

## The Good News and the Bad

By Shelly Lowenkopf

In what may be the oldest joke in publishing, an aspiring writer learns from his or her literary agent, “There’s good news, and then there’s bad news. The good news is, you’re going to be published.”

At this point, the aspiring writer wonders what downside could impact this extraordinary event. “Ah, the bad news,” the agent says. “The bad news is, you’re going to be published.”

Of course the irony is lost on the aspiring writer, who now has visions of transition from aspiring to emerging. After some long, arduous sessions, the writer has performed chiropractic on the original concept, adjusting, twisting, and reshaping it to the point

where an agent has agreed to represent it, provided the following matters are resolved. Thus the writer learns of editorial notes.

But what could go wrong now? What could turn the good news into bad news, now, of all times, when the contract has been signed, and the publisher's check for the advance against royalties has cleared the bank?

What, indeed?

The aspiring-now-emerging author is soon to meet the editor who, in fact, is taking a risk to her own emerging career. The meeting is in the form of a memorandum, either snail mail or pdf file, by no means something as terse and business-like as a mere email. The eager author reads it, then telephones the agent. "Why," the author asks, "would they take my novel on if there is so much wrong with it?"

"Ah," the agent says. "I see you received your editor's notes."

"This is like—" the author says, "—like going to a doctor to have a splinter removed, then being diagnosed with stage III cancer."

"Could we please," the agent, all patience, says, "dispense with the metaphor and get on with the work? Oh, and by the way, welcome to the club. When you're finished with the editor's notes, you'll be a writer."

Several myths shatter in this imaginary scenario, which is not so much imaginary as it is a compression of my own experiences as an

editor, with authority to contract titles, for general trade, massmarket, literary, and scholarly book publishers.

You might think, then, that my experiences would preclude the phone calls or emails to my agent when, as a writer, I'm on the receiving end of editorial notes, or that I even get editorial notes. Go ahead—think that. But you'd be wrong. To set the record straight, I would not want to publish with a house that did not give notes and suggestions. This statement is made with the memory of a call I once made to my agent where I said, in a Bowdlerized version, "They want me to spell out—to freaking explain—what the reader will all ready know."

Agents being agents, mine said to me in reply to my outburst, "Maybe if you got through in time, we could meet for dinner."

Yet another myth for shattering, this one being that writing is a lonely, solitary business, one screenwriters and dramatists retreat to after such traumatic experiences as a producer once wanting me to write in a part for his girlfriend's Golden Retriever. "Not the brightest dog in dogdom," I said. " The producer smiled. "You'll understand when you see my girlfriend."

When I'm doing the thing I most enjoy, which is telling stories, I'm grateful for the occasional hours I get alone, with no interruptions, no deadlines, no suggestions. If I'm lucky, I might get

in as much as an hour before some character doesn't see his or her part the way I do, or some editor, often my own inner editor, takes exception to a word choice or a line or, sometimes, an entire paragraph. "You call that story? You call that dialogue?"

I'm often delighted to learn my literary agent has a full plate at work, because then I won't have to listen to her telling me about an editor she knows who'd be perfect for the novel we've been discussing. When an old sales manager pal from earlier publishing days reminds me to keep my ear to the ground, I try to make light of the situation by telling him, if I do keep my ear to the ground, all I'll hear is the D Train to Yankee Stadium. But I know what he means. He means, listen to the public.

The good news is, I hear the public; the bad news is, I hear the public too much, drowning out my own. I have, in fact, spent the past several years trying not to listen to the public for marching orders, rather to listen to it for ideas.

"Good," your sales manager buddy, whose name is Fred, and who has on occasion, given you blurbs for your books, says. "You got to move beyond midlist." He means I have to work my way closer to the front pages of the publisher's catalogue. He means well; I know that, and I love him for it. Another writer we both know well has

listened to the public and as a result, her books are frequently on *The New York Times* bestseller lists.

My literary agent has never welcomed me to the club or told me I was a writer now; she took me on because she assumed I already was in the club, which, for her, means I write at least two thousand words a day.

Fred's and my friend who hits the *New York Times* bestseller list once attended lectures I gave at a writers' conference, and I once saw her, her back so messed up, that she had to sprawl across the width of her bed in order to reach her laptop, down on the floor, to get in her pages. I have a blurb from her on a previous book of mine.

There's good news, and there's bad news. The good news is, you're getting published. The bad news is, you're not alone. #