

Query's Blessing, Query's Curse by Natasha Deen

I don't know what I was thinking...don't know where my head was...I guess I figured that I would write a book and just as I typed "the end," I would hear a knock at my door. And when I opened it, I would find an editor, agent, and Oprah/Larry King's booking people, all waiting for me.

Sigh.

Fantasies are nice, aren't they? I think they're the same magical stuff that prompts four hundred pound men to strut around on beaches, wearing nothing but a black Speedo and a smile.

My soft dream that I'd run into an editor or agent in the grocery store (I, dressed a classic black turtleneck and dark jeans, would be standing by the cantaloupes, thoughtfully squeezing a melon, and I would look up and see her/him. Our eyes would meet, electricity of kinship and camaraderie would spark and set the parsley ablaze. They'd ask for my manuscript, I'd ask for their card...and at some point, there would be a glorious red-orange sunset, or maybe a nice bottle of Chianti by the ocean...) spoiled like milk left on the counter when I realized that New York editors wouldn't travel to Alberta to pick up a dozen eggs.

Thank God for writing companions. At a meeting one night, they uttered the words that both saved my soul and cursed it: "Query letters," they said, with sage nods. "That's how you apply to publishing houses."

"Ah, okay...what's in a query letter?"

"The usual—your name, information about your novel, that kind of stuff."

I nodded, hoping I looked contemplative and not like a brown bobblehead, and thought I can probably get that to fit into five pages.

"Your life on a page," said one lady.

"On a what?" My brain stuttered, cursing what had to be my faulty hearing.

"A page. Single-spaced."

"Wha-wha?" Now, all of me stuttered. My brain made stammered apologies to my ears (who have still not forgiven either of us for our rash judgments about its abilities).

She repeated the words, slower and louder, not realizing that my hearing was the least of my problems.

A single page to mash all my credits, address, and story into? Was this another ritual to torture writers? Some sick joke, like the "you can't be published until you get an agent, but you can't get an agent unless you're published"? This wasn't just mean. It was cruel and heartless.

That night, I headed home and put a call into a psychotherapist, positive that hidden deep in my subconscious were sado-masochistic tendencies, and they were responsible for my venture into a writing career. The therapist called me the next morning and amid exhortations (“A writer, are you? Oh, that’s lovely. I’m a writer, too. I’m going to write a book—Psychosis of Psychoanalyses, as soon as I have a minute.” Why, oh WHY, do people say this, like writing a book is something you do when you’re bored and have time to kill in between Survivor and Jerry Springer?), he assured me that writing as a career venture was not a sign of a diseased mind.

Having nowhere to turn—the bars and mental institutions being filled, I had no choice but to strap on the wrist guard, flex my fingers, and write a query letter. I’m not clear on this (having never been able to maintain consciousness long enough at one of these meetings), but I’m certain that writing a query is marginally less painful than listening to politicians debate why they should get a raise, and argue about whether it should be “Bylaw 5” or “Bylaw Five.”

For all my efforts, I got polite rejections to my queries. And I felt an emotion that fell somewhere between despair, dejection and insanity. What did editors want? I put all the information into the letter: my address, my manuscript information, and my credits. Why was I getting rejected?

I checked out “How To Query” books from the library, only to find out that by the time they were published, they were also out of date. I talked to published writers—even got them to look at my letters, and still I got rejected. Was there a secret code? A special decal I put on the letter that got me behind the velvet rope?

The answer is yes. It’s not enough to have the parts; it’s how you put them together. Remember Bill Pullman’s character in Sleepless in Seattle? He was a good guy with a good job, nice enough...but we were all rooting for Tom Hanks, weren’t we? Why? Because he was vibrant, colourful...Bill’s character, meanwhile, kinda seemed like oatmeal: probably good for you, but bland, and sorta goey.

Take a look at this query:

Dear Editor,

My name is Bronwyn Storm and I’m a writer. My book is called Beauty and the Beast, and it fits your guidelines for Fairy Tales at 30 000 words.

Belle is beautiful, smart, and loyal to her father. One day his horse comes back without him. He is missing, she goes to find him. She sees his hat on the other side of a castle gate, and she goes to investigate. Inside, she finds a candelabra and a clock who can speak. She also finds a horrible beast. He sets her father free but keeps her as a prisoner. Belle is sad. She doesn’t think she’ll ever be happy again, but when the beast shows her the library, she begins to love him. One night she finds out her father is sick. She goes to help him. But Gaston catches

her and steals the magic mirror. He goes to kill the beast. Belle chases after him. She sees them fighting on the castle roof. She tries to stop them, but Gaston kills the beast. Belle is devastated and cries. She tells him that she loves him. Suddenly, there's a spark of life...

At this point, we'll all be lucky if there's a spark of life left in the editor. What's wrong with this letter? First of all, it's plagiarized material, and man oh man, editors hate it when you send them stories that someone else wrote (they also hate it when you send them novels that other houses own the publishing rights to). But add in the spelling errors, the fact that it's addressed to "editor." Common courtesy says to give the editor a name—their birth name, would be best. Think about it, they spent the better part of their preschool lives learning how to spell their names, don't diminish that accomplishment. You know how much you hate those telemarketers who call and ask, "Are you the owner?" I think that's how editors feel when they get "Dear Editor" letters, like they have no identity, like the writer didn't even care enough about the writing art to do a little research.

But what else is wrong with this letter? Take a look: loads of "is" "goes" "finds" "she." There are so many verbs in the English language—grandiose, large, robust verbs. Use them. Also, if you look at the letter, there's no flow to the plot. Who's Gaston? Where does the mirror come from? How much time has elapsed? If your query leaves enough holes to make Swiss cheese, it's going to go into the recycle section of an editor's desk.

So, what's a writer to do?

When you pen a query letter:

- Include word count, title, line you're targeting
- When you write the blurb, give: the MAIN characters' names, their conflict, and the ending.

- If you're not published, keep that information to yourself. Likewise with, "This is the first novel I've written." This seems to have the same effect on editors as going on a first date and saying, "I thought I had genital warts once, but they cleared right up, so I guess I'm wrong," has on your partner. As in, it may not be a deal breaker, but that kind of private information is more third date, contract in your hand, kind of information.

So, if we were to rewrite the above query, what might it look like?

Dear Ms. December,

Trapped by small town politics and a suitor who can't take "no" for an answer, Belle longs for a bigger, more exciting life. Her wish comes true in a horrific way: her father goes missing while on a trip to a nearby village. Racing against time and winter's cold, she speeds into the woods, determined to bring him

home. What she finds in the dark forest--a magical castle, a monstrous beast, her father held captive, and a dark proposal--will test everything she thought she knew about the world around her, and about love...

Notice that in the first paragraph, we now have the villain, hero, heroine, an external conflict, and the internal conflict. The verbs are more verbose, the plot more concise.

I said earlier that queries are my saving grace and my curse, and I hold to that. They test my skills as a writer, force me to make sure my plot is tight (they're a great way to check for holes. Try writing rough queries as you write your novel and you'll see what I mean. Issues with plot, conflict, and pacing are spotlighted by queries and synopsis). Queries have me thumbing through my thesaurus, trying to come up with synonyms for "gentle" (sigh. A too favourite word of mine).

When they work, I feel like Annie, walking on to the platform of the Empire State Building to discover Sam and Jonah waiting for me. When they don't work, then I'm dejected, standing on the side of the road, watching Sam hug another woman.

Whether I'm on a building or on the road, though, a query is my map and if I want an editor to find me, then I best make it as detailed, concise and colourful as possible.

So to you, my fellow travellers, I tip my hat and wish you good journey on your writing and querying trips. May the sun be bright and warm, may the grass be green, and should you run into a Bill Pullman query, may it be a "While You Were Sleeping" Bill, rather than a "Sleepless in Seattle" Bill...

Reprinted with permission. Natasha is a super-hero in training—hey, one day being a klutz will be a superpower...if she doesn't break anything vital in the meantime. When not tripping over her feet, she writes for The Wild Rose Press and plays butler and cuddler to her four furry boys. Check out her website www.natashadeen.com and drop her a line, she could use the excuse to stop petting the dogs and cats.