Why I don't recommend writing-contest sites, and why writing fiction isn't like the NBA

By Holly Lisle

I've just finished have a long, interesting conversation with Bob Anonymous, who found my site, noticed I had a lot of materials for writers, and was hoping I would recommend his "forward your work to an agent" writing contest site.

I'm going to pull out all personal details about Bob Anonymous and his site, and give you the rest of the conversation verbatim.

The Introduction

Dear Holly,

I'm Bob Anonymous, co-founder of an online querying competition called [name removed]. We're just starting out but we have a number of literary agents backing the project and hope to one day become a first, much gentler step for writers looking to query agents. You can check us out at [link to site removed]. Right now we're looking to build our blog/resources section. We love what you do and the lengths you've gone to help amateur writers and we'd like to promote you to our readers/submitters. I was thinking along the lines of an article of some sort where you can link to your website/s at the bottom. The article could be about any topic you'd like (you could use one of your old entries even). I was also thinking a static link on our actual website writer resources section (coming soon). Since our aim is simply to help

writers, we'd like to promote you whether you're able to quid pro quo us somehow with a mention, but we would appreciate any help you could offer.

Let me know if this interests you.

Kind regards,

Bob Anonymous

My First Reply

Hi, Bob,

Thank you for your kind words about my work.

There are a couple of issues I'd like to present to you that you may not have considered. The first is from Victoria Strauss, who is the owner/operator of WriterBeware. If you're operating anywhere in the realm of fiction writers and you don't know about Victoria's work, you need to.

Here is her article on online slush piles: http://accrispin.blogspot.com/2015/03/manuscript-pitch-websites-do-literary.html LINK OPENS IN NEW TAB

The second is a personal issue: I have a standing rule that I have never broken. I don't recommend or link to contests that charge entrants to participate.

Charging an entrance fee immediately moves contests from the realm of "possibly legitimate, let me read their terms of service," to "this contest is a profit center for the site owner, and not something that will help the hopeful writers who spend their money to enter."

So while I appreciate your interest in my work with writers, what you're offering is not something I can support.

With my best wishes,

Holly Lisle

Bob's First Response

Hi Holly,

Thanks for your reply and the interesting article. I wasn't aware so many sites had tried to solve the same problem. The fact is though, many people have tried because there is a genuine problem in the market: writer's spend anywhere from 3-10 years writing their first novel, fire them off to 20 agents at once, slowly receive form rejection letters over the next 3-6 weeks, never quite knowing why they failed, and then give up on writing.

I realise you are genuinely sceptical of our site (and with great reason, there ARE a lot of scams out there), and it's perfectly fine if you don't want to be involved, but you have jumped to a conclusion quite quickly, so I would like to make our case briefly as to why we charge $6 for entry and why it's not a scam.

Firstly, we are different from the other websites in the article in that we are a competition. We are a 'curated' slush pile, if you will. Many commenters on the article pointed out that the concept would work if it were curated, and the fact that the most recent iteration isn't holds no interest for agents. Why WOULD they slush through more slush. When we approached our partner agents with the idea, they were interested precisely because we were curating the list. Another big difference is that we do have partner agents from big agencies who are backing the project. They are guaranteed to read the work. You can see who they are on our website under 'parent agents'. We also have another CEO of a big agency probably coming on board soon whom you've almost certainly heard of, if not have met personally. More than this, I've also spoken with many agents who are very interested in the idea, want to see our initial lists (many

agents want to see how we go which is perfectly reasonable), and have promised to read them. So, the winners will be read. If we one day lose our partner agents, we'll stop the project.

Why we charge a $6 entry? Because otherwise nobody would do the job. Truth be told, we have to pay "Submittable" 1 of those dollars, and another 2 or so to the tax man. Thus we might hope to earn $3 from every entry we have to fully read. Take into account all the other time running the site, responding to questions, advertising etc, we're hardly going to be millionaires. This is a labour of love, but sure, a little bit of compensation helps people want to participate. It also encourages people not to submit without thinking. The other free websites mentioned in the article don't vet the submissions, so there's no time involved for them (but also no interest for agents). Perhaps they make money from advertising vanity publishers, I don't know, but I'm sure there's a catch.

Anyway, I would love to hear your opinion on the project and any ideas you have to improve it. Whether you're convinced or not, it IS a genuine attempt to help writers and so I hope I've at least opened your mind to the prospect. I wish I were rich enough to run the competition completely pro bono, but I'm not, and if I want to keep people involved, I have to offer them something. I think you can understand this.

Kind regards,
Bob Anonymous

My Second Reply

Hi, Bob,

I honestly didn't (and don't) think you're a scammer.

I don't recommend sites that charge entry fees to contests simply because the odds of any sort of return for the participant are astronomically small.

I don't gamble, either with my own money or anyone else's. ⬜

If you can list the names of agents and agencies involved, though, you'll do yourself a world of good in proving yourself reputable.

Cheerfully,
Holly

Bob's Second Response

Hi Holly,

You can see the agents on our partner agents page ⬜

[link to page removed]

These are only the agents who have agreed to attach their name to a new and untested site. We have many others who want to see how we go first, as I mentioned.

It's not gambling with us also because we offer feedback. That was the whole concept behind the site. Before blindly firing off your queries to agents/agents assistants looking for any excuse to cull their pile, send it to us and we'll let you know where you're going wrong. If it's good enough to receive an ms request, we'll put you on our Top Five so you get, hopefully, a whole bunch at once. Resubmit as many times as you'd like.

We've been toying with how to make this process worthwhile for both the subber and us. Of course, we can't be reading and critting hundreds of subs for free. No one has the time. My original idea was to have a free submission option (but with no feedback) and a paid submission for feedback. I received a lot of pushback from my partners, however, who feared we'd be inundated and working countless hours for free. Your comments have made me consider this option again, but I don't know how we can make it work. Everyone might quit and another site will

disappear (it may well anyway). But that doesn't help us or writers or the problem we've tried to address.

Any ideas then would be welcome

My Third Reply

Okay.

Here's how I can see making it work:

Include your credentials for offering feedback. How many stories have you and your partners successfully submitted, how many have you sold, where have you each been published? That needs to be included with your pictures on your main page, as your credentials for charging for your feedback.

Next, eliminate the "contest" element, which always raises red flags. Note that you're screening submissions to send along to agents, but guarantee feedback for the price you're charging. Your fee has to be for your feedback, NOT for submitting to the agent—otherwise, you're shilling, and any agents working with you are going to be suspect.

Finally, having [one known agency] associated with you is a HUGE win, and needs to be on your front page, not a side page.

I actually know [agent name] of [another agency]—she worked for a while with my agent, Robin Rue. She's wonderful.

And though I'd never heard of them, [a third agents' group] check out as legitimate, too.

So get statements from representative agents from each of these three agencies that say WHY they're willing to work with you, and place them on your site. Make sure the agents involved are willing to have their names on their statements, as well as links to their agencies.

This is a tough business, and full of sharks. Having signed

statements from real agents on the front page of your site separates you from the sharks, because anyone considering you can check with the agent or agency in question and verify what you've posted.

Working for free isn't working. I don't recommend it. So this should help you show prospective clients why you deserve to be paid.

Hope this helps.

Cheerfully,
Holly

Bob's Third Response

Hi Holly,

Thanks for your ideas. It might be worthwhile to have our partners on the first page, you're right. We were facing a chicken or the egg situation, however, when approaching agents. They were all very curious to know who else was getting involved. From an agent's perspective, three isn't a bandwagon, so we haven't wanted to emphasise that we only have three. On the other hand, three is a coup considering we haven't even had our first Top Five. It's an interesting marketing conundrum… I don't think any of them would love signing statements though. Our partnership is quite informal, really, and runs like this: they give us their criteria/preferences etc, we seek out/choose works we think they'll be interested in, if we choose badly they tell us why, we then tell the author why, we try again next week. They can opt out any time and we'll remove them from our website. Ultimately we'd love to have about 10 partner agents involved, but chicken or the egg…

Your idea about only charging for feedback (my original idea) is persuasive. I think we'll run with it. The feedback,

however, is nothing more than our agents' criteria and preferences (and agents' preferences in general, that we know from agents' blogs, books etc.). We have a form that we fill out and say 'hey, your word count is way too high for the genre', or' you lack tension in your opening'. We aren't out to teach people how to write (that's your job), we're just solving the form rejection/lack of feedback problem. A good example of this is a recent romance we've just received. The woman is a very good writer but the book is 120,000 words. Now I know all of our agents would reject her with a form letter and not feel bad about it. I can picture [agent's] words perfectly: "well she should know the genre expectations before submitting." Sure, but she doesn't. She's a writer. All she cares about is writing. Hence, where the [Bob's web site] steps in…

Now that you know more about the project and that we won't be charging for basic entry, I'd like to reiterate our original offer. You might be interested to know that [one agent] will be doing a monthly blog, [one well-known author] is interested once we're up and running, [one script consultant] is doing an interview with us next week. I'll be approaching more established names next week. The aim is to become a one-stop-shop for writers who aren't yet succeeding with their queries. Instead of giving up and self-pubbing, we want to direct them to the experts who can help them. We think you and your books/workshops should be part of that…

Whaddaya think?

My Fourth Reply

Hi, Bob,

One tiny thing you might want to consider.

"Instead of giving up and self-pubbing, we want to direct them to the experts who can help them."

After thirty-two novels, I quit to self-publish.

I dumped my publishers, turned down an offer on the table, and have never regretted the decision or looked back.

I spent the first seventeen years of my career in semi-starvation and near poverty, in spite of the fact that I was well-published by very good houses throughout my career, was prolific, got good reviews and good sales, and had a solid, enthusiastic fan base.

Since I walked away roughly seven years ago, my writing income has trebled, my bills get paid, we have never had a single "beans and pasta" month, and I've been able to put money into savings.

The difference is that I own all my rights, get paid monthly in most cases and daily in a couple, and don't have to deal with publishers' accountants, whose sole job it is to keep as much money for the publishers as possible.

Commercial publishing, unless you're an NYT bestseller with a book a year going to the top of the charts, is great for your vanity, but hell for your checkbook.

We're at the point where, if you make the changes to eliminate the contest element of your offer, I could recommend your service with a clear conscience.

You just need to realize that the only folks I'd be recommending you to would be the die-hard masochists more interested in talking about who their publisher is than in making a real living from writing.

And I don't have too many of those folks anymore.

Cheerfully,
Holly

Bob's Fourth Response

Hi Holly,

Thanks for your reply and insights. I see you're quite negative toward trad publishing, which judging by your experience is fair enough. I do see a lot of people rushing to self-publish though, usually by vanity publishers and then getting lost in the 500,000 books being published yearly. How anyone can hope to stand out, let alone get a decent editor, is now the pertinent question. I wonder if a lot of your current success is due to the fact you were already trad published (with the editing experience that brings), had already built a platform and a fan base? IMO, being trad published for at least a book or two can help an author greatly. After that, sure, it may be worthwhile self-publishing once the author is an expert. But, I'm no lobbyist for the publishing industry and have no interest in convincing you. Still, before dismissing authors who want to be trad published as 'die-hard masochists', you might want to remember one thing:

Being 'published' is the dream of just about every young/aspiring writer out there. Whether that dream (like any dream) lives up to your initial expectations is beside the point. Dreaming of seeing your book in a bookstore one day, doing a book tour and talking to fans, is what inspires people to slog out the hours writing in the first place. (not 'oh wow, one day I can self publish this with amazon and spend countless hours self-promoting myself on Facebook and Twitter with a billion other writers). There's something magical about that idea. Being published is like playing for the NBA. Sure, not all players make it rich and famous. Some play one season and get dropped. Some get injured and can never play again. I can guarantee you though that every single one of those players are proud of the fact that they made it. They worked hard and made it no matter how short a period it was. That's

something to be proud of the rest of their lives, even if they go on to work as a laborer. Why is that such a bad thing? Why is publishing the only industry that you see so much negativity and bitterness. Imagine what would happen if every NBA player that didn't strike it rich went around saying 'oh boy, don't bother aiming for the NBA, kiddo. Unless you're Michael Jordan it ain't worth it.' The attitude would ruin the game. Just like publishing is slowly being ruined… in twenty years we'll be seeing a lot less writers out there than there are now, not because of dwindling sales, but because just about everyone on the internet is saying 'don't bother, it ain't worth it.'

Anyway, personally I've grown tired of all the negativity in the industry. That's why recently I decided to join the programming wave that's so hot right now. Everyone's positive in the tech world ⬜ [Our site] is just a side project to help people, but maybe you're right: it's probably a waste of time and money. In the end it will probably go the way of the other query sites you mentioned.

Thanks for the chat though. I like the (friendly) competition aspect of [our site] and it's what we pitched to agents. To change it would be to fundamentally change the concept of the project and I don't want to do that. I could compromise on the free entry, but not everything ⬜

Thanks again and good luck with everything.
Bob

My Final Reply

Hi, Bob,

If you'd ever had to support a family of five on just your writing, and you were very successful at selling books to publishers and to readers, and had a bunch of readers who loved your work and eagerly waited for every new book…

…And paying the water bill every month was STILL a breathtaking adventure, you too would be negative about traditional publishing.

It's always a good idea, if you're trying to sell shoes, to make sure you can stand to walk in them yourself.

I wore those shoes for seventeen years and thirty-two novels (including the one I ghost-wrote).

I know how to make a living at this in both camps, and am showing my folks how to do both—but the only path I actually recommend is indie.

You say, "*There's something magical about that idea.* Being published is like playing for the NBA. Sure, not all players make it rich and famous. Some play one season and get dropped. Some get injured and can never play again. I can guarantee you though that every single one of those players are proud of the fact that they made it. They worked hard and made it no matter how short a period it was. That's something to be proud of the rest of their lives, even if they go on to work as a laborer. Why is that such a bad thing?"

Because writing ISN'T like playing in the NBA.

Basket ball players are at their physical peak when they are drafted. They still have to learn some skills, but they do so against a ticking clock. Guys go into that knowing they have a short shelf life—that their entire career is limited by the ability of their knees and shoulders and spines to perform and recover from injuries. They know that one day, their bodies will simply not be capable of doing what the job requires.

Writing has no such physical limitation. Writers need to write about a million words of fiction (intelligently, and with intent to learn) before they get good. Writers who write with

the intent to improve as they go get better with age.

Writers publishing commercially prior to Thor Power Tools could build and maintain life-long careers. Asimov, Phyllis Whitney, and others published from their teens until their deaths.

HOWEVER… THINGS CHANGE.

In 1979, the Thor Power Tools decision broke book warehousing and backlists. In the nineties, corporate chain "ordering to the net" broke commercial writers' front lists.

Shoddy ebook rights in contracts right up to this minute destroy commercially published fiction writers' ability to earn as long as their fiction sells.

https://hollylisle.com/selling-to-the-net-or/ (LINK OPENS IN NEW WINDOW)

You're looking at your fantasy of what people THINK writing is like. I've lived the reality.

And I'm not negative about writing. It's the best job in the universe. **I'm not negative about the writing industry.** It's ALWAYS been tough to get noticed, but it's doable, even by absolute beginners.

Indie publishing takes us back to the era of Mark Twain, who published himself. **This is the best of all possible times to be a writer.**

It's just not the best of all possible times to try to build a career from "The Dream." **The dream is a lie.**

Reality kicks ass.

Cheerfully,
Holly

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