

Hook 'em With Your Cover Letter

by Joëlle Anthony

Whether you call it the pitch, the hook, or simply your query, the blurb you write in your cover letter that tells an agent or editor what you're trying to sell them, is one of the single most important things you'll ever write. When trying your hand at it, think about the back of a book's dust jacket. Think about the blurb a reviewer uses to describe a book to an unknowing audience. Think short, sweet, and exciting. But don't think it's something you can gloss over because your sample pages will speak for themselves.

Early in my career I went to a writer's conference and I distinctly remember an editor saying that she put very little value in the cover letter. She advised writers to keep them short and to let the writing do the talking. She said that she barely read covers and a brief letter would endear you to an editor's heart.

I held onto that advice for years. Now I know she was only speaking for herself, but at the time, I thought she was speaking for all editors. When it came time for me to try and sell my young adult manuscript, I included short covers and only submitted to editors who accepted sample pages. With a bland cover, I was counting on my writing to grab their attention. What I didn't understand is that a strong hook does so much more than make them want to read your sample, it makes them want to read your whole book.

Just over a year ago, I switched from searching for a publishing house to trying to find an agent. As I tuned into blogs (Miss Snark, Kristen Nelson, Nadia Cornier, Rachel Vater), I learned that the hook for your book, which is part of your cover letter, is probably the most important tool you have at your disposal. In theory, I understood the

concept, but it took me a long time to really “get” that the hook was as important as they all said it was.

And believe it or not, I had to learn it twice before it sunk in. The first time was last summer. I had finished my new YA and wanted to query an agent who had shown interest in some of my previous work, but who had declined to sign me on. I knew my book had a good twist to it, so when she responded that the writing was solid (first five pages) and she loved the character’s voice, but the story was tired and had been done many times before, my first thought was, “How can she say that? She doesn’t even know what my book’s about! It’s got a great twist!”

After I got over the pang of rejection, my second thought was, “All she really knows about my book is what I put in my hook.” Ding. Ding. Ding. That was my problem. I rewrote the hook but I didn’t just fire it off to agents again. Instead I gave it some thought and worked as hard on it as I had on my manuscript. This time I thought of a clever way to tie the hook into one of the unique features of my story and the title. I made the voice of the hook match the voice of my character, even though it was in third person. And I made it tight, snappy, and funny, just like my manuscript.

That hook went on to snag many requests for partials and fulls (even without sample pages) and in the end my writing got me an agent. But I wasn’t done with hooks yet. Before I had signed, I finished another YA and I started querying that one. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice though. Instead I made a new one. **People who’ve read your manuscript are not the ones who should critique your hook.** They already know too much.

I sent that hook out to my critique group. They gave me great suggestions on how to tighten it, what should be cut, where I could rearrange stuff, and when I was done, it was very smooth and professional. Everyone in my critique group already liked my book, and knew first hand the sense of urgency that I'd embedded into the manuscript, so they didn't notice it was missing in my hook.

I sent out a batch of queries and one of the quicker agents got back to me right away with the comment, "This is really polished but I don't feel the magic." How could he not feel the magic? Couldn't he see how quick-paced and exciting my book was? Didn't he feel the life or death situation? I decided it must've just been him. After all, not every manuscript is right for every agent. But it wasn't just him. When the "nos" started coming in hard and fast, I clued in that once again, it was probably my hook. Instead of going back to my critique group, I sent it to a writer friend who knew absolutely nothing about the book.

Her comments were, "There's no sense of urgency. What does the character lose if she doesn't get what she wants? Why does this matter?" In my attempt to show off my great plot and character voice, I'd forgotten the essentials. *What does she want and what happens if she doesn't get it?* It all has to be in there, every time, and if you ask agent/writer Donald Maas, he'll say do it in fifty words. Yep. Fifty words! Others, like Miss Snark give you two-hundred-fifty words, but you still only get to write a one page query, so you've got to pack in your intro and bio around that. No fair using 8 pt. type either.

Miss Snark (www.misssnark.com) and her Crap-o-meter is a great place to start researching how to do a hook. Even if she never does another one, everything you need to know is already out there in her archives. Rachel Vater (<http://raleva31.livejournal.com/>)

talks on her Live Journal regularly about the queries she receives and explains why they do and don't work for her. Every agent who blogs covers this topic off and on. With all the help available, there's no excuse for not making your hook the best it can be. After all, the better your hook, the more likely an agent or editor is to find the gem in slush. Help them find your jewel, and you'll help yourself get an agent or publishing contract. Besides, it's good practice for when you really do have to write the copy for your dust jacket.

© Joëlle Anthony, 2007