

GCWA Panel Discussion

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After many years of writing, with several published short stories and poems, I decided to try publishing one of several novels I had on the shelf. I started querying agents, following all the rules, sending out hundreds of emails, and getting almost no responses. Then I met an agent through friends. She liked my book and wanted to represent me. I signed a contract, and off we went.

I should have done a bit more research. My agent was well known and had worked for a New York City agency. She was now living in Florida and had her own agency, but in reality, she was retired. I think she was just looking for a bit of work to fill her time.

The first sign of something a bit off was when my agent asked for postal/administration fees. I did a little research and found that apparently this is acceptable, so I paid. She accepted a copy of my manuscript and even sent it back with a few (very few) suggestions for changes.

Months passed with no information from the agent. I bugged her, and she sent me a list of publishers' editors she had sent requests to read the manuscript. No contact information was included with the list.

More months passed, and I continued to bug her. She finally responded, telling me that a couple of major publishers were reading my manuscript. She gave names of the publishers, but not editors—no contact information. I wasn't able to contact the publishers—no way to find out if they were interested in my book.

I started hearing stories about my agent's laziness and reading bad reviews online.

Meanwhile, I decided to publish another book. But I was locked into a two-year contract. The agent had rights to not only the manuscript I had sent her but first rights to anything published under my name. So I self-published my next book under a pen name (my maiden name). I hired an editor, who gave me lots of feedback, then I edited, formatted, designed a book cover, and published with CreateSpace (now KDP), Amazon's publishing subsidiary.

Two plus years into my contract (it was a two-year contract), with no response from my agent, no information pro or con about the editors who were supposedly reading my manuscript, nothing. I'm not sure if she ever did anything for me. I sent her a registered letter ending the contract.

I sent the manuscript I had with the agent to my editor and received it back with significant markups. After much editing, formatting, and cover design, I self-published through CreateSpace.

Lessons learned:

- Do thorough research before signing a contract with an agent. There are some links on the GCWA website for agent searches, agent organizations, etc.

https://gulfwriters.org/home-new/publishing_resources/#agents

- Hire a good editor before submitting to an agent.
- Try submitting your work directly to a publisher. There are some out there who will take submissions without an agent.
 - Make sure it's a reputable publisher. Here is a list of types of publishers:

<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/types-of-book-publishers-2799865>

- Try self-publishing. But know that you need to spend time and money getting your book ready.
 - Hire a good editor
 - Hire someone to format your manuscript if you don't know how to make it look good.
 - Hire an artist to create a cover, unless you have graphic art talents. If you do your cover, have it reviewed by people who know what sells.
 - Publish with a reputable self-publishing company, not one who charges big bucks every step of the way. Some offer services, editing, formatting, covers, etc. Some are free ([KDP](#)) or almost free ([IngramSpark](#)).

<https://thepennymatters.com/best-self-publishing-websites/>

So get out those manuscripts sitting on the shelf, or start writing. Publish, publish, publish, but be careful who you hire to help.