

Just the Write Word

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The agent who came down from the cold

Why is a New York literary agent, coming to Orlando? To scout for talent, of course. Kate McKean, of Dystel and Goderich Literary Management, accepted the invitation from organizers of the annual Orlando Writers Conference to hear pitches from local writers with book projects. The event, sponsored by the Florida Writers Association (FWA), will be held at the Maitland Arts Center on February 25.

Agents get bombarded with submissions by mail and e-mail, but the truth is that they don't just hang out in their offices, or at trendy Manhattan restaurants. For McKean and most other agents, getting to know authors is an important part of the process of bringing a new book into the world. So they do a lot of traveling. Agents from Dystel and Goderich, for example, have pressed the flesh at a variety of prestigious venues including the Iowa Writer's Workshop, the Denver Publishing Institute, and the Columbia School of Journalism. "We don't want writers to think of us as just a website or an address," says McKean. "Giving writers the opportunity to meet us at conferences helps them put a face on the agency."

Some might be surprised that an agent would travel all the way from New York to Orlando to attend a small writers conference in only its second year. Paul Nutcher, conference organizer and FWA's regional director, is not. Though young, the event is growing fast. "We're anticipating an attendance of 100 or more writers at this conference," says Nutcher,

"including many talented, emerging authors ready to be discovered."

The Orlando Writers Conference may not yet have the cache that some do, but Nutcher believes this is an ideal city for a conference of this kind. Orlando, in fact, has a burgeoning literary community. The University of Central Florida and Rollins College both have well respected writing programs with faculties that include award-winning fiction writers like Susan Hubbard and Connie May Fowler respectively. Greater Orlando is also home to other significant literary institutions. The Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities celebrates its namesake's contribution to American Literature in her hometown of Eatonville. The Kerouac Project of Orlando,



named for another icon of American letters, sponsors a writers-in-residence program at the Kerouac House in College Park, the home in which Jack Kerouac lived for a time.

Nutcher is eager to establish the Orlando Writers Conference as yet another fixture on that literary landscape, and to give aspiring authors an opportunity for face to face contact with established writers and industry representatives like agents. Though UCF and Rollins serve their students well, for emerging writers outside the campus walls, it's been tougher to find support in the area. "There really hasn't been a writers conference in Orlando," says Nutcher, "and next to no opportunity for writers here to meet with agents in person." He wanted to bring an agent to this year's conference who was energetic, actively seeking new clients, and interested in a variety

of genres. “Kate McKean met all of those criteria perfectly.”

He also wanted someone from an established and respected agency. Dystel and Goderich Literary Management founder Jane Dystel has thirty years of experience in the publishing world and the agency has an impressive and diverse list of clients, including actor-turned-author Richard Dreyfuss, the notorious Sydney Biddle Barrows, and best selling novelist David Morrell.

Nutcher points out that an agent presence is an essential component of a successful writers conference, because, today more than ever, agents are a virtually indispensable part of a writer’s career. In fact, the opportunity to meet an agent is a big draw for any writers conference.

That stands to reason, according to Kate McKean. In the increasingly competitive business of publishing, writers have to be more aggressive than ever. “Meeting an agent at a conference is great because it shows the agent that you’re proactive in getting your name out there and advancing your writing career.”

Though the February 25 conference visit will be a business trip for McKean, it’s also a homecoming. She was raised in the Sunshine State and still has family throughout North and Central Florida, including in Apopka. Her roots were another factor in her decision to accept the conference invitation. “I was certainly attracted to the idea of getting to know authors from my home state, especially since Florida has such a rich and diverse literary tradition, from Hurston to Hiaasen.”

McKean attended the University of Florida, and got her start in publishing as an assistant at the University Press of Florida. She went on to earn a Master of Arts in Fiction Writing from the University of Southern Mississippi, a fact that gives her a keen understanding of what writers go through to produce a finished work. And she describes herself as coming from a long line of writers, editors, and salesmen, so becoming an agent seemed like the perfect combination of those family influences.

McKean understands that, to aspiring authors, agents are seen as the publishing world’s gatekeepers. After collecting a drawer full of rejection slips, some writers might see them more as guard dogs. That’s another

reason agents travel to writers conferences. “We view conferences as a public service,” says McKean. “There’s a lot of misinformation out there about what agents do and how publishing works, so we like to educate and help whenever we can.”

Among the popular misconceptions McKean is referring to is the idea that agents actually *like* to reject projects. Not so, she says. “It’s heart wrenching to have to reject someone, because agents know how much work was put into writing a book.” Another common impression is that agents don’t really read everything. McKean says they certainly do. “I have the paper cuts to prove it.”

What advice does she have for writers giving verbal pitches at a conference? Remember that it’s a business meeting; keep your demeanor professional. Make the pitch itself short and sweet: hook the agent quickly with something that will make her want to read the book, then let her ask follow-up questions. Be positive: too many writers sell themselves short in pitch meetings by making self-deprecating comments about their level of experience, or their uncertainty about the viability of their projects.

Perhaps her most reassuring piece of advice is directed at hopeful writers whose projects have been rejected by an agent or two. Or a dozen. “Keep trying,” says McKean. “Your book can only get published if an agent or editor is reading it.” She points out that there’s no accounting for taste. “It might take dozens of submissions before you find just the right person who shares your sensibilities, but when you do, you can be sure it’s because the agent connected with your work in just the right way.”

If you have questions or comments about this article, please feel free to contact me at tommyflorida@earthlink.net, or at 407-332-0122. You can also visit me on the web at <http://home.earthlink.net/~tommyflorida>.

Do you know someone who might benefit from the information in this article? If so, please feel free to pass it along. And, as always, keep writing.

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