query letter to the agency where I worked at the time. Her letter was impressive, and I asked to see her manuscript. I read it right away and loved the book, but as a new agent I hadn’t yet developed a long list of contacts or a full sense of a variety of editors’ likes and dislikes. The book was beautiful, yes, but it *was* quiet, and for months I considered sending it back—but I simply couldn’t get it out of my mind. The characters and their trials and tribulations, the vivid poetic images, and the exotic Japanese setting combined with the universal theme of a child grieving for her beloved parent came back to me again and again. Finally I decided that was the best test of whether I should choose to represent a book or not. I called the author and asked to represent her. Thankfully, she said yes.

While it took me an inordinately long time to respond to Kyoko’s manuscript, the lesson I learned—that if you can’t forget a book, it’s worth taking on—has stayed with me, and it’s one of the indicators most agents and edi-

tors use when making a decision about whether or not to publish a work of fiction. It's only through such an intense connection with a book that an agent will be able to keep going through (in this case) thirty rejections and get you both to the lucky thirty-first submission. If a book holds such fascination for an agent, he can truly believe it will hold an equal fascination for some editor somewhere, and certainly for readers. And because not every one of those thirty editors turned the book down flat—several of them, younger editors largely, wrote and said they'd tried to buy it but their bosses hadn't allowed them to offer for it—my belief in Kyoko's work held firm until I found someone to publish the novel I couldn't forget.

When you're looking for an agent, you'll want to find someone who believes in you and your work. For some, this will happen serendipitously. For others, many years, many revisions, many rejection letters, and many hours of despair will come along before they connect with an agent who can help them get published. Yet even getting an agent is no guarantee—I've heard too often of the agent who sends a manuscript out to six or seven editors, then drops it when there isn't a quick sale. On the other hand, you and an agent might agree at the start that that's what you want to do: If a small segment of the market speaks and says "no," you're both planning to move on. The important thing, after all the research you've done to confirm that the agent is credible—something we'll discuss in greater detail later in this book—is to listen to your instincts about whether the person is working well for you or not.