

Middlemen: Literary Agents and the Making of American Fiction

Laura B. McGrath

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Laura B. McGrath's *Middlemen* is a thorough, diverting investigation of the role literary agents play in the creation of book markets and reader tastes.

"No figure has been more significant, and yet more invisible, in American literature than the literary agent," the book opens. Agents have operated since 1875 in the UK, but only from 1927 in the US. With a focus on the 1950s onward, the book illuminates how agents function as "the first and the most consequential" gatekeepers of the publishing world. It also demystifies clichés of the profession (like the query letter, slush pile, and publishing lunch). A work of "literary sociology," it includes extensive endnotes and a lengthy bibliography. However, much is off the record, based on intuition and conversations with 75 agents.

The structure is chronological and thematic. Each chapter spotlights a celebrated agent, starting in 1952 with Sterling Lord, who persisted past a bevy of rejections to secure a deal for Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, earning fame for both. Agents prize plot, genre, and marketability more than writing style, the book reveals. While short story collections are a hard sell, standout individual stories in literary magazines might be taken to presage a successful debut novel, so agents browse them to target potential clients.

Eighty percent of agents are women, and seventy-three percent of publishing professionals are white, the book reveals. Given agents' "great deal of influence over the literary marketplace," such homogeneity is said to pose a threat. On the flip side, Nicole Aragi represents multicultural authors, and Black agent Marie Dutton Brown boasts a fifty-seven-year career, both aiming to bypass "common narratives" (such as slavery) that present "a limited vision of Black life."

Through profiles of famous literary agents and their clients, *Middlemen*, an invaluable work of literary analysis, goes behind the scenes in the American publishing industry.

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