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# Agent & Author Roundtable

## *Agents and Authors on Finding the Right Agent*

BY BARBARA DEMARCO-BARRETT

**A**uthors Guild member Barbara DeMarco-Barrett, a California-based writer, writing teacher and host of a weekly radio program, *Writers on Writing*, rounded up three successful authors and two literary agents to trade advice on one of the biggest challenges in an author's career: finding the right agent.

Literary agent Betsy Amster, a former editor at Pantheon and Vintage, is based in Portland, Oregon. Jane Dystel is president of Dystel & Goderich Literary Management in New York City. Novelist Bret Anthony Johnston is the author of *Remember Me Like This*, and is director of creative writing at Harvard University. Karen Karbo, based in Portland, Oregon, is the author of fourteen award-winning novels, memoirs and works of non-fiction. Southern California author Aline Ohanesian's debut novel, *Orhan's Inheritance*, was a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Selection for Summer 2015.

**Barbara DeMarco-Barrett:** What makes a good agent?

**Betsy Amster:** A good agent is bonkers about your work, helps you shape it by holding you to your own highest standards, knows which editors are likeliest to love it, too, and keeps you posted on the responses she gets. Ideally, you'll feel he or she is your co-conspirator. The whole process needs to be transparent. If you're lucky, it might even be fun.

**Jane Dystel:** A good agent is honest, hardworking, totally accessible to you, well thought of by editors and publishers and flexible. Above all else, he or she cares deeply about his or her clients and their work.

**Bret Anthony Johnston:** Passion for the work. I'm unconvinced that where an agent works or which writers she represents makes a lick of difference. What makes all the difference in the world is how deeply the agent identifies with the writer and the work. The agent has to be passionate about the work she represents. I would take passion over fancy letterhead or a rock star client list every time.

**Karen Karbo:** A good agent understands your work, your strengths and weaknesses as a writer and human being, and is willing to go to the mat for you. Also, he or she returns your phone calls within a reasonable length of time. Basically, the rules of any functional relationship apply.



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—Agent Betsy Amster

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**Aline Ohanesian:** I'm a debut novelist who's still in the honeymoon phase with my agent. As in any relationship, there needs to be a lot of trust. What I want in an agent is someone who believes in my writing. I put everything I had into my first novel. It took me six years to write it, and after a year of researching and querying agents, I had a few offers of representation. I knew right away that Eleanor [Jackson] was the most enthusiastic about my work. She understood right away why I had written *Orhan's Inheritance*, and I believe that was what helped her sell it at auction. It also helps to have someone who is professional, responsive and willing to go to bat for you when the time comes. Also, she would never give me advice about what to write next, and for that I'm very grateful.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** What's the best way for a first-timer to get an agent?

**Amster:** I recommend that writers research agents on publishers marketplace.com, my favorite website. The most common mistake I

see aspiring writers make is approaching agents in categories they don't represent. That's true for probably half the queries I get. In fact, I sometimes get the distinct sense that the only reason I'm being approached is that my last name begins with A. Publishers Marketplace allows you to sort agents by the categories they represent, which makes it possible for you to target your efforts.

**Dystel:** Go online, of course. There is a wealth of resources on the Internet about agents and their lists. Look at books like yours in the bookstore and note who the agent is. Speak to your writer friends. Check out the AAR [Association of Authors' Representatives] for agents' names.

**Johnston:** There are plenty of ways, but the one that has always made the most sense to me is to read the acknowledgments pages in the books of writers you love. The writer should always thank the agent, and if you've identified with the book, then there's a reason for it. Maybe the reason is the same as why the agent identified with it.

**Karbo:** Scour the acknowledgments in works of contemporary fiction or nonfiction that speak to you for the name of the agent. If the book is similar to yours, even better. Write him/her a succinct e-mail in which you mention your great affection for the book and allow as how perhaps your book is in the same vein. This accomplishes several things. First, the agent gets the sense you're not spamming eight hundred agencies. Second, it shows that you're savvy enough to understand that publishing is often a matter of taste, and also you understand that sharing similar tastes is important. Third, it sets you apart from the other nine hundred writers who've zipped off an e-mail that hour.

**Ohanesian:** This question is so important. My first bit of advice is: take your time. The query is your very first impression. Standard or stock letters that you send to a gaggle of agents are never a good idea. Look at and read books that are similar to yours, and find out who's representing them. I wrote ten query letters when I started looking for an agent. Each one was crafted specifically for the agent being queried. My first sentence would allude to other books that agent had represented. It told them that I was familiar with their work and that I'd done my homework. I was querying them specifically, not just any old agent. And it worked. I got three solid offers from those ten queries. It's also important to state the genre and word count and to keep the query under a page long. It helps to



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**—Bret Anthony Johnston, author**

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have a few credits from literary journals. I was a finalist for the PEN/Bellwether Prize as well as a finalist for the Glimmer Train Best New Writers Award, and I made sure to put that in my final paragraph.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** I've noticed a new category in agent listings: "book club fiction." I imagine it came about because of the influx of book groups, but how is "book club fiction" defined and how do you feel about it?

**Amster:** "Book club fiction" is fiction that exerts a strong pull on the emotions—the kind of book you might be tempted to start reading all over again when you're done. (I felt that way about Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*.) It's the kind of book you want to press not only on your friends, but on random strangers. Remember that word of mouth is a powerful driver of sales.

**Dystel:** I would imagine this refers to "buzz" books and commercial women's fiction, which is a category I love. I think of titles like *Gone Girl* and *Still Alice* as examples. But you also have to include bestsellers like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which hit a major nerve for female readers.

**Johnston:** I have no idea. I do love book clubs, though, so I hope I write book club fiction.

**Karbo:** It's the distressed denim of the book world. The genesis of book clubs was—and still should be—a group of readers making a discovery. That's what's exciting about being in a book group. We should be reading the lesser novels of Graham Greene and the latest genre mash-up by someone strange and difficult, not some artificially constructed narrative with built-in Moments and Lessons that can be easily processed after three glasses of chardonnay.

**Ohanesian:** From what I understand, book club fiction is a book that is literary but still accessible, something that can be read in under a month and still lend itself to a lively discussion. I think of books like *The Kite Runner* or *The Lovely Bones* as book club books. They often have supplementary material in the back of the book. My editor and I had a lot of fun coming up

with discussion questions for *Orhan's Inheritance*. I was a member of a book club for a little while, and those were some of the most sophisticated readers I've had the pleasure to interact with.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** What are the wrong things writers look for in an agent?

**Amster:** I find that aspiring writers don't always do enough research into the agent's taste and track record and instead jump at the first agent who wants to represent them.

**Dystel:** Sometimes writers want agents who are with big-name agencies, where the agent is way too busy to really pay attention to someone new. This is usually a big mistake. Sometimes writers want a new best friend. Though the agent-author relationship is long-term and should be a solid one, being best friends isn't necessarily a good thing. It should be a caring but *professional* relationship.

**Johnston:** Fame.

**Karbo:** "Where is my Lena Dunham-sized advance, please?"

**DeMarco-Barrett:** These days there is so much information to be found on the Internet regarding agents. What are important questions to ask an agent, and what should you especially be cognizant of—personality, chemistry, proximity to New York, houses the agent has sold to?

**Amster:** It's important to get a sense of the agent's strategy for your book. You might ask, "How do you tend to work? Do you like to submit material to every editor you think is right for a project at once, or do you submit it to an A-list, a B-list, a C-list, and so on?" I prefer the latter approach because it allows authors to take editorial feedback into account if the book doesn't sell in the first round.

Proceeding in rounds, usually from large houses to smaller ones, also requires a certain amount of persistence, which is a useful quality in an agent. You should also ask if the agent will show you rejection letters. It's interesting to see how editors respond to your work. And it pays to know which editors an

agent is approaching. I wouldn't take no for an answer here. I've been a West Coast agent as long as I've been an agent, and I've never found it to be a disadvantage for me or my clients.

**Dystel:** You should, of course, be aware of the agent's personality, and you must feel comfortable communicating with your agent on everything having to do with your career. Communication is key in all aspects of our business, in fact. You should be able to ask any questions you have, even if they seem ignorant or dumb. Our job is to educate our clients in order to empower them to make good decisions. Proximity to New York is not important given the current technology. If possible, you should make sure that the agent deals with as many publishing houses as possible and is well respected throughout the industry.

**Johnston:** You want an agent who feels like a fellow traveler on your chosen path. You don't want an agent who leads the way, and you don't want one who

blindly follows. You want an agent who listens to your ideas, who challenges and respects you, who values the kind of writing you want to do regardless of its commercial appeal. You want to feel comfortable disagreeing with the agent, and you want to respect her intelligence and reading experience to the degree that she can criticize your manuscript.

**Karbo:** I have several lovely friends who are excellent agents and who don't live in New York. I would send students and friends to them in a heartbeat. That said, my own agents have made deals on my behalf because they ran into an editor at the Bryant Park Grill on a snowy Tuesday. My way of saying, I'm old-school. Agenting is still, for the most part, in New York, and it helps if your agent is there.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** You've all been involved in the publishing industry long enough to see and experience changes. What is the one main change you've seen that's for the better? For the worse?

**Amster:** For the better: It's actually easier these days to develop a platform if you put your mind to it. Social media is very democratic.



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—Aline Ohanesian, author

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For the worst: I don't tend to dwell on what's gotten worse. I remember an article by Thomas Whiteside in *The New Yorker* from 1980 called "The Blockbuster Complex" that bemoaned the "huge emphasis on the 'blockbuster' bestseller" now that "most publishers are owned by conglomerates" (I'm quoting from the abstract I found online). What a modern complaint! Yet the article was written thirty-five years ago. What I focus on is the fact that it's still possible to launch new writers, and it's still possible for me to ply my trade as a so-called "boutique" agent.

**Dystel:** The changes for the better are that publishers are more flexible in how they publish—they have adapted to digital publishing well and continue to publish in print effectively, too. The worst thing is that the industry continues to contract, with fewer companies, fewer editors, fewer places for agents and authors to go.

**Johnston:** One of the best things is that it really no longer matters that the agent works in NYC. With the Internet, there are great agents all over the place. One of the worst things is how so many imprints have folded or been consumed by larger houses.

**Karbo:** Better: rise of the small press. I live in Portland, where we have a number of excellent small presses: Tin House, Hawthorne Books, Future Tense Books, Forest Avenue Press. I know I'm forgetting some. And lo, in these modern times the Big Five trade publishers would just as soon publish parenting advice from *Real Housewives* than an inventive, literary novel from an unknown writer. The result: small press editors are in a position to acquire often great and inventive work that in another time might have been snapped up by a larger house.

Worse: Evolution of authors from introverts willing to do some self-promotion to shameless hucksters.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** These days, with so many changes in publishing, how are agents' roles changing?

**Amster:** We have to coach our clients more and more on the importance of self-promotion and the uses of social media.

**Dystel:** We are advising in areas we didn't previously. Many of us advise on digital publishing; we advise on marketing and publicity as publishers have continued to cut back in those areas. Many of us take on editorial roles that in the past were handled by publishers.

**Johnston:** Agents are doing far more editing than they ever have. So often the agent is working with the writer the way editors did previously.

**Karbo:** Once upon a time the editor was the chief champion and nurturer of writers (think Maxwell Perkins and Hemingway). Now the agent has assumed that role. This evolution has been in the works for some time. Maintaining a long-term relationship with an editor is a luxury afforded mega bestselling authors, since the sales department has had its boot on the neck of editorial for some time. Agents, on the other hand, are generally in it for the long haul. Or at least mine is.



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**Communication is key in all aspects of our business, in fact. You should be able to ask any questions you have, even if they seem ignorant or dumb. Our job is to educate our clients in order to empower them to make good decisions.**

—Jane Dystel, president  
of Dystel & Goderich  
Literary Management

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## Questions for the Agents

**DeMarco-Barrett:** If you reject the first fifty pages or the entire manuscript, are you interested in seeing the work again, if the author has performed a major revision, or are you only interested if you've welcomed the author to resubmit?

**Amster:** I'm only interested if I've invited the author to resubmit. It tends to be difficult to revisit material.

**Dystel:** I am surely not interested in seeing the material again if the reason I rejected it is that the material just doesn't work. But if it's something that just missed the mark and could be improved with editing, then of course, I'd take a look again once it has been revised.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** When you're queried or receive the first fifty pages and it's not right for you, will you pass it on to another

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**agent in your agency or is the author free to query that agent?**

**Dystel:** The author should only query one agent in our agency, and if that agent feels it isn't right for them but is for someone else, they will always pass it on. If an author submits to more than one agent here and we find out about it, we automatically pass.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** Are there particular fiction genres that are especially of interest right now? Nonfiction genres? What about memoir?

**Dystel:** Currently, I am looking at and interested in thrillers and commercial women's fiction, but any well-written, well-plotted fiction works for me. I am also always interested in narrative nonfiction on science, military, business, politics, history, current events, etc.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** Why does someone become an agent? Love of literature? Money?

**Amster:** It's a great privilege to work with writers and to help them shape their material and get it into readers' hands. I'm often asked if I'm a writer myself, and my answer is no, I'm a reader—a very, very attentive reader who loves to share her enthusiasm for good books.

**Dystel:** One certainly doesn't become an agent to get rich. At least I didn't. It is a love of new ideas and books, and it is the serendipity of the agenting experience.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** What makes a good client? Is it mainly the work? And if the work is good enough, what will you put up with? Have you ever fired a client?

**Amster:** The quality of the work is the prime attraction. Demonstrating a willingness to revise the work is also important, since the bar is very high. I particularly like clients who are curious about how publishers think.

With some few exceptions, publishers are not going to be terribly sympathetic to the idea of publishing your 200,000-word novel in two volumes just because you can't figure out how to get it down to 100,000



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**—Karen Karbo, author**

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words. Nor do they necessarily care if you can live off your advance for the time it's going to take you to write your book. They make their own calculations about how much your book is worth. The more authors understand that publishing is a business, albeit a very quirky one, the better off they're going to be.

**Dystel:** A good client is respectful, totally honest and, of course, good at his/her craft. Very rarely these days do I put up with poor behavior or disloyalty, and I never put up with dishonesty.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** What about authors who come to you who are switching agents?

**Dystel:** Switching agents is a serious matter, and I always try to find out why an author has done this. I want to be as sure as I can that I can satisfy whatever needs their previous agent didn't. That said, I'm always willing to consider someone who's left his or her agent, as long as it's a clean break. If you mean how do I feel if an author leaves an agent, it should always be done with respect (most of the time the agent has worked very hard for the author). Sometimes the agent will

be hurt or angry, but as long as the author leaves in a businesslike manner, the "burned bridge" can be rebuilt at a future time.

## Questions for the authors

**DeMarco-Barrett:** When is it time for a change, and how do you go about it? Have you switched agents?

**Johnston:** I've had three agents. I fired one, one decided to leave the industry and I'm now with my third. I think you handle the change with respect and professionalism. It can feel very personal, and in many ways it is, but ultimately this is a professional relationship, so you do everything you can to check your emotions and ego at the door.

**Karbo:** I started answering this question in a way that didn't make me sound like a complete idiot, but have abandoned that in favor of the plain truth. I've been represented by InkWell Management for twenty-plus

years. My relationship with Kim Witherspoon and David Forrer has lasted longer than my marriage. We were children together, and now we are middle-aged. Then, like any twenty-plus-year marriage, I started feeling restless. I started worrying that maybe they were looking at me and my work like a housewife in stained yoga pants and greasy hair, that I would send in a manuscript and they would roll their eyes and think, “not yet another, weird, impossible-to-sell Karbo thing.”

When I published my first novel (to some acclaim, I should note) twenty-five years ago, I naively imagined that every book would garner a higher advance and even more acclaim. I didn’t grasp that a career in the arts was different than, say, working for a bank, where you keep scoring promotions and raises until your gold watch retirement.

I also thought that once I was published I could pretty much write whatever interested me, both novels and nonfiction, imagining that my readers would just follow along with whatever harebrained thing I cooked up.

The idea of a platform was complete anathema to me. By the time I felt my dissatisfaction with InkWell, I’d published more novels and several different types of nonfiction and frankly, it was amazing they were able to place this stuff with good publishers and editors *at all*. But they did. They had my back. They liked my work, handled all my deals with complete professionalism, and we liked each other.

Still, I did not have the career of my dreams. I worked hard, wrote well, worked harder, wrote better, worked even harder, wrote even better, made my deadlines, cooperated with my publicists, learned how to give good speeches, went on book tours arranged sometimes by the publishing house and sometimes by the very good outside publicist I hired. I built a good website, lost years of my life on social media, bleached my teeth. I did everything I thought I was supposed to do, and still there were no insane bidding wars for my books or front-page reviews in *The New York Times Book Review* (I did get a full-page review on page 10, once) and cozy chats with Terry Gross.

I thought, it must be my agent.

So I left InkWell, without voicing my concerns, or even letting them know I was unhappy. I ran off in the night, leaving a Post-It on the fridge (i.e., FedExed them a letter) and found a new agent at an equally reputable agency. She was a nice woman who didn’t seem to get me at all, didn’t have much of a sense of humor (a must) and, weirdly, said “Yes! Absolutely!” to questions in which I was soliciting her opinions. Also, kiss of death, when I was on the phone with her, I could hear the mad clicking of her keyboard keys.

Like the sad boozy adulterer who goes crawling back, I called InkWell and asked if I could come back, and with great generosity and class, they said, absolutely, they would love to have me. And now we are back together as if nothing had happened.

The point to this rather long anecdote is that there are so many variables to any writing career. Not enough credit is given to the mammoth role of luck, timing and the zeitgeist. Failing to have the career of J. K. Rowling is not necessarily a reason to find a new agent.

**DeMarco-Barrett:** Any more advice for writers looking for an agent?

**Dystel:** Take your time, be thorough in your search (and research), be tenacious and know that if you make the wrong decision, you can always change.

**Johnston:** Focus on your writing—first, last, always. Don’t be impatient with the process of writing or the process of finding an agent. Both take time, discipline and faith, and much of it is out of your control. What you can control is the quality of the work. Plenty of writers submit work that isn’t ready for

submission, just because they get impatient. Submit only your best and most polished work, and trust that the right agent will eventually and inevitably find her way to you.

**Karbo:** Develop the patience of Job. ♦

Barbara DeMarco-Barrett is a fiction writer, the author of *Pen on Fire: The Busy Woman’s Guide to Igniting the Writer Within*, and the host of Writers on Writing on KUCI-FM. She lives in Corona del Mar, CA, and teaches writing at Gotham Writers Workshop.



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**What makes a good client?**

**Have you ever fired a client?**

**—Barbara DeMarco-Barrett**

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