

**Hey, thank you so much for signing up for
Poe Can Save Your Life, my free, darkly inspired self-help
newsletter. Glad to have you along.**

Since my book came out, I've received a lot of inquiries from other writers and creators who are interested in the process and/or getting a book deal of their own. So, below, I shared the details of how it happened for me, and I also shared my query letter that finally got me a literary agent.

CHEERS. I hope that, if you're on this journey, these posts are helpful even in a small way. Break a leg, friend! **And just scroll on down to read the posts now.**

—Cat

How to get a book deal when you're not famous

Or, how Edgar Allan Poe helped me get a book deal and could help you, too.

A couple of weeks ago, I was talking to my old L.A. writers group via Zoom, and it came up how damn near *impossible* it is these days to get a book deal.

A book deal, in this case, to mean a traditional, “Big Five,” New-York-publisher-with-an-office-on-6th-Avenue kind of book deal. Most people know that it’s easy to self-publish a book on Wattpad or Kindle. But to convince an outfit like Simon & Schuster or Little, Brown to publish your novel or work of nonfiction? That’s like trying to win *American Idol*, and I don’t think that show is even on the air anymore—making it all the harder to win.

So I thought I would share, here, a little-discussed hack that helped me get a traditional book deal in the fall of 2019. Not a deal that made me rich or anything, but still: my childhood dream, stamped like a parking validation! What a thrill, especially before I realized how much work would be involved.

First things first, though. Why is it so hard to get a deal?

A better way to phrase this question might be, why is it so hard for an ordinary, non-famous person to get a book deal? Because famous people have no trouble. If you’re a Kardashian or a comic with a Netflix special or even a momfluencer with 500,000 Instagram followers all breathlessly awaiting your next inspirational quote, then it’s not that hard.

For the rest of us, those without massive platforms or perhaps *any* platform to speak of, it’s extremely, *extremely* hard, because the publishing industry thinks it can’t afford to take a chance. The big houses, these days, are more in the business of running proven winners than fresh horses. It’s such a tough business environment for them that they’re simply not willing to put money and effort into books they’re not sure will sell. And sell a lot. As in, at least 10,000 copies and, preferably, much more than that.

This means that there’s effectively almost no chance that you—ordinary, aspiring, non-famous writer you—can sell your book.

Of course, exceptions to the rule exist. And the usual entrenched advantages—having gone to the right school (an Ivy or Iowa), having elite connections, and/or having some big, noteworthy job—matter, too. One way or another, brilliant new writers emerge every year. In general, however, an ordinary person trying to get a traditional book deal is much like an ordinary person buying a lottery ticket and hoping against hope. It could happen. You could pocket the \$200 million. And hell, I’m probably underestimating the odds a tiny bit. But make no mistake, they are *long*.

Back in 2019, when I sold a nonfiction book proposal, I didn't set out to game the system. What happened was, after a dozen years of writing novels and trying to find an agent who might want to represent me, I fell into a horrible depression. Then, for the first time since I was a kid, I started reading Edgar Allan Poe. For about a month straight, I just lay around reading Poe and crying, mostly in my bathtub, because I was in a dark place and also because, all of a sudden, the metaphorical nature of Poe's short stories had become clear to me. Holy shit, I thought. He was talking about depression and despair the whole time.

The ships captained by ghosts, the yawning whirlpools, the whistling scythes? All that stuff was just window dressing. Poe was talking about two things at once. On the surface, shipwreck or, say, torture by the Spanish Inquisition. Below, awful existential pain, the same kind that was plaguing me.

I started digging through the numerous biographies about his life, and though Poe's life was indisputably a dumpster fire, just incredibly sad to read about, doing so had the strange effect of cheering me up. Look at everything he lived through, I thought; he still got his work done. He still managed to keep going despite, well, everything. And he'd even cracked some pretty good jokes all while. I loved reading Poe's letters in which he bitched—*endlessly, bitterly complained*—about his day jobs.

Poe was funnier than he ever got credit for, I thought. No one knows how funny he is.

Soon enough, a realization hit me: I was the only person ever, in history, to really understand Edgar Allan Poe.

Obviously, that was a delusion. But it's a common one. Since Poe's death in 1849, hundreds of books and thousands of articles have all been written by people suffering from this delusion. Poe just has that effect on people. He's such a complex figure that, once you Hoover up enough facts and you're finally able to bring him into focus in your mind, you start to think you're the only person who *truly* gets him.

I was having a drink with a historian friend one night and I told him about all this: how Poe was cheering me up, how I'd come to see him as a kind of flawed-yet-fascinating existential hero. Plus a few words about my being the first and only Poe Understander in history.

"That sounds like a book," my friend said, lifting his glass.

"Oh yeah," I deadpanned. "I'm going to write a book about reading Poe for self-help and call it *How to Say Nevermore to Your Problems*." Which turned out to be just the working title.

Over the next year, I roughed out a book proposal. (A book proposal is essentially a 10,000-word sales pitch for publishers that details what a nonfiction book will look like and who might

buy it. This is how most nonfiction books get sold. You write the proposal first, not the book itself.)

Next, I sent query letters to agents, hoping someone would want to represent me and my Poe idea. This time around, I got offers. And while it took another eighteen months to find a publisher for the book, and I had to rewrite my proposal from top to bottom three different times, my book proposal eventually went to auction, with Running Press, a subsidiary of Hachette, bidding the most and winning.

So what changed?

I still wasn't—obviously, still am not—famous, and wouldn't want to be. Who would? Most adults agree that, while some money might be welcome, the other aspects of fame seem horrible, essentially life-ruining, right? Meanwhile, I continue to suck at Twitter and have few followers. I still don't have *any* large platform to speak of. I publish freelance articles sometimes, but that's nowhere near enough of a public presence. At least in my experience, it's not even table stakes.

But none of this mattered much anymore because I was writing about *someone who has a massive platform*. Poe has four million Facebook fans. He may've died 171 years ago, but he's so well known, beloved and influential today that not only is there an entire academic discipline known as Poe Studies, but people get tattoos of his face. People cosplay as Poe at Comic Con.

Most importantly, you can put numbers to Poe's audience: the 4 million Facebook fans; the 63,000 people following the Poe topic on Quora; the 22,000 fans on the official Poe Wattpad page; the 3,500 folks following the Poe subreddit. In other words, you can "prove" the appeal.

The book-deal hack I stumbled across unwittingly

You don't have to be famous to get a book deal if you write about someone who IS famous.

Or maybe you write about a famous phenomenon. Maybe you write a nonfiction book about side-hustles or Cross Fit or crosswords or coding or knitting or whatever, so that it matters less how many fans YOU have, and instead a publisher will look to how many fans there are of your TOPIC.

You do still need some experience as a writer. That's when your previously published work comes in handy, and all your relevant work experience and life experience starts to matter.

This hack applies especially to nonfiction, of course, but I could see it being relevant for fiction writers, too. Maybe you write a short story collection about Princess Diana, and how she faked her own death to escape the press and now works in a legal pot shop on Santa Monica

Boulevard. Or you write a historical novel about Biggie in the '90s, or, I don't know, you write a musical about Alexander Hamilton.

Any of these gambits would allow you to make the claim that there's already huge public interest in your subject. Then you basically just point to that interest and say, "there's the audience for my book." Instead of going on about your own platform, you can detail the platform that your subject, your topic, already has. My own 10,000-word book proposal basically boiled down to: *I'm a Poe fan who buys books about Poe. I think other Poe fans will buy this book about Poe.*

Now, maybe this hack has occurred to you already. Maybe it didn't take you the last dozen years to puzzle out. What's that saying, "learn slowly, then you'll know"? That's my process. I hope your process is quicker and more fun, and less naive and absurd. In any case, if you want to write a book, you could do worse than beginning with the famous thing, famous person, that you're obsessed with. Surely you're obsessed with *something*?

A good link

If you've got a subject or topic already in mind, then as a next step, maybe check out the following link. It's only a random LinkedIn post, yet it contains some of the best writing advice I've ever come across. And the advice also applies to marketing and pretty much every other creative endeavor. Here it is: "[The Secret to Coming Up with Ideas People Can Get Excited About.](#)"

The query letter that got me four agent offers

How to write advertisements for yourself

This is the story of my querying “journey,” which could be helpful to you if you’re pitching a project right now. It is also a little meditation on self-promotion, which I’ve been thinking about a lot because, since last September, I’ve done so many uncomfortable things that it’s probably given me mesothelioma. Promoting a book is one part dream come true, two parts face-planting with witnesses.

Do you feel this too, an overriding awkwardness that comes whenever you try to present yourself in some even *sort of* together light? Do you struggle to talk yourself up in emails, website bios, fellowship applications, and queries? Excellent. Please join my class-action suit against the universe. It’s not fair how hard this stuff is to figure out or to execute.

Yet others have figured it out—arguably. Or at least plunged in with great vigor. Case in point: Edgar Allan Poe wrote fake letters to the editor praising his own work. A couple of years later, the great historian and biographer Thomas Carlyle invented sources in order to quote *himself*, glossing his own opinions with more authority. This being Carlyle, all his fake sources’ names were scatological German puns. What a guy. Norman Mailer, in the 1950s, wrote a whole book called *Advertisements for Myself*.

So perverse is the human imagination that even anonymity can become a form of self-promotion and credibility-mongering. Think of Banksy. How many people would care about that work if the artist’s identity were known and all the speculation stopped? Enough to fill a 7-11?

Now here’s a better question: What if these examples are to be emulated, not just smiled at? I don’t suggest drafting fake letters or spray-painting London. I do think that, then as now, the attention market is crowded, and thus some self-promotion is necessary to have a career at all. By the same token, it’s a good idea to try to cultivate authority and credibility, knowing as we do that people tend to care as much about who’s talking as they do about what’s being said.

You don’t have to invent this credibility wholesale, however. This is the internet age. The data is out there, like Big Foot and aliens and maybe even Banksy.

How this applies to querying is straightforward.

How can you appear credible to literary agents, or simply *more* credible to literary agents? With all the usual caveats about how other people’s mileage may vary, I think one big way is to use specific numbers and vivid anecdotes. In short, to use data.

More on that in a sec, but first, if “query letter” is new to you, this is the term for the emails you send to literary agents when you’re seeking representation, while “querying” refers to the

larger process. Still, the principles involved aren't narrowly applicable to querying. They apply to all sorts of emails a creator might send and to all manner of horribly necessary self-promotional efforts.

By the time I sent the query letter you'll see below, I'd been approaching agents off and on for over a decade, though always, before this point, with fiction projects and with highly conventional queries—i.e. ones following the typical query advice you see everywhere, which involves pitching the idea before you pitch yourself. It never worked.

This go-round proved more fruitful. In the week after I sent my query, four agents offered to represent me. I'd approached eight agents in total, so that's an offer rate of 50%.

While I can't say for sure why this query worked, I'm pretty certain it's because I presented the data, especially the market data, instead of waiting to do so until some later point. See how the longest paragraph is about audience:

Hi, [Firstname]—

I'm contacting you after coming across your profile and realizing that you agented [Book Title] as well as [Book Title]. My name is Catherine Baab-Mugira, and I'm a writer who's contributed to *New York Magazine's* The Cut, *Playboy.com*, *Salon.com* and *FastCompany.com*, among others. My June 2016 Quartz essay, "Millennials Are Obsessed with Side Hustles Because They're All We've Got," has been shared on Facebook more than 50,000 times and also became the focus of an April 2017 episode of NPR's *On Point*.

I've just finished a nonfiction book proposal that I believe may be right up your alley – one that comes with some nice proof of concept, too.

In September of 2017, my essay, "Edgar Allan Poe Was a Broke-Ass Freelancer," ran on The Millions. It quickly became one of the site's most-popular articles of the entire year, and was picked up and shared by blogs and magazines including *Publishers Weekly* and *Arts & Letters Daily*. Even Michiko Kakutani liked the story on Twitter.

But that piece was just a small excerpt from a much larger project I've been working on. It's called *How to Say "Nevermore" to Your Problems: Surprisingly Great Life Advice from Edgar Allan Poe, the World's Most Miserable Writer*. To put it glibly, it's the world's first ever self-help book based on Poe. It's one part Alain de Botton's *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, one part Jen Sincero's *You Are a Badass*.

As you might expect, I've had a lot of book ideas over the last few years, but I ran with this Poe idea because the commercial potential was obvious to me from the beginning. Poe fans are legion: He has four million fans on Facebook alone, and there are Poe museums in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Richmond, Virginia. Demand for

works of Poe biography and criticism has stayed strong for nearly 200 years. And yet, while so much ink has been spilled, no one has ever looked to Poe for advice on how to live a fulfilling, worthy life. This unique, new angle occurred to me when I was suffering from a nervous breakdown in 2016 – which is the starting point for this book and puts some of the “narrative” in the narrative nonfiction.

My hunch is that you’ll like the voice and the direction I’ve taken with this premise, so I’m attaching my proposal and first chapter. If you’d like to discuss them, you can reach me by email at [emailaddress] or at [phone number]. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Thanks again, and all best,

Cat

Of course, I sounded about 4 billion times more confident than I felt, and to this day I feel a little *ehh* in having name-checked poor, innocent Michiko Kakutani, who just happened to like a tweet one day and most assuredly does not know or care who I am. But I would use the same basic approach again for several reasons.

In general, focusing on strategy and tactics takes the pressure off. Instead of squirming in self-consciousness, you think in terms of technique, and this makes the job of talking yourself up much easier. Beyond that, a few more considerations:

- Data is powerful because it inspires belief. It can make you look legit no matter how you illegitimate and jumped-up you may really feel down deep in your soul. (Hi!)
- In a query, data could take the form of specific numbers including traffic, shares, likes, what have you. For instance, to get the number of Facebook shares for my Quartz article, I just used the FB search function. Zuckerberg & Co seemed to have changed that function since, making it harder to find out how many times a specific piece of content has been shared. But often times an editor can give you some traffic numbers, or you can approximate popularity/reach by looking at how many other publications or prominent people have shared or referenced your piece. If you’re publishing through Substack or similar platforms, you’ll have much of this data already.
- Maybe you don’t freelance or write a newsletter. It’s still possible to use data. You could cite short-story publications or contest wins, include blurbs from highly placed friends or acquaintances, or cite your degrees, Peace Corps experience, YouTube following, whatever. (Granted, I’ve never sold a novel. I still think all these methods may be just as applicable to fiction queries as non-fiction—that it can be a good idea to pitch yourself before you pitch your project, and to point to a possible readymade audience/market.)

- Don't have data, or have some good data but think it's too dry? What about vivid anecdotes—any of those hanging around? It doesn't have to be high-end or status-y. It could be an idea-origin story, or a pithy thing some stranger once said to you that changed your life and set you on the path to this particular project. Etc, etc. The point is to provide some kind of memorable color.
- When it comes to the specific idea you're presenting, focus on "proof of concept," i.e. evidence that suggests your project has commercial potential. Has the idea already worked as a shorter piece? Are there Facebook fan groups, Quora followings, Reddit boards, physical locations or similar that are dedicated to your subject? If so, cite those numbers. Data, friends! Magic!

This might all seem dully practical, I realize. Personally, though, I always want to talk about how the sausage gets made. And speaking of Carlyle, he said that ambition is like being a dog with a kettle tied to your tail—the faster you run, the more of a clatter you raise, and so you try to solve the problem by running even faster. In other words, everyone can hear the noise. The funny thing is to imagine we can somehow hide it.

I'm ambitious! So are you if you are reading this, probably, I am just guessing! Why shouldn't we trade notes? We might all be a tiny bit happier and more comfortable every day. Maybe more successful, too.

A Good Link

Finally, here's a [longer querying story from me](#) that I wrote for Jane Friedman's site, in case that sounds interesting.

As always, thank you for reading, and best of luck with your querying if you're querying,

Cat

P.S. If you feel moved to read *Poe for Your Problems: Uncommon Advice from History's Least Likely Self-Help Guru*, here's a link to [Amazon](#) and another to my [favorite local independent store](#). Let me know if you buy it by emailing me at catbaab@gmail.com, and I'll stick a signed book plate in the mail. Or if you want to reach out and chat about anything else, I'd love to hear from you.