

Step 2 -Finding an agent

This is a huge and difficult step for any writer starting out. You have to brace yourself for the rejections. Nobody finds an agent straight away. Nobody!

Bearing this in mind, I did what they tell you never to do: I sent me MS out before it was finished. A big NO NO! But sometimes you have to commit the error to find out why. My motivation for doing this was to get some feedback, but then when one agent asked for the whole MS, I tried to finish it in a week. Impossible! And when, a week later, I returned a hastily finished MS, I never heard from her again. My mistake!

It took a further two years to finish the book to my satisfaction, and even then, I still had doubts. After all it would never ever be perfect. When I spoke with one agent, he said they work with MSs that are 70-80% ready, and I think that's a good thing to bear in mind when sending one off.

So the next step was to find the right agent. I went on the faithful internet, pulling up an alphabetical list of agents in the U.K. I started at the beginning and read the profiles of each agent, looking for one who I thought would be interested in my novel. When I had five, I wrote a query letter (less than one page) for each agent, giving brief details about my background, and why I thought I was best qualified to tell the story I was telling. I also explained why I had specifically chosen them, then I attached the first fifty pages and the synopsis (also less than one page) and sent it all off via e-mail.

And I waited. Sometimes rejections came quickly, others I didn't receive till a year later! Some of the rejections included a positive word about my writing, which gave me the confidence to continue, and after two-three months without any request for the whole MS, I did another wave of five. And then another.

Simultaneously I decided to check out which agents my favourite authors were using.

CurtisBrown came up again and again. This was good because I happened to have got to the letter 'C' on my alphabetical list anyway. And when I looked at the profiles for each agent there, I knew straight away it would have to be Sheila Crowley. She said she was looking for stories that made her cry. When I read the epilogue to my book it made me cry. Dare I hope it might make her cry too?

Apparently it did! Her assistant at the time, Abbie Greaves, got back to me requesting the whole MS! I held my breath. Then I closed my eyes and sent it off with a prayer. And I waited on tenterhooks.

The following week an e-mail came through while I was teaching at school. My pulse raced as I read it. Sheila Crowley actually wanted to meet me!

A few days later I was on my way to the CurtisBrown offices at Piccadilly Circus. Sheila and Abbie took me out to lunch at a French restaurant. They let me choose the wine and I felt very special! But I hardly tasted the food as I could barely contain my excitement when I realised they really did love my book.

Of course, they had some changes for me to make. Most of them were about character development; some of my characters needed more depth, more angst. Gradually my original 90,000 words grew to 110,000. But I was confident that I was in safe hands and any changes they were asking for were for the good of 'my baby'.