Club Ed Conversations

What Developmental Editors Need to Know about Literary Agents

Gwyn Jordan answered questions about literary agents and all things publishing and developmental editing. Here’s a little bit more about her:

Gwyn Jordan is a developmental and line editor who specializes in romance, women’s fiction, mystery, thriller, and suspense. She’s also a literary agent and book reviewer for Publishers Weekly. Gwyn specializes in plot and character development, relationship development, consistency, pace, flow, developing conflict, syntax, sentence structure, dialogue, tightening sentences, and more. In addition to individual clients, Gwyn edits for Hallmark and HarperCollins. Gwyn lives in Haslet, TX.

**Question** (Jennifer Lawler): *Gwyn, maybe you could say a few words about what a literary agent does – how does the process work?*

**Answer**: In regard to a literary agent’s duties, it’s a common misconception that we don’t do much outside of reading submissions and pitching books. While this is a huge part of our job, it’s hardly the only duty.

As an agent, I do a lot of networking. New editors appear on the scene all the time. Don’t get confused with editors as in developmental editing. Right now, I’m referencing the editors who acquire books for publishing houses. Not all are called acquisitions editors, as the editors we often submit to must get approval from acquisitions or senior editors before making an offer.

I attend conferences and workshops, participate in pitch fests, negotiate contracts, and do a lot of networking. Literary agents must get to know editors and their preferences. This is very important, because there’s more to selling a book than a good story.

**Question** (JL): *People sometimes say it’s easier to work with newer literary agents because they’re building their lists. Is that same true of editors – are newer editors (talking about staff editors at publishing houses) more open to pitches because they’re trying to build their lists?*

**Answer**: Yes, newer agents are anxious to get submissions, and it takes a lot of time to go through the slush pile and pick a good story. However, that doesn’t mean they don’t hold out for quality work. Because they don’t have a list of clients, they have more time.

As clients are added to the list, available time to read submissions decreases as the agent has to give priority to their clients, so more time is spent polishing their clients’ work, pitching the stories, negotiating contracts, etc.

The same can be said about editors at publishing houses. There’s a lot that goes into getting a book published, and they are responsible for their books from acquisitions to publishing. Both (agents and editors) prefer career authors, no one-offs, which means clients they’ve already signed are still submitting material which takes precedence over potential clients.

**Question** *(JL): Oh, so that tells me one thing we can help our clients understand is that agents and publishers are looking for career writers. I mean, it’s always “sell the first book first and then we’ll worry about the rest” but if the client has just the one book and that’s all they ever imagine having, that’s going to be less appealing in traditional publishing.*

**Answer**: No, it won’t appeal to them. That doesn’t mean it won’t happen, but it’s highly unlikely an agent will take on a client who just wants to publish that one book. I know if the query doesn’t mention plans for future works, I’ll ask before I make an offer. Editors are the same. When I pitch a book, I include past writing credits, whether or not the book is part of a planned series, and if it’s not, I share ideas for future works.

**Comment** (Jake Nicholls): *I’d also add (if I can chip in with my limited experience) that agents are often able to negotiate multi-book deals for their clients when they sell to a publisher—so, as the author, you’d get a book deal for your existing manuscript, and then suddenly have a deadline to come up with another manuscript (or two!). I imagine that could be pretty stressful if you haven’t got anything on the back burner and if you’ve not had to write a book to deadline before!*

**Answer**: Big names get huge deals without an idea to present – John Grisham, Danielle Steel, etc. But, for a new author, it would be a deal on a series and they would’ve shared the synopses for future installments. Now, if the first book has huge sales, then yes that’s a possibility, but even then, more than likely the editor wants at least a premise, even if the plot is not yet outlined.

**Comment** (JL): *Jake, such a good point – and a great illustration of the need to get started on the* next book while you’re trying to find an agent for the first!

There are a lot of stories of authors who couldn’t get their sophomore novel written (or it took them years) because of the pressure.

**Question** *(Kendra Olson): Gwyn, in terms of indie authors who are seeking representation, is a strong story enough? Is there any way that authors can get a sense of the market, beyond reading comparable titles and a good working knowledge of genre conventions (in the case of genre fiction)? I’m thinking about what you said about angst-ridden stories not selling at the beginning of the pandemic, though I imagine the ones you had were quite compelling!*

**Answer**: No matter what, the story must be marketable and sales for comparables must be good. For example, I’ve received some great stories with a lot of angst and suspense, but during the middle of the pandemic, these types of stories were not selling as well as they were pre-pandemic.

The consensus is that readers were looking for stories to lift their mood, so light, beach reads, romcoms, and such were increasing in sales, whereas angsty dramas, romantic suspense, etc. were decreasing. Because of this, several editors held out on making an offer although they liked some of the stories I pitched. One even told me to try back in 6 months to see if sales had shifted.

Also, although not a requirement, some agents edit their clients work before pitching, and as you know, editing can take up a lot of time.

Publishers pull together sales info usually on a quarterly basis-and during acquisitions meetings- for the books they publish. Agents have access to the sales numbers for their clients’ works, for obvious reasons. There are ways to find out how many copies of a particular books has sold, but I don’t have a resource to find out about every book for every publisher, or to calculate increase/decrease of sales for a specific genre. The editor who told me that was speaking only for her publishing house. Now, another publisher could’ve been having success with their angsty stories.

**Comment** (JL): *Oh, that’s interesting about the advice to hold off for six months to see if things had shifted. So, timing matters, too – but probably not in a way that people can necessarily predict.*

**Question** *(JN): This is really interesting! Re: agents editing their clients’ work, I’ve seen some agents who are very upfront about doing extensive rounds of edits with their clients, in contrast to others who are more focused on acquiring ‘ready to pitch’ manuscripts. I was wondering if you had an impression of what proportion of agents would consider themselves ‘editorial agents’ in that sense, and how many wouldn’t?*

**Answer**: Unfortunately, I don’t. Some agents use to do it, and then stopped as they became to busy or just grew tired of doing it. Some agents edit on the side (such as myself) and others don’t know how to do a developmental edit as it’s not a required skill for agents.

**Comment** *(JL): That reflects my experience! Years ago when I worked as a lit agent, I wanted to be an “editorial agent” and I spent a lot of time helping authors shape their work. But I got busier and busier and that stopped being possible.*

*As a writer I had one agent who was very involved in helping me revise my work so that we would spend months going back and forth and another whose editorial guidance consisted of “fix that typo on page 3 and we’re good.” It really varies!*

**Question** *(JL): Since most of us are working with indie authors, some of whom may be seeking traditional publication, what are a few things we could do to help them improve their chances of finding an agent for their work?*

**Answer**: Get to know literary agents and editors. Some editors accept unsolicited manuscripts, so there is a chance to get a traditional publishing contract without an agent.

I often receive submissions for genres I don’t represent, despite it being clear on my website. Although I will respond and let the author know I don’t accept that genre, a lot of agents will just delete this and never reply because they have already warned you on their website.

Also, not all romance is the same. That’s a saying I have, although it applies to all genres. What I mean is, agents and editors are usually very picky. They are favorable to some things and shy away from others.

For instance, one romance editor may lean more towards stories where the hero is a blue-collar worker, another editor may avoid stories with any mention of abuse (past or present). Then, there’s the agent/editor who loves mysteries but shies away from any involving politics or espionage.

Which brings me back to the original comment – get to know the agent and editor. It seems like a lot of work, but it’s worth it and with social media, it’s not really all that time-consuming. It helps to read books the agent/editor has already contracted/acquired.

Make sure your story fits the genre you are claiming. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been duped by a query because the author doesn’t understand the elements of a genre. In other words, Romeo & Juliet is a tragedy, not a romance.

Edit, edit, edit, and edit some more. Then get someone else to edit it. Not only do you need to edit the big stuff that keeps developmental editors employed, but you need to slay that small, seemingly insignificant stuff as well.

Although I edit my clients’ works, I will not take on a client that won’t even bother to learn their craft. You can have a great premise and a wonderful plot, but if I have to wade through dangling participles, I will pass. Now, you can get by with rogue commas and such. That’s proofreading, not editing. Not to say that’s not important, but I, personally, would not judge on proofreading issues.

One more thing, subscribe to a publication or newsletter that will keep you up-to-date on the industry. Find out what’s selling and what’s not, what agents/editors are looking for.

**Comment** *(JL): Yes, when I ran a romance imprint that accepted unagented mss, I would get romances that did not have an HEA. That is just basic genre stuff. Don’t waste my time.*

*There was one agent in particular who got what I wanted and I always looked forward to seeing her submissions. She must have had about 100% success rate with me and I treasured her! I responded to her super fast and she carried a lot of clout with me. That’s one reason why the right agent can make such a difference in a career.*

**Question** *(JL): You mentioned doing a lot of networking – and since you’re networking both to find author clients and to find editors/publishers, I bet it’s a fairly constant effort. I know networking strikes fear in the heart of most introverts (and there are a lot of us in the DE world). Do you have any tips for making this process easier?*

*It sounds not terribly obvious, but I found that once I started teaching it was easier to network because I got used to having attention on me and sometimes saying something stupid and the world didn’t end. But there must be easier ways than “Establish a teaching career first, and then . . . .”*

**Answer**: My advice is to join organizations, participate in online groups – this is a good way to get your name out there. I don’t suggest offering free editing services, but you can pop into those groups and just leave a tidbit of general writing advice. Also social media.

I know everyone says this, but it’s about how you use it. When you follow accounts, you must actively engage. Eventually someone will remember seeing you several times. But just clicking like or retweeting/sharing the post is not enough. Leave meaningful/memorable/helpful comments. If you want to work with a person, strike up a conversation with them.

It’s easier to do online than in person, and I find even introverted people can handle it. But show people that you are interested in them and looking to make a real connection, not just become another follower to add to the count.

Mention of their accomplishments or let them know you read their blog (actually read it, though). I think it’s human nature to like to hear nice things about ourselves and most will remember those who said it and those who are genuinely interested in them.

If you don’t have a website get one, and make sure you include a blog. Post regularly and showcase your portfolio. Since authors are your clients, try interviewing them. Even written interviews are great. At the beginning of the pandemic, I wanted to interview Jennifer Ryan, but we were both busy and couldn’t commit to a time to zoom (not to mention during the pandemic I laid around in flannels and didn’t look forward to having to get dolled up for a 30-minute zoom interview). So we did an email interview.

Instead of listing questions and having her answer them all, I emailed one question, waited for her response, and then based my next question on her response. This resulted in it sounding more conversational than scripted. We both loved it.

Keep in mind, an author can search for a new agent at any point. You don’t have to target only new or aspiring authors. You can grab a NY Times Bestselling one. Believe it or not, they still get their work edited.

Don’t wait for a job post about freelance work. Connect with editors on LinkedIn and offer your services. Reach out to other established editors or editing companies (make sure they’re reputable as a lot are not) and ask for freelance and/or overflow work.

In the wake of the pandemic, there’s been a lot of free and inexpensive workshops, conferences, and the like. It’s a great idea to attend these and strike up conversations. Take down the names and reach out to them later, one-on-one and tell them what you liked about their presentation and/or ask follow-up questions.

Find a fun, beneficial way to connect. For example, you could do a monthly event where people submit their first page and you critique their hook. Of course you probably can’t do all of them, but writers will tune in to see if they were a “chosen one.” Basically, you have to let people know you’re out there and work hard to not let then forget it.

**Question** *(Raquel B): This was one of the same questions I had! I see a lot of authors who have questions about how much editing they should expect will be done after it is acquired, and whether that should influence when they determine it is ‘ready to pitch’ to agents.*

*Related to Jake’s question, I saw that you mentioned “edit, edit, edit, and edit some more” and that you want authors to know their craft. Would the more ‘editorial agents’ fill that role of really digging into things once they are working with the manuscript, or is there a general limit to what authors should expect even with ‘editorial agents’*?

**Answer**: Although I’m an agent, I still edit for Hallmark and HarperCollins. I’ve received some work that made me wonder if anyone edited the story at all. What I’ve learned while freelance editing for large publishers is that if the story is unique enough, they’re willing to take it on.

That doesn’t mean the author had no idea how to write – that will never fly. But I do sometimes do two rounds of DE for stories that have already been acquired. In regard to line editing, it could be light, moderate, or major overhaul. I’ve changed up to 50% of a book – just editing the lines, not actually changes to the story. We edit without changing the story or the author voice.

Unless it’s a fact-checking issue (I often see the sheriff being fired by the mayor which can’t happen because they are both elected officials), then we don’t change the story, only improve it.

**Question** *(JL): Oh, here’s a question that pops up now and then: What do you think of companies/freelance editors who submit queries to agents on behalf of authors? I sometimes have students who think this is a service they could offer – protecting the author by actually receiving the rejections themselves, then just reporting numbers at some point (“Ten noes, two full requests.”)*

*I have reasons for thinking this is a bad idea, but what about you?*

**Answer**: I agree. I don’t think that’s a good idea. If the editor hasn’t gotten to really know that agent, they run the same risk the author does under these circumstances - submitting work to an agent who’s not interested in that work.

Now, it’s okay to write the query letter for them, but I would avoid submitting the work. In essence, the freelancer will end up being expected to follow-up, not to mention, they’d be setting themselves up for blame. As far as fielding rejections goes, yes you can cushion the blow, but the author will still know they were rejected when you never present them with an offer from those agents.

Gwyn, thanks for joining us! It was a terrific session!