

## Literary Agent Versus Self-Publishing: the Modern Writer's Dilemma



A friend I correspond with is relatively new to the professional writing business and recently asked me this question:

"Should I work with a literary agent to publish my fiction? I'm reading that self-publishing fiction is a bad idea..."

I could not resist this invitation to a brain dump, so one followed. And I'm sharing it here where a broader audience can read it as well. Not that I think I have a special take on this--this kind of thing gets batted around all over the net wherever authors are debating what direction to go in regarding publishing. But I trust that the right person somewhere will read something here that is useful grist for his or her mill, and so I offer it in that spirit.

### Get an Agent, or Self-Publish?

If you go the literary agent route, you are a) committing to (probably) a year or two or longer in order to secure someone to rep your work, and b) strategically positioning yourself to release work in the traditional publishing industry. Which is collapsing in upon itself as we speak. The industry is being blown away by the ebook revolution, and traditional publishers have not yet figured out how to make a profit in the new market. Not to say that you won't make money by going the traditional route, but simply that there is a vibrant ebook market you will (for the most part) not be part of.

It is extremely misleading to characterize self-publishing of fiction these days as "a bad idea." You need to qualify that in many ways: what kind of fiction? Aimed at what market? At what length? (For instance, there is a boom in this market in novellas and novelettes that traditional publishers won't touch because they're too short). The big issue with self-publishing (besides the obvious one of quality control--**always** have your work professionally edited, if you don't already work at that level yourself, and packaged/processed by an ebook specialist)--the big issue is one of marketing.

"Self-publishing fiction is a bad idea if you are not prepared to also commit to a marketing campaign to peddle your work," says I. Now I think *that's* a true statement.

For what it's worth, traditional publishers do *very little* marketing support for new authors and new books unless for some reason they perceive it to be (or hope it will be) some break-out success or novelty and throw serious marketing mojo behind it. Otherwise, you are in very nearly the same situation *as if* you had self-published: you will need to market your book when it is released by the traditional publisher, if you really want it to get significant attention.

So, marketing-wise you are in the same boat whichever route you take. Self-pub, you have more flexibility; traditional pub, you might have some level of publicist assistance in a cookie-cutter way (they help set up book signings, might take out an ad in some genre-related trade publication, will send the book to some reviewers, etc.) The real drumming-up-of-interest will come all from your own efforts whichever way you go.

There is a ton of advice and info about both of these routes all over the web. Google it until you can't see straight, read and consider until you are in brain overload. Seriously. Set aside a couple of weeks (at least!) to dedicate to a research and self-education effort on this topic, because these days you need to become savvy about publishing and marketing channels if you intend to write as a career.

More importantly, you need to form your own opinion by reading about the experiences and the commentary from successful published authors who have gone both routes, and see what they have to say about traditional vs ebooks. Then form your own conclusion about which path is best for you at this time. Don't take other people's advice about what you ought to do; get educated then form your own conclusions instead. It is much more empowering and it is knowledge that will serve you in the future.

### Writer Beware

Also, a cautionary note: If an "agent" ever tells you they will rep you for a fee, or read your work for a fee, drop them like the turd they are. Real literary agents do not charge you a fee to look at your work, nor do you pay them to represent your books. The money flow is from the publisher to the agent (if they're involved), to the author--not the other way around. Agents pay **you** when they sell your work. They typically get a 15% commission when you sign contracts for a work they sell on your behalf and you get the rest.

This is also why it takes so long to find a good agent who will rep you. They have stacks of manuscripts and potential clients to consider while they are also selling books. It can take months for them to get back to you, only to reject you, at which point you have to knock on another door and start the process all over again.

On the plus side, a literary agent can get your work into places you can't get into any other way, including markets and publishers that lend a warm glow of legitimacy and market clout to your reputation and work. So. There are upsides and downsides to working with an agent. Another thing to research.

## Notes From the Lizard Lair

Fulmination, Ruminations, and Snacks from a Resurgent Author  
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If you haven't looked around there yet, check out [Writer's Digest online](#). Lots of publishing and marketing info there. At least it's a good place to start. And if you're thinking of working with an agent or paying someone to represent your work, be sure to check out this most excellent collection of scammers and problem "agents" identified at SFWA's highly respected ["Writer Beware" page](#).

Good luck with it all! Big questions, and big answers.