

The trick of getting an agent is: you need the \*right\* agent. You need an agent that not only appreciates your kind of book (and the market for it), but has lunch regularly with the editors who buy such books. This is why a lot of writers have more than one agent -- one for their non fiction, one for their fiction, one for their poetry, etc. The first thing to do is go to a bookstore or library and pick out several books that are similar to yours. By similar, i mean same genre, same market, same sensibility, etc.

Assemble a list of about ten, and first look in the acknowledgements; the agent is often mentioned. If not, write down the publishers. Then call the publishers, ask for the editorial department, and when they answer ask for an intern or assistant. Tell them who you are and what you're doing. Ask if they look up the name of the agent who represented that book. This will leave you with a list of about ten agents that are possibilities.

Then call those agents' offices and make sure you have the name spelled right and the address correct. Send the proposal to each, along with a letter saying you are looking for representation for this project and you have sent it to several agents. Any agent that writes or calls and says he/she doesn't look at simultaneous submissions -- that is, won't look at someone's work while other agents are looking at the same work -- strike from your list. You are the client. They should be begging for your business, not the other way around.

When you have a few agents that want to represent you, ask them first what they charge. Most agents charge fifteen percent commission. There is room to dicker, especially if you have several who want to represent you. (Keep in mind that you also need to put aside about a quarter of the advance to pay the taxes, so between that and the agent commission, you really only get about half the advance. That's important to remember when you're thinking about how much you need in order to finish the book.)

Then ask the agents for the names and phone numbers of some of their clients, and then call all those writers. Figure out what's important to you in an agent. Does she return phone calls? Does she work quickly? Does she get big money? Does she follow through on foreign/film rights, etc. Is she aggressive? Does she offer editorial/career advice?

Another thing, and this is important: Disqualify any agent that requires

you to sign a contract with them, especially if it's a contract for a period of time. Stand firm on this. Tell them you're willing to pay their commission if they sell the book for an advance you can accept. But if they can't, you need to feel free to take it back from them and go elsewhere. This is important. No agent contracts.

That's my advice in shorthand, for what it's worth.