On Campus

# The Agent Tango

By
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|
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Yardenne Greenspan ’12SOA moves purposefully toward the high round table dotted with wine glasses, around which a cluster of women talk. She stops a few feet away, hesitant to crash the conversation. The tip sheet, e-mailed in advance to the writers attending the annual MFA Writing Program alumni/agents mixer in Low Library, said, *Everyone will feel nervous and awkward (including the agents)*, but Greenspan seems confident enough as she waits for an opening.

“I was nervous when I came in here, but I’ve talked to a number of agents and now I feel good,” she says. It helps that she’s accompanied by her former professor, writer Paul Beatty, who suggested approaching two of the women at the table, who are agents from the Wylie Agency — his agency. *Faculty and staff (also feeling awkward) will be there to facilitate introductions.*

Soon Beatty catches agent Kristina Moore’s eye, and Moore and Greenspan connect. After some introductory chitchat, Greenspan asks if she can talk about her novel. *Have a pitch line prepared. One or two sentences that encapsulate your book.* Moore urges her to go ahead.

“It’s about David, who’s an American expat living in Israel, and he gets contacted by the daughter of his deceased ex-fiancée — I know it sounds complicated but it’s not. His connection with her brings him back to his hometown of New York, where they get into this strange sexual relationship and he’s forced to deal with his past, his abusive childhood, and also his relationship with his son. So it’s very family-oriented, very character-driven, um —”

“Cool,” Moore breaks in. “Let me give you my card.”

“Yeah, thank you.” Greenspan smiles and slides the card into the front pocket of her dress. She and Moore continue talking, discussing the Wylie client list. Light jazz plays. Aspiring writers wander the rotunda, squinting for white name tags — the color assigned to the agents. (Fiction writers have lavender tags, nonfiction writers peach, poets light green.) If they spot an agent, they slide in or wait on the sidelines.

But conversation can take you only so far with a literary agent. Michelle Brower of Folio Literary, in attendance, says face-to- face meetings are nice, but “if I don’t like what’s on the page, I don’t like it.”

After she finishes with Moore, Greenspan crosses paths with Brenda Bowen from Sanford Greenburger. Bowen listens to Greenspan pitch *The Book of David*, nodding approvingly at the title, only to gently inform her when she’s done that though it sounds interesting, “I do mostly young adult and some adult fiction, but not much.” In other words, she’s not interested. Greenspan accepts this graciously.

Agents often try to define their specialties clearly enough so that they don’t get besieged by general submissions, while at the same time remaining open to serendipitous finds. Josh Getzler ’95BUS, an agent at Hannigan Salky Getzler, had long favored mysteries and historical fiction but now has a growing list of mommy bloggers. He’s going into the mixer expecting not much of either, guessing there will be “manuscripts about people in their twenties living in Brooklyn, playing in a band, and breaking up with their girlfriends,” as well as a “number of tight-perspective relationship novels,” and he’s open to the possibility he might be intrigued by one of these or find something altogether new.

And actually, there’s a lot more than books about boys in Brooklyn. *Stories from the Roof* by Willa Morris ’90SOA is about “two friends who connect after twenty years,” Morris says. “It’s about the Jewish community in Queens. It’s about love, friendship, betrayal.” Russell Contreras ’02SOA, a journalist, came from Placitas, New Mexico, to suss out interest in his nonfiction proposal about JFK’s groundbreaking engagement of Latino-rights groups, *When We Arrive: JFK’s Last Night and the Birth of the Latino Vote*.

The first half of the event has a palpable energy, writers rushing to meet as many agents as they can. Then acting writing-program chair Ben Marcus takes the stage to give a brief welcome, and quips to the writers, “We hope you don’t feel too nervous or too shy and just go and talk to anyone who is attractive to you.” The

crowd laughs.

Indeed, there are moments when, despite the evening's grownup hors d'oeuvres, sophisticated music, and impeccable manners, one feels a middle-school-dance vibe. The agents and the writers — around a hundred people in all — sometimes drift to separate corners, like boys and girls to the opposite sides of the gym. Publishing is a small industry and many of the agents know each other. They linger together by the drinks station, talking about how much easier nonfiction is to sell than fiction.

Paul Lucas from Janklow & Nesbit explains that nonfiction is sold on proposal, whereas fiction usually requires a polished manuscript. "With nonfiction, you can work on forty pages before submitting to publishers, instead of four hundred pages. I really like that about nonfiction."

While Getzler, Lucas, and Brower talk about common friends in the business, Carolyn Hill-Bjerke '03SOA comes over. She has a book of poems, but tonight her main focus is on getting representation for her memoir.

"The reason I'm here with the memoir is because I am adopted, and I did recently get my information about my biological family, and basically, with the right film agent, you will sell this as a movie-of-the-week in about ten minutes."

"Oh, wow," Brower says.

Hill-Bjerke goes into more detail, eventually revealing that though she does not remember it, she spent time in an orphanage, "the New Haven Children's Asylum."

"That's the title of your book, right?" interjects Brower.

"No, my poetry book is called *Things I Don't Want to Talk About*. My memoir is called *Mistake*."

"I would love to read your first twenty pages," Brower replies smoothly. "Send me your first twenty."

As the evening winds down, the jazz seems to grow louder. *We hope this evening proves successful for you; we also hope that you enjoy yourselves and perhaps catch up with old friends.* The writers who remain seem satisfied, invigorated even, at having had the chance to talk about works that they've largely labored over in

solitude.

“I spoke to about seven people,” says Karen Moulding ’01SOA. “I perfected my pitch and people seemed really enthusiastic.” She’s ready for the next step, the follow-up. *They will not remember you; when you do send your manuscript, open the cover letter with the reminder that you met at the Columbia mixer.*

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