

Approaching Your Editor-to-Be

written by Holly

May 19, 2010

By Holly Lisle

Most of the time, the way you're going to meet your editor is through the mail. (For exceptions to this, jump down to Conventions, Dinners, Hanging Out at the end of this article.) This is pretty neat, really, because you don't have to dress in a suit or hose-and-heels, you don't have to worry about stammering or forgetting her name or your own (always a big concern of mine when meeting anyone in a high-stress situation), and if you have a bit of parsley stuck between your front teeth when you meet, she'll never know. The down side is, if you look fantastic in your business duds and you have a megawatt smile and the most stunning personality this side of the solar system, it won't do you a bit of good.

The only side of you your future editor will see is your work. And your work can make you look like an idiot, no matter how well you might come off in person. Here are some things you must remember, and this advice you will ignore at your own peril.

- **DON'T try to make your manuscript 'stand out.'**

This means don't put your book in a fancy box or an artistically decorated envelope; don't use any color of paper but white; don't use any color of ink but black; don't include your sketches or painting for the cover art (and I don't care how fantastic an artist you are) ; don't include sketches of the characters or little sculptures of them; don't put a box of chocolates in the box; don't put a check for a thousand dollars or ten hundred-dollar bills in the box. EVER.

- **DON'T try to make yourself 'stand out.'**

Don't begin your cover letter with the words "This is your lucky day" or any sentiment of the sort; don't threaten to kill yourself if she doesn't buy your book; don't do a cute cover letter that says, "Once upon a time an editor received a manuscript that changed her life and made her rich beyond the dreams of avarice"; don't include nude photos of yourself, erotic photos of yourself, photos of yourself with your pet tiger, or even nude erotic photos of yourself with your pet tiger.

▪ **DON'T waste your time with the sob story cover letter...**

... that says, "I have twenty starving children and I've been fired from every job I ever had and my husband left me and we're about to be evicted and only you can save us if you'll just buy my book."

▪ **DON'T tell the editor that you expect a ten million dollar advance...**

... and a hardcover printing of 250,000 copies and a book tour and a guest spot on *Oprah*. Don't say that you'll do this first book for nothing, either, if she'll just publish it, or that you'll wax her car or her legs or be her sex slave. Don't mention money at all—you don't know each other yet, and strangers do not talk about money. (Actually, you won't be discussing money at all, because you're going to be smart and get an agent. Agents talk about money.)

A woman called me on the phone back when I had a listed number, demanding the name of my agent. She left a message that said, "I know you've published a few books, and I want the name of your agent. I've written a cookbook, and it will be a hardcover, and it will have full-color illustrations, and I will expect a large advance."

Maybe you have to have been doing this for a while to know how truly funny that call was, but I heard her message and laughed my ass off for about an hour. Then I returned her call and

told her, briefly, that this was not the way the world worked. I recommended some reference book to her (Writer's Market, I think) and to myself I suggested that she also look into therapy. I didn't say that out loud, of course. But I'm a writer, and I can afford to be nice to morons. If I'd been an editor and had gotten that call, I would have had the woman's name put on my Idiot List, and I would have made sure that anything that arrived on my desk with her name on it would have forever after been returned unopened. Editors are so swamped they DON'T have time to be nice to morons.

Here's a little clue for those of you who have never sent anything out before—EDITORS DON'T NEED YOU. They need publishable manuscripts, but one of those manuscripts doesn't have to be yours. If you are a complete idiot or a jerk (this woman managed to be both, but since I'm not an editor maybe it won't cost her) your little book will come home to you so fast it will make your head spin. With thousands of manuscripts pouring into publishing houses every month, editor's don't have to go too far to find something to buy.

- **DO include a self-addressed stamped envelope or manuscript box...**

... with enough postage on it to get your manuscript back home to you, and do follow normal submission guidelines. (There are a zillion books on how to get your manuscript ready for market. Writer's Digest Books publishes about half of them. Do yourself a favor—if you haven't done so before now, go out and buy one or two and read them.)

- **DO query the editor first to see if she wants to look at your book...**

... and have it completed when you ask so that if she says yes, you can send the book out by return mail. Before you query, do be sure that the publishing house already publishes books like the one you've written, and that the editor you're querying

works on similar books. Marketing guides, like *Insider's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents, 1997-1998* by Jeff Herman (Prima Publishing) will give you this information. In fact, I strongly recommend this particular guide, which offers more in-depth information on agents, editors, and publishers and what they're looking for than anything else I've found.

- **DO find out the name of the editor to whom you're sending out your manuscript...**

... and address the cover letter to her, and spell her name correctly. Never send out a manuscript "To Whom It May Concern." If that's all the trouble you can go to, your book won't concern anyone.

- **DO believe that if the editor says she doesn't look at science fiction, or romances, or non-fiction, she means what she says.**

No matter how brilliant your book might be, if you send it to an editor who doesn't work with, want, or even like that sort of book, you might as well brand "I AM AN IDIOT" on your forehead. In this instance, I will use an experience of my own as an example. When I was teaching for *Writer's Digest*, my students were carefully matched to my interests and areas of expertise. But one student, who in his bio described himself as a future science fiction writer, decided, once we were ready to get to work on his book, that he wanted to write a literary novel of life in academia, and sent along the first chapter, and told me he figured this would be a good learning experience for both of us.

Wrong. I have read such books. I uniformly loathe them. I would sooner go back to the day job than be forced to wade my way through endless hundred-word passive-voice sentences and passive scenes of flat characters indulging in self-pity and navel-contemplation. My idea of editing such a book would

consist of setting each page of the manuscript on fire individually, and mailing the ashes back to the author. I know this sounds rabid, but what you have to realize is that every editor has equally strong feelings about the books she likes and the books she hates.

Concept Discussions >>

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved