

What Do Agents Look for in a Query?



- ✓ **Is it the right genre?**
 - Nelson Literary Agency represents literary fiction, commercial mainstream, women's fiction, romance, sci-fi, fantasy, young adult, middle grade, and memoir. Any other genre is automatically rejected. Do your research and target the right agencies to avoid disappointment!

- ✓ **Does the query have a strong voice?**
 - Is your book funny? Or full of suspense? Is your main character sarcastic? One of the main purposes of a query is to give agents a taste of your writing style and voice. A dry, colorless description of what your book is about will never stand out from the crowd.
 - Imagine you are writing the flap/back cover copy for your novel. How would you draw readers in and make them want to open the book?

- ✓ **Is it a hot topic?**
 - Agents love market-savvy writers who are also familiar with the particular tastes of that agency. Did I mention research? Try www.publishersmarketplace.com or www.agentquery.com. Twitter, Facebook, and agent blogs are also excellent resources.
 - That said, don't write a story simply because you think it's what will sell. The market is unpredictable—write what you are passionate about.

- ✓ **Is it concise but thorough?**
 - Keep your query to one page or less. All you need is a hook, a 1-2 paragraph synopsis, and a brief author bio. Any more than that will leave agents glassy-eyed—if they even make it to the end!
 - A little flattery is fine, but don't go overboard. Cut to the chase.

- ✓ **Does the author seem confident in his or her work?**
 - Don't be arrogant, but also don't put yourself down or emphasize a lack of experience (e.g. "Please note this is my first attempt at submitting a query letter...").
 - If you have publishing credits or references from authors or publishing industry professionals, be sure to mention them.

Resources:

www.aar-online.com

www.publishersmarketplace.com

www.agentquery.com

www.writersmarket.com

www.writers.net

www.pred-ed.com

www.nelsonagency.com

Sample Query Letters from NLA Clients

Date: February 23, 2012 2:43:17 PM MDT
From: futurebestseller@bigtalent.com
Subject: Query: THE PANAMA HOTEL

Dear Ms. Nelson:

I must admit I hate Asian stereotypes. You know the ones. Good at math. Hardworking. We all look alike. Come to think of it, that last one might hold water. After all, my father once wore a button that read “I am Chinese,” while growing up in Seattle’s Chinatown during WWII. It was the only thing that separated him from the Japanese, at least in the eyes of his Caucasian neighbors.

Sad, but true. Which is probably why my novel has a little to do with that particular piece of history.

Anyway, the working title is THE PANAMA HOTEL, and when people ask me what the heck it’s all about I usually tell them this:

“It’s the story of the Japanese internment in Seattle, seen through the eyes of a 12-year-old Chinese boy, who is sent to an all-white private school, where he falls in love with a 12-year-old Japanese girl.”

But it’s more complicated than that. It’s a bittersweet tale about racism, commitment and enduring hope—a noble romantic journey set in 1942, and later in 1986 when the belongings of 37 Japanese families were discovered in the basement of a condemned hotel.

This historical fiction novel is based on my Glimmer Train story, *I Am Chinese*, which was a Top 25 Finalist in their Fall 2006 Short-Story Competition For New Writers. An excerpt was also published in the Picolata Review.

Think Amy Tan, but with a sweeter aftertaste.

Thank you for your consideration and time.

Jamie Ford

The Panama Hotel

Historical Fiction 86,000 words / 353 pages

About the author: James “Jamie” Ford grew up near Seattle’s Chinatown and is busy writing his next novel, *Rabbit Years*. In addition to his Glimmer Train accolades, he took 1st Place in the 2006 Clarity of Night Short Fiction Contest. Jamie is also an alumnus of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. He hangs out at www.jamieford.com and has been known to eat jellyfish, sea cucumber and chicken feet on occasion.

Note: Jamie’s book was later retitled HOTEL ON THE CORNER OF BITTER AND SWEET and became a phenomenal *New York Times* bestseller from Random House.

Sample Query Letters from NLA Clients

Date: February 23, 2012 2:43:17 PM MDT
From: romancesuperstar@readmenow.com
Subject: Query: RUMBLE ON THE BAYOU

Dear Ms. Nelson:

I have recently completed a 93,000-word humorous romantic suspense novel entitled RUMBLE ON THE BAYOU, and I hope you might consider me for your list.

Secrets have been buried in Gator Bait, Louisiana for over thirty years, but someone is about to blow the lid off of them and rock this sleepy little town. Dorie Berenger likes her life just the way it is—simple, easy, relaxed. Serving as both Game Warden and Deputy in her hometown of Gator Bait meets her needs nicely, until DEA agent Richard Starke shows up—abrupt, demanding and far too attractive for this one-horse town. Soon he’s complicating everything, from her job to her self-imposed ban on relationships, and Dorie wants him out of her hair as soon as possible.

RUMBLE ON THE BAYOU is a humorous look at what happens when big city crime visits small town mentality. It received an Honorable Mention in the 2004 Daphne du Maurier contest and second place in the 2004 TARA First Impressions Contest.

I am a member of Romance Writers of America, Dallas Area Romance Authors, and Sisters in Crime. I spent the first twenty-one years of my life among the bayous and marshes of southwest Louisiana.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jana DeLeon

Note: RUMBLE ON THE BAYOU was published in 2006 by Dorchester Publishing. Jana’s THE SECRET OF CYPRIERE BAYOU (Harlequin Intrigue) was nominated for the 2011 *Romantic Times* Reviewers’ Choice Award. Her latest in the series, THE LOST GIRLS OF JOHNSON’S BAYOU, released earlier this month.