

HED: California Dreaming
SUB: Are New York Agents Really Better?

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LAST fall, Sally van Haitsma, an agent with the Castiglia Literary Agency in San Diego, took part in a panel discussion at the Southern California Writers Conference in Palm Springs. When a writer in the audience asked, “Do you see a difference in having a New York or West Coast agent?” van Haitsma, along with agents from Los Angeles and the Midwest responded, as did one from New York who “went on and on,” van Haitsma says, about how New York agents had access that West Coast agents don’t. “She made this absurd comment that she had lunch with editors every day.” Putting on a hokey, Western accent, van Haitsma told the audience, “We don’t have time to have lunch with editors every day; we’re *working*.”

Decades ago it was a given that one should have an agent in New York. After all, that’s where the publishing houses, the literary agents—indeed, the entire book publishing industry—was located. But in the last few decades the “regional question” has begun to pop up at writers conferences across the country as an increasing number of agents and publishing houses have opened shop around the country, in places such as Boston, Minneapolis, and, increasingly, California.

Yes, California. If there is any place in the world that is going to challenge New York for hegemony in publishing, it’s going to be the Left Coast—specifically Southern California, with its sunny skies, endless oceans, and vast

array of talent and ambition showing up hourly. In the last decade Southern California has challenged the Big Apple as the cultural leader in fields like fashion, music, and design, and now it's moving on to publishing.

As the indisputable hub of the film industry, Los Angeles has always been the place for screenwriters, but as the industries have overlapped over the last few decades—books being made into films, screenwriters penning books—Southern California has proven to be a force of its own in the literary world, with a bevy of top-notch agents scouting talent from the West and around the country.

The question remains, is Southern California in a position to finally put to rest the old prejudices that one must have an agent in New York? And are there advantages to being outside the literary center—on the other side of the country? In short, can SoCal take on NYC?

OLD prejudices die hard. While many editors say that an agent's location is irrelevant, there are a few agents and writers who still believe it's better to be in New York, although few will come out and say it on the record.

"I don't want some agent in Seattle reading this to feel bad," says a top New York literary agent whose clients include Pulitzer Prize-winning authors. "New York City is the home of most of the mainstream trade publishing houses. So it's certainly more convenient to be an agent in New York City because that's where the editors are."

Publishing, she says, is still an industry made up entirely of relationships—and those relationships are cultivated at lunches and at book parties. The agent concedes that "it's certainly *possible*" not to live in New York, as long as one flies in once a month or so for publishing lunches and parties and such. "Despite teleconferencing and e-mails, there isn't really a substitute

for face-to-face contact," she says. "But I'm old-fashioned."

Agent Laurie Abkemeier has seen firsthand the differences between agenting in and outside of New York. When her husband's job moved to Atlanta, she followed, joining the SoHo-based Defiore and Company and working from her new home. "If I were an author looking for an agent," she says, "I would probably start with all the New York agents, just because it is easier if you have a meeting with your publisher if your agent can get there easily. It's just an accessibility thing."

But while she was in Atlanta she signed John Grogan, the author of *Marley and Me*, the 2005 HarperCollins best-seller about a man and his dog that has since spawned an entire genre. Grogan had found Abkemeier's name on the company Web site and sent her a blind pitch.

"I asked him once if he would have queried me if he had known I was in Georgia," Abkemeier says. "You know, I don't know," he told me. There's a good chance that he wouldn't have."

After her husband's job in Georgia ended, Abkemeier briefly considered moving back to her native California, but eventually settled on returning to New York. "For me to be in a different time zone—that's too far away. There were a couple of times I came up for a day [when I lived in Atlanta], but you can't do that from San Francisco," she says. "Having been an editor and wanting to be closer to the publishing scene, I wanted to be here. That was important to me, and in the last year I've met quite a few authors I never would have met before."

New York agents aren't the only ones who wonder whether it's better to be in New York; it's a fair question for writers, too, especially those first starting out. Los Angeles-based fiction writer Jessica Emerson-Fleming says she decided to start her search for an agent in Los Angeles because, as she puts it, "I'd rather be repped in my hometown." Plus, other writ-

ers in Los Angeles told her that the best local agents are more accessible and dedicated than those in New York. But among her broader community of writing friends, she says, there's still a snobbish preference for New York agents. "If you can get repped in New York, you should," they told her.

That attitude, though on the wane, would likely come as a surprise to top agents around the country, especially Southern California agents who have been working from the Left Coast for the last quarter of a century and selling their books to major publishing houses—not to mention optioning them to film studios.

"It's not relevant anymore," says BJ Robbins, of the eponymous BJ Robbins Literary Agency, which she opened in 1992. "I don't think it's been relevant in a very long time, to be honest." Like many agents on the West Coast, Robbins worked in New York as an editor, and made many connections there—connections she maintained even when she moved across the country. "I have no problem seeing editors," she says. "I don't think they see each other as often as you might think."

For the small but growing community of agents in Southern California the perceived disadvantages work to their advantage. "We may always be three hours behind, but you are already asleep when we are still thinking our brilliant thoughts!" agent Sandra Dijkstra writes in the essay "Being 'Out There,'" originally commissioned for the Association of Authors Representatives, and published on CaliforniaAuthors.com, an online literary hub for West Coast writers and readers. "And sometimes, the call from 'out there,' or the overnight package from California can get more attention," she writes.

Instead of making the rounds on the lunch circuit, many Southern California agents make two or three trips to New York each year, doing what Betsy Amster calls the "immersion thing" on their visits. "I go to see a ton of editors at different houses and get to take the temperature of the house," says Am-

ster, who was an editor in New York until she opened up her own agency in Los Angeles in 1992.

The rest? E-mail. It's not like the time-consuming and costly "olden days," Robbins recalls, when sending out a manuscript meant getting copies made and printing out letters and going to the post office. "I transmit almost all of my manuscripts electronically," she says. "I've represented people for years whom I've never met. It really doesn't matter."

Being away from New York, agents say, means being away from the myopia of New York too. "New York is famously a fishbowl, and so here you feel a great sense of freedom," Amster says. "Both freedom to pursue the projects that we want to pursue and see what happens, and not having the feeling of somebody looking over our shoulders."

Los Angeles Times book editor David L. Ulin, who edited the anthologies *Another City: Writing From Los Angeles* (City Lights Books, 2001) and *Writing Los Angeles* (Library of America, 2002), says being out of the fishbowl is important for writers, too, because no one is paying as much attention to them in a town where literature is not the dominant cultural form. "What that gives you is a lot of room to fail. I think it's really essential for writers to take risks and fail, so they can figure out what they want to be doing. And in the fishbowl where everyone's paying attention, I think writers' failures get too much attention and they can be crippling, rather than liberating."

According to Ulin and others, being on the West Coast allows agents and publishers to focus on what really matters: talent. "It's easier to get the hype going when you're in New York or London," says publisher David Poindexter, founder of MacAdam/Cage in San Francisco. Poindexter says most industry professionals make decisions based on the "buzz" that's generated by other agents and editors before anyone's read the book. "You never really want to buy a book on the buzz,"

he counters. "You always pay way too much money and it never really does as well as you want it to," he says. Being outside the fishbowl, Poindexter adds, "allows us to discern without a lot of noise around it."

But what is it about Southern California in particular that makes it such fertile ground for literary agents and authors? One answer: ideas. With its multiethnic culture, its surfing, skateboarding, and fitness fanatics, and its cutting-edge music, fashion, and design scenes, California has long been a place from which national trends originate.

"Manhattan is Manhattan. So if you want new ideas, you have to go outside of Manhattan," says Julie Castiglia, who founded her own agency in Del Mar, about twenty miles north of San Diego, fifteen years ago. "California's more laid back, it's got a slower pace, and it's got Hollywood. It's a different type of creativity."

Of her colleagues in New York, Castiglia says "they look to the West to bring new ideas that are different from the East Coast. A lot of times they are *begging* us to find them Western ideas."

Younger literary agents sense the same thing. "I do get the feeling that L.A. has a particular mystique to New York editors," says Nicole Gregory, who worked in New York as a magazine editor before moving to Los Angeles to open her Horton+Gregory literary agency in Los Angeles a year ago. "I don't know whether it's longing or whether they think good ideas come from L.A."

But even more than the trendsetting culture, the unique ability of the area's agents to not only provide their writers entrée to both East Coast and West Coast publishers may help explain their appeal—their "allure," as Amster calls it.

Ten years ago, Ulin says he was looking for the sort of agent who could translate between East Coast and West Coast sensibilities when he signed with Bonnie Nadell in San

Francisco. “I was increasingly committed to writing as a Western writer and writing about Western issues, and even writing for Western publications, but I also wanted to have access to national mainstream publications and houses, and it seemed to me that with a good West Coast agent, you can have the best of both worlds.”

IN THE end, geography is the last thing those in the publishing industry should be worrying about. Like their counterparts in the music business, editors, publishers, and writers are trying to figure out what publishing will look like in the future: As book sales shrink and houses consolidate, more and more agents and writers flood the market, and it isn’t clear how things will shake out. “These giant structural changes, so far, overshadow anything that might happen locally,” Amster says.

So the old saw “location, location, location” might be a thing of the past. For editors, talent remains the most important factor. “If you’re talented I don’t think you need to be in New York,” says HarperCollins senior editor Gail Winston of the authors she’s worked with. “I think talent wins hands-down.”

The same can be said about writers searching for agents. “I think the most important thing is finding the right agent, whether you have the right rapport with them,” says Robbins. “Does the agent like my work, will they do all the things that an agent should be doing down there?”

While Southern California—or any other region, for that matter—won’t be replacing New York as the center of publishing anytime soon (“There is a creative energy that exists by having all those houses there, and I just don’t see that changing anytime soon,” Dijkstra says), it will always be a place for new ideas, new talent, new trends, and new voices.

And perhaps in this technological age of porous borders, New York will become a *little* less central. “New York

will always be the center of mainstream publishing,” says Ulin, but readers will always be interested in what he calls “the news from elsewhere.” ∞