

THE STRANGE LIFE OF A LITERARY AGENT

BY NICK MARSTON

The strange world of literary agency is in my blood. My grandmother, Rosica Colin, was a Romanian immigrant, who arrived in the UK in 1939, a single mother with a single daughter, my mother. After working for the BBC Romanian Service during the war, she started an agency, which is now run by my sister Joanna, from her house in South Kensington.

Like Peggy Ramsay, she started her career as an agent in her forties after a younger life of rich experience. And like Peggy, she was a vibrant extrovert and fierce defender of her authors. Using her European languages and instinct for people and literature, she built up a list comprising of many of the greats of 20th Century literature. Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Alan Sillitoe and all sorts of others were frequent visitors.

Peggy and Rosica were London rivals of their era. I remember a family holiday in Marbella (Rosica went to

agents do not charge by the hour, so that investment is not made lightly.

It is a common perception that agents are money-obsessed sharks, the ruthless operator behind the naïve artist. It is actually my experience that it can be a soul-destroying job unless you can find stimulation and enthusiasm from the work being produced. It has been said that when agents get together, they talk about books, plays and films and when writers meet, they talk about agents and contracts.

The world's first literary agency, AP Watt Ltd, was founded in London in 1875. Competitors in the UK and US quickly followed. Their purpose was the representation of literary material to the publishing industry. Many of these firms are still going and play a vital role in the promotion of books and authors around the world.

FOR A LOT OF AGENTS, JUST LIKE PEGGY, WORK AND LIFE ARE INDISTINGUISHABLE

the same hotel every year) when Rosica came back to the restaurant table after a telephone call looking ashen. A young firebrand author (he is still an active writer) had left the agency and joined Peggy. The atmosphere for the rest of the holiday was soured. I had no idea that, half a century later, I would spend my time anxiously checking emails with the constant agent's dread of similar news.

It took me some time to realise that the rarefied work of a literary agent, whilst second nature to me, is a mystery to most of the world. I am often asked what an agent actually does. I can only respond that it involves playing a combination of different roles on behalf of an author - friend, therapist, accountant, lawyer, editor, salesperson.

Of these, 'friend' is the most important. However much we try to separate the business from the social, the relationship remains necessarily personal and emotional. Writing is a peculiarly lonely and nerve-inducing occupation. So for a new writer to have a professional advocate who is ready to invest time, energy and, above all, belief in your work, is an enormously important moment. Unlike lawyers,

From the perspective of these agencies, the world of stage and screen which Peggy inhabited can seem like an unreliable and unregulated Wild West compared to the more solid and established world of book publishing. Their first concern is often the 'subservice' of the handling of film rights to the firm's books rather than the development of original work for stage and screen. In spite of Britain being the land of Shakespeare, it sometimes feels that playwriting is not given the same respect as the novel.

In the US, the entertainment agencies have evolved into the powerful corporate businesses you see portrayed in the TV series *Entourage* or the film *Jerry Maguire*.

Entourage is said to be inspired by the star actor Mark Wahlberg's dealings with his own agency, Endeavor. The stand-out character of the show is the adrenaline-fuelled agent Ari Gold, a parodic version of Endeavor's founding partner and CEO, and Wahlberg's real-life agent, Ari Emanuel. Emanuel was one of a group of young renegades who left CAA in 1995 to found the breakaway agency. Legend has it they escaped with the

files in a night-time flit and were caught by the security staff in the elevator. Endeavor is now a publically-quoted company controlling interests as diverse as the Wimbledon Tennis Championships (through their acquisition of IMG), cage fighting (through UFC) and art fairs (they bought a controlling stake in Frieze, the arts magazine and events company, in 2016).

This September, it was announced that CAA had acquired a majority share in their rivals ICM. If that deal passes through monopoly regulations, it will mean that there are only three major agencies in LA, controlling most of the output from the huge American entertainment industry.

In the UK, meanwhile, although there are few left with the purity of Peggy Ramsay's dedication to playwriting, 'boutique' agencies for both writers and actors still abound. Many are run by individual characters or a tight

The most searing account of an agent's life is not *Call My Agent*, but Bernard Rose's 2000 film *Ivansxtc*. Loosely based on Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Illyich* and reputedly inspired by the tragically short life of CAA superstar agent Jay Maloney (superbly played by Danny Houston), no other depiction charts the highs and lows of an agent's life so unsentimentally. The film starts with the funeral of agent Ivan Beckman before flashing back through his life, one of intense excitement and crushing loneliness. At the funeral there is a fight between a writer client of Beckman's and the star who has just fired him from his film. Industry bickerings are not even postponed to reflect on the agent's death. We hear Beckman's voiceover from beyond the grave: 'The pain was so bad I took every pill in the house.' He tried, he says, 'to find one simple image to get me through it.'

My abiding memory of my grandmother is working late

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group of friends set in their ways, not unlike the Parisian firm ASK in the French TV series *Call My Agent*. In a large number of UK agencies, an HR department is a rarity and progress for a young hopeful will often depend on an assistant finding a mentor in a more senior agent. As a result, the relationship between agent and assistant can quickly become intensely co-dependent.

For a lot of agents, just like Peggy, work and life are indistinguishable. Their reading, their viewing and all of their cultural and emotional lives are often bundled together. When you are not on office duty, there is always a script to read, a play or film or TV show to watch or an industry event to attend. It is a life of great stimulation, but it can come at a cost, sapping the energy and will to find a fulfilling life outside the bubble.

It can also be a life of disappointment and loneliness. We have all had our 'Prince Hal' moments, when our hearts are broken by the defection of a client to whom we have dedicated too much of our own lives, often from the beginning of their career.

into the night on her own in her office, surrounded by the tools of her trade - her rolodex of contacts, the piles of contracts and manuscripts. We lived round the corner and borrowed the garage under her house. Whenever we came back at night with the car we would stand under her office window and call up. It invariably took an age for her to respond. That was partly because she was always hard of hearing, but also, I am sure, because she was utterly absorbed in the addictive, all-consuming life of the literary agent.

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