

Note from the wilderness

by Mathew Paust

So much advice from the publishing industry to writers is either condescending or disingenuous.

We all know that in order to get published by a traditional house, the type respected reviewers respect, the unknown writer must have an agent traditional publishing houses respect. We're also well aware of the catch (22, of course) that it's normally even harder to get the attention of one of these agents.

The ubiquitous advisers tell us all legitimate agents expect that professional skills be exhibited in queries and blurbs and in keyboarding and formatting. Some agents may reject an otherwise perfect query, for example, if the font is not Times New Roman. Gadzooks.

"Sorry, this otherwise intriguing concept about a man with an obsession for a particular whale is not for us." A clerk in the agent's office inadvertently includes the query with the rejection. This is scribbled in the margin: "Courier New—OMG can you *believe* such unprofessionalism!"

What the advisers don't discuss is that these rules apply only to writers emerging from the wilderness. Should a query or manuscript from an unknown writer arrive on the desk of anyone with industry muscle—agent, publisher, editor, literate marketing director—with a scribbled note attached: "This is good shit. Cormac," need I elaborate how quickly the doors would creak open and the figurative red carpet unfurled? Brings to mind that line in Ray Charles's "Them That's Got."

If ya gotta have somethin before you can get somethin, how do ya get your first is still a mystery to me.

The advice from those who would help us "get" comes in a single word: Professionalism. And it's perfectly understandable. Writing might well be the one skill on Earth all who can read (even if they prefer watching television) secretly believe they can do. And many do. Many many do, even if they have no clue what they are doing.

Available online at [«http://fictionaut.com/stories/mathew-paust/note-from-the-wilderness»](http://fictionaut.com/stories/mathew-paust/note-from-the-wilderness)

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And we are told many many do not. These would-be writers might have a knack for telling a story, which is a good start, but they have no concept of craft in putting that story into written form. And I can empathize, truly, with first readers at agencies and publishing houses who face an apparently endless flow of manuscripts typed (keyboarded?) by these many many storytellers who have not bothered to study the craft of telling their stories in writing.

It's not unreasonable that agencies and publishers erect as many screens as they can to slow this horde of inferior manuscripts. Most of the older established houses warn up front they won't be bothered by anything that doesn't come from an agent. And most established agencies warn up front they won't be bothered by anything that doesn't come with a recommendation from someone they know. I suspect this call for "professionalism" is an innovation by the newer publishers and agencies not yet blessed with the kind of industry currency that would permit them to adopt such a country club exclusivity.

It's a business, after all, all are quick to remind us. True dat, and the sun always rises in the east and sets in the west, and death and taxes...yup yup, we know. We get it.

But haven't the most successful businesses proven over and over that in order to find and hold success the business must be dynamic? Have Microsoft and Apple become and remained household names, for better or to curse, without knowing and serving their markets? Without continuous innovation?

Amazon. Now we come to the crux. Jeff Bezos's behemoth, having changed the face of publishing, has introduced an unparalleled level of skepticism in readers. With "writers" self-publishing anything, no matter how poorly written, and entrepreneurs selling "positive reviews" of anything on Amazon, no matter how poorly written, how does a poor arguably talented wilderness writer who's not friends with Jonathan Franzen or Cormac McCarthy and who can't afford even the hundred or so bucks for "fifty positive Amazon reviews" manage to squirm into the sunlight of respectability?

There's a ray of hope, of course. Always a ray of hope. Almost offhand, as if this is surely understood by everyone, most agencies and even publishers include in their submission rules after warning about typos and formatting and professionalism, a statement along this line I consider to be not much more than an obligatory disclaimer: "Our primary goal, a goal toward which our very hearts beat ever faithfully, is to find the next best-seller." The wording varies. Some seek literary gems or future classics (altho I'd be shocked shocked were any agent or publisher bold enough to lay out such blatant balderdash), but all reek of boilerplate smarm likely suggested by house attorneys nervous that some embittered, litigious wilderness writer with a publicity-savvy lawyer friend might sue the bejeebies out of them under some little-visited ambiguous paragraph in the fraud statutes.

And yet, this hackneyed, wistful statement veritably bursts with underlying truth. What agent or publisher—or any literate human being—would not love to discover, with the promise of cash reward of course, the next best-seller or literary gem or future classic? The problem might well reside in that one word that's walking point along the trail of our entire discussion: professionalism.

It's a word, a concept, with variable implications. I suggest that on a spectrum between marketing and artistry, writers—those whose background does not include writing copy for the ad world, and maybe some of those who've fled huckstering as a livelihood—think of themselves closer to the artistry end. Many are solitary souls whose personalities are complex, struggling with both ambition and insecurities. They write because it's the safest way they know to produce to the best of their ability without incurring instant negative feedback. They cringe when it's time to put their product out for scrutiny by others. They might be able to sell with confidence, and even with flair, the work of someone else, but when it comes to selling themselves they go all goofy. Attempting to write blurbs and queries for their own work takes on an absurd aura, summoning forth the shouting TV voice of the late Billy Mays. And add to this the worry that getting the tone wrong, or the length or

form, or, Heaven forbid, the font, can keep their work from advancing to a spirit possibly kindred by anal front-line readers whose curiosity ends at a dropped Oxford comma in an email, and...

There's also the danger to the agent or publisher of losing a prize acquisition to the misconception (I dearly hope it's a misconception) that the submission itself is expected to conform in idea and voice to a rigid predictability similar to that of the query and blurb formulas. The gimme another *Fifty Shades* or *Hunger Games* mindset.

A rather simple solution suggests itself to assist industry professionals in identifying wilderness work that just might have what it takes to sell reasonably well in the marketplace. It's another single-word benchmark. One not so tight-assed and forbidding as *professionalism*. Lean closer, Benjamin, and I will whisper it in your ear. That's the boy—quit ogling my wife—okay, the word, Benjamin? *Plasticity*.

And this: one page of a manuscript is all any experienced, inherently curious reader should need to read in order to want to read another, and then another and more. Inherently curious. Don't forget that, for goodness sake. If you're a publishing professional with an itch for success, it's *de rigueur*.

