Twitter Thread by Delilah S. Dawson



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Hello, writers! How about a thread on LITERARY AGENTS? How to get one, how to talk to one, how to keep one happy. Spoiler alert: I am 100% pro agent and can't imagine not having one on my side. 1/

Why would you want a literary agent?
* you want to be traditionally published
* you want someone experienced to help guide your career
* you want to learn how to edit like a pro
* you want to sell foreign and movie rights
* you want answers to your newbie questions 2/

Why you might *NOT* want a literary agent:
* you want to self publish
* you're not willing to compromise on your edits
* you don't think their expertise is worth 15% of your advance
I... can't think this way. Literary agents have been crucial to my career. 3/

So, how do you get a literary agent?
1. Have a finished, revised, edited, polished manuscript.
2. Write a query letter for your book
3. Send your query to agents who rep your genre and are open to submissions
4. Repeat steps 1-4 until you're offered representation. 4/

So, let's go through those four steps. First of all, you must have a finished, revised, edited, polished book, and it must be sellable. That is, you can't sell a 600k picture book or a 40k adult Fantasy, etc. You must read extensively in the genre you're writing. 5/

If you send a book that has not been:
* revised (deep edits, big cuts, plot problems)
* edited (pass through to make sure the revision works)
* polished (drill down to sentence level to make it sing)
then you're doing yourself a disservice. Agents can tell when you're rushing. 6/

So you have a finished book, and it's edited and polished. Now you have to learn a completely new skill: writing a query letter! If you read *ALL 325 QUERIES* on @QueryShark, you'll have a leg up. That's what I did. Witness an agent (lovingly) critique queries in real time! 7/

Now, this thread is going to have a lot of tough love. At no point is being a pro writer easy, not at the beginning and not as you continue. If you're not willing to read *all 325 queries*, why are you even here? Dig in. Learn. Level up. Don't half-ass it; whole-ass it. 8/

In short, a query is ~250 words of you selling your book. It's not a synopsis or a dry retelling; it captures the voice and genre and makes the agent hungry to read on. The goal is that at the end, they are desperate to read your book and see how it ends. And how you write. 9/

Here's the query that hooked my agent. I received 30+ rejections before I got the yes. 10/

So now we're assuming you have a finished book AND a well-written query. The next step? Finding literary agents. I used QueryTracker and AgentQuery, which allow you to filter for only agents who represent your genre and are open to submissions. Start an Excel spreadsheet. 11/

For each agent you put in that spreadsheet, do the research. Are they legit or 'schmagents', which are dirty bottom-feeders who prey on new authors? What's their reputation? Their agency? Where are they located? Have you heard of their books? Do you like their Twitter banter?12/

When I did my agent spreadsheets, I included columns for their email, their agency, their likes or dislikes as seen on social media, snippets of what they were looking for or represented. I wanted all that info so I could personalize queries. 13/

Here's the thing: All the information you need to get an agent is online. If you do your research, you will see when an agent or editor doesn't seem legit. I almost got preyed upon by a vanity press, with a shady salesperson claiming to be an 'editor'. Don't fall for it. 14/

I also numbered the agents in my spreadsheet.
1 = seems like a perfect fit
2 = this agent would work, but they're not super into my genre or there's some other reason that makes them tier 2
3 = not the best fit, but we'll try and see
And I queried widely across all 3 levels. 15/

Oh! And with novels, it's expected that you will have simultaneous submissions, meaning you can query 100 agents at once. I wouldn't, but you can. It's not like short stories, where you're only supposed to query 1 magazine at a time. 16/

Quick reminder:
* I will only speak to traditionally published genre fiction here-- not poetry or graphic novels or non-fiction.
* YMMV. Every journey is different. There are always exceptions.
* Slush works. I was found in slush with no prior publishing connections. 17/

So! You now have a book, a query letter, and a spreadsheet with agents. I aimed for 100, if I could find them-- I queried 2 books before finding my agent. Now you select 5 agents to query and personalize your letters to them according to their submission guidelines. Send! 18/

Why send out 5 queries to start?
1. You can see what kind of response you get. If I got 5 form rejections, I completely rewrote my query.
2. So you don't waste 6 weeks waiting for 1 response.
3. Because fortune favors the brave.
4. Why not? It's free. 19/

Guess what? If you're querying, you're going to get rejected. Probably a lot. Most traditionally published writers have over 100 rejections at least. Get a rejection, send out a new query. Queries are like arrows-- keep that hope flying! 20/

You're getting close to finding a literary agent when you start getting Requests, which is when they ask you to send pages or the full manuscript. If they offer personal feedback with a rejection, that's also a really good sign. R&R = Revise and Resubmit, another good sign. 21/

At each stage of the process, your reaction to the test is part of the test. Can't finish a book? You're out. Won't edit? You're out. Query stinks? You're out. Let rejection stop you? You're out. So Get stubborn. Keep going. You are full of query-able books! 22/

Most writers secretly hope their dream agent will read their 1st query and immediately offer representation. 99.99% of the time, that won't happen. Some writers will get 10 rejections and give up. Those who get published keep pushing through. They start writing the next book. 23/

A rejection doesn't mean your writing sucks. It could mean:
1. It's just not their jam.
2. They already rep something like it or the trend is not selling.
3. Their client stable is full.
4. Your book isn't sellable-- too long, too short, doesn't fit a genre
BUT!!! 24/

Here's the important bit: If a book is compelling enough, NOTHING will stop an agent from offering representation. It can be the wrong size, defy genre, WHATEVER. If you think your book is getting rejected for these reasons, the book just isn't succeeding like you want it to. 25/

When I was querying, I thought I could get rejected for not having credentials or an MFA, for spelling errors, for bad font choice, for the book being a little too long, for it bucking trend. NAH. If an agent or editor can't put the book down, all else is fixable. 26/

So, let's say you get an email from an agent saying they liked your book and would like to chat. This is THE CALL, and it is A BIG DEAL. The agent wants to speak to you on the phone to determine if you will be a pleasure to work with-- and to hear about your next ideas. 27/

On THE CALL, prepare to hear what the agent liked about your book-- and what they would change. Tell them what you want to write next. Talk about what you want in a career. And ask them questions, too. You can find lists of things to ask an agent in a simple Google search. 28/

Point being, THE CALL is a job interview-- for both of you! You want an agent you can talk to, who groks you and is enthusiastic about your work and your future work... while still being realistic about what you could do to improve. They should not promise the world. 29/

If the agent offers representation on the phone, it's standard to ask for 2 weeks or so to respond. Look at who still has your query or pages under consideration and send a brief email with 'OFFER RECEIVED: Book Title' in the subject line. Give them the chance to offer, too! 30/

If your gut tells you the agent who offered isn't a good fit, you don't have to accept. A bad agent is much, much worse than no agent. And if one agent offered, more will, for this or the next book. It's hard to get an agent, but ultimately, they work for you. Trust matters. 31/

True story: I had to choose between two agents who offered, and it felt AWFUL turning one down! I adore and respect her so much, but I was already writing my next book-- in a genre she didn't represent. I always knew I was going to be a genre hopper. Still feel bad about it! 32/

So, let's say you have accepted an agent's offer of representation. Yay! Congrats! You might be asked to sign an agency agreement, so be sure to read the fine print. The writer does not pay a legit agent ANYTHING until they've made a sale, at which point the agent gets 15%. 33/

During my first year with an agent, I had so many questions, but I was terrified of annoying her. I would keep an open document of questions and send it to her when I had 10 or so. Not stuff you could Google, though. Don't waste her time! It's normal to feel at sea. 34/

While the agent technically works for you, it's important to respect her time. If you tell her you'll turn an edit around in a week, do it. If you have questions, ask. We had phone calls for several of my big edits over the years. I'm so grateful for that hand-holding. 35/

The hope here is that you and your agent will workshop your queried book until it sings, she'll submit it to editors at the major publishing houses, and someone will buy it-- and then your agent wills shepherd you through that process, too. See why agents are so fabulous? 36/

Winding down to a close, so I'll remind you that I'm generally happy to answer genuine and unGoogleable questions about writing and publishing here on Twitter. I can't read your query or first pages. I can't pass you on to my agent. And I'm no good at answering long emails. 37/

In conclusion, I am 100% pro agent. A good literary agent can exponentially improve your advances, fight for more royalties, improve contract stipulations, get foreign and media deals, and play the bad guy when you have a problem with your editor. Worth that 15% for me! 38/

But! If you end up with a bad agent who doesn't return your emails, who doesn't do what she says she will, who refuses to submit your book after extensive edits, or who encourages you to pay for her/a friend's editing services, FIRE THEM. A bad agent is worse than no agent! 39/

So in conclusion FOR REAL THOUGH, you can do it! Getting a literary agent isn't easy, but neither is writing a book. If you carry on in a spirit of self-improvement, of play and whimsy, of dedication to the craft and helping others, you've got a great leg up on success. 40/40