

THE PATH TO A PUBLISHING DEAL isn't always an easy one, but a good literary agent will help you navigate the choppy waters and champion your cause. However, with all the world telling you that securing an agent is *more difficult* than getting a publisher, how on earth do you get yourself an agent in the first place?

Sophie Hamley, senior literary agent at Cameron Creswell Agency gave us her thoughts...

How to get an Agent

WHY YOU NEED AN AGENT

The first thing to understand is *why* you need an agent. Australia is slightly different to America, where it's almost impossible to get published without an agent, but more and more it's the case that Australian trade publishers prefer to take submissions from agents, rather than directly from writers, as they simply don't have the time or capacity to find the gold in the 'slush pile'. There's also the expectation that an author who has an agent will be better prepared for the publishing process, and will know what to expect in terms of editing, marketing and publicity.

WHAT AN AGENT DOES

An agent helps their writer find and keep a publisher, and one who loves your book will give it the right sort of editorial, design, marketing, publicity and sales attention it needs. They will also connect you with a publisher with whom you're most comfortable working. The agent will be the intermediary, offering guidance and support and helping you prepare for the publishing process, whilst allowing you to concentrate on what you do best - writing.

BEFORE YOU SUBMIT

Before approaching an agent, make sure your manuscript is really ready. The first draft is never the final one, so adopt the 'bottom drawer' technique – once you've finished Draft One put it away and leave it for a few weeks. Don't show it to anyone, don't peek, don't re-read the first page – just don't look at it. After about four to six weeks – the longer the better, because that way you'll get a fresh perspective on it – go back and read it from start to finish. You'll probably have to go through this process a few times, but it serves the purpose of bringing your novel as close to perfection as it can be.

Once you think you finally have the right draft to send out, you can now start investigating agencies. Check the Australian Literary Agents Association or *The Australian Writer's Marketplace* for a comprehensive list. Go to each agency's website to check their individual submission guidelines, read them and follow them TO THE LETTER. As you look at the sites, check for authors who are writing in your genre and also for any information that says what sort of manuscripts the agency wants. For example, if you've written a crime novel and the agency only represents romance and horror, you wouldn't send a submission to them.

HOW TO APPROACH AN AGENT

The basic rule I'd apply when approaching agents is BE POLITE. In all your interaction with the agency, we are assessing whether we want to have you as a client. Don't approach an agency with a sense of entitlement and become rude if we haven't read your submission in a week. Keep in mind that we are not your enemy – we simply may not have time to read your submission quickly, so it's wise to respect the fact that we can't respond immediately.

Another very important aspect of approaching an agency is your written communication, including your query or cover letter and your synopsis. All your communication is representative of your writing skill, whether it's an email or a more formal letter, so do let your personality come through, but be professional. And check your spelling.

Writing a query letter is also a helpful process for you, as it forces you to think about who the reader is, what you're hoping for with the book, and how you'd try to convince someone to buy it. Also include anything that's relevant to your writing, including any courses you have done, or writing 'credits' you may have achieved. Unless it specifically says not to on the agency's website, it is safe to assume that they are happy for you to submit to multiple agencies at the same time, but do be clear about this in your letter to avoid any later confusion.

Definite query letter no-nos: saying things like, 'you'll regret it for the rest of your life if you don't sign me because I am the greatest writer in the world' or saying you have read the submission guidelines but then flagrantly flouting them. Ignoring the guidelines - which are there for a reason - is an almost certain ticket to rejection. 'Dear Sir' is also a risk, as many people who work in publishing and agenting are women.

See the next page for an example of a good query letter.

Your synopsis should be a clear, succinct outline of the plot, weaving in characters but avoiding giving detailed character descriptions. Keep the language simple - the style in which you write the synopsis doesn't have to be the same style you use in the novel - and the sentences reasonably short.

WHAT MAKES GOOD WRITING

Quite often with agents (myself included) there is no identifiable trend to the *sort* of books I'll choose for the agency. The books do, however, all have a few things in common:

1. A good story, and one that is evident early on.
2. The story should be well told. In fiction, the writing must be strong; in non-fiction a great story can sometimes override the need for great writing, and that's quite okay.
3. The author needs to be clear who their reader is.

4. While there may be no completely original stories under the sun, there are ways of telling stories that are new. Usually that will come down to the narrative voice, whether in first, second or third person. It is the one element that has to engage the reader straightaway, even before the story kicks in.
5. Be professional about your writing – you have to be aware that there is work to do beyond writing the manuscript, and be willing to do it to get a readership. Bottom line, you have to write books that people want to buy, so be realistic.
6. The best writers are those who read a lot – so keep reading. Read in your genre, read outside your genre – just read. It also helps to place yourself within the industry and literary world in general.

In a nutshell:

1. Draft, draft and re-draft. Writing is a job – it's work, work, work.
2. Do your research – find appropriate agencies and check their submission guidelines.
3. Craft a good query letter and synopsis.
4. Be polite, professional - and patient.

Good Luck!

**Query letter from Sharlene Miller Brown, author of *The Retreaters* (ABC Books 2008)
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June 19, 2006

Sophie Hamley
Cameron Creswell Agency
Locked Bag 848
Surry Hills NSW 2010

Dear Sophie,

I am writing to you regarding my debut novel, *The Retreaters*.

I'm Australian, but have been living – and working on my writing – in New York for the past three years (I travel to Australia regularly and plan to move back permanently next year). Thanks to my participation in several workshops and conferences here in the States (including the Sewanee Writers Conference and the Tin House Writer's Workshop), I believe that my novel is ready for representation.

Set in the small NSW town of Hatton River, *The Retreaters* tells the story of Liv – 30-year-old bookworm and would-be librarian – who suffers the loss of her only living relative, and goes deaf overnight. Amidst whispers that she played a role in her aunt's passing, Liv takes a live-in job at the exclusive Cottonwood Retreat, a wine-country resort fifteen kilometres outside her town, where she finds herself surrounded by an array of characters, including Jake, a young boy who seems to be receiving regular visits from his sister's ghost, and Mason, an elusive gardener with a hidden past. Surrounded by this new motley crew, Liv sets out to uncover the reasons behind her unexplained deafness, and in turn discovers that loss, in all its forms, can't always be explained, and that the new start she's been craving might already be in motion.

As both a reader and a writer, I'm interested in characters who form families – and find their place – as much through emotion and landscape as by blood. Considering Cameron Creswell Agency's client list, I'm well aware that the chances of you taking on a new writer are slim, but since the agency represents so many authors whose work I love (in particular, Eva Sallis and Brian Castro, whose novels remind me of why books by Australian authors matter so much) I just had to give it a try.

Enclosed are the first twenty pages of *The Retreaters* for your review, and a one-page synopsis. I've included my email address for a reply (no SASE, due to my lack of Australian stamps). If requested, I'd love to send you a larger sample, or the entire manuscript.

Kind regards,

Sharlene Miller Brown