

PNWA 02/19/09

Joni Sensel, www.jonisensel.com

Query Do's & Don'ts Workshop

PNWA Monthly Meeting 2/19/09

Presented by Joni Sensel, www.jonisensel.com

Resources

- Free Amazon download from Noah Lukeman (former agent & author of The First Five Pages). (Careful, though. His preferences for some things — particularly comparisons, endorsements, and FedEx — are atypical. Again, do your homework.)
www.amazon.com/How-Write-Great-Query-Letter/dp/B00122GU86/ref=dp_shrt_new_0
- Free workbook (for the price of your e-mail address):
www.getpublishednow.biz/7-free-workbook.html
- Numerous books

Blogs with query critiques (often in archives):

- Miss Snark archives: <http://misssnark.blogspot.com>
- PubRants (agent Kristen Nelson) archives: <http://pubrants.blogspot.com>
- Agent Nathan Bransford: <http://nathanbransford.blogspot.com>
- Evil Editor: <http://evileditor.blogspot.com>
- Bad queries for Hollywood: <http://queryletters.blogspot.com/>

Targeting research support

- The websites and blogs of specific editors, agents, agencies, and publishing houses (Google their names and houses, or do searches on blog directories such as www.technorati.com, www.bloghub.com or <http://dir.blogflux.com>)
- The Agent Query database: www.agentquery.com/
- Conferences and workshops where editors and agents speak
- Networking, both live and via forum and bulletin board sites such as the Absolute Write Water Cooler at www.absolutewrite.com/forums, Science Fiction Writers of America (www.sfwaweb.org), etc.
- Publisher's Lunch e-newsletter (the free version or more complete paid version with a Publishers Marketplace membership) at www.publishersmarketplace.com/lunch/subscribe.html

Debate

Stephen Barbara's frustration with good queries and bad manuscripts:

www.publishersweekly.com/index.asp?layout=articlePrint&articleID=CA6614767

Nathan Bransford's rebuttal perspective:

<http://nathanbransford.blogspot.com/2008/12/on-quality-of-queries.html>

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Jimmie Hopeless, Writer



To whom it may concern,

I'm writing to you today because I'm interested in obtaining representation for my first novel, a comedy/thriller/horror/YA called GUN-TOTING MAMAS FROM MIAMI.

Have you ever wondered what would drive two ordinary Florida housewives to become serial killers? Read my manuscript and you'll find out. In it, Tammy Faye, 38, blonde, buxom, bossy, comes home one day from her job as a groomer in a Pet Smart, which she hates, since her boss is really incompetent, to find that a burglar has snuck down the chimney and gotten soot all over her favorite sweater, which her ex-husband gave her but she couldn't bear to give to Goodwill when he dumped her. Thus thrust into a mid-life crisis, she sleeps with the mailman and then goes on a murderous rampage against incompetent chimney sweeps, and when the CIA finds out she has ties to the mob, everyone in the country is hot on her tail. You won't believe the zany humor and suspense that results.

MAMAS is a 133,000-word fiction novel — the first in a planned series of five — that can best be described as a cross between Dirty Harry and Harry Potter. My doctor, Dr. Frank Nstein of Orlando, has read it and agrees that it's sure to be a bestseller, and he has offered to buy copies for every patient as soon as I can find a publisher.

I also have six picture book manuscripts, including one about Ken, who is traumatized when his mother gets plastic surgery so he no longer recognizes her, if you'd like to see one of those instead. Well, maybe I'll go ahead and enclosed them; picture books are pretty short at only 5,000 words each.

Please, please, just give me a chance and read the enclosures. You won't be sorry; six months from now, we'll be raising a toast on the beach in Bora Bora. (I know you've always wanted to go there because I Googled you and found an old interview that also included your phone number, so I'll just call you about this query if I don't hear from you by next Tuesday.)

Until Tuesday,
Jimmie Hopeless, Soon-to-be Bestselling Author

P.S. I thought you might be interested in the bullet casing enclosed, which proves that I own a gun and have done proper research on this novel.

Hook/summary improvement case study

Draft 2 (after nothing but form rejections):

On the pages of the real estate catalogs Livie Owen treasures, the empty houses look silent and a little bit sleepy. Only Livie knows the truth about the houses. That they crack if you hit them hard enough. That they never forget you, no matter how long you've been gone.

LIVIE OWEN LIVED HERE is a 45,000-word upper middle grade novel exploring an autistic teen's efforts to bring her family home. When Livie's tantrums net the Owens another eviction notice, she becomes obsessed with reclaiming the Sun House, the first house she ever loved enough to write on the walls. The Sun House is abandoned and it isn't yellow anymore, but it's the last place Livie remembers seeing both her sisters happy.

Only by losing the Sun House does Livie discover what truly makes a house a home, both for her family and for herself.

Draft 3:

Livie is certain the Sun House remembers her, even after ten years have passed.

Maybe that's why she feels drawn to the big yellow house that was once her family's home. When the damage she causes to a rental trailer results in her family's eviction, Livie becomes obsessed with reclaiming the Sun House for the Owens. But although Livie and the yellow house have never forgotten each other, the only thing her family seems to remember are the eviction notices since....

Draft 4:

What is it that makes a house feel like home? **To Livie Owen, who has autism, it is simple: a reliable bus schedule, a gas furnace, and a coat of yellow paint.** So why won't her family agree to move back to the Sun House, which met all three requirements when the Owens first lived there? In her efforts to convince her family to reclaim the big yellow house, Livie will challenge her mother's hopelessness, her father's impatience, her sister's stubborn nature -- and her own assumptions about what makes a house a home....

Draft 5:

What is it that makes a house feel like home? To Livie Owen, who has autism, it is simple: a reliable bus schedule, a gas furnace, and a coat of yellow paint. So why won't her family agree to move back to the Sun House after their eviction from the rental home? The Sun House met all three of Livie's requirements when the Owens first lived there ten years ago. Although it's changed some in a decade (so what if the bus doesn't run anymore, and all that's left of the furnace is pipes?), Livie still prefers it over any house in the neighboring town, which is where the Owens will end up if Livie doesn't recapture the Sun House soon....

Drafts 6 and 7:

What is it that makes a house feel like home? To Livie Owen, who has autism, it is simple: a reliable bus schedule, a gas furnace, and a coat of yellow paint. **So when an eviction threatens to force the Owens to move out of town....**

Draft 8 (tightened by someone else):

What makes a house a home? For autistic teen Livie Owen, it's simple: a reliable bus schedule, a gas furnace, and a coat of yellow paint. When an eviction forces her family to consider leaving town, Livie decides they should move back to the Sun House...

The breakthrough (after more form rejections):

"I sat down with my story, jotted down some notes, and figured out exactly what it is about the plot that I want to focus on in the query letter."

Go ahead. Look through the windows of any house in Nabor. It won't take you more than a couple of blocks to find Livvie Owen's name written on a wall. That's because Livvie, who has autism, has gotten the Owens evicted from over twenty homes in Nabor. Of course her family doesn't say it's her fault. But Livvie can sense it in the stares of the landlords and her growing isolation from her family.

The options now are few: move out of town or convince a landlord who knows about Livvie's destructive behavior to take a chance anyway.

But Livvie, who sees a lot of things her family doesn't, sees another option hidden in the rubble of their past. The Sun House stands empty on the edge of town, abandoned after the Owens lost it to the bank. There's a sign on the front porch, and Livvie, who doesn't read, is convinced the sign says "For Rent." Can Livvie control her behavior and convince her family to take a chance on staying in Nabor? More importantly, can she convince them to take one last chance on her? In her efforts to reclaim a doomed house, Livvie will challenge her parents' frustration, her sisters' anger – and her own ideas about what makes a house a home.

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Date

(Name/Address block)

Dear Ms. X:

Many kids would call their younger siblings pests. The problem changes when the little sister hanging out in your bedroom, uninvited, is a ghost — especially if you played a role in her death.

My middle-grade ghost story, *Blank Pages*, recounts the struggle of 12-year-old Bree, who is haunted by her dead baby sister and her own guilty memories. The long-ago death is a taboo family topic, however, so Bree keeps the problem a secret. As the family embarks to visit her grandmother, she worries about rousing even more frightening spooks. After all, nearly everyone in the family admits that Grandma's old farmhouse harbors evil spirits.

To her dismay, Bree discovers that it also harbors a long-abandoned baby book once begun for her sister. Its blank pages accuse her. Tormented by guilt and fear, she confronts the ghosts head-on. After a terrifying encounter with the Thing in the basement and her own damning memories, the family silence is finally broken. With new light shed on memories, guilt, spooky spaces, and blame, Bree forgives herself and uses the baby book and the redemptive power of story to foster a healthier, more complete family.

The full manuscript runs 40,000 words. I'm enclosing approximately the first 30 pages, as directed, for the XYZ Workshop.

My first middle-grade novel, *Reality Leak*, will be published by Henry Holt in Spring 2007. I am also the author of two picture books, including *Bears Barge In*, which received a 2001 ASPCA Henry Bergh Children's Book Honor.

Thanks so much for your consideration, and I'll look forward to meeting you and hearing your reaction at the workshop in August!

Sincerely,

If I redid this query today, I'd use a briefer hook & summary, more like this:

Bree's pesky younger sister won't get out of her room. Little Joanna is more than a pest, though — she's a ghost. And Bree played a role in her death.

My middle-grade ghost story, Blank Pages, recounts the struggle of 12-year-old Bree, whose guilty memories haunt her even more than the ghost. The death is a taboo family topic, so there's no help from her parents. But when a visit to Grandma uncovers Joanna's long-abandoned baby book, its blank pages drive Bree to break silence and confront family members — both living and dead.

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Before:

Dear Ms. Well-Researched Agent,

Gone are the days of "Children must be seen and not heard." Today's youth are rising up, building new organizations and creating for themselves the changes they want to see in the world. YES YOU CAN: HOW TO CHANGE YOUR WORLD will show readers 12 and up how they too can make a positive impact by providing approximately 20 chapters of instruction on everything from choosing an idea, to raising funds and budgeting, to sustaining an organization long-term. Each chapter will include profiles of young leaders and their organizations, inspirational quotes, and helpful templates. There will also be a glossary, a bibliography, a resource list and an index.

An earlier draft of YES YOU CAN was nominated for the Sue Alexander Award at the 2008 SCBWI Summer Conference. More recently, Editor X from Little, Brown Books for Young Readers requested a query after reading the first chapter at the 2009 SCBWI Winter Conference Writers' Intensive. I am a regional advisor for SCBWI-Western Washington and a full member of SCBWI International with many publications for children and parents, including articles in FACES, KNOW, KONO, and WeeOnes. Please visit www.MyWebURL.com for more.

I first received a recommendation for you from fellow nonfiction author Published Author A. Then, I learned that you represent Author B, whose work I greatly admire, and Author C, whose book TITLE HERE is similar to another manuscript of mine. After even more research, I have concluded that the kinds of books you represent are exactly the kinds of books I want to write. I am, therefore, submitting this query for your exclusive consideration.

Please let me know if you would like to see the full proposal for YES YOU CAN. I have enclosed a SASE for your convenience. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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After:

Dear Well-Researched Agent,

Today's youth are rising up, building new organizations and creating the changes they want to see all around the world. YES YOU CAN: HOW TO CHANGE YOUR WORLD will show readers ages 12 and up how they too can make a positive impact. The book provides 20 chapters of instruction on everything from choosing an idea, to raising funds and budgeting, to sustaining an organization long-term. Each chapter will include profiles of young leaders and their organizations, inspirational quotes, and helpful templates. There will also be extensive back matter.

YES YOU CAN was nominated for the Sue Alexander Award at the 2008 SCBWI Summer Conference. At the 2009 SCBWI Winter Conference Writers' Intensive, Editor X at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers requested a query. I am seeking your representation before submitting to her or anyone else.

I received a personal recommendation for you from fellow nonfiction author Published Author A. You also represent Author B, whose work I greatly admire, and Author C, whose book TITLE HERE is similar to another manuscript of mine. Because you seem to represent many of the kinds of books I want to write, I am submitting this query for your exclusive consideration for two months.

I am co-regional advisor for SCBWI-Western Washington, and I have many magazine articles published in *Faces*, *Know*, *Kono*, *WeeOnes*, and *ParentMap*. You may visit my web site at www.MyWebURL.com for more information about me and my work.

Please let me know if you would like to see the full proposal for YES YOU CAN. Thank you.

Sincerely,