

THE COWBOY WAY—March/April 2002 issue

By Mickey Freiberg

Q: I live in London and have a good agent here. I have been advised by a U.S. writer that I should try to get an agent and manager in Hollywood and that I should be pitching there too. Does this make sense at this point in my career? I have one feature in development, another was under option and a third is a competition winner. I also have a TV credit. My agent feels I should get established in England first. What do you advise?

A note to all non-domestic writers: it is equally as important to have a skilled agent in your home city or country as it is to have a skilled agent in America. Yet, despite the many advantages and resources a local representative can offer your fledgling career, it remains nearly impossible for a London-based agent to cover the all-important American marketplace with any real depth. Once you have served your time and hammered out a number of excellent writing samples (while hopefully accumulating a respectable body of credits) it should not prove difficult for you to secure representation in America. And if your local representation is truly forward thinking, and as committed to your career as he is now suggesting, the last thing he will want to do is stand in your way.

Q: What should a query letter encompass? How in-depth should a writer try and go?

Let's send this one out to all those writers responsible for the frighteningly overwritten query letters I see on a daily basis. Always keep in mind that the query letter serves as the writer's first introduction to an agent whose attention he is trying to capture. The smarter and more inspiring your letter, the greater your opportunity to find willing response. For my buck a good query letter should be sharply written, and should demonstrate story sense as well as an appreciation for minimalism. If the idea is good enough to sell itself, then a log line and succinct synopsis might just do the trick. It's all right to flesh your idea out where necessary to whet the reader's palette. But keep in mind the patience of the type of person that's likely to open that envelope. The longer the letter, the more likely those overtaxed eyes are to lose focus halfway down the page. Remember that in this industry time is always of the essence. Just be sure not to waste my time.

Q: What do they mean by "voice"? I've read so many advice columns and "how to's" and they all say you need a voice in your writing. And out of all of them no one can actually explain what it is, except that we *need* it. Could you explain it in layman's terms, please?

The abstract concept of narrative "voice" is one of the most elusive and poorly used terms in an industry renowned for its fancy double-speak. In most cases, when a person throws out a term like "voice," what they are really referring to is the "creative voice" of

the writer himself. From time to time, a writer's dramatic flare or idiosyncratic style is allowed to surface on a limited basis; just enough to lend his story a distinctive character all its own. In laymen's terms, we could call this voice the creative signature a writer leaves imprinted on his material. When you read Tarantino, like it or not, you're left with Tarantino's taste in your mouth. You've heard the voice behind his work. It's what makes a script stand out from the pack and forces you to remember it a few days after it's been read. More importantly, it's that elusive quality that is likely to convince an agent to pick up the phone and ask for more of your material.

Q: Do you have any advice for new writers, to help them break out of the Catch 22 situation where agents will only take you on if you are recommended by an established artist—and film companies will not even glance at your script without an agent!?

We'll call this one a toast to professional friendships. If the heart of the industry seems to be turning its cold shoulder your way, why not try looking for a warmth around the edges? One way to seek out a viable introduction is through any contacts you have in the legal profession. This is especially helpful if these contacts deal with the entertainment industry on a regular basis. Most lawyers absolutely love to pass projects along. Most agents and producers tend to put a lot of stock in the opinion of their legal counsel. Win over a lawyer with these kinds of connections and you might be surprised whose hands he can get your work into. You might even end up as lucky as Christopher Dean Johnston. One lawyer spoke to another lawyer, that lawyer spoke to me. Now Chris is moving into a beautiful new home in the valley, a long way away from the Hollywood bar he was tending one short year ago. And if none of the above works for you, hang out at a celebrity car wash. I hear a lot of deals can be made between rinse cycles.