

### Writers as Agents and Publishers: Crafting Literary Markets



Laura Biagi

Laura Biagi is a second-year MFA fiction student. She grew up in small-town Kentucky and spent eight years working in New York at a literary agency, where she represented literary fiction, nonfiction, YA, and children's books.

#### Can you describe a day in the life of a literary agent?

No day was ever quite the same, so here's an average week! Mondays would start on the subway, where I read manuscripts from potential clients. When I got into the office I'd usually respond to those manuscripts, then go through emails from clients about projects, editors about submissions or books under contract, publicity and marketing people with updates, etc. Most literary agents wear a lot of hats. On Tuesdays I'd send out and follow up on client projects, on Wednesdays I'd pitch projects in Australia and the UK, on Thursdays I'd work on audio sales, and on Fridays I'd follow up on permissions requests.

#### What was your most fun project?

A fun young adult project was *Ash Princess*, which I sold in a major auction, and went on to become a *New York Times* bestseller. I was comping it to *Game of Thrones* and *Red Queen*, and I was determined to go big or go home in my pitching strategy—and it certainly paid off!

#### What advice would you give a writer looking for a literary agent?

Don't feel obligated to jump into a contract with the first agent who's interested in your work—but also don't give up if those first agents aren't interested. There are a ton of established agents and even more young, hungry agents. Research agents widely and submit to multiple agents at varying experience levels at once. Interview your agent before signing with them. Ask how they work with clients, where they see themselves submitting your book, how they pitch, how they handle subsidiary rights and terminating relationships, etc. You'll work very closely with this person and will have to put a lot of trust in them, so make sure it's a good fit.

#### What are you currently working on?

I'm writing a novel about two sisters whose father disappeared when they were kids. They have a contentious relationship and very different views on love. They live in New York, but separate journeys take them back to their hometown in Eastern Kentucky. Ultimately it's a novel that's meant to challenge our notions of love and how it structures our lives (with slight magical realism involved). It's been a lot of fun playing around with the ideas and honing my voice and characters!



Rohan Chhetri

Rohan Chhetri is a first-year PhD poetry student. A Nepali-Indian poet, he is the author of *Slow Startle* and the chapbook *Jurassic Desire*. His second book of poems is forthcoming from Tupelo Press in 2021 (Kundiman Poetry Prize 2018).

#### Can you describe a day in the life of a publishing editor?

A day in my life as a publishing editor -- it was another life about 5 years -- began with running to a brief sales meeting where editors were subjected to dizzying array of figures and sales numbers and data from Nielsen. After lamenting on the declining shelf life of books, editors had to sell the book we were planning to take on to the folks from marketing. Then the real work began: which involved just sitting and poring over about 40-50 pages of a manuscript with my headphones on. I mostly worked on literary fiction and sometimes poetry. Other things had to be done in between, making phone calls to designers for the book cover, talking to typesetters etc. In between I would even find time sometimes to work on my own poems.

#### Did your work experience influence your decision about where to place your own manuscripts?

Not at all. It just demystified the process, being on the other side. I was writing poetry. Poetry has a solely small press presence in India. Poetry, like everywhere else, is not really something trade publishing houses are excited about in India. I was allowed however to take on one or two poetry titles a year. They wanted to appear inclusive. I tried to exploit that and started a poetry imprint, Hachette Poetry Series, and published a couple of new collections by Indian/Indian-origin poets. I think they discontinued the series after I left in 2015 to join the MFA program at Syracuse.

#### What has surprised you most about moving to Houston?

I had a more desolate image of Houston in my mind. The lack of sidewalks etc. Nobody walks in Houston, I was told. The winter has been fairly pleasant. The food is consistently good almost everywhere. I'm beginning to warm up to the city more every month. I like this strange lovechild of "local" and "metropolitan" that Houston can be. The museums are a stone's throw away. And the local transportation isn't as bad as people claim it is.

#### What are you currently working on?

I'm working on my second book of poems which is scheduled to be out from Tupelo Press in 2021. It started out as my MFA thesis at Syracuse. So there is a lot of work to be done. I'm at a stage where I doubt every single poem in the book.

Should you have queries or wish to support the cwp: [cwp@uh.edu](mailto:cwp@uh.edu)