

E-mail or Snail Mail an Agent?

BY ANTHONY S. POLICASTRO

OK, AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS OR years of hard work, your novel is complete. You've proofread it several times, your spouse, relatives, friends, and maybe some professionals in the writing business have read it and they all agree it's ready for publication. You've written your professional query letter, a synopsis, and a short biography. You are now ready to find an agent to represent your work.

It's not impossible these days, just a bit harder than it used to be. Agents are buried in queries—some report over 500 queries a week—that's roughly 100 queries a day. You need a small army just to open all the mail and read it in a timely manner. So don't fret when you read that an agent will respond to your query in six to eight weeks; consider that a quick response.

Some agents who use email for their queries are even worse off. I repeatedly see statements on agent's web sites that say they are no longer accepting email queries, and ask that you query them via traditional snail mail.

Peter Rubie of the Peter Rubie Literary Agency in New York who recently purchased a Sony book reader to help him get through the electronic avalanche of email queries says, "I receive so much material via email that is unasked for I rarely have time to respond to it. So in this case, no answer IS an answer. Occasionally I'll send a rejection, but usually I just don't have the time. If I'm interested I will respond. In my case I'm famous for being slow getting through my material to begin with, so I rarely if ever ask for something exclusively."

Mr. Rubie said his agency receives about 500 snail and email queries a week.

Cameron McClure, an agent at the Donald Maass Literary Agency in New York says she receives about 75 email queries a week and approximately 40 snail mail queries. She also believes two other agents at the agency receive about the same number of queries and that Donald Maass, the president, probably receives more.

The reason email is so abundant is simple—it is quite easy to click your mouse a few times and send a query to an agency. Within a few minutes, you can email sev-

eral agents and it doesn't cost you envelopes, stamps, paper, and expensive printer ink and then waiting for your letter to arrive and be read. However, there are agents who prefer email queries and some believe it is a generational divide that separates them from those who are pro-email versus those who are pro-snail mail.

As Richard Curtis of the Richard Curtis Associates Literary Agency in New York said on why he doesn't use email queries, "I get too much junk mail as it is. And I need time to reflect on any query that interests me."

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Ms. McClure doesn't have a preference for email or snail mail but says, "They (e-queries) are more environmentally friendly than paper queries, and don't take up any space in my office. However, writers should note that I don't respond to e-queries unless I'm interested (many agents have this policy), so if they want an answer either way, they've got to shell out for paper and postage."

Some agencies use a web-based database technology where there is a form on their web site that the author fills in to complete the query. The information is forwarded to a database or email address where the agent can search for specific information in the queries. But I don't think this technology will become the buzz of the publishing industry any day soon. Even the giant agencies like William Morris worldwide ask that you query by snail mail. However, there are agencies that prefer to receive queries only by email and you should adhere to their request.

Mr. Rubie believes agents' preference for email or snail mail is a generational issue. "First of all, opinions about email are

definitely colored by generational considerations. Younger editors and agents prefer it as the communication method of choice to us older fogies. However, email is a strangely intimate way of communication that seems to lack the etiquette controls of traditional communication. I accept and often ask for email and attachments from clients or authors I have invited to send me material. It's the uninvited that I have trouble with."

He said he recommends to his younger colleagues that they contact editors by phone so that, "the initial contact has some meaning to the people on the other end of the line... THEN you can continue the relationship by email and it is extremely useful for shorthand communication that has an intimate quality to it and can continue a relationship when we are often too busy to answer the phone."

I used to think that agents who didn't use email queries were conservative, not willing to embrace change, behind the times. I initially sought out only agents who would accept email queries, after all this is the 21st century, but I found there are disadvantages to email queries. I also found that my initial thoughts were inaccurate.

First, there is little effort in sending an email query. No printing the query, stuffing it into an envelope, addressing it, affixing postage, and including an SASE (Self Addressed Stamped Envelope for the agent's response). Think about that for a second; agents probably have received many email queries from people who are not serious about publishing their work, or have incomplete projects, or who just emailed the query on a whim because it is so effortless. The result is that the agent may be going through emails that are a complete waste of their time.

Second, the agent does not feel obligated to respond to your email if they are not interested. So, you may never know if they read your email, if your email was delivered, or if they just didn't get to your email because it was so far down on the list. If you send an SASE, most agents feel obligated to at least send back a pre-printed post card or letter indicating they

are not interested. Although receiving a form letter is no guarantee that the specific agent read your query, at least you know someone read it. Mr. Curtis concurs. "The odds of getting my attention are raised considerably with a mail query. My staff sorts out those that we're interested in from those we're not, and bring them to my attention. The system seems to have worked very well for us, but those who may think it's old-fashioned may not realize that some traditional processes work better than new ones."

One would think snail mail also communicates effort, commitment, and seriousness about your work. Snail mail also weeds out those who are not serious about their work, right?

Ms. McClure feels differently. "I used to feel that way—that snail mail queries showed more effort, commitment, and were of higher quality—but not so much now. I used to prefer posted queries, because for some reason, when writers are printing out their query, and paying 78 cents for it, they tend to take their submission more seriously. I used to see less typos, better formatting, and generally higher quality coming through the mail. Because e-mails are free and more informal, writers seem to put less thought into e-queries. We used to get a lot of queries from writers who would cc every agent in the directory and address us all as "Dear Sir," or writers who didn't use paragraphs. But that's not true

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anymore. I'm seeing the quality of e-queries rise. I request more partials from my e-queries now than I do from my paper queries."

But what about a sense of intrusion? As Mr. Rubie notes: "Receiving electronic material has a number of aspects. Most people are not rude or at least overtly self involved when communicating by telephone, face to face, or by letter, yet they often seem too uninhibited in a bad way, being rather forward and overly friendly when it comes to email. A little like the total stranger that comes over to me while I'm relaxing in a public lounge with a book or having a quiet meal, and intrudes uninvited on my personal space with a pseudo backslapping "Hi ya Pete, now about ME."

From a writer's viewpoint, I prefer email queries because of their ease and efficiency. But, I also prefer to receive a response from an agent, good, bad or indifferent. I feel more connected to the publishing business with a response; I feel my

work is getting some exposure out there so I will continue to send queries, but if the agency has no preference, I will definitely send a snail mail query over an email one.

As Richard Curtis so appropriately put it, "Emails are communications. Queries are ideas." ■

Anthony S. Policastro has been writing all his life first

as a journalist, editor, and professional photographer and then as a freelance writer with his work published in The New York Times,



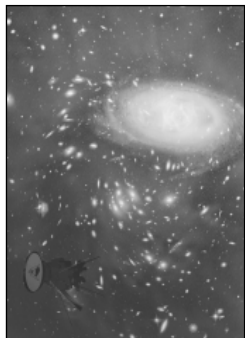
Oceans, Diversion, and American and Popular Photographer magazines. He was also the editor-in-chief of Carolina Style magazine, a regional lifestyle publication similar to Southern Living magazine with national distribution.

He currently writes a blog with Michael Neff, creator and editor of the Webdelsol and Algonkian websites, about writers' issues called The Writer's Edge. Policastro and Neff have been referred to as the Ebert and Roeper of the literary scene with their point/counterpoint posts.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

JOHN TEEHAN

John lives in Providence, Rhode Island where he makes a living as a freelance book and magazine designer. Over the past few years he has designed and laid out over seventy books covering a range of topics from *The Twilight Zone* and pulp fiction to radio scripts and the *Saturday Night Live* films of Tom Schiller. He has worked on book projects with authors such as William Nolan (*Logan's Run*), Joel Rapp (*Gilligan's Island*, *My Favorite Martian*) and June Foray (*Rocky & Bullwinkle*, *Looney Tunes*). In addition to books, John has been the Production Manager of the *SFWA Bulletin* since 2003, and also produces a the monthly journal for the Rhode Island Medical Society.



"I've been working with digital imagery for nearly twenty years. I start with a general concept in my head, then approach the 'canvas' and work at it until what I see in front of me on the screen matches what I set out to do. Sometimes this takes hundreds of different techniques and attempts. Sometimes it falls right into place with remarkable ease. "Lost Probe" falls somewhere in the middle.

When not designing book covers and layouts, John spends his time writing fiction, poetry, and book reviews. He plays banjo and bodhran at local Irish music sessions, dabbles in fishing, scrimshaw and watercolors.

On October 6th of this year he and his fiancé of several years, Margaret Froiseth, will finally tie the knot.

Maybe that will calm him down. ■

