

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL STEARNS

by Jennifer Bertman



Michael Stearns recently founded Upstart Crow Literary. Prior to that, he worked a brief stint as an agent with Firebrand Literary and labored for many years in the trenches of children's publishing. Among the many books he's edited and/or published are Fly by Night by Frances Hardinge, A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnelly, Tangerine by Edward Bloor, Gone and Hunger by Michael Grant, Whales on Stilts by M.T. Anderson, and a whole slew of books by Bruce Coville, Jane Yolen, Bruce Hale, and too many other folk to list. He used to write about books on his much-neglected blog at www.astheworldstearns.wordpress.com, but now more regularly vents on the blog at www.upstartcrowliterary.com.

Congratulations on your new agency! Could you tell us a little about Upstart Crow Literary? What is the significance behind the name?

Thanks! Well, the name was an insult cast at a youngish Shakespeare by older, embittered playwright Robert Greene. It is one of the more famous literary insults in the history of letters, because among other things, it did the opposite of Greene's intentions: It elevated Shakespeare's stature by recognizing his accomplishments. Greene's obvious irritation at the younger artist's pluck and nerve is, we think, typical of the response of the old guard toward any new talent. There is something in the phrase that speaks of courage and brio and daring, and we feel we should all be upstart crows when it comes to our writing and our work.

What motivated you to start your own agency?

Oh, mostly it was just a sense that my one-time partner and I had pretty different views of what a literary agency should be, and how it should function. I wanted something more author-oriented, editorially-driven, and artisanal; the best way to work at such a place turned out to be by making it up from scratch. It's been a happy experience thus far (even if it is only a few weeks old!).

What is a day in the life of a literary agent like?

There is a lot of reading, as you might expect. That's probably a good half of the day. The rest is spent answering emails, combing through submissions, editing, looking over contracts, and talking to various editors at the different houses.

How has the transition from editor to agent been for you?

It's been a bit like coming home, to be honest. When I left HarperCollins, I had been an editorial director for several years, and spent most of my time in meetings, or traveling to

conferences, or managing my team, or helping them problem-solve on various books. Working closely with authors and editing books was about the last thing I had time for. Which is as it is supposed to be, mind you—I'd risen high enough in the system that I'd gotten far away from what gave me the most satisfaction in the first place. So agenting was all about getting back to the stuff that most makes me happy.

How would you describe yourself as an agent? Would it be safe to assume, with your editorial background, that you are an agent who provides editorial feedback on your client's work rather than one who deals solely with the business negotiations end?

Um, yes? I work with my clients to shape their manuscripts. I really wish I wasn't so compelled to do so, but I feel it is part of what I bring to the table. And I can't help myself.

Are you actively seeking new clients? What type of work or writer are you interested in representing?

Of course I am seeking new clients.

The common elements of any project that draws me in are a careful use of language, an often wry quality to the writing, and a fearless wedding of more literary aims with genre plotlines. Yes, I love good writing, but I also love for things to happen in a story. Generally, I am never drawn to more issue-oriented books.

In terms of teen fiction, I am looking for realistic, humorous coming-of-age stories along the lines of John Green, Ned Vizzini, E. Lockhart, or Andrew Auseon; breezy re-thinks of traditional fantasy for girls (not so much Marion Zimmer Bradley as Kristin Cashore or Tamora Pierce and Patricia Wrede); dystopian breakneck thrillers such as Michael Grant's and Suzanne Collins'; and Pullman-esque novels that straddle genres (the Sally Lockhart books or *The Golden Compass*). Regarding middle-grade fiction, I am a big fan of traditional children's fantasy: real-world stories with one fantastic element—more the vein of *Half Magic* and *The Borrowers* and *The Graveyard Book* than, say, high fantasy featuring worlds with made-up languages. I love humor and wit in my middle-grade novels, and am a big fan of Bruce Coville, Andrew Clements, and Louis Sachar. As well, I love realistic stories such as those written by Rebecca Stead and E. L. Konigsburg.

As for picture books, I am interested in very few. I look primarily for language-driven stories for the very young. Picture book authors whose work I adore are Mem Fox, Deb Lund, and Bob Shea, and I will always respond well to stories that are about the sound and play of language for the youngest of readers.

From your current list of clients, what were some of the qualities of their original submissions that made you want to represent them?

Well, there's something I refer to as "the chortle factor"—if the author can get me snorting and chuckling over the situations in her novel, I'm probably pretty involved.

(This isn't about comic hi-jinks, by the way, but rather to do with our being a fan of the characters and deeply involved in the events of the story.) So for both Bridget Zinn's *Poison* and Christina Mandelski's *The Icing on the Cake*, I found myself lost in the book while reading it on the subway, laughing to myself and unable to put down the story because I had to know how everything was going to turn out. So: Chortle factor and an inability to guess what's going to happen next.

What is your attitude or approach to today's challenging economic market?

Well, like everyone, I suppose I am a little concerned. But people will always buy good books, and those are the only sorts of books I am interested in representing. So I am not as fearful about it as some others I hear speak. But perhaps I'm a Pollyanna.

How important do you think it is for authors and illustrators (aspiring and/or published) to participate in online social networking? (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, GoodReads, etc.)

Is it important at all? I don't know that it is. I recently took what ended up being a three-month holiday from Facebook, Twitter, various blogs, and so forth, and I didn't miss it. I think these things tend to add to the noise around us, and I have a love/hate relationship with them.

If you're a published author, by all means create profiles that will allow readers to find you and make it easy for you to promote your book. That seems pretty obviously necessary. But in other ways, I don't know that it helps anyone actually write a book or put it in front of the right people. Social networking sites may help you get some vague public sense of who an editor or agent is, but more likely they will give you a sense of having accomplished something when you've done very little at all except squander time. Sorry to be so namby-pamby about this answer, but it's hard to know whether they are useful or not.

The desert island question: Three books you would like to have with you and why?

Well, since I'm going to be stuck on this island for the rest of my livelong days, I'm going to need books that will reward rereading in a way that, sad to say, no children's books do. So it's all adult books for me.

The Stories of John Cheever (I can quote a fair piece of "Goodbye, My Brother" off the top of my head, and I adore these stories to a degree that is hard to explain. I think he mixes deliberate ambiguities in the plotlines with a crystalline specificity in the writing to devastating effect, and his moments of lyric flight are better than Fitzgerald's because they are always aware of the darkness of a coming fall.)

The Complete Riverside Shakespeare (Mostly because this would give me opportunity to finally read all of these! And to go over them again and again until I know them as primary texts and not, as nearly all of us do, as a collection of quotations that we've heard

time and again all the days of our lives.)

The Art of the Personal Essay, edited by Philip Lopate (I need some nonfiction in there, and this fat collection of essays draws from all sorts of locales and disciplines and keeps forcing the reader to redefine what makes for a personal essay. So many of these are so moving, but so few of them are at all alike.)

And, because I never follow instructions, book four:

A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry edited by Czeslaw Milosz (Because I feel the need to have poetry at hand. It can be hard work, poetry—understanding the turns of language and the way that meaning arises out of strange juxtapositions of images and sounds, but it is also enriching. And there should be things that we have to think hard about. There is a reward in hard thinking, especially about language and craft, and I find I do my hardest thinking while reading poetry. As well, I just want to finish this book and have been dragging out the reading of it for years!)

Do you have any advice for those who will be attending the Letters & Lines Fall Conference?

I've always been a bit skeptical of people giving me advice without knowing the particulars of my life and position, and I certainly don't know where each of your conference attendees is in his or her career. I suppose I would give the advice that the most important thing to do at a conference like this one is to listen, and to make connections among one's peers. Connections to the faculty aren't likely to happen, or if they do happen, won't be as significant as you'd hope. What is important is to learn as much as you can and then to submit the best work possible. Do that, and everything else will be easy.

Jennifer Bertman volunteers for the RMC-SCBWI as the Managing Editor of Kite Tales newsletter. She has an MFA in creative writing and works as a freelance copyeditor and proofreader for a variety of publishers. She is currently revising a middle grade mystery and keeps a blog at <http://writerjenn.blogspot.com>.