

Pitching in your Pajamas

By Anna Hackett

You've heard the horror stories: literary agents get thousands of submissions a year and only take one or two new clients. Writers submit straight to editors and wait months, even years, for a response. There are rumors of slush piles filling rooms in New York.

As an unpublished writer, what can you do to get your story in front of the right agents and editors sooner? Are there ways to shave some time off your wait? If you put yourself and your work out there, the answer is yes.

You've probably heard of some of the options: pitch appointments at conferences, writing contests, and critiques from published authors, agents and editors. But there's another way that's gaining popularity: the Pitch Contest.

What's a pitch contest? Basically, you send in a blurb about your story (like the back cover copy), an editor selects those that catch her attention, then you "pitch" your story to her in an online chat room. There's no nervous stammering, no sweaty handshakes, no stressing about what to wear and no memorizing your pitch.

I sold my first story, *Savage Dragon*, as a result of a pitch contest offered by Harlequin on their website. I polished and polished until I had two paragraphs describing my story, and hoped it captured my hook, conflict and characters. I was thrilled to get selected with four other writers, despite the fact I was in Australia and the 11am NY pitch time was 1am for me! I set my alarm, pitched in my pajamas and that contest snagged me my first sale and an editor.

What do you need to do if you're interested in an online pitch?

- 1) Keep an eye out for pitch contests on websites and blogs. Many of the Harlequin imprints offer pitch contests on their website. The Knight Agency held the "Book in a Nutshell" contest where you could send in up to 150 words about your story and get a chance to have an agent read and request.
- 2) Hone your skills in writing your pitch paragraph. You should be able to distill your story into one eye-catching paragraph. If you're good, maybe even one logline. This isn't only a skill needed for pitch contests but also for query letters and to have a polished answer for that question "what are you working on?" Writing your pitch is a writing skill, just like POV and grammar. There are some great resources out there to help you do this: check out Agent Kristen Nelson's blog for advice and how-to books like "Selling Your Story in 60 Seconds" by Michael Hague.
- 3) Know your story—the hook, the conflicts, your characters, their motivations. Then you can answer any question an editor or agent may ask about it.
- 4) Finish writing your story. You can't pitch an unfinished story, so make sure you get to The End before you pitch.
- 5) If you've avoided chat rooms, now's the time to get familiar with them. You don't want any technical difficulties the day of the pitch. eHarlequin.com has various chat rooms where authors and readers mingle, and they're a good place to practice your chat room skills.

Not every contest will pay off, but along the way you'll gain valuable advice and experience. Remember, you only need one agent or editor to love your story, and your writing career can change quickly. So grab every opportunity that comes your way because you never know which one might help you get a foot in the publishing world door.

Anna Hackett is a mining engineer by day and a writer by night. She delights in combining action, adventure and a healthy dose of romance in her paranormal stories. Anna's debut short story, *Savage Dragon*, will be released by Silhouette Nocturne Bites in July 2009. Watch for the first story in her WindKeepers series, *Wind Kissed*, *Fire Bound*, in September 2009, also from Nocturne Bites. For additional information, please visit her website: www.annahackettbooks.com