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1

The Pitch

I.

1927. A letter of transmittal arrived at the offices of *The Saturday Evening Post*. It was sent by Paul Revere Reynolds, the first literary agent in the United States, addressed to editor George Lorimer.

> Dear Mr. Lorimer,
>
> I am enclosing a novel by Henry Kitchell Webster entitled *The Man With the Scarred Hand*. I will sell you the serial rights for $30,000.
>
> Yours Sincerely,
> Paul Revere Reynolds[1]

The fact of the letter hardly would have been noteworthy. The agent who sent it represented the leading short fiction writers of the day: Willa Cather, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, F. Scott Fitzgerald, George Bernard Shaw, Ida M. Tarbell, Booth Tarkington, H. G. Wells, and P. G. Wodehouse, along with the lesser-known Mr. Webster. It was only natural that he should submit to *The Saturday Evening Post*, the leader among the thirteen mass circulation magazines where short fiction was routinely (and profitably) published. The 1920s were a seller's market for short fiction, and Reynolds's writers had a good track record with the *Post*—by some estimates, he represented almost 25 percent of the writers they published. He could command the high price.[2]

The content of the letter, likewise, would have come as no surprise. This was Reynolds's mode of correspondence: a purely factual accounting of his client's name, the work on offer, and an asking price. Understated, dignified, direct; nothing so untoward as salesmanship.[3] Descended from *that* Paul Revere, Reynolds studied under William James at Harvard and graduated in 1892 with literary aspirations. Or, maybe, more accurately, literary-*ish* aspirations. He did not want to be a writer, but, in that vague way of the twenty-two-year-old man of means, he wanted to be around books. He took a job with a British publisher, selling their rights to American publishers in New York. Gradually, he began making introductions on behalf of writers, placing their work in the mass circulation magazines for a small fee. And before long, he had a business. In this way, Reynolds inaugurated a grand tradition: he became an agent accidentally.[4]

Though a new entrant to the literary field in the United States, agents had been operating in the UK since 1875. A. P. Watt is widely believed to be the first, though the chief functions of agents—making connections, negotiating deals with publishers, advising writers on both literary and business dealings—had long been conducted formally by other publishing professionals and informally by an author's knowledgeable (or meddling) friends. But the excitement and anger whipped up over the emergence of this new middleman was one of the most heated debates in literary circles at the turn of the century, a controversy through which the roles and functions of publisher, bookseller, and agent all solidified.[5]

As agents amassed power, other players in the field repositioned themselves uneasily, loath to cede ground to such professional upstarts. Editors employed by publishing companies felt that agents were unnecessarily inserting themselves into time-honored relationships and creating animosity through the mere suggestion of competing interests. British publisher William Henry Heinemann made no secret of his opinion on the literary agent in 1897, calling him "generally a parasite" who "always flourishes," and a "canker . . . eating itself into the very heart of our mutual interests."[6] With their focus on contract negotiations and financial gains, agents supposedly disrupted an ethos of

collaboration—likeminded individuals, working together on a craft, a vocation. Of course, this rosy image of the industry benefitted publishers, often at the author's expense. The more that authors were discouraged from seeking capable representation, the more publishers could exploit their lack of knowledge while assuming the guise of caring patrons.[7] Desperate to see their work in print and grateful to the publishers willing to make that happen, authors routinely found their work edited without their permission, were often made to pay publishing costs themselves, and ultimately received little to no money from the sale while publishers profited.[8] The sense of mutual interest, commitment to literature, and an intimate working relationship, though perhaps genuine on the part of many editors, effectively masked the ways that the publishing industry was ultimately profit-driven, despite salutary claims to the contrary.

It would take some time for the feelings of distrust toward agents to dissipate, but publishing begrudgingly learned to live with this new middleman. The agent's reputation began to change, as with the rest of the publishing industry, after World War II.[9] The industry was booming: the rise of mass market books and the trade paperback led to steep competition, and escalating author advances, with Norman Mailer setting the record for a book at $35,000 in 1951.[10] Book clubs developed to fill in the gap between readers' high demand for books and publishers' poor distribution mechanisms.[11] As the number of would-be writers exploded alongside the MFA program, the agent became a useful gatekeeper to author and editor alike, letting the right authors in (connecting them to an otherwise opaque industry network), and keeping the majority out (running interference for the publishers).[12] Agents were happy to take advantage of increased competition to improve their position. Add to this a major innovation: the book auction.

In 1952, literary agent Scott Meredith broke with the genteel tradition instituted by Paul Revere Reynolds and did the unthinkable, sending the same manuscript to ten publishers simultaneously. It was common practice to submit manuscripts exclusively, to just one publisher at a time.[13] Publishers would either offer their standard advance or return the manuscript with their regrets, and down the list the agent would go

"in leisurely sequence"—a lengthy and demoralizing process that often primed the writer to accept a low-ball offer.[14] Instead of making the rounds, Meredith sent copies of the same manuscript around town in one afternoon. Soon, he began fielding competing offers. *He* would dictate the terms of the deal—and why shouldn't he? Without the quality writers he represented, publishers would have nothing to sell. Unsurprisingly, publishers were not happy with this development, the trades reported breathlessly, but Meredith's sense of the shifting balance of power had been keen. Soon, other agents were following suit, and simultaneous submissions—if not full auctions—became standard practice. Though no one, not even Meredith, could remember the book that was sold, the auction solidified the agent's position at the center of the literary field, capitalizing on their power as gatekeepers. With the auction, the modern literary agent was born.

By 1963, *Esquire* was calling agents not "parasites" but "the center of the literary establishment."[15] As the publishing industry consolidated and conglomerated, the agent's structural significance only increased: copyright laws became more convoluted, the financial stakes of the book deal skyrocketed, and publishing contracts suffered from severe bloat. With expert knowledge and a keen eye for talent, the agent could both advocate on behalf of authors and scout talent for the ever-busier editor. By 1989, agents were, according to *The New York Times*, "the biggest fish in publishing." Today, in 2025, it is virtually impossible for a writer to be published at a Big Five publisher or a major independent press without one.[16] Though not without growing pains, the agent's swift rise throughout the latter twentieth century transformed American publishing, and with it, American literature.

There are more than 1,500 literary agents in the United States.[17] Most of them are white; most of them are women; most of them live in or near New York City.[18] There is no special training required to be an agent, no requisite license or certification to begin to represent authors or open your own agency. Agenting, like the rest of publishing, is an apprentice

industry, taught by supervisors to assistants who, in turn, become supervisors of their own assistants and pass down the trade.

The composition of the field of agenting resembles the US book market as a whole: more nonfiction is published and sold, on average, than fiction. Likewise, there are more agents who represent nonfiction than fiction, and more agents who represent commercial fiction than literary fiction. In the twenty-first century, the Big Five have published approximately 43 million adult titles; 19 percent of those adult titles are fiction and 81 percent are nonfiction.[19] On average, adult fiction has accounted for 37.8 percent of sales annually, with nonfiction accounting for 62.8 percent.[20] The market share of fiction and nonfiction has fluctuated over the course of the twenty-first century, but fiction has never surpassed 45 percent; currently, adult fiction is the strongest selling category, with five consecutive years of gains as of 2024.[21]

The division of the field of agenting follows the marketplace to a shocking degree: 37 percent of agents specialize in fiction and 63 percent specialize in nonfiction.[22] Practically, it does not make much sense to speak of a "Fiction Agent" or a "Nonfiction Agent." Most agents sell all types of projects, fiction and nonfiction alike. The simple reason for this is that agents represent clients, not books: if a Pulitzer Prize–winning investigative journalist has a novel in him, it's very likely his longtime agent will sell it. That said, agents tend to be known for representing either fiction or nonfiction. Within fiction, they tend toward either commercial or literary, with an even starker divide; approximately 77 percent of agents represent commercial genres compared to 23 percent literary. And, finally, within commercial fiction, agents specialize by genre.[23] (This, too, follows sales: within adult fiction, approximately 70 percent of the deals made each year are for expressly commercial genres, such as romance, thrillers, science fiction, and the like.)[24]

Agents with literary aspirations face long odds, as the field is dominated by very few: only twenty-five agents are responsible for representing half of the authors short listed for major American literary prizes in the twenty-first century.[25] Likewise, agents who aspire to an especially profitable list face a challenge: testimony from the August 2022 Antitrust Trial revealed that only about 1,200 authors win advances over

$250,000 each year, out of tens of thousands.[26] These deals represent a subset of approximately 2 percent of books acquired and published annually, according to trial testimony. This book focuses on the agents who sell that 2 percent, who represent those prizewinners, and those who aspire to do so (and stand a fighting chance).[27]

As someone who has never formally worked in publishing, I knew agents only by their stereotypes (or, at least, the stereotypes of their Hollywood counterparts): they go to lunch, make deals, and take their 15 percent. The women are sour, shrewish types who chain-smoke; the men have winning smiles and a tendency to yell. And I had been steeped in the tired academic generalization—that those who work in publishing are the English majors who couldn't hack it in academia or those who cared more about money, either only marginally intelligent or sell-outs. These stereotypes could not have been farther from the truth.

Despite the differences among the agents that I spoke with for this book—their career stage, the type of agency they work at, the city they live in—each spoke about "sit[ting] down and curl[ing] up with a book," and the pleasure they find in recommending books to friends. (They were also self-conscious about their tendency to speak in clichés.) These agents identify as members of the literary community first. They conveyed both an allegiance and responsibility to the literary world, framing their work as a great privilege. "There aren't that many people carrying on the literary tradition, in terms of people that are at the nexus of writers in the world," as one told me. "I feel a sense of duty to posterity, to the present, and the future." They framed their work as a matter of cultural production.

To be sure, these agents are all too aware of their bad reputation, and may very well have been overcompensating, eager to connect with—and, perhaps, impress—their (admittedly) captive audience. Yet, while the agents were reflective about their contributions to the literary marketplace, they often resisted my efforts to analyze their work. I would have to follow up and prod and coax to get them to provide an answer beyond, "It depends." I spoke to one very well-established agent on three separate occasions—I'll call him Mark.

"Have you found any strategies especially successful for pitching short story collections?" I asked him.

"I don't have any, Laura," he told me, not unkindly. "It really all depends on the book, and on the author." I pushed back—how could someone get to his level of seniority and success without having picked up some tricks of the trade? But, no, he insisted, as did every single agent I spoke with: it really all depends.

I do not believe that Mark has no strategies when pitching any given type of book—debuts, short stories, memoir, narrative nonfiction. But I do believe that Mark is genuine when he tells me that "it depends." Whether or not Mark's statement is true is less important to me than his belief in, and his reliance on, that statement, and what it can tell us about the profession and contemporary literature. Statements like "it depends" are a part of the game—a professional necessity.[28] Sociologists call this the Thomas theorem: if agents believe the situation is real, it is real in its consequences.[29] It doesn't matter if Mark is bluffing or hedging about trusted strategies; what matters is that Mark approaches the representation of each client and the sale of each project as though it were singular, or at least feels that it is necessary for a good agent to do so.

In these moments of dissonance, we see that agenting is built on performance, projection, and perception. And in these statements, we might glimpse the larger system of symbolic capital that is the contemporary literary marketplace. Consider the junior agent, just beginning to build her list, who maxed out her credit card to buy a Prada bag before attending a literary conference filled with client meetings: she needed potential clients to see a symbol of her success—even if she wasn't actually successful yet. It doesn't matter whether the brand-new agent could afford both her groceries and her designer purse; what matters is that potential clients see that she owns it. A Prada bag may have set this agent back $3,000, but what she gained from its symbolic capital is something else entirely. Agents trade in this symbolic capital—their own, and that of their clients. My interest is less the cost of the Prada bag than its imaginary worth, less the veracity of any individual statement than the symbolic system of belief in which that statement

accrues value. What agents say does not need to be *true* in order to be *illustrative*. I believe that Mark believes that he doesn't have any strategies—but I do not believe that there are no strategies.

II.

"Is everyone here?"

For the past two minutes, small black squares have been popping up on my laptop screen, as agents scattered around the country log on to Zoom. I sit at my desk in my Philadelphia suburb, a mug of coffee within arm's reach. One by one, the black squares are replaced with images of assorted offices, all filled with books, as the agents who work for the Opus Agency (a fictional name for a real agency) assemble virtually. As a group, these agents resemble the profession as a whole—mostly women and mostly white. They smile and exchange waves and make jokes, until a partner calls the meeting to order. It's time to look through the slush pile.

If ever there were a publishing cliché, it is the slush pile: an agency's mailbag, open to unsolicited submissions from would-be writers from all over the country. (Once referring to a literal pile of mail, the slush pile is now purely digital.) Scott Hoffman of Folio Literary told *Poets & Writers* that he received an estimated 11,000 unsolicited submissions a year; Susan Golomb of Writer's House told the same publication that she receives approximately 20–30 daily, adding up to around 10,000 annually. (This, on top of the manuscripts they solicit and those sent by their existing clients.) If each of the more than 1,500 literary agents in the United States receives the same amount, that's between 15 and 17 million slush pile submissions *each year*. No wonder that "slush" is something a writer is "rescued" from or "discovered" within—a path, in other words, for a writer with no connections or better options. It is rare that a well-established agent still reads the manuscripts that are submitted this way; perhaps their assistants read for them. However, on occasion, agents with full client lists will open to unsolicited queries, whether meant as a well-meaning nod to meritocracy, or in pursuit of the same sort of thrill that sells lottery tickets—*you never know*.

The Opus Agency has opened to unsolicited submissions for the past month, and the partners have agreed to let me observe as they sift through the query letters together. Each agent has read all of the submissions and marked those that they find promising. They've received 937 submissions, all of them fiction. Of those, the group estimates that approximately 40 to 50 are any good. This, in itself, is shocking consensus—not only that so few have potential, but that they can be agreed upon almost unanimously. Of these 50, agents at Opus will take 10–15 calls with authors; from that group, they will make about 8–9 requests for full manuscripts; and, finally, they will make between 2 and 4 offers of representation, collectively, meaning they'll sign 4 clients, max, out of 937 queries: *very* long odds. Offering representation to a writer is perhaps the most consequential decision that an agent can make. In signing a client, the agent essentially grants a writer entry to (but not necessarily success within) the literary field. Considering client queries, agents exercise both aesthetic and market evaluations about a book's potential. Judgments about style, commerce, and capital coalesce. This is what the Opus Agency has given me access to, the question that I hope to answer through my slush pile observation: How do agents think about books?

The Opus Agency begins with the fifty promising submissions, with each agent "claiming" the writers they want to contact. There is some friendly competition between the agents, but by and large, this is a collective endeavor of mutual affirmation. Some of this is cut-and-dried—agents specialize, becoming a "native reader" in different market or generic categories, and flatly refusing to represent others. The agent who specializes in gauzy rom-coms, for instance, will not be a good fit for an esoteric work of autofiction. Because these agents know one another well, there is little conversation as they claim the writers. Everyone in the (virtual) room can sense the fit between a manuscript and a colleague's taste. As well they should: agenting is a profession built on taste, determining how they select their clients, their interventions in a book's production, and their position within the industry.

"Taste is everything," one agent told me in an interview. "You stand on your own taste," said another. To be successful, a third explained,

an agent has to "*believe* in [their] taste" so that others—editors—will believe in it, too. The collective belief in an agent's good taste is so strong that authors want to work with them, and publishers compete to acquire the books they sell. Moreover, taste becomes the basis of a reputation. Agents can identify their colleagues by the books they like: "I worked for [Agent Name] for a while. I think his favorite book is *Jude the Obscure.* [The books he represented] were kind of twee, the prose was slightly overwrought. A bit sensational." They can describe their own reputations readily by assuming the point of view of potential clients: "I think that those who come to me see me as a champion of things that are a bit more challenging." And they also imagine how publishers view their taste: "Publishers think of me for something new and different. Which I think has always been kind of my M.O." In a cultural field like publishing, good taste—*literary* taste—distinguishes an agent, setting her apart from the rest. As they sorted the slush pile submissions, the Opus agents reinforced these reputations and positions: "You know how I love my ghost stories!" one of them would say. Or, "That's a little too commercial for me," while their colleagues would nod their heads in assent, as if to say, "Ah, yes, we thought so too." There are some groans of disappointment or mock cries of dismay when an agent loses out on a query, and fist-pumps of success or gentle gloating from the winner, but the vibe is playful, collaborative. They know what they like and they know what everyone else likes too—a foregone conclusion.

While personal taste may help the Opus agents determine if they want to rescue a query from the slush pile, it is not a good enough reason to sign a client. The Opus agents will only request full manuscripts or take meetings if they have a sense that a project is marketable. The agent's taste is carefully calibrated to the marketplace; they may know instinctively what they like, but they have learned through experience what can sell. Manuscripts, even the most hostile experimental work, must reach a minimum threshold of commerciality for an agent to take it on. This is not to say that a novel must be "commercial fiction," to be deemed worthy, or that agents are disinterested in all but the work with the widest mass appeal. But, because agents work on commission, a

manuscript must be worth enough money to a publisher to justify the agent's time. (There are important exceptions, of course, such as short story collections, the subject of chapter 3.)

The descriptors "commercial" and "literary" are often opposed in the industry, as though on two ends of a spectrum. In overly simplistic terms, "commercial fiction" is said to be driven by plot, appealing to a mass audience; "literary fiction," by contrast, is sustained by characters, and appeals to the smaller, specialized audience who appreciates artful language.[30] Between the two, we find "upmarket," artfully telling a commercially appealing story, using more elevated language, and, hopefully, attracting audiences from all points on the spectrum. For agents, culture and commerce are not opposed; one is not pursued at the expense of the other; these are not mutually exclusive categories, but continuous, varying by degree. These two ideas and priorities are always held in tension. Seen in this light, all contemporary fiction—at least, as published by the Big Five and major independent presses, and as represented by literary agents—is commercial fiction, and is evaluated according to the same standards.[31]

Regardless of the genre or category, the Opus agents evaluated a book's viability according to three interrelated but distinct criteria: the author, the project, and the market.[32] *The Author*: At the Opus Agency, whenever a slush pile submission warranted a longer conversation, the agents would talk about the author's background first. "She has all the right credentials," they said about one prospective author: the right training, the right networks, the right expertise. "I think I met her at Bread Loaf," they would say, or, "Oh, I see that she was at RWA [Romance Writers of America]; I'll reach out to my friend there," while one member of the group scrolled through the writer's social media accounts to see who she followed. Publishing is a closed social network—we will learn just how closed in chapter 4. Though I'd long since stopped being scandalized by such a reliance on social and educational networks, I was surprised to find that this attitude persisted in the slush pile evaluation, which was designed precisely in the hopes of finding someone without an inside track. Still, personal connections and assurances are useful, even in the open market, because while agents read queries for

books, they represent authors. And, as we will see in chapter 2, the author and the book are mutually reinforcing products. One agent who represents fiction explained to me, "Part of my thinking is, Could this author get on a talk show and talk about these things? Or could this author be part of a larger article on this cultural phenomenon?" These queries are just the beginning—when an agent offers representation to a client, she enters into a long-term professional (and, very often, personal) relationship with a writer. The Opus agents refuse to do so naively—too much is at stake.

The Project: When it came to the queries under consideration, the Opus agents tended to focus less on the writing or the style than the structure, the plot, and the genre. Partly, this is practical: they have only a query letter and sample pages to guide their decisions, not a full manuscript. A query letter, as any of the hundreds of resources for aspiring writers will tell you, is a genre of its own, with key structural elements that guide an agent's process of evaluation. One key feature of this genre is comp titles—comparative or comparable titles. Authors list books or other writers to whom their work favorably compares. Comp titles are used at all levels of the industry, and do different work at different stages in a book's life. As a result of the industry-wide reliance on comps (and by virtue of the sheer, unreadable volume of books published each year), comparison provides the basis for aesthetic judgments.[33]

When reading queries, the Opus agents would use comparison to well-known authors as a shorthand for discussing style, in hopes of capturing the affective sense of what it feels like to read and projecting a potential audience. "I see this as, like . . . a low-budget Sally Rooney," one of the agents said, and was met with vociferous nods. Immediately, this phrase conjured up a stylistic tendency or an aesthetic experience: one imagines a dialogue-driven book, sparing in its punctuation, about young people who can't sort their confusing interpersonal relationships from their confusing political investments or nascent class consciousness. "Low-budget," meanwhile, bespeaks the book's quality—a derivative, middlebrow novel, less than challenging intellectual fare. This sort of comparison dictates which editors an agent might pitch, who might acquire a book, and how it might be handled in-house (i.e., how much money to pay the author in an advance, what sort of advertising

campaign might work best, how and where to sell the foreign rights). Likewise, comparison drives recommendation algorithms (both computational and human), helping readers sift through the hundreds of thousands of books available to them at any given moment to identify those titles that they will love. "If you liked Sally Rooney, you might also enjoy . . ." While the agent's aesthetic judgment certainly becomes more nuanced and capacious when evaluating a full manuscript, at this first-pass evaluation, comparison is paramount.

The query letter is accompanied by sample pages, selected by the author to accompany their letter. The Opus agents have requested ten pages of sample material with each query. Within those ten pages, they'll know if an author has the potential to deliver on the promise of the query. Though agents take different approaches to sample pages, they described the ability to discern rather quickly if a book would be "right" for them. Often, this was a simple matter of wanting to continue reading. Talking with another agent, "Angelica," I express my shock at her ten-page barometer for new submissions. I wonder aloud, *How could she possibly know after only ten pages?*, remembering that some of my favorite novels are slower burns. "I'm going to push back with you," she said. "I think you would know too. If someone is not capturing you enough to want to keep going after ten pages, then it's not good enough." Most agents described a similar experience in more positive terms: not knowing when to reject a writer, but knowing when to extend an offer of representation. They would tell me about the experience of reading a manuscript they *just had* to represent in visceral terms—hair standing on end or a punch to the gut. Typically, agents specialize in representing the sort of work that they enjoy reading for pleasure—one agent used the phrase "native reader" to describe her affinity for a certain genre and her fluency in its conventions. Experienced agents can be well assured that, if they find themselves bored by a project or if they physically ache to possess it, readers will feel the same way.

The Market: When the agents considered the market for a given project, they thought primarily about the immediate buyers for a book—that is, acquiring editors.[34] Even at this very first, early stage of evaluation, agents are imagining which editors might be attracted to a project. In one of my favorite moments with Opus, one agent said of a

query, "Somewhere, Christie Turner can hear little bells going off in her head!" "Christie Turner" is a fictional name for a vice president and editor well known for acquiring upmarket women's fiction, just like the query under consideration. As I detail in chapter 4, this sort of "matchmaking" is a key component of literary agenting, with significant consequences beyond personality alignment. Placing the book with the right editor at the right imprint, in turn, positions the book in a certain market for a certain audience. Literary agents sit at something of a remove from the reading public; their ideas of readership are filtered through editorial priorities. Does an agent think that an editor can be convinced of the existing readership for a given project? Making this case is the agent's work.

This is not to say, however, that agents are interested in marketability *alone*, or that a robust market might supersede personal taste for an opportunistic middleman. ("But do they actually think this is good?" I'm routinely asked by academics and critics, in reference to an agent representing what they see as the schlock du jour.) Though I have spoken with agents who represent extraordinarily commercial works of genre fiction, as well as those who represent the hyper-literary, I have not yet spoken with an agent whose approach to literature is purely opportunistic. (That most agents represent work that spans the commercial and the literary, fiction and nonfiction, testifies to this fact.) Becoming a "native reader" in any given genre or market requires deep knowledge and appreciation. Yes, in other words: they think it is good. The standards for quality, however, vary contextually and agents train themselves to evaluate a work *on its own terms*. One agent, mentioned by several other participants as someone with excellent taste in literary fiction, reflected on a work of commercial fiction she'd sold that might perhaps seem out of place on her list. "Every now and then, I'll find something that's really funny. . . . Really funny, really great story. Everyone feels better after they read it. . . . That's just a good thing, you know?" Would this agent compare the prose of this bestseller to that of her National Book Award winners? Unlikely. But as a humorous book, as a work of entertainment, as a book designed to appeal to the commercial reader: it was excellent.

No matter how much they'd like to be known for their tastes, they also sell books with an eye toward the bottom line. "Most everything I do is of literary quality, but I'm also about to sell a book by [a popular, offbeat band]," one agent admitted, with a wry shrug. Another told me a self-deprecating story of her first big commercial sale, a "cozy lifestyle book. . . . It had so much charm and it was well written, but there was really no point to it." A third described an early sale, "a fun pop science book," with a tinge of regret and a shrug of resignation: "I sold it in like hundreds of different territories and . . . *teenage boys* read that book, you know? And it did pretty well. It's not changing the world, but it's okay." Even in these contexts, when personal taste gives way to marketability, they assert the value of the projects: the band is beloved, the lifestyle is charming, the pop science is fun. In other words, even when an agent signs a project with an eye toward the market over individual taste, they still believe in the book and its potential for success.

A phrase recurred as the Opus Agency evaluated the submissions: "this feels like it could *be* something." Agents sell books, but they receive queries—a finished book, let alone a finished *product* is still a long way off. In performing their role as gatekeeper, agents exercise significant influence over the process of developing manuscripts, well before an editor acquires and begins the work commonly associated with book publishing. Said differently, in the twenty-first century, agents edit:

"I do a ton of editorial work. As much as I want to."

"At least half of the books I've sold, I do more editorial work before the sale than the editor does afterward."

"Good agents are editing agents."

"We *all* edit. We all edit, and we think about not just the book as a piece of art and working on it for its own sake, but also how it will be most appealing to the audience that it's intended for."

Early editorial oversight is necessary in today's industry, as editors face a number of noneditorial demands and are increasingly unlikely to bid on an unfinished novel: "There's a greater expectation that the

material that is submitted to publishers will be closer to finished than not," one agent told me. There is also a financial incentive: "[It's] easier to create excitement and competition around an almost perfect work than it is an obviously flawed but very, very promising work," said another. Of course, editors still edit, despite lamentations to the contrary. But, anticipating the response of the next reader in the chain, and aware of the pressures those readers are facing, agents develop and edit manuscripts to make it easier for an editor to say "yes" to a submission.

So important is the agent's editorial oversight that the decision to represent a new client often rests on the potential to develop the manuscript. One agent told me that with each new submission, she asks herself, "'How much can you shape a book with an author? How much can you not do?' If I don't know how to *fix it*, then I shouldn't take it on." "Fixing" a book: transforming a manuscript from flawed-but-promising into what an acquiring editor will deem almost perfect, what publishers will greenlight, what marketing departments will be able to sell, and what book reviewers will cover.

This degree over the shape of the manuscript is historically specific. Lynn Nesbit explained that editors today "expect the book to be almost perfect when they buy it. That certainly wasn't true when I started in the business."[35] In the 1960s, Sterling Lord fought with publishers to leave Jack Kerouac's punctuation alone, and in the 1980s, Candida Donadio told her junior agents to leave the editing up to the editors. Even now, veteran agent Esther Newberg, who got her first job as an agent when Nesbit hired her in the 1970s, tells her junior colleagues, "That's not your job," as she watches them toil over manuscripts, but knows she is fighting a losing battle.[36]

Beginning in the early 1990s, as publishing continued consolidating, many editors became agents. Knowing firsthand how editors think, this group of agents became much more invested in developing clients on the page, and trained their assistants accordingly. By 2017, sociologist Clayton Childress estimated that about two-thirds of all agents had worked elsewhere in publishing before becoming agents, a good many in editorial.[37] Consequently, most agents edit in some capacity, with the eventual sale guiding their editorial suggestions. And while their edits

are merely suggestions, they control if and when a book is submitted to acquiring editors in the first place.

Despite the necessity and prevalence of editorial work, when I asked agents for specific examples, they were either unable or unwilling to talk. Typically gregarious and sociable, agents became guarded, their language circumspect, on the topic of editing. A good agent will not take credit, even under the cover of anonymity, for an author's prose. It's bad business to even hint that authors were influenced by anything other than creative genius. And, once again, "it depends": the way that an agent edits varies by client, depending on the author's experience, their commerciality or literariness, or their creative process. "I have some clients who I just wouldn't—I mean, I wouldn't *touch* their sentences. They might ask, 'Should this be positioned here or there?' Or I might say, 'There's some inconsistency here,' but I wouldn't really get in there. And I've got other clients who I'd mark up," one agent explained. She would not name names.

Though reluctant, when agents offered me examples, their editorial work spanned everything from close line editing to large-scale positioning. On one hand, agents edit for length ("This book would be great if only it were a hundred pages shorter"), characterization ("Why did this character do this? It didn't make sense," or "Making a character more believable"), plot structuring ("Making it tighter," or helping an author to "land the ending"), and pacing ("Making a book take off faster"). On the other, agents edit at "the 30,000-foot level," thinking with their client about positioning their book in the market and making appropriate textual decisions during the development process.

"When I'm editing," a senior Opus agent I'll call Erica told me, "I want to make the lines better and all of that—the kind of classic stuff—but I'm also thinking about how I'm going to pitch it, and I'm making sure that the book fits that pitch." Editing a book with the pitch in mind has significant implications, including for its form and content. Erica continued, "If I'm pitching a book as a thriller, I want to make sure that it has the thriller voice and that often means short chapters and tons of pacing and the right kinds of twists and all of that. And obviously I don't care about twists if the book is, you know, a romance or whatever. It depends on the pitch."

In other words, when "editing for the pitch," Erica asks, *What does this book need in order for me to sell it well?* For Erica, this may lead to formal interventions related to chapter length, voice, pacing, and plot—all not-so-subtle reinforcement of generic conventions. For one book, for one client, these changes may be insignificant. But for an agent's entire list, for an agency's entire list, for all agented authors, the consequences escalate quickly.

While editing to fit the pitch can have formal consequences, the pitch itself is more than the simple act of trying to sell a book. The agent's pitch kicks off a series of cascading effects: it directs the book to a specific editor at a specific publisher, which will then lead to a specific marketing and promotional approach, which will, in turn, reach specific readers, and shape the book's reception. The stakes for such decisions might seem minor, even too obvious to mention, for works of genre fiction like those that Erica referred to—no agent would send a legal thriller to Berkley, for instance, an imprint at Penguin specializing in romance (whose website boasts, as I type this, authors "Emily Henry, Carley Fortune, Ali Hazelwood, and Jasmine Guillory").[38] But for fiction that is challenging to categorize, whether genre bending or genre blending, the consequences can be significant. What if Berkley, instead of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, had published Sally Rooney? What if science fiction and fantasy imprint Orbit, instead of Doubleday, had published *Zone One*?[39] How might these novels have been read and received if they had been packaged as romance or science fiction?

Consider, for instance, the story of a novel as told by the agent who sold it (I'll call her Sarah, mid-career and well-established), and an agent who passed on it (I'll call him Caleb, younger, but at a reputable agency). This novel, Sarah told me, represented her "best taste." She loved this book and the author. It was also quite successful. After she sold the book to a reputable literary publisher, she was asked to intervene in the cover selection, as the author and editor could not agree. After fifty cover suggestions ("they weren't right"), everyone in-house finally agreed, only for the fiction buyer at a major bookstore ("the biggest account") to express displeasure. "We don't like this," the buyer said, threatening to reduce their order significantly, effectively shorting the book's debut.

The buyer went so far as to make a suggestion: "We want a person on it." Sarah scoffed at the memory of the proposed cover: "We saw several jackets . . . that looked like either YA or addiction memoirs. A young woman walking into a bar, from the back, in peril." (I've read the book—there's a woman and a bar, but no peril.) A fight ensued: the editor, writer, and agent—all demographically similar to the book's target audience—pled their case. "We spent all Sunday writing a letter to [the publisher], the head of publicity, and head of sales, as three women who are the audience for the book, and we won! And that cover's been written about. It was part of [think pieces about trends in cover art]! We were just like, 'Instagram!' That was our argument." The book did not win awards, but it was well reviewed and the author was profiled in major outlets; it was optioned for adaptation as a limited series. I hadn't read it before my interview with Sarah, but her enthusiasm won me over—I read and enjoyed it, and recommended it to friends.

Later, I heard about this book and its remarkable cover story in another interview. Unprompted, Caleb mentioned the book, but he had a different take. He, too, had been queried by the writer when she was looking for representation. He passed, but the book clearly made an impression on him. "I liked it," he told me, but it wasn't right for him.

> In my opinion, it's commercial women's fiction. But her agent sold it as literary fiction and [a prestigious literary imprint] put it out as literary fiction. They put a literary cover on it. So it's literary fiction! And that book worked because people felt that they were smarter because they were reading it, and because it was from [the prestigious literary imprint], and because of its cover . . . it looked like the next big literary thing. But if [the prestigious literary imprint] didn't put it out? If Berkley put it out? I mean it may not have done the same business, but it would have fit there, too. But you know, [Sarah] was the agent on that. She had a vision for that book and it worked! So. Good for her.

Editing for the pitch involves determining at a very early stage how to position a book in the market and helping the writer to develop it

according to those specifications. For Sarah, that meant seeing what *could be* in the manuscript, and setting it on a certain trajectory. She made some crucial choices—how to pitch the book (as literary fiction), which editors to query (another woman in the target demographic), and at which publishers (specializing in literary, not commercial). The cover reinforced those choices. And so the book garnered a literary reception: it was reviewed in major outlets, including *The New York Times*, where the author was also profiled. The book was taken seriously by critics; it could have been a contender for major awards (though it wasn't nominated, in the end). It is shelved in the "literary" section of the bookstore. The agent's pitch isn't a singular document, but a first step in defining a book that will follow it through the entire field of production, that will govern the decisions made in the editorial process, which will ultimately shape how the book is positioned (and reviewed) in the field of reception.

Editing "to fit the pitch," finally, tells us something about both the pitch as a genre, and the work of the literary agent. A pitch should be accurate and believable. Despite claims to the contrary—and their sometimes rotten reputation—agents are not all hype and bluster. To be sure, their work involves performance, but the agent's word matters, even in a context where showmanship is expected and rewarded. One agent I'll call "Leila" reported to me that some agents write pitch letters that are all swagger, but those agents have no credibility. "Their pitch letters notoriously go unread," Leila said. By contrast, she told me, "My pitch will end up on the jacket, because I got it right." This isn't only a matter of writing accurate descriptions of books or writers, conveying the appropriate reading experience to a potential editor. It's about maintaining credibility, both for the sake of professional reputation and for the sake of all of the authors on the agent's list. "Your word is everything," a veteran agent named "Lucille" told me.

Your taste, your word, and your list. Throughout my interviews, as agents cast about for language to describe their taste, their eyes would drift to their bookshelves. They would pick up a book or touch a spine, pointing out a recent client or two whose work could stand in for some aspect of their taste. One agent handed me a galley that had been displayed proudly on her desk, saying, "He represents my *best* taste." The

agent's bookshelf, containing the body of work that she and her clients produce together, is the physical symbol of the writers she represents, colloquially referred to as a list. The list is not only an expression of an agent's taste—the clients to whom she's gravitated—but also proof of her ability to sell a book, to turn the symbolic capital of her good taste into financial capital for herself and her clients. Her list might be extremely prestigious, filled with literary prizewinners or the estates of the already canonized. Her list might be extremely commercial, filled with bestsellers and beach reads. It might be a mix of both. Regardless of its composition, the agent's list is her resume, the success of her clients ultimately reflecting on her. "An agent is only as good as the clients he or she represents," Gerry Howard told me. "That's the acid test." The agent of prizewinners might be known for her excellent literary taste; the agent of bestsellers, known for her tough negotiation and dealmaking. These are two different modes of agenting, but both will be met with recognition and respect.[40]

Just as the writer's reputation and prestige reflect on the agent, so too does an agent's taste precede the author. The list becomes leverage for every new writer an agent takes on: the agent who discovered Jonathan Franzen, the agent who is entrusted with the literary interests of Jhumpa Lahiri, the agent who built Percival Everett from an academic at an indie press to a Pulitzer Prize–winning writer—that agent *also* believes in this unpublished author. As an editor told sociologist Clayton Childress, acquiring editors are also "using the agent as a piece of information that describes something about the author and the project."[41] For an author, signing with a prestigious agent is tantamount to an invitation to join an elite club. Before the author debuts—before their book can be purchased at your local bookstore—they have been categorized, a horizon of possibilities set forth. They might not have a reputation yet, but their agent does, thanks to her other clients. And all of those reputations pave the way for the debut author.

Good taste is necessary but insufficient when it comes to selling a book. It is in the gap between personal taste, on the one hand, and very obvious commercial viability, on the other, where the work of agenting is most crucial. The agent's ability to close that gap, whether by developing a manuscript, generating buy-in, activating her network, or

presenting a "bulletproof" argument, distinguishes good from great agents. This is how agents exert influence over contemporary literature—how agents might become tastemakers.

Late one September morning at the beginning of the twenty-first century, an email arrived in an editor's inbox. The sender: a literary agent. The topic: a new novel.

> *Dear [Editor],*
>
> *I'm going out today with a novel I'm extremely excited about, and hope you'll want to consider it.*
>
> *Please find attached* [redacted] *by* [redacted]. [redacted] *is the author of* [redacted] *highly-acclaimed novels published by* [redacted]. *Their new novel is their most inventive and their best yet. Simply put, I'm crazy about it.*
>
> [Redacted: two paragraphs of detailed plot description.]
>
> [redacted] *considers questions of memory, immortality, our obsession with objects, what it means to devote a life to art, the fragility of civilization, and the consequences of violence. The novel follows the interlinked lives and fates of* [redacted]
>
> *This elegant, remarkable novel is high concept, character-driven literary fiction in the vein of Karen Thompson Walker's* The Age of Miracles. *The beautifully crafted structure—the various characters' stories ultimately link up—is reminiscent of Dan Chaon's* Await Your Reply.
>
> *Please find attached the manuscript for* [redacted], *along with an author bio and reviews of their previous books.*

I look forward to hearing from you, and hope you'll love this novel as much as I do.

All my best,

[*Agent*]

The fact of the email is unsurprising; an editor might receive a dozen of these per week, sometimes more in the busy fall season. The form evolved considerably since Reynolds's day, in terms of both length and relevant details (and one, very telling omission: an asking price). The early twenty-first century was not a seller's market; the primary product exchanged was not short fiction. Beyond the essential details, Reynolds likely would not recognize this as an agent's pitch.

As pitches go, the email is unassuming. Devoid of exclamation points, relatively light on the rhetorical jazz hands, the pitch focuses on the novel's plot details more than on hype. The adjectives are either non-specific ("remarkable"), or hackneyed by over-use ("beautifully wrought"). With the specifics redacted, the pitch could be describing any novel—questions of "memory" and "immortality" and "what it means to devote a life to art" are hardly unique. To an unpracticed eye, this pitch seems to say very little of substance at all. But beneath the email's apparent restraint are a series of critical disclosures, signaling to the knowing editor that this novel is worth their serious consideration:

The author is experienced, with previous books to their name. (A professional.)

But this book is better. (It could break out.)

The previous books were critically acclaimed. (Awards potential.)

They were also successful. (There is a proven, receptive market.)

It is trendy, like other successful books. (This turns out to be an understatement; it will, in the end, far outperform both.)

The story has global appeal, raising questions about "civilization" itself. (And the timing, of course—early fall, in the run-up to the Frankfurt Book Fair.)

Its structure is complex, with an ensemble cast of interlinking characters. (Read: easily adaptable.)

And, above all, charisma: the agent herself, and her affective connection to this novel. She is "extremely excited" about the novel. No, she's "crazy about it." In fact, she "loves it," and wants the editor to love it as much as she does. And not just any editor, but *this* editor. Sure, "beautifully wrought" may be somewhat blasé; "remarkable" is a lukewarm aesthetic category, at best. But these adjectives have weight behind them, for they have been selected and written by *this agent*. Her reputation—for selling this and other clients' books well, for her eye and taste—precedes her. No matter how light her touch, when this agent promotes a book, editors believe her.

And they were right to believe her, though the magnitude of the outcome couldn't have been predicted. An auction ensued, and the book was purchased for a modest sum by a publisher with a literary reputation. The book would go on to become one of the bestselling novels of the early twenty-first century, selling well over one million copies. It would win several major awards, while being nominated for many more. It would be translated into more than thirty languages. It would be adapted into a limited series, which would, in turn, be nominated for several major awards. There are vanishingly few readers in the United States (if not the world) who have not heard of this book or its adaptation. And, just as certainly, there are vanishingly few readers in the United States who have heard of the agent who sold it. This is where our story begins.

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