

**Karen Gantz Zahler
Vassar Club Speech
Tuesday, April 25, 2006
6pm Random House**

It is a distinct pleasure to speak here for Vassar, where I have great memories. I have always admired the reverence for literature and analytical rigor that Vassar instills in its students. Vassar encourages young people to be intellectually curious and eloquent about their ideas, the very qualities that make for remarkable writers.

I work as both a lawyer and literary agent, and I hope I can share some insights on how to take your passionately penned work and transform it into a marketable and profitable reality. I work on the practical side of the publishing industry, and – as an author myself - I believe that books are sacred, and have the potential to change the world. As Christopher Morley once said, “There is no mistaking a real book when one meets it. It is like falling in love.”

As a literary agent, my job is multi-layered and consistently challenging. On one end, literary agents are always looking for talented writers, keeping their eye on new publications. On the other, agents are constantly looking at publishers, gauging their preferences and trying to find a happy match between those preferences and the manuscripts that come unsolicited every day. An agent may refine manuscripts to help the author gain contact with a competent and appropriate editor. Skilled agents can help their authors sharpen their language, so publishers are moved - if not to pity, at least to purchase – the linguistic expressions of their hearts and minds. In this way, the agent is a guide, publicist, an interpreter and protector.

Many of you are writers, and are working on or conceptualizing a book project. At Vassar you have access to a uniquely supportive community of writing professors and fellow students who are also passionate about the written word. Whether or not you are currently working on a book or a book proposal, it is important to cultivate relationships with your professors. A professor can serve as a mentor, one that has gone through the publishing process for her or his own work, and can act as advocate and guide in preparing your work for publication.

Professors may also be a resource for book ideas. Lots of Vassar professors have a good book in them, and if you’ve taken their classes, you may know what it is. Vassar professor Don Foster, for instance, already achieved a certain amount of recognition in the public sphere. People are interested in reading a book by the man who discovered “anonymous,” (not to mention unearthing the unabomber!) If you can convince a professor that a layman’s book would be worth writing, you might get to be the co-writer or the research assistant, or at least have a hand in the book’s creation.

Once you have your book idea, you will need to write a proposal so that you can acquire an agent. Hiring an agent is essential. Agents come from diverse backgrounds,

and it is important to find an agent that can be the best and most passionate spokesperson for your work. Some agents come from an editing background, and they can be very useful when it comes to shaping and reworking your book. Other agents are also lawyers and can help you navigate the tricky legal territory of book deals. Publishers are increasingly relying on the editorial and business expertise of agents to filter out those books unworthy of consideration. The agent is the first level of the publishing bureaucracy that an author must penetrate.

As students and burgeoning authors, there are certain steps that you can take to more easily penetrate that first level. As I said before, rely on your professors and ask them if they know of any agents that might be interested in your work. A query letter or proposal that comes with a reference or recommendation is bound to receive more attention and go beyond the agent's assistant. An even more direct way of gaining contacts is to intern for an agent or publisher. I frequently hire college students and there are numerous agencies that provide students with the opportunity to read submissions, write proposals, edit potential books, and confer with authors. The best way to learn the art of writing a proposal or query letter is to read them. Working at an agency will not only provide you with useful contacts in the future but will also help you to understand what agents are looking for.

This brings us to a very important question: What does an agent look for exactly? If you're writing a non-fiction book, a platform is indispensable. Your platform is your list of credentials. How do we know you are qualified to write your book? What work have you done in the field? What is your publishing history? *One of my clients, Floyd Abrams, was a first time author at the age of 60. Floyd, however had given hundreds of talks, teaches at Yale and Columbia and is often taped as a First Amendment spokesperson to comment on a news event on television and radio.*

I understand that as a young student, you probably don't have many contacts in the media or have your own segment on Nightline. That's okay. There are still things you can do to improve your resume. Contact your professors. Determine whether they need assistance conducting research. Your contributions might earn you a spot in the acknowledgements or even as a co-author. You can also start smaller. Write an article for a scholarly journal. Become the star reporter for your school or local newspaper. Many authors will tell you that they didn't start with a book but worked up from other types of publications.

Of course, all this is different if what you write is fiction. Fiction doesn't demand the same proof of credibility that non-fiction does. Charles Frazier, the author of *Cold Mountain . . . sold his 2nd book Thirteen Moons for eight million dollars.*

In my capacity as an agent, I am constantly working with authors and editors, and I've developed a good idea of what catches a publisher's attention. One thing that I suggest to writers who are preparing their proposals is to walk into the front entrance of a Barnes & Noble or a Borders bookstore and to give a long, hard look at the new books display. Then I tell them to ask themselves this question: what distinguishes my book

from these books? What is it about my books that would make a customer want to pick it up, instead of the new book to its left or right? If an author can answer these questions, then he is ready to submit a proposal to a literary agent.

A book proposal is a formal way of explaining what makes your book uniquely compelling. Writing a compelling proposal can be tricky, since you have a limited amount of space to convey your vision. The most important quality in a book proposal is confidence, the conviction that your manuscript is worth reading. The clearer you are about what sets your book apart, the easier it will be to show publishers how desirable your work is. Sometimes the deciding factor can be something as small as a title. As Will Schwaabe, an editor for over twenty years at Hyperion says “If you can’t come up with title and subtitle that explains your book, then it’s too complicated.”

Of course, there are exceptions in the publishing world – books that don’t need a truly standout, fully developed proposal to strike an agent’s fancy. If you’ve landed on a really hot topic, a celebrity tell-all or a book from a major figure in the news, the development of the proposal will not be what’s most important. Right now for instance, I’m working on the Alec Baldwin book, which practically advertises itself. Considering the hoopla surrounding him in the news these days, who wouldn’t want to read a book from the guy who feels our divorce laws, which he feels are antiquated and unduly presume the woman is a better childcare provider? I also sold the Britney Spears book, and again, the proposal was not what did it. I had photographs of Britney Spears that had never been shown publicly. The more prescient the subject matter, the easier it will be to sell; which is one reason Britney’s book sold in the first place.

So you’ve snagged the perfect agent and sold your book to an editor. But your job as an author does not end there. At this point in the process, you must be convinced by the power of your vision, and actively seeking to make the book a success. During publishing, you must work with your agent and publisher as a team. This simple maxim distinguishes books that become successful from those that fail. Even during these later stages of the process, you can still be your best advocate, and use that team to your advantage.

The breakdown of any part of the team has the ability to result in disaster for all members. The current James Frey scandal is a prime example of how this breakdown can quickly spiral out of control. As most of you know, the majority of Frey’s torrid, gut-wrenching, and seemingly painfully-honest tale – *A Million Little Pieces* - was pure invention. Much speculation is taking place about possible participation of the publisher in the fabrication of this novel-turned-memoir. However, what can be said is that the creation of a book is a highly collaborative effort and all the members of the team bear responsibility when a book project goes so awry.

The process of getting your book published can have many surprising twists and turns for the inexperienced. If you are determined to write, your determination is your most essential tool with which to be recognized. Do not be discouraged by rejection. Instead, make changes which improve your manuscript and make contacts wherever you

go. Eventually an editor will respond to your conviction in the merit of your work. During my years as an agent, I've had the privilege of working with authors who have resilience and fortitude, and their eventual successes have greatly inspired me.

At Vassar, you have a chance to let your ideas ferment and grow in a unique learning environment. When you graduate from this institution, the skills you have accumulated and your resourceful mindset will give you a distinct advantage as you navigate the publishing process. I hope that you are able to leave here today with a few ideas that might ease the process of moving your work from manuscript to the "New Books" rack at Barnes and Noble.