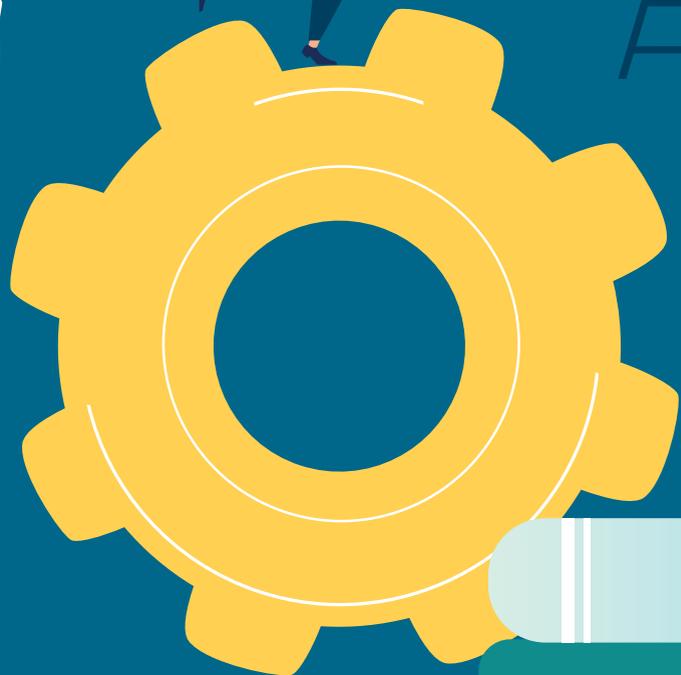


THE AGENT- AUTHOR RELATIONSHIP



**HOW TO CREATE
AND CULTIVATE
A SUCCESSFUL
PUBLISHING
PARTNERSHIP.**

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN

Writers who dream of signing on with a big publisher know that the first step in the process is finding the perfect literary agent to represent them. But once an agent and author decide to partner up, what then? What are the expected roles and duties of each person? What factors go into creating a successful long-term agent/author relationship? We asked a handful of authors and agents to weigh in.

THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT AGENT

For many writers, finding a literary agent can be a test in patience and persistence. Roni Loren, award-winning and best-selling romance author of more than 15 books, was no exception. She got serious about writing during the *Twilight* craze. While her son napped, she wrote a



YA paranormal manuscript and queried it. When she didn't get any bites, she developed a contemporary romance manuscript and sent it out to 15 to 20 agents. While waiting for responses yet again, she completed a third book, an erotic romance titled *Crash Into You*. Through a referral from a blogger friend, Loren sent sample chapters to Sara Megibow with KT Literary Agency.

Megibow loves the romance genre. While reading the opening scene of Loren's erotic romance, she burst out laughing. "It was hilarious, real, and sexy. Roni is truly one of the most outstanding authors I have ever had the privilege of either reading or working with," she says. "The sexy banter in Roni's books has always been over-the-top outstanding. I knew right away, even within first few pages, that I wanted to represent Roni."

Before finding an agent for her newest picture book, children's book author Denise Vega had to let go of her current agent. She wanted a new agent who represented novels *and* picture books.



"Because she was great and she was my first agent, it was hard," Vega says. "At the same time, we both knew it was the right decision. It turned out to be a really nice conversation."

After having the same agent for 10 years, Vega sat down and thought about what she really wanted. She came up with three criteria: First, the agent had to be part of an agency so she could bounce ideas off other agents. Secondly, this agent had to have solid connections with sub-rights agents. Lastly, she needed to be an editorial agent who could help Vega grow as a writer.

Query Tracker, a website designed to help writers find literary agents, led her to the Andrea Brown Literary Agency. While serving on



AUTHORS & THEIR AGENTS

DENISE VEGA

Children's author of seven books, including her most recent picture book, *If Your Monster Won't Go to Bed*.

AGENT: Lara Perkins, Andrea Brown Agency.

RONI LOREN

Romance author who is a two-time RITA Award winner and a *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author with 15+ published books and novellas, most recently *The Ones Who Got Away*.

AGENT: Sara Megibow, KT Literary Agency.

CAROLINE WOODS

Cambridge, Mass.-based author of the historical fiction novel *Fräulein M*.

AGENT: Shannon Hassan, Marsal Lyon Literary Agency.

KEVIN VAUGHAN AND JIM DAVIDSON

Co-authors of the *New York Times* best-seller *The Ledge: An Inspirational Story of Friendship and Survival*.

AGENT: Dan Conaway, Writers House.



the faculty at a conference the agency hosted, Vega connected with Lara Perkins, one of their agents. Perkins had previously been a co-agent and was just beginning to take on her own clients. They hit it off, and Vega submitted a query and sample pages to her. During their initial phone call, Vega felt that Perkins really understood her work and her vision. Vega was thrilled when Perkins asked to represent her. "She has been beyond anything I could have expected in terms of how she handles herself as an agent. As an editorial agent, she is phenomenal in helping me grow as a writer," Vega says.

When historical fiction writer Caroline Woods felt she had gone as far as she could with her novel, she began her quest for an editorial agent who could help her polish her work before sending it to publishers. She created a tiered list of agents and agencies who had been successful with historical fiction and queried them. Woods received a few rejections before Shannon Hassan of Marsal Lyon Literary Agency – one of her top-tier agency choices – reached out and asked to schedule a phone call.

Hassan says it was Woods' voice and beautiful writing that caught her attention. "I loved her take on the era. It was a little bit different from other [WWII] books you see," she says. "Characters are a big thing for me, and she has amazing, compelling, vivid characters that really spoke to me." Hassan knew as soon as she read the manuscript she wanted to work with Woods but wanted to confirm by talking with her.

During the phone call, Hassan asked her three questions: *Are you willing to do the editorial work?*

How active are you going to be as a partner in marketing the book?

What else are you working on?

"Once I asked her those questions, it was clear to me we would be great partners. It is a relationship, so personalities have to match, and through

our conversations, I felt we would work well together. I offered her representation on the phone that day," Hassan says.

Woods felt the same way. "I wanted to work with someone who wanted to stick with me through a writing career. I had a good feeling after the call, like we would work really well together, and I appreciated Shannon asking those questions. It showed me she was taking this seriously," she says.

Kevin Vaughan, an award-winning journalist, met author and motivational speaker Jim Davidson at a writer's conference where Davidson was the keynote speaker and Vaughan was a presenter. Vaughan was intrigued by a past event in Davidson's life, in which he plummeted 80 feet into a crevasse while mountain climbing and then had to climb out with minimal gear. Vaughan wanted to write about it for the newspaper he worked for. "After the publication of the series, 'The Crevasse,' about the accident on Mount Rainier, Jim and I began discussing working together on a book based on his experiences," Vaughan says.

Through a contact of Vaughan's, his piece ended up with Dan Conaway, a literary agent at Writers House, who became interested in their book project. "Jim and I agreed to go forward with Dan representing us. Jim and I both hoped to land an agent who was as into us and our story as we were into him," Vaughan says. "We definitely found that. At the same time, I know from the experience of many friends that we had a lightning-strike situation. I know many people who spend months or years trying to find an agent and have a difficult time. In that sense, we definitely feel very lucky."

OK, WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER. NOW WHAT?

After all the paperwork was finished and signed, Megibow asked Loren if she could turn *Crash into You* into an erotic suspense because there was some traction with that genre at the time. Loren tried, but they soon dis-



Authors Jim Davidson (front right) and Kevin Vaughan (back right) with agent Dan Conaway.

covered this was not a good fit for her. With Megibow's help, Loren returned to the original concept of erotic romance and developed the characters and storyline more. "It was some work," Loren says, "but it was more about how we were going to position this to publishers."

Megibow says authors don't always initially see the importance of a publisher's relationship with their distribution channels. Writers may discuss agents or self-publishing or eBook prices, but agents, editors, and publishers are discussing Barnes & Noble, Amazon, indie bookstores, libraries, Target, Costco, and book clubs.

"So when Roni says we spent that time 'positioning,' that is the piece that makes an author money," says Megibow. "Someone who has written something utterly brilliant, but it is a YA science-fiction-fantasy-romance memoir – it doesn't have a place in the distribution channel, so they are not going to get an agent. Whereas with Roni's writing, we looked at [it] through the lens of romantic suspense and then through the lens of contemporary erotic romance and decided on contemporary erotic romance, and within a couple of weeks had an offer for it."

Megibow considers herself a strategic agent and not an editorial agent. Her focus is on the best plan for the success of the book. Some agents are very involved in the editing process; however, she is not. Her relationship with Loren is now at the point where Megibow doesn't even see the book until it is published.

“When I am trying to sell something to publishers, I need to be able to present to them why I believe this book has opportunities in their distribution channels and in subsidiary rights (translation deals, audiobooks, Hollywood deals). That’s my job,” she

was ready to go out. “I crafted my pitch letter,” says Hassan. “Put my list of editors together and went out with the pitch. We received some feedback and some ‘revise and resubmit’ requests.”

Before making any changes, “we talked a lot about whether or not

to listen to the input of our editor, and to do as many revisions as necessary to make the work its very best. We worked hard to meet those criteria, including meeting all our major deadlines on time. It was an enormous amount of work, but with everyone expecting a lot out of each other, we feel that we put out a good piece of work that is a credit to the entire team.”

Conaway consulted with them frequently, including each time he had a conversation with a publisher. After getting an offer from Ballantine, Davidson and Vaughan had a decision to make because they had planned to have an auction for the book deal. “Dan talked through the pros and cons of doing that versus accepting an offer that was on the table,” says Vaughan. “Jim and I were enamored with the Ballantine crew, so that helped our decision.”

In November of 2009, they accepted the offer from Ballantine, and in the summer of 2011, *The Ledge: An Inspirational Story of Friendship and Survival on Mount Rainier*, was released and became a *New York Times* best-seller.

MAINTAINING A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

Loren and Megibow have worked together for eight years now and have even developed a friendship.

“When you first sign on with an agent, you are not sure how formal you need to be,” says Loren. “What’s OK to talk about and what’s not? With Sara, it is a very comfortable relationship. I can call her about anything. She is my advocate.”

Vega says Perkins is very keyed into the industry. “She has a great balance of helping you make your story better while also thinking about its marketability. Her insights into my writing are valuable. Sometimes I can be all over the place about what my story is really about, and she can help bring me back in.”

As with any relationship, you want someone who is willing to stick around even when it gets tough. Woods really

appreciated Hassan’s support and commitment. “She was a teammate and somebody else who loved the book the way I did. It didn’t feel to me like she was rushing me into changing it just so it could get published. There were things that both of us really liked and didn’t want to change. Having that backup was really reassuring,” she says.

Davidson and Vaughan say they enjoy working with Conaway because he is very hands-on and a great writer and editor. “He was involved in our book every step of the way and actually even helped with an edit of our first draft after our regular editor became ill and had to take some time off. While we ultimately worked most closely with our editor on the final language, cover, photos, etc., Dan was involved in each decision,” says Vaughan.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Good communication is the key to any successful relationship, and it is no different for agents and authors.

Loren says she needs high communication because she has high anxiety. Megibow keeps her informed with weekly emails even when there’s no news to report. “She is also good at keeping me calm because I can get a little wound up. She mellows me out and says everything is fine. She is good with my personality,” Loren says. “I have lots of writer friends that have had agents who they didn’t mesh [with] personality wise. It wasn’t a match, so they left those agents and found different agents.”

“If someone wants a lot of communication and their agent is less communicative, that’s going to be frustrating,” Megibow says. Conversely, if the author wants more space and the agent wants to do more editing, that may be frustrating. So a lot of it has to do with personality.”

Woods says Hassan is a great communicator who responds quickly, promptly, and effectively. “I know that she is doing that with editors, too, the foreign rights agent, or the film rights agent,” Woods says. “Shannon is also a

good editor, so she has been able to help me artistically as well.

I am working on another book, and when I have ideas, I can send her those, and I get really good feedback. It has been a good ongoing process.”

As with most agents and authors, much of their interaction is by email or phone, but Woods and Hassan feel lucky because they’ve had the chance to meet in person a few times. For example, a week after they received the book offer, they enjoyed a celebratory lunch together in Boston.

Davidson says that because agents are handling many books and projects at once, their availability ebbs and flows significantly. “We learned to be clear about when some issue was ‘hot’ and we needed Dan’s input fast, versus when another item was not critical, so that he could focus on something else that needed his attention more urgently. As always, clear communications and diligent professionalism go a long way in working relationships, including the author-agent collaboration.”

PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE – AND A NECESSITY IN THE PUBLISHING WORLD

Something everyone we spoke to seemed to agree on: The publishing world does not move fast.

Megibow hears from writers all the time that the hardest part is waiting. “My emails to any of my clients during this time is, ‘don’t worry, this is normal. I don’t have any answers yet,’” she says.

“Frequently there is this perception that agents should just be able to call up anyone and get an answer. That’s not how it works. The editor reports to the publisher, who reports to the sales director, who reports to the sales reps, who are checking on the distribution channels, who’s looking at subrights, etc. There is a lot of red tape.”

Loren says the longer you are in the business, the more you realize it is a game of patience. “That is the other side of traditional publishing some writers don’t realize. You sign your first book and it doesn’t come out until a year and a half later,” she says.

Hassan agrees that it is a lot of waiting. Hassan’s advice to authors is to start working on your next project. “Keep busy. Publishing is a very slow process and you have to have patience. But when you get that call that someone loves it, it is so joyous and wonderful.”

FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

- Megibow advises writers to avoid comparing your career and or book with anyone else’s. It’s easy to wonder how come that author got this or that, but you’ll never see the full story behind the scenes.
- Loren was grateful she had a slow build. “I didn’t come out the gate and hit ‘list’ and get all the attention, but slowly I have built my career to where I am in a good place now. Being patient can sometimes pay off,” she says.
- Vega has talked to writers who are so excited to have an agent...and then don’t think beyond that. It’s essential to consider the relationship: how you work, how you like to communicate, and how you like to receive information is so important.
- Hassan says not to take rejection personally. An agent may already have something similar to your project on their list or they are not looking for the type of book you proposed. It doesn’t necessarily have any reflection on your writing. You have to cast a wide net and keep trying.
- Woods says, “go for it! Writers shouldn’t hold themselves back thinking their work has to be perfect. You have to get out there and meet a lot of agents. Connect with a lot of them, and that’s how you find your perfect advocate. Don’t be shy! Expect rejection, but go in with an optimistic spirit.”

Kerrie Flanagan is a freelance writer from Colorado, writing consultant, and author of eight books under her label, Hot Chocolate Press. She is also the author of the book *Guide to Magazine Article Writing*. Web: KerrieFlanagan.com & HotChocolatePress.com



GOOD COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY TO ANY SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP, AND IT IS NO DIFFERENT FOR AGENTS AND AUTHORS.

says. “I have to find something I will fall in love with and then have a solid strategy for selling.”

Vega signed with Perkins in June of 2013. She says, “She sold a picture book for me, *If Your Monster Won’t Go to Bed*, in October of 2013. We are now in 2018, and I haven’t placed anything else yet.”

It hasn’t been for lack of submitting or preparing. Perkins tries to sell a few of Vega’s books each year. The picture book market is competitive, and publishers are being very selective. “I’ve had a few get really close. They went to acquisitions meeting and just couldn’t quite sell it to the marketing team or the sales team,” says Vega.

It’s definitely not because of Perkins, Vega says. Not everything she submits to her agent goes out because Perkins is focusing on the needs of the current market. “She’ll tell me in her wonderfully sweet way, ‘Maybe this needs to go on the back burner right now.’ I am fine with that. Even though things aren’t happening, that doesn’t dampen our enthusiasm,” Vega says.

Once Hassan signed on Woods, she sent her editorial feedback on the manuscript, and Woods reworked it until it

something was someone’s taste or something that should be fixed in the manuscript,” says Woods. Once they agreed on what revisions to make, Woods fixed it up and Hassan took it back to publishers.

One year from initially signing on with Hassan, Woods got an offer for her historical novel, *Fräulein M*. Hassan then had to negotiate the deal and the contract.

“There are a lot of things behind the scenes that people don’t think about,” Hassan says. “The devil is in the details. What rights are you giving away? Do you want to hold the foreign or translation rights and have one of your associates try to sell those? Audio rights are a big deal and need to be considered.” Hassan says her job is to get the best deal for her authors and maximize the benefits of those rights.

As with most authors, Davidson and Vaughan hoped to secure a publishing deal and have a successful book. They signed with Conaway in late 2008 and spent the next few months crafting a proposal for the book.

Once an agent is secured, it doesn’t mean the work is done. Davidson says, “Dan expected us to work hard,