



## The 7 Question Interview with Anne Hawkins

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Please let us know who you are, your company, and some of your clients:

Hi! I'm Anne Hawkins, senior agent with John Hawkins & Associates, Inc. Our agency was founded in 1893 by Paul R. Reynolds and, to the best of our knowledge, is the oldest literary agency in the country. Some of our early clients included Stephen Crane, Willa Cather, Jack London, and P.G. Wodehouse. John Hawkins joined the agency in the late 1960's and purchased it from Paul R. Reynolds's son upon his retirement. (Paul R. Reynolds Jr., incidentally, was one of the founders of the SAR, one of the two organizational precursors of the AAR - Association of Authors' Representatives.)

We currently have five full-time agents plus support staff. A sample of our authors includes (in alphabetical order) Tasha Alexander, Brett Battles, Mark Danielewski, Tananarive Due, Janet Fitch, John Gilstrap, Gail Godwin, E. Lynn Harris, John Katzenbach, Gregory Maguire, Joyce Carol Oates, Cecilia Samartin, and Jess Walter.

I joined the agency in 1996 -- and, in case you're wondering, I am not Mrs. John Hawkins! I represent literary and commercial fiction, including mystery, suspense, thriller, women's fiction, and historical. My nonfiction list is pretty eclectic but tends toward the "serious" -- history, biography, public policy, science, nature and the outdoors, medicine, and women's issues.

So our readers may fully understand the role of an agent, please tell us how you make contact with an editor at a major house once you have a manuscript you are interested in.

I almost always contact the editor by telephone, briefly describe the project, and ask the editor if he/she would like to see it. 99% of the time, the answer is yes, because I know from past experience and current research that the project is appropriate for his/her list. I follow up by sending my own submission letter along with the manuscript or proposal. These days, the vast majority of submissions are digital, since editors and agents prefer to work from their electronic readers.

As an aside, I won't take on a project if I don't know the right editors for it -- no matter how good the project may be. Why? Except in rare circumstances, if an editor at a particular



imprint turns a manuscript down, I can't present it to another editor at that same imprint. I only get one chance. That's why it's critical to get a project into the right hands the first time around.

When reviewing a submission, what do you look for:

The first thing I evaluate is the concept. If I get that "been there done that" kind of feeling or if it's inappropriate for my list, I pass. If, however, I find the concept original and intriguing, I read on. And that's where the art and craft of writing come in. Wonderful voice, compelling storytelling, characters that jump off the page, a strong, cohesive narrative arc -- these are the elements that persuade me to offer representation.

Any suggestions or comments on how a writer can break into the publishing industry:

It goes without saying that a writer must hone his craft to the highest level possible. Once that's accomplished, however, a writer needs to put on his business hat and devise a smart strategy for gaining representation and eventual publication. If I could give unpublished authors one piece of advice, it would be this: Learn as much as you can about the publishing industry, how it works, and who the players are *before* beginning the query process. Publishing is a quirky business, and things often happen in a non-linear fashion. The author who adopts a learn-as-you-go philosophy runs the risk of making costly, even disastrous mistakes.

This brings up a second point. Don't assume that everything you read online is true. Some writer-friendly websites do offer accurate, up-to-date information. Others perpetuate wild untruths. As a case in point, I Googled myself and discovered, among other curious things, that: 1) I am a top agent for horror fiction. (*I have never represented a single horror novel.*) and 2) I am one of the top ten agents for YA fiction. (*In my entire career, I have represented only one young adult novel.*) Get the picture?

Aside from excellent writing skills, what are the literary factors that make an author successful?

As my colleague Eddie Schneider said in last month's interview, creativity, originality, and the "awe" factor are elements that set a writer apart from the crowd. I also agree that addressing broad issues within the context of fiction give a story more immediacy and relevance. These days, reading groups are a potent market force, driving the sales of smart fiction and nonfiction. For these groups to select a book, however, it obviously has to offer something worth discussing.

I'd also like to stress the importance of an author writing the book he/she wants to write, instead of "writing for the market." Trends change, sometimes abruptly. Take chick-lit, for



example. One minute was flying off the shelves, and the next minute its market had tanked to such a degree that publishers wouldn't touch it. A more positive example is this one: About five years ago, a wonderful historical novel came across my desk. It was just so good I couldn't resist, even though I knew that the historical market was such weak one that I'd be facing an uphill battle. Fortunately, a top editor loved it as much as I did, and went on to publish it. And then the strangest thing happened. The market for historicals turned around, and this book, along with a few others, was on the cutting edge of an ever-increasing readership. Again, write your own book.

What are your feelings concerning traditional publishing houses versus smaller vanity press houses or self-publishing?

I have to admit to a prejudice against most self published books. Let's face it, just about anybody can self-publish just about anything. In the majority of cases, editing is nonexistent, and the overall quality is poor. Like every other agent, my reading time is limited, and I don't want to waste it on a project that, in all probability, has little potential. There are a few self-published books, usually non-fiction, that do go on to find a home with a major publisher. But these are the ones that demonstrated their muscle through significant sales and/or media buzz.

And then there's the saying, "You can only publish a first novel once." First novels don't have a track record. They're all about potential. Agents put in more time helping the author polish the manuscript. Editors work extra hard as their in-house advocates to publicity, sales, and marketing. Reviewers are more likely to select them, and less likely to make truly nasty comments. In other words, everybody cuts first novels a break. Self publishing can take the bloom off that particular rose.

Are there any upcoming releases associated with your agency that you would like to tell our readers about?

I'd only like to mention books from my own list, because, Heaven forbid, I should overlook one of my colleagues' new releases. In the next few months, you'll see John Gilstrap's ***NO MERCY***, Mary Anna Evans' ***FLOODGATES***, Brett Battles' ***SHADOW OF BETRAYAL***, Marybeth Maida and Debbie Kiederer's ***BEAUTY PEARLS FOR CHEMO GIRLS***, and Tasha Alexander's ***TEARS OF PEARL***.

WritingRaw.com would like to thank Anne Hawkins for taking the time out of her busy schedule for this interview.