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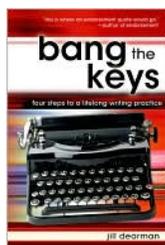
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The Writer's Secretary

by Jill_Dearman



When a writer is too tired to send his own work out to lit mags, that's where Writer's Relief, a well-regarded Author's Submission Service <http://www.writersrelief.com/> comes in.

Ronnie Smith, head honch-ess of Writer's Relief sat down to discuss what her submission service does, and how they do it.

JD: Tell us about Writer's Relief -- how did your company come to life and what should writers know about your services?

RS: Writer's Relief is an author's submission service that I started back in 1994, and we've been helping writers ever since. I wanted to work with creative people and to enjoy coming into the office every day, and I also wanted to fill a hole that I saw in the industry by offering writers a service that they truly needed. Writer's Relief now has a staff of 16 people; we're something of an alternative workplace--we work great/excellent hours, we bring two canine mascots to the job, we are a diverse bunch in terms of age, race, religion, sexual orientation, politics—and, after almost 16 years, we still love what we do.

Essentially, Writer's Relief is a specialized service for writers who want help with the submission process. We are NOT publishers, publicists, reviewers, agents, editors, or any other publishing entity. We target our clients' books, short stories, poems, and essays to the literary agents or literary journal editors who are most likely to appreciate the work. We also proofread and track submissions, write (and collaborate on) cover and query letters, print letters for mailing, and advise clients when things get sticky (like multiple acceptances or agent requests for exclusivity). In other words, we do just about everything to manage the submission process.

We believe that you CAN develop a strong submission system on your own if you have the right tools, resources, and time. But in our experience, most writers would rather be writing than mucking around in research and paperwork, so that's where we come in.

Writer's Relief clients have included everyone from new, unpublished writers who are breaking into the literary magazine market to New York Times best-sellers. We are pleased to say that our clients regularly win major publishing industry awards and honors. Professors routinely publish poems, stories, and essays in literary journals using our services (sometimes departments pay for them to work with us, or professors will enroll on their own because we save them so much time). Writers working on a book or novel will often work with us BEFORE their book is done (so that they can build up their bios and have a competitive edge when they begin to query agents). Others approach us to help them find an agent once a book is done.

Writers who are interested in our best and most inclusive program (our Full Service program) must apply to our Writer's Relief Review Board because we partner only with writers whose work is suitable for submission. Like many personalized services, our work is based on flat fees. We do not take commission, and there's no reading fee for consideration. For more information about the nuts and bolts of our services (including pricing), visit

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*ONE LAST NOTE: We publish a free Newsflash for Writers, delivered monthly via e-mail. It's filled with publishing leads, writing contest listings, anthology calls for submissions, writing conferences, and also fantastic articles that offer tips on submission strategies and etiquette while the industry is in flux.

JD: For writers who are trying to get their work published in literary magazines, what advice would you give?

RS: I think there are three major elements to making strong submissions to literary magazines. The first is obvious: strong writing. It's important to read and subscribe to literary journals--this gives you a sense of how your writing compares, improves your technique, and it also helps keep the market alive!

Second, you've got to do the research—identify the literary journals and magazines that are the best fit for your writing. Of course, identifying the right markets means you must also rule out the thousands of “wrong” markets, so the research can be quite time-consuming. But ultimately if you're not submitting to appropriate markets, you're not in a good position to get published. Our clients report that what they appreciate most about what we do is our targeting--we have a database of thousands of literary magazines and literary agents that is updated regularly with current submission guidelines and editorial interests. Plus, we track countless personal responses that our clients receive from agents and editors, so if an agent writes “I don't like first person” on a rejection letter, we can apply that unpublished knowledge to all of our targeting and make sure we send that agent only those projects that he or she will like. Our clients have an acceptance rate that is well above the national average.

Third, submitting is a numbers game. Many writers will submit a story to ten journals, then give up. But that's the wrong attitude. The submission process is successful when it is ongoing, and the writers who are publishing most frequently are writers who have made the submission process habitual and professional. In other words, when writing is a habit, submitting needs to be a habit as well—a steady stream of submissions going out and responses coming in. There WILL be many, many rejections, but that's all par for the course. We keep our clients from getting discouraged—yet another reason our clients are so widely published and successful.

JD: How has the world of lit magazines changed since you started Writer's Relief? Are online journals taken as seriously as old fashioned print publications? Are there TOO many places to publish?

RS: Certainly there is increasing emphasis on publishing and submitting online to literary magazines and agents. At Writer's Relief I've always tried to keep the company up-to-date (and for that reason we've been incorporating a percentage of online submissions into our clients' submission packets). At this point, we target our clients' short prose and poetry only to literary journals that have a print edition. Our writers generally want to publish in reputable print journals—there's just something about seeing your name in print. However, there certainly are online literary magazines that are gaining in popularity and reputation. Because of the economy, many traditional print magazines have either closed their doors or switched to online publication, and we'll see more and more magazines go online as the years go by. Writer's Relief is keeping close tabs on online literary magazines and their reception in the literary community, and when it's time to incorporate reputable online publications in our targeting, we'll be ready.

Are there TOO many places to publish? I don't think so. The publishing industry generally recognizes that there is a certain hierarchy of literary journals and magazines. At Writer's Relief we target only those journals that are reputable and known for quality. We will build up our clients' credentials when necessary, starting new writers in mid-level magazines, then building toward more well-known publications. But all of the markets in our database (including agents and editors) are vetted for reputation and quality before we advise our clients on where to send their work. In other words, there are myriad places to publish (maybe even “too many” as you suggest), but if a writer's purpose is to submit only to publishers of a high quality, then the pool is significantly decreased.

The fact is, some writers want their work to appear only in a handful of top-tier, extremely competitive journals. Others are glad for their work to appear in even the smallest independent magazines. We feel that the heart of American letters right now is mid- to upper-tier literary journals and magazines, and we submit our clients' writing to an eclectic mix of those magazines to keep our clients publishing on a regular basis.

JD: What type of writer -- whether of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry -- has the best chance of getting his or her work out there in lit journals these days?

RS: It doesn't matter what genre you're writing: short stories, flash fiction, poems, and essays are all highly sought. The key is being a strong writer who has a unique perspective

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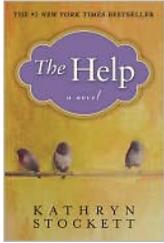
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of the world. That said, there are some strategies that make one work more appealing than another. For example, poems that are one page long tend to be more accepted than poems that are five pages. The same goes for stories—under 5,000 words is best (and under 3,500 words is even better). We regularly publish practical tips for breaking into the literary magazine and literary journal market in our free Newsflash for Writers.



JD: Who are some of your favorite authors?

RS: My favorites tend to be the authors I've recently read and thoroughly enjoyed, such as [The Help](#) by Kathryn Stockett, [South of Broad](#) by Pat Conroy, or Laurie King's Mary Russell novels. I also loved reading Barbara Walter's [Audition](#).

JD: Thanks, Ronnie! For more on the craft of writing please check out my book, [Bang the Keys](#), or visit the site, <http://bangthekeys.com> And before we end, I submit this question to YOU:

Reading, writing, submitting ... how do these priorities stack up for you as a writer?

--Jill Dearman is the author of [Bang the Keys](#) (Penguin). A part-time Prof. of Journalism at NYU, Jill is also a freelance editor and writer coach.

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