

## About Agents

by Ann Tompert

Whenever a group of children's book writers gather, the subject of agents often surfaces. Should I have an agent? Would having one improve my sales? How do I get an agent?

Unfortunately, there are no easy or right answers.

What follows are some purely subjective thoughts I would like to share. First of all, I must say that all agents are not created equal. Some are good; some, not so good. No credentials are required. Agents are not licensed. All a would-be agent needs to do is 'hang out a shingle.'" Some agents have a few clients; some have as many as two hundred. In the latter case, a writer cannot expect too much [marketing help](#). Based on a forty-hour, fifty-week work year, all he is theoretically entitled to is ten hours of his agent's time a year. Let us assume that a writer approaches a good reliable agent. Usually top-notch agents are reluctant to accept unpublished authors of children's books. They are in business to make money, and unless they can be reasonably sure an author's work is marketable, they cannot afford to take him on. This is not necessarily a reflection on the author's work. It maybe perfectly acceptable, but agents may feel that they, for whatever reasons, cannot market it successfully. Agents are acutely aware that editors expect them to be familiar with their publishing needs and wants and count on them to submit only those manuscripts that are suitable. Agents who do not are soon ignored. If an author is accepted by a good reliable agent with a small number of clients, can he relax and wait for the contracts to roll in? I don't think so. Agents cannot be expected to know everything that is happening in the publishing world. Just as he did before he had an agent, a writer needs to keep abreast of current trends and the needs of publishers. He should try to discover what editors actually buy-not what they say they are looking for. He will study publishers' catalogues and read the books they list to find where his work might be welcome. Then he will apprise his agent of his findings.

Why should an author have an agent if he still has to do all that work?

One answer, of course, is that the agent has a much easier access to editors. Then, too, more and more publishers are closing their doors to unsolicited manuscripts. Besides access to editors, agents offer another important service-negotiating contracts. Because they are in the business to make money, they generally make the best possible deals for their clients. If, however, the agent negotiates a large advance royalty for a book that does not earn that advance, future sales may not be forthcoming. Agents are not all-knowing, infallible people. In managing [careers](#) they do make mistakes. If an author sells an unagented, unsolicited manuscript to an empathetic editor with whom he establishes a good working relationship which [leads](#) to more sales, he may have no need for an agent. It's a mixed bag at best. All one can do is consider the options, make an informed choice, and hope for the best.

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