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Making the Perfect Pitch: How to Catch a Literary Agent's Eye
Katharine Sands, editor
The Writer Books
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This collection of short essays and interviews alleviates some of the intimidation that writers can feel when approaching literary agents with their manuscripts. The editor, a New York literary agent herself, has consulted other qualified agents—who have guided the literary aspirations of such writers as Stephen King, Eudora Welty, Deepak Chopra, Isaac Asimov, and Pope John Paul II—and presents their advice on how to pitch a manuscript successfully.

Sands's colleagues address subjects like whether a writer really needs an agent, how new writers get "discovered," how to get a book made into a movie, whether or not to pay reading fees, and more. They also explain how to format a query letter and what faux pas to avoid.

The agents repeatedly stress the necessity of a well-written query letter; ironically, this book still needs polishing. The interviews are unedited and unstructured, and many of the essays contradict each other, or repeat the same admonitions. Perhaps the subject would have been easier to digest in a topic-by-topic format; as it is, readers are left to navigate the information without a guide, judging for themselves which directions best fit their own situations.

On a positive note, Making the Perfect Pitch offers some very heartening sentiments for aspiring writers. John Ware expresses his love of the craft as "the wonderful mystery of writing. Somehow the way [writers] string the words together affected you."

Ellen Levine likens being an agent to being a midwife, saying, “I just feel really blessed to have these incredible, talented people in my life that I can help.” As David Vigliano points out in his interview, “for somebody to take me saying no as a judgment on their [sic] work is not the right message. I think people have to keep that in mind, not to look at a rejection from an agent as a comment on their work.” Robert Gottlieb mirrors this attitude: “If a book doesn’t sell, if a manuscript doesn’t attract the attention of an editor or a publisher, put it in a closet and start your next book. But keep on writing.”

Sands has been a guest speaker for Poets and Writers, the American Society of Journalists and Authors, New York University, and the New York State Council on the Arts. Her book reviews have appeared in Publishers Weekly and the New York Times Book Review. Here, she proves that agents are, indeed, human, and that the best way to grab their attention is to treat them as such. There is no one formula for success, because getting a manuscript on an agent’s desk is not mathematic. But there are guidelines and advice that writers will do well to follow, and this book is a great place to start.

Jennifer Hoffman