

Why might we want a literary agent and what can agents do for writers in Wales?

JULY 03, 2020

This is the first article in a four-part series written for Literature Wales on how to secure the interest of a literary agent...

Let's begin at the beginning: what is a literary agent?

Put plainly, a literary agent is someone who represents and champions you and your work. This means that a literary agent will work with you on your manuscript to get it into a state where they feel the project is submittable, they will pitch your manuscript to editors, and then, if they are successful in getting a publishing deal for you then they will negotiate your contract to get you the best deal they can. Agents might also hang onto and sell your foreign rights (the rights to publish your book in different languages and territories) and subsidiary rights (such as TV adaptation, serial rights etc.) which can mean another revenue streams for you as the originator of the literary work.

The relationship doesn't end there. Agents will also be a champion for you within the publishing process, once the contract is signed with the publisher; they will help with any qualms you might have about the blurb or the book cover or any issues you might run into during the editing process and, importantly, they will champion your book's campaign within the publishing house and beyond once your book is published.

Literary agents can also help to steer you through the process if the initial submission to publishers doesn't go well and if all the publishers which they have submitted it to say they don't want to acquire your book. Most agents will persevere here, and they will work with you then take the book out onto submission for a second pass. They may well continue to work with you beyond these initial submissions if they fail and try to sell a subsequent book.

Agents have a commercial interest in your success, because a literary agent will take a commission on your earnings resulting in the initial sale of your manuscript – known as an advance – and on royalties if you ‘earn out’ your advance. Literary agents have an overall knowledge of the industry and are often very adept negotiators who know their way around book contracts while also maintaining a solid and evolving understanding of the overall bookselling landscape. And, perhaps most critically, agents have an insider’s knowledge of what editors and readers are hungry to read as well as future trends on the horizon.

Many writers in Wales are unrepresented by a literary agent and while there are programmes within Wales to assist writers with career progression – such as the Hay Writers At Work programme and Literature Wales’ bursaries and mentoring scheme – there is no one literary agency dedicated to representing writers from Wales.

A quick glance through the *Writers’ & Artists’ Yearbook* or *The Writer’s Handbook Guide to Writing for Children* will demonstrate that there are dozens of agencies in the UK – mainly in London, but also in Bristol, Oxford, Edinburgh and elsewhere. Each agency will have its own brand and reputation; some are bijou while others are very large indeed, sometimes operational in more than one continent. The landscape is always shifting; as such it’s always worth checking in the most recent edition of the *Writers’ & Artists’ Yearbook* (most municipal libraries carry a copy) or checking on agency websites, especially just before submission, to check their details. If you don’t mind a busy inbox, writers can also subscribe to [the Bookseller](#) and [Bookbrunch daily email alerts](#) in order to keep up with moves and changes within the agenting and publishing business.

Not only will any one literary agency have their own specific culture, they will also have individual agents within the agencies who have their own list which they’ve built up and curated since the beginnings of their respective careers. These agents will have a taste which is unique to them. The best way of finding out about what individual agents are looking for is to check out their page on the agency website. We’ll talk in more detail about this later.

Individual agents also have their own career trajectories. It is worth thinking about this when you are researching them online in the run-up to submission (though their 'status' within the agency can be a little tricky to gauge, a bit of investigative work can pay off!). As a general rule, you'll find that those agents at the beginning of their careers will be very eager to build their lists and will be attending writers' festivals, going to universities to talk to students studying Creative Writing MAs, perhaps spotting trends on Instagram or Youtube and then searching out the content creators to work with them on book proposals. While these agents might have less experience in terms of negotiating contracts (they will work with the senior agents to work on this skill), the more 'junior' agents may possibly have more time to work with you on making a stellar book proposal or finessing your manuscript and they'll potentially have more time to invest in this graft. This is by no means a hard and fast rule, however, as every single agent is unique.

Whether you need an agent or not will depend on the genre and market that you are writing in as well as your aspirations as an author; however, there will always be exceptions to the rule here too. It will also depend, in part, on the readership you're writing for and whether you are looking to publish within Wales or outside of Wales.

To tackle the first point: broadly speaking, poets don't have agents. However, a high profile spoken word and page poet such as Hollie McNish will have a literary agent because of the kind of sums that her book advances and event bookings attract. If you're writing a children's book and are seeking to get it published outside of Wales and by a major publisher, again you'll likely need representation.

Writers can approach publishers directly within Wales without the need of an agent and it's always a good idea to check the submission guidelines of the Welsh publishers in question to see what they prefer in terms of a submission package. The one-stop resource for authors who wish to approach editors in Wales is the Books Council of Wales website which has a comprehensive and frequently updated database here.

If you are offered a contract by a publisher, regardless of where the publisher is based, and if you don't have representation then you might wish to have the

contract vetted, in which case you could consider either joining the [Society of Authors](#) or the [Writers' Guild](#) and request that their contract division look over what you've been offered.

If you'd like to submit your work to independent presses outside of Wales, it is possible that you will not need an agent in order to do this. The indefatigable Mslexia Press publish an excellent resource, the [Mslexia Indie Press Guide](#) which is currently on its third edition. It covers not only presses who publish women, but writers of any gender (the magazine's tagline is 'For Women Who Write'). It is always worth checking the independent presses' submission guidelines; some will have 'submission windows' during which time the presses are actively seeking submissions, for example. And then there are publishers such as [Unbound](#) which work on a completely different crowdfunding publishing model which you might want to consider as well as, of course, the route of self-publishing.

Lastly, if you'd like to submit your fiction or non-fiction project to a medium- to large-sized publisher outside of Wales, then the likelihood is that you'll definitely need representation. This isn't a hard and fast rule, thankfully, and some of the 'Big Five' publishers have initiated programmes in order that writers can submit directly through their writer development scheme - such as [WriteNow](#) which is run by Penguin Random House; WriteNow seeks authors from under-represented backgrounds on a rolling basis and we'll talk more about diversity in publishing in the next article.

It's important to point out that seeking a literary agent isn't just about the here and now; literary agents can become career-long advocates for your work, steering you back out of dead ends with works-in-progress that have stalled or giving you sage advice if you're not sure which book project to tackle next. They have a bird's eye view of the industry and good literary agents will have their ears close to the ground to get wind of what editors are hungry for in terms of voice, narrative style or theme.

Ultimately, you employ an agent to represent you, not the other way around, and it is important to remember this when you are considering looking for an agent, which we'll consider in the next section.

Must Reads Books to tell you more about the publishing process:

- *From Pitch to Publication* by Carole Blake (Macmillan, 1999) This is now relatively old, but it still has some timeless tips on how to approach agents
- *The Writers' & Artists' Yearbook 2020* edited by Alysoun Owen and Eden Phillips Harrington (Bloomsbury, 2020) This includes brilliant mini-essays between the publisher and agent listings
- *The Writer's Handbook Guide to Writing for Children* by Barry Turner (Macmillan, 2004) This book is the go-to if you're writing for children
- *How to Be a Poet* edited by Jo Bell & Jane Commane (Nine Arches Press, 2017) This book contains over twenty chapters written by a range of contributors on the process of getting your poetry into the public domain
- *Scratch: Writers, Money and the Art of Making a Living* edited by Manjula Martin (Simon & Schuster, 2017) This is an important book for writers wanting to find out more about the reality of author incomes
- *Indie Press Guide* 3rd edition edited by Debbie Taylor (Mslexia Publications, 2020) A must-read if you want to submit to independent presses

Feed Your Ears Podcasts to listen to about the process of publication:

- [Honest Authors](#) podcast with Gillian McAllister and Holly Seddon
- [The Creative Penn](#) podcast with Joanna Penn
- [How to Fail](#) podcast with Elizabeth Day

Online Some ideas for picking up tips on submission:

- A quick search of #QueryTips on Twitter will pull of a raft of advice and peer information
- Dip into Nathan Bransford's blog: Helping Authors Achieve Their Dreams. This is a US site by an ex-literary agent and author who shares excellent tips daily
- Check out Sam Missingham's The Empowered Author. Sam is a powerhouse in publishing whose blog and enewsletter is a must-read
- Aerogramme Writers' Studio is an excellent resource for writers at all stages of their careers

Julia Forster