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Bridget's Guide to the Agent Search

You've got a book. You think it's good. It's been read by a few people—friends, beta readers, maybe a professional editor—and they think it's good too. You want to get it published, and you've decided you want a commercial house to do that, not an academic press, a hybrid press, or a self-publishing outfit.

If you're in this position, then you need an agent. Agents are the gatekeepers to the big presses. If you want to be published with one of them (or with one of their imprints), you have no choice but to get an agent first.

So, how the heck do you do that?

You engage in a process that I see as having **three parts**—all of which I will walk you through below:

- 1. Researching agents who might be good fits for you.**
- 2. Assembling a list of the ones you want to pitch.**
- 3. Pitching them.**

Please note that I'm not going to tell you what to do when you find one; that's another topic for another day—and a good problem to have!

1. Researching agents

Your holy grail is an agent who loves both your subject matter and your style. Ideally, he or she has published other books in your genre, and you admire one or more of them. This picture-perfect agent has the industry connections, drive, and time to get your book out to editors and is perhaps even interested in a longer-term relationship with your work.

Where do you find this person?

They're out there, but you have to do your research to find them. You're going to need to go digging in three different pool of resources, which I have presented below in order of priority:

- A. Friends/acquaintances/colleagues who have published books.*

These folks are far and away your best resources. If they have agents, they can put you in touch with them. If they don't, they will likely know people who do.

Direct referrals are powerful. Most agents feel compelled to respond promptly to an email from one of their authors that says, "Check out my friend so-and-so's work" or a note from you that says, "Your client so-and-so recommended that I get in touch with you." These kinds of communications put you in their inbox rather than in the inbox titled submissions@abigliteraryagency.com (which is almost certainly attended to by an intern). If you have a connection like this, you will get at least a few minutes of the agent's attention—and that is gold. While this agent may not be the right fit for you, they may know someone who is.

Think long and hard about people in your life who might have connections of this sort, even if they are somewhat distant. Chances are you know more of them than you think you do. Brainstorm, ask around, and keep a running list.

B. Books on your shelf at home or on your favorite shelf at the bookstore

Chances are you read the kinds of books you like to write. Rifle through your collection and pull out the texts that are most like yours (in subject matter, style, or tone). Look at who represented these books—you'll almost always find this information in the Acknowledgments, where the author says, "Many thanks to my agent, so-and-so." Write that name down.

Then, do the same thing at your local bookstore. If you're working on a memoir, go to the memoir section and start pulling books off the shelves. If they look intriguing, figure out who their agents were and write down the titles, authors, and agents you turn up. (Incidentally, this is also a good way to find great new books to read as well as a key step towards finding "comparable titles"—a process you may have to engage in if you need to write a book proposal down the line.)

There's an online equivalent of this process, of course: Amazon. My least favorite corporate overlord, for better or worse, does a fabulous job of "recommending" books that are similar to each other. Start with a title that is like to your book and let the algorithm do the work from there. Goodreads is also a great resource for similar titles. In both of these cases, you probably won't be able to flip to the Acknowledgments to see who the agent was, so you might still need to traipse down to the library or bookstore to track that information down.

C. Online agent lists, databases, and referral services

There are free online sources that list agents and their interests. Among the most popular are:

- Poets and Writers' Literary Agents Database
- Manuscript Wish List
- Agent Query

But there are literally hundreds of indexes out there. Some require a paid subscription, which typically entitles you to a lot more information than what is available for free.

Keep in mind that when you search these databases, the closest you can get to determining whether or not an agent's tastes align with yours is a phrase like "I'm looking for women's fiction" (which is super vague) or "I love anything that dives into the rock and roll lifestyle" (which is a lot more helpful). You're going to need to refer to this phrase—or better yet, to a book the agent represented—if you decide to pitch them, so, in addition to writing down the agent's name in your files, make a note of the connection between your work and their interests that's prompting you to do so.

This research can take time, so it's a process that's best started as early as possible. In fact, there's no reason not to start it while you're working on an early draft. It uses such a different part of your brain from the writing process that it can be a fun diversion along the way.

2. Assembling your pitch list

Once you've decided that you've done all the research you can (i.e., you're sick of it AND you've exhausted all of your resources), it's time to take all of those names you've written down and do a little more research on them.

Questions you'll need to answer are:

- Are they accepting new clients at this time? If not, do they say when they will open their submission window again?
- What do they require in a pitch? Just a query letter, or a query letter and some pages? Or is there an online form that they have folks fill out? Do they want a full proposal? If you have not written one (and/or don't want to), you might deprioritize agents who require them.
- Where do you send the required information to? And, what details do they ask for? (e.g., many agents say something like, "Please put 'QUERY: YOUR TITLE HERE' in the subject line; emails that do not adhere to this convention will be disregarded." You want to make sure to play by their rules.)
- What kind of follow up do they want? Often, it's none, in which case they will say, "We'll get in touch if we're interested. Please do not contact us to follow up." If they say, "Feel free to follow up if you haven't heard from us in 4-6 weeks," write that down as well.

For me, it works best to keep all of this information in a spreadsheet, but any organized system will work.

3. Pitching

Once you're done with your book and you've perfected your query letter, it's time to start pitching. One by one, go down your list. I recommend starting with your best leads, then progressing to the long shots.

Keep in mind that every single pitch you send needs to be adapted to the specific agent you are addressing. I know, it's a pain. But I have heard agents say time and again that they do not pay any attention to generalized "form" pitches. They want to know why you are pitching them and not one of the thousand other agents out there. You **MUST** present a thread of connection between their interests and your work (ideally, a book they represented that you liked) in your letter. This means that each pitch is likely to take you at least a half hour to put together. For this reason, when I have been in a pitching cycle, I have held myself to some kind of "quota" process (e.g., I pitched 2 agents a day for a week, then took a break).

Make sure that you obey every one of the rules they put forth. If they say they don't want attachments (common), don't give them attachments! If they say they want the first 10 pages of your book pasted in, don't give them 5 or 12 pages. Not playing by the rules gets you thrown in the electronic trash.

When approaching agents who you have some connection to (e.g., your writer friend's agent), it's best to ask that connection/friend how they think it's best to proceed. They may want to orchestrate the introduction themselves, or they might just want you to use their name. Do what they suggest.

What about paying to meet with an agent at a writing conference?

If you have the resources to do this (it can be as much as \$50 or \$100 for a 15-minute meeting), go for it! Chances are the agent you talk to won't be a great fit, but they may know someone who is. Alternatively, they might give you advice on your query letter or on your strategies for approaching an agent. At the very least, meeting with them will give you some practice talking about your project with someone who may be less supportive than your friends and family, which is good practice to get.

So, how long do you do this for?

That's really up to you. When I was pitching my book (a collection of nature essays—so, a genre with a relatively limited audience of agents), I stopped when I hit about 25 people and just couldn't find any more decent leads. That said, a friend of mine who wrote a memoir pitched 180 agents (and found one).

It's worth thinking about how much energy you have for this process (versus doing other things with your life, like writing!) and at what point you plan to throw in the towel and start looking at other venues (small presses that don't require agents, hybrid presses, and self-publishing options—often great choices for many people). I routinely talk people through this process and through evaluating options, so let me know if you ever want to bounce ideas around.

I suspect that there are people out there who think this process is fun. I can't say that I am one of them. I consider it a necessary evil—something to be rationed out like cod liver oil and dealt with in small bites. So, take care of yourself while you engage with it.

And, if you get a positive response—which might look like “Hey, can you send me the whole book?” or “Let's set up a call”—celebrate! Quickly, that is. Then respond ASAP. And let me know if I can help!

*If you have any questions about any of this or want to run your ideas by me,
I'm always happy to help with this process!
Just reach out...*