



# LITERARY AGENTS: ARE THEY ESSENTIAL?

by  
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“You *must* get an agent!” is advice that inquiring writers hear and read everywhere. Is it really true?

Our publishing statistics in Canada demonstrate that it is simply a misconception caused by American influence. In Canada, only ten percent of books are agented. Aspiring and established authors here successfully submit the majority (10,000) of the titles published every year directly to editors. US writers face more worrying odds – 80% of all books published there are agented.

How do you know if you need an agent? Well, try the following questions:

- Do I want my book published in the States as well as Canada?
- Is my book international in scope?
- Is it likely to sell tens of thousands of copies?
- Is the topic of interest to almost everyone?

If all your answers are yes, you probably need an agent to break into one of the eight publishing conglomerates in the US, which work solely through literary agencies. In Canada, no, but you could benefit from one.

If your book is more modest, the chances of attracting representation are slim indeed and they are even slimmer if you are unpublished. The reason is the bottom line. Agents are paid out of the author’s advance and royalty payments. The math tells the story:

- . An author makes 10% on each book sold;
- . On 4000 copies sold at \$25.00/copy, the author earns \$10,000.00. (4000 copies is the minimum for a Canadian bestseller);
- . With a commission of 15%, an agent would earn \$1500.00 on 4000 copies.

An agent spends about \$1000.00 to market the work of a first time author and typically takes a year or more to sell it and receive the commission from the first advance payment. Writers must remember that first books usually sell considerably less than 4000 copies in Canada and only one in four earns out its advance. For example, my book, *Through a Canadian Periscope* (Dundurn 1995), had a print run of only 3000 and was

considered a success here, but no agent would have been interested because it didn't earn enough. The figures, of course, get better for the agent as the sales go up. At 10,000 copies, an agent would earn \$3750.00; at 50,000 copies, \$18,750.00. But in Canada sales of 50,000 are the exception and very unlikely for a first time author....

If you truly believe you have the next blockbuster, you'll need an agent. S/he will help an author to prepare an outstanding proposal or synopsis and even improve your manuscript. A good agent exposes your work to all the right editors at all the right houses and increases the chances of gaining its acceptance because the publishers know and trust their judgement. After receiving the offer to publish, an agent negotiates the contract for you and can often achieve better terms than a fledgling author can ever hope to do. S/he will also sell subsidiary rights, if they have been retained, after the book is sold.

Where do Canadians find a literary agent? *The Canadian Writer's Guide* (available in any library) lists twenty-four agencies in this country, four of which handle only screenplays and scripts, and one, just translations. Most have connections to American publishing houses. If you are seeking to publish your book in the States, there are hundreds of agencies to choose from and the best listing is to be found in Jeff Herman's *Writer's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents* (Prima Publishing, 1997).

Writers submit to agents in the same way as they do to editors—with a sales pitch, which is called a query letter, and a SASE. You may send out several letters at the same time, as long as you inform the agents that you have done so. If an agent offers to represent you, try and meet face to face. Make sure you find out what he has sold and who's on his client list. Get permission to talk to a few of his authors. Ask if he attends national and international book fairs and what his connections are in the publishing industry.

The rest of us writing books of lesser stature or regional interest have to become our own literary agents. Knowledge is power, so get out and take courses that will teach you how and where to market your work and how to write your own query letters, non-fiction proposals and fiction synopses. Learn what clauses publishing contracts contain and how to negotiate them and, last of all, develop the skills to promote your book to increase sales. Remember, in Canada the odds remain in your favour *without* an agent.

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