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Working as a Literary Agent in Times of Digital Developments: An Interview with Lori Galvin

By Geertje Hoogenboom

Lori Galvin works as a literary agent for the agency Aevitas Creative Management, which has offices in six major cities (New York, Boston, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Seattle, London) and represents a great variety of writers and genres. As an agent, Galvin represents writers and helps them negotiate deals with publishers. She represents adult fiction (primarily thrillers and women's fiction) as well as non-fiction (cookbooks and personal development). I talked to her on the 23rd of October 2020 about her job and the effects of digital developments on the world of publishing.

Hoogenboom: Why did you want to become an agent?

Galvin: I had been working as an editor before I became an agent. The last decade, I worked as a cookbook editor, which after ten years became somewhat monotonous. I was ready for a change. I knew I didn't want to edit at another publisher, even if it was a different kind of book, so I tried to think of other avenues where I could still use my editorial skills as well as learn a side of the industry I didn't know much about. Becoming a literary agent was the perfect solution.

H: How did you become an agent?

G: I spoke with many people who knew the agenting business, so I could hear about the positives and the negatives—it helped that I already worked in the publishing industry. I was also lucky to have a former colleague who had made the switch from editing to agenting. She gave me an informational interview and then shortly after I was asked if I wanted to join the same agency. Relationships are so important in publishing!

H: Can you walk us through what a typical working day looks like for you, or is there no such thing as a typical working day for an agent?

G: It's almost never typical. My most typical day is Monday because I have standing meetings that take up most of the day. I try to block out two hours every morning for reading/editing, but that doesn't always happen, so I end up reading or editing on the weekend.

The reason why I don't really have a typical day is because my clients' needs are all different as their books are at different stages—I have clients who are working on their manuscript or proposal prior to selling; clients whose books are sold and are working with their publisher during editing, or layout; clients whose book is out and they're working on publicity. I can be called in during any of these stages to help. Yesterday, for example, I emailed and texted with a client in a different time zone who received her page proofs to review and she didn't have the latest version of Acrobat on her computer. The files got corrupted when she sent them back to the publisher. It was really frustrating for her because she had to do it all over again with updated Acrobat. There wasn't much I could do except lend an ear to allow her to vent; this is also part of an agent's job. I also reviewed a contract for a client who has been commissioned to write a novel by a Hollywood book-to-film/TV agency. They provide the concept and she writes it accordingly. I've never worked with an agency like this so I had questions I had to review with colleagues. Additionally, I

had to make sure my client could write her own books outside of what she's doing for the agency. And of course, I spend a good amount of time reading queries and looking for prospective authors every day; yesterday was no different!

H: Agenting is definitely a multi-faceted job. What do you like most about it?

G: Selling a book! It's very gratifying to find an editor/publisher who is just as enthusiastic about a project as I have been and to know that they'll help make the manuscript even better and that they will deliver it to a broad audience. I also enjoy the editorial process—helping the author get the manuscript or proposal in shape so that we can submit it to editors.

H: What makes you decide to take on a client?

G: I fall in love with the book and the author. The agent/author relationship is often compared to a marriage, so I have to make sure the client and I are a good match both business-wise and personality-wise.

H: How do you know you are a good match?

G: I schedule a meeting with a promising author to see if we match. It's always important to explain to authors how this business works and what they can expect of me, but also what I expect of them!

H: Does your agency also play a big part in who you can take on?

G: Yes. If I have an author I am considering taking on, the agency has to agree to it first. I also like to consult my colleagues; I value their opinion, and not only those of the other agents. Aevitas prides itself on negotiating foreign rights and movie rights for the books it publishes, and so I like to consult those departments about the possibilities for a book.

H: The range of books you represent is quite broad: thrillers, cookbooks, women's fiction. What

do you think are the advantages of an agent having broad interests? Is there something to say for focussing on one specific genre as well?

G: I think today, agents must be diverse in the genres they represent—it's just too risky to put all your eggs in one basket... the only exception I can think of is celebrity books. I think it's good to have a mix of fiction and non-fiction too because non-fiction is often sold on a proposal, which might be fifty pages, whereas with fiction, you need to sell a full manuscript. The fiction market is also very competitive and a riskier proposition for publishers.

H: The digital age brings lots of new possibilities to the field of publishing, such as self-publishing, online publishing, audiobooks, etc. Is there a specific digital development that you are excited about?

G: I've become well acquainted with audio books since COVID-19 began, though I don't use it for work—I mainly listen to books on my morning walks and also when I clean around the apartment. I do use ebooks for work; I download submissions to read on my Kindle, although as a civilian reader, I still prefer the experience of reading a printed book.

As for digital developments in publishing: I still remember a time when it could take the publisher over a week to prepare a book for the printer, and a time when we did have a digital version of a text but you couldn't properly search it for words or images. In that sense, what I think is great about digital developments in general is how much more nimble we can be in the publishing industry, especially because, as far as industries go, publishing can be quite slow; it takes eighteen months on average between selling a book to a publisher and the book hitting the shelves, although publishers are always looking for ways to speed things up, especially for 'timely' books.

H: Are there any challenges for agents caused by these digital developments?

G: Yes! Ebooks aren't as profitable for authors as printed books. In some categories, like cookbooks, it's not so bad because the ebook format sells a fraction of what the print books do. That's because digital copies of these books aren't nearly as good in quality or readability as the print version. But for novels, especially commercial novels, the author may sell more ebooks than print and thus make less money than if they'd sold the same number of print books. At the same time, those ebooks may be purchased by new readers or those who have grown up on devices, so at least the author may be growing their audience.

Ditto for audio. Once audiobooks became popular—and that has been quite a recent development, really helped by Audible, which is now owned by Amazon—many publishers wanted audio rights included in the purchase of the book—whereas before agents could sell audio rights separately, just like film and TV rights. Most big publishers have audio departments that produce audiobooks. Having the same publisher who produces your print/ebook produce your audiobook can be a good thing distribution and publicity wise. However, publishers often fail to increase advances to account for those audio rights. It's definitely a point of contention.

H: You mentioned that you've started listening to audiobooks a lot more since COVID-19. How has COVID-19 impacted your job?

G: It's been a tough year, especially in the spring when no one really knew what was going on and suddenly everyone was working from home. It took everyone a while to adjust. I sold a novel fairly quickly over the summer but otherwise, it's been a very slow year. Some of my projects are dark and that's not something people have wanted in this crazy year. Instead, what sells is more

light-hearted and escapist works, also known as 'uplit'; this is a trend that was already on the rise in the USA due to the stress of our political situation, but it's been given a boost due to COVID-19. I've also started looking for more nonfiction projects.

Apart from the projects I'm taking on, there's also the fact that our office closed. This means I'm working from home 100% and I miss seeing colleagues in person and the usual office chit-chat about our projects. We do meet on Zoom, so there's that.

There are upsides, though! I don't have to commute—the subway here can be frustratingly slow in the winter. Also, I've attended conferences virtually that otherwise I may not have been able to attend because I couldn't afford the flight and hotel.

H: Do you still read for pleasure? Has your job as an agent influenced the way you read?

G: I absolutely still read for pleasure—though it's audiobooks most of the time to give my eyes a chance to rest. Alternatively, I try to reserve 30-45 minutes each night to read a print book before I go to sleep; I try to avoid screens in bed.

I'm constantly tagging books to read related to work in some way because it is my job to know the market. I keep an eye on what's getting a lot of buzz—though I find that just because something's trending doesn't necessarily mean it's good. I also follow a lot of book people on social media and I'm always on the lookout for writers who are with a very small press and may be ready to get an agent. ■

To see which authors Lori Galvin represents, you can visit the Aevitas agency's website aevitascreative.com and click on her profile. She also has an active Twitter account [@galvinlori](https://twitter.com/galvinlori) where she often shares book tips, upcoming conferences, and other literature-related insights.

