

## On Agents

When I was in high school, I heard about an agent named Swifty Lazar who could sell something plagiarized off a soap label for a fortune. I wanted him to be my agent.

But I settled for G., an associate with William Morris. He either promised to make me a star, or I misunderstood. A year later, he gave up.

Next, K. read a story of mine and contacted me. He was with a good agency. I said sure, but when I finished my novel *Midheaven*, he declined to send it out. So I gave it to B., a Viking Press editor who stopped at the University of Iowa where I was studying. After a year, M., another Viking editor, found *Midheaven* in a tall pile left behind when B. ran off to Georgia to grow peaches. M. wanted the book. K. wanted to handle the contract. I said sure. But when I finished my next novel, *Yanqui*, and K. declined to send it out, I moved on.

A friend suggested I query P., his agent. P. was successful and smart. He liked my work, but then he bought out a large agency and had to cut back so he turned me over to an associate, L. She sent *Yanqui* to R. at Simon and Shuster. He wanted it, but when he three weeks passed and he still hadn't gotten approval from the editorial board, L. withdrew the submission. Remembering that Viking bought *Midheaven* after a year, I objected.

Then I swore off agents, and might've sworn off writing novels, except I was addicted.

Tom Hickey, the protagonist of my novel *The Loud Adios*, was an M.P. during WW II. After my friends Dennis and Gayle mentioned the St. Martin's Press/Private Eye

Writers of America Best First P.I. Novel contest, I discovered that Tom Hickey had been a private investigator before he got drafted. I sent *The Loud Adios* to that contest and won.

Dennis suggested I let A., his agent, handle the contract. I said sure. A. took her cut for that and the next two books with St. Martin's. But she sold nothing, so I moved on, to S. who represented several of my favorite writers. I told him I wanted a contract that would assure my next book got a paperback reprint, so I could build a larger following. Two books later, either he or I or both of us gave up. I moved on.

My next agent was a friend of my friend Alan. D. usually represented non-fiction, but he wanted to tackle the mystery and thriller market. He tried, and I might be with him still, except I told him I was returning to the Hickey family, the series I started with St. Martin's. He advised me not to, because mysteries don't pay. He wanted me to write thrillers.

I sent *The Do-Re-Mi* to Poisoned Pen Press, who doesn't insist on agented submissions. They offered a hardback and paperback deal, and agreed to reprint my three St. Martin's Hickey family novels in paper.

So far, of my five published novels, I've sold five. Agents have sold none. But my theme isn't don't go with an agent. My theme is, if you don't have an agent, don't mope, and if you have one, don't feel certain you can afford to quit your day job.

My take on agents is, if you can work with one who gives evidence of the ability to sell in your genre, and you find her agreeable and not so absorbed by successful clients that representing you comes second--if such a treasure comes along, take her on.

Otherwise, remember that agents don't run the only game in town.