

waiting

It takes a lot more than writing
your heart on the page to sell a book.
Here are three lessons in perseverance one
writer learned the hard way.

BY BARBARA DEMARCO-BARRETT

Last October, Harcourt/Harvest published my first book, *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman's Guide to Igniting the Writer Within*—a book I had all but given up on. Over a period of years, as my son went from a chubby toddler to a lanky 8-year-old, I worked on the project, moved more by the idea of creating a writing guide/memoir than by the promise of selling it. Ironically, for years, though I tried, I couldn't sell it.

In my first attempt, through another writer, I got a major New York publisher interested in my book proposal. They seemed so interested that I thought I should get an agent to negotiate my

impending contract.

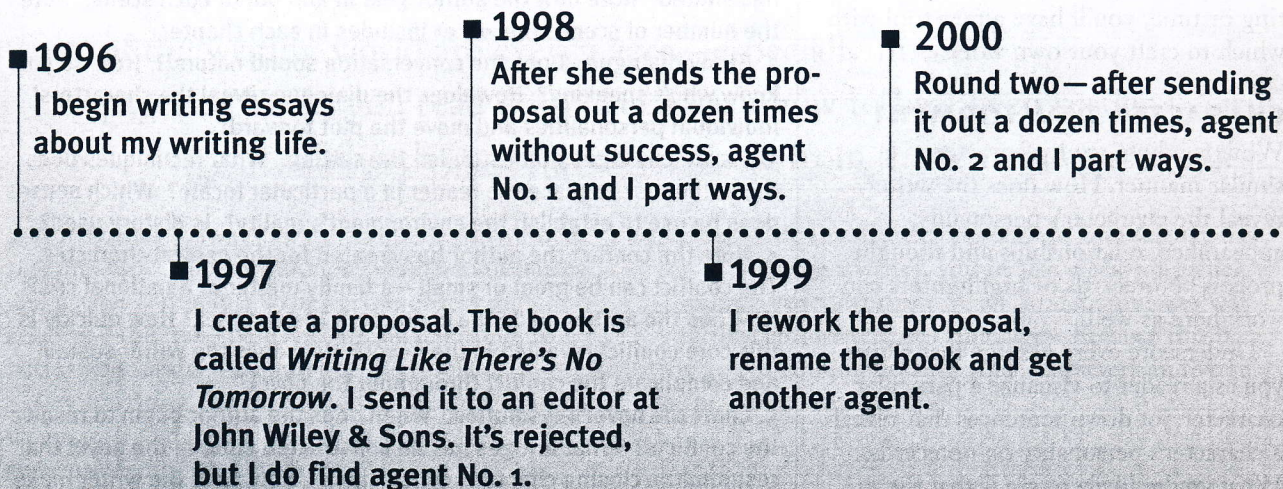
At that first publishing house, my manuscript made it through the editorial department but came to a dead stop when it hit marketing: Who was I? They wanted to know. I taught private workshops and freelanced now and then, but no one knew me. The publisher turned me down.

Lesson #1

Develop a reputation, reader base or platform.

Having what the publishing industry calls a "platform," I've learned, is more than just useful in selling

A TIMELINE OF TENACITY



to excel

most types of nonfiction: It's a must. So I started teaching through a university-extension program instead of privately, I freelanced more and I created a weekly radio show, "Writers on Writing," in which I interview authors. My first agent continued to try to sell my book for another year or so, but it wasn't meant to be, and we soon parted ways.

I hired a freelance editor to look over my proposal and she offered suggestions. I tweaked it and a year later found a second agent. But he fared no better than the first. Not to mention that he also sent my proposal to editors in tandem with proposals from other authors. Although this is an accept-

able practice, it bothered me. If my project wasn't important enough for him to market by itself, why would any editor think it important enough to give it her precious attention?

The words I saw on so many rejection letters—"crowded shelf"—also bothered me. Even though every writer I know, published and unpublished, buys writing books, apparently editors thought there were too many—at least too many that were the same.

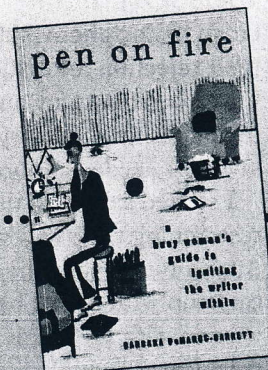
So I hired another freelance editor to read a few chapters and provide feedback. She agreed with the editors at the publishing houses: Though I now had

■ 2003

I decide to resurrect the book. Agent No. 3, Betsy Amster, takes me on.

■ October 2004

Pen on Fire hits bookstore shelves.



■ 2001

I hire a freelance editor who looks over the proposal and provides feedback. I bury the proposal in my garage.

■ May 2003

Pen on Fire goes to auction and sells to Harcourt/Harvest.

a budding platform, my writing book just wasn't unique enough. She offered suggestions, yet I put the proposal away. A couple dozen rejections over more than a few years and I'd lost energy for the project.

Lesson #2

When you don't know what to do, let it sit.

Actually, what I did was take my proposal and bury it beneath boxes in the garage so I wouldn't have to look at it. It was just too painful. I worked on other things—articles, fiction, another book proposal. But six months later, I pulled the first proposal out from the heap and set it in a visible place in my studio, along a well-worn path. For two years, my proposal lay sequestered out there. Occasionally, I'd trip over it on the way to do the laundry. It wouldn't let me forget—nor would friends and students.

Over the years, I've begun—and finished—two novels plus that other book proposal I mentioned, none of which sold. All three I lost desire for, and when that desire's gone, it's gone—no one can convince you otherwise. But, I discovered, not everything you write deserves to be out there. And that's OK. Some projects serve as learning experiences, as painful as that is to accept.

But I believed my writing book was more than a learning experience and it deserved to be published; my heart and soul were on every page. The pages just needed massaging. My proposal needed to stand out from the "crowded shelf" of writing books, to make editors see that even if the writing bookshelf was tight, there was still room for one more.

Lesson #3

Learn to decipher what editors are really saying in their rejection letters.

I had to get past my anger and frustration at those in the publishing industry and hear what they were saying: I needed a more unique slant.

I started spending time in bookstores and online, researching titles and slants of other writing books. After a ton of thought and research (and prayer), I came up with one: The book would be slanted to women with little time. I also came up with a new title: *Pen on Fire*.

I still wasn't exactly hopeful—hope was too risky at this point—but I thought I'd ask one more agent what she thought. If she said it was a lousy idea, I told myself I'd forget about it forever. I e-mailed

Los Angeles literary agent Betsy Amster, whom I'd gotten to know from having her on my radio show, and asked her what she thought about my idea. She liked it, she said, but needed to see the proposal.

I began to work on it yet again. For two months, I revised, reslanted and made changes that would make it more marketable, while not compromising my original vision of a quirky, inspirational writing book.

Although the proposal's history made her nervous, Amster loved it. She said she'd take it on as long as I provided her with a list of editors who'd already seen it. Together we refined the proposal even more, and two months later she sent it out. Three weeks after that my book went to auction, with five publishing houses bidding. On a predetermined day, over the phone and via e-mail, New York editors transmitted bids to my Los Angeles agent. The auction went into a second day, with two houses battling it out.

Amster had predicted when she first sent the proposal to publishers that the advance might be in the vicinity of \$30,000; books on writing, she said, "tend to trade in a narrow range." In fact, she warned, the advance might be as low as \$10,000, depending on the number of publishers interested in the project. Imagine our delight when Harcourt won the auction with a high bid of \$55,000. Granted, it wasn't a six-figure advance, but for me, and I think for Amster, too, it was a sublime victory. (Ironically, an editor who'd rejected the proposal a few years earlier had gotten hold of the new proposal and was involved in the early bidding.) "I guess it goes to show what a great idea, bullet-proof book proposal and a solid platform can do," Amster says.

My publishing experience so far has been stellar. I love my Harcourt/Harvest editor, and the support staff at the publishing house has been helpful in so many ways. Fellow authors were kind enough to give me great blurbs. Believe me, after being on the radio for more than six years talking with authors, I've heard horror stories about what can happen after you sell your book. I was prepared for the worst.

What I learned firsthand is to never give up on a project you believe in, no matter how long it takes or how many editors say no. All you need is one yes to send you on your way. **WD**

Barbara DeMarco-Barrett's radio show, "Writers on Writing," airs weekly on KUCI-FM and is simulcast at www.kuci.org.