

WHY YA ASKING ME?

by Betsy R. Rosenthal

My teenage son shoved the phone in my face. "It's Dr. G.," he said. In a panic, I asked our pediatrician, "Is one of my kids sick and I don't know about it?" But Dr. G. assured me it was merely a personal matter.

"My sister from New Jersey has written a children's book," he said. "Could you give her some advice on how to get it published?" That'll teach me to send book announcements to everybody I've ever met! Understandably, people think that once you're published, you've found the golden ticket. They don't believe me when I tell them that I've never even laid eyes on it.

Sons and daughters of friends of friends of my parents, my third cousin twice removed and even my 80-year-old badminton partner have all written at least one children's book manuscript. During an exam, while my doctor gagged me with a tongue

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leading to an editor. Yet, like one of those freestanding inflatable punching bags, no matter how many times I get knocked down, I keep popping back up. When they learn I can't help with an editor, they ask me for the secret publishing formula. Believe me, if I knew, my shelves would be lined with my own published books instead of others'.

I always give help-seeking writers my attention, even those who ask, as I once did, "Do I need to find an illustrator for my picture book?" I offer what crumbs I can. Motivation by guilt comes with my religion. None of my tips are state secrets. They're just things I've learned over the long haul of writing and getting rejected. In fact, I may go into the rejection letter wall-paper business.

I'll gladly share with new writers how I research the market—scanning bookstore and library shelves to see who's publishing what and probing publisher's websites, looking for clues to their

depressor and looked up my nose with a tool that resembled a ferret, he told me about a correspondence course he was taking in children's book writing. Writers—they're lurking everywhere.

Sometimes they want me to read their manuscripts. My neighbor once asked for feedback on her 300-page opus magnum a la *The Da Vinci Code*. It didn't occur to him that my longest book was a 32-page picture book. Saying "No" is hard. I'm thinking of adopting another author's approach. She generously agrees to read all manuscripts, followed by "unfortunately, I have to charge a fee." Then she quotes an amount so frightening and outrageous, that the requester runs the other way, tightly clutching his manuscripts, yelling, "No thanks!"

Others don't want to show me their stories or ask for writing help. They just want the name of my agent. That's easy. "I wish I could oblige, but I don't have one," I say. I tell them that, in my experience, the path to getting an agent was more strewn with dead bodies (i.e., my rejected manuscripts) than the road

tastes. I'll reveal how I try to find a specific editor to send my story to instead of an anonymous "submissions editor" or how I use my lucky, hot pink paperclips to fasten the pages of my manuscript, and then cross my fingers before slipping it into my favorite mailbox. And if all else fails, I'll suggest that they change their names to Madonna or John Lithgow or Jamie Lee Curtis.

One piece of advice I always offer—join SCBWI and attend its conferences to network tirelessly with editors, authors, and other conferees. And just maybe they'll meet someone there who will hand them the golden ticket, the secret to getting all their manuscripts published. Then I'll beg them to tell me. And I might even share it with my pediatrician's sister. ■

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