

Interview with Barry Goldblatt, Agent by Todd Tuell



Barry Goldblatt formed his literary agency in September 2000 after nearly twenty years of working in subsidiary rights at various children's publishers including Dutton Children Books and Dial Books for Young Readers, The Putnam and Grosset Group, and Orchard Books. Some of his clients are Shannon Hale, Libba Bray, Holly and Theo Black, and Lauren Myracle. Visit his website www.bgliterary.com for more information.

I spoke with Barry via phone for this interview.

You've said on your website that you stumbled into the children's book industry in foreign rights. You didn't leave, though, when the opportunity arose. What made you fall in love with children's literature?

I was working at Dutton and Dial at a time when Dial was publishing everybody from Steven Kellogg, Susan Jeffers, Rosemary Wells, and James Marshall. Those books . . . they were just amazing picture books. And I was having so much fun with them.

It was also a time when sub-rights were at a good time. There was a lot of money to be made in book clubs and reprints and foreign sales. It was a fun job. I liked my boss. And I think there was probably an element of "Why leave something that's going well to try something you have no idea you'll actually like?"

You went from Penguin and Orchard to representation. Tell us about that shift.

Agenting was always something I had in the back of my head as a career move down the road. I didn't think I was *that* far down the road at the time. When Scholastic bought Grolier (who at the time was the parent company of Orchard), that meant a lot of what I liked about my job was going to become unavailable to me. They already had a rights director at Scholastic, and they didn't need me. It was clearly time to do something.

The first person I asked was Angela Johnson. We'd become friends when I worked at Orchard. I knew she didn't have an agent. I called her up and said, "Hypothetically speaking, if I were to open an agency, would you be interested in being represented by me?" She said *yes* without hesitating. That gave me a whole lot of confidence to go ahead.

Going into the agenting game I knew that I had the negotiation skills because I'd been the contracts director at Orchard. I'd been sitting across the desk from other agents negotiating contracts with me. I knew what to ask for, what to hope for, what to expect and not to expect. I knew the legal side and the contract negotiation side of things very well. I knew the rights department side of things, the selling and licensing.

What I didn't know was if I had any kind of editorial eye. I knew I certainly got excited when I read a good book. I could champion it and talk about it with anyone without any problem. But would I know it before an editor had gotten to it? Going into it that was probably my biggest hesitation. All I could do was just sit here and say, "I've got good taste. I've liked a lot of books that have done very well, so I just have to hope that will carry me through." I think in retrospect, I'm very pleased that my taste actually translates to other readers. Now to be here and know that I get to bring books that otherwise might not find their way into the marketplace into the hands of readers, it's pretty cool.

With your initial interest in science fiction and fantasy, is there a special place in your heart for this genre? Is there anything in particular you are looking for at this time?

Pretty much from the time I was eight years old, there was very little outside of genre that I read. I look back now at the things I read as a kid, and I'm kind of appalled that I liked them. That's kind of the nature of getting older.

It's been really exciting to me to see fantasy make such a huge comeback to the point where it's a mainstay of our business. It's no longer considered *geek literature*. It's something everybody reads. If that would only happen to science fiction, I'd be a very happy camper. But we haven't had that breakthrough. There are signs that it's coming, although you still can't use the label "science fiction" in our business without getting slapped around pretty solidly. But if you look at someone like Scott Westerfeld, his sales figures are pretty darn impressive. What he's writing is definitely science fiction. There's hope.

As far as what I'm looking for, it's actually funny. I've got an awful lot of fantasy writers, but not as many science fiction writers. As I said, they're a tough sell, though if I could find the right things, I'd be very happy. I think my concern at the moment is that I have been labeled a genre agent. While I'd never turn down a fantasy or science fiction novel that came along and blew me away, I'd love to find some more non-genre stuff to represent. That said, my last two clients have both been fantasy writers, one of whom I just sold her book to Little, Brown. It's not that I want to bite the hand that feeds me in any way, but I don't want to become one note.

Many of us have this picture of publishing as high-powered schmooze lunches in exclusive New York restaurants. Tell us what a typical day is really like for agent Barry Goldblatt?

Well there is certainly a lot of lunching. I like lunching. I'm not going to lie. We don't do that everyday. I think people would be surprised. As anyone who knows me would tell you, I'm not the suit-and-tie kind of guy, so a business lunch with me is pretty casual even if we're at some fancy restaurant.

My days are pretty boring. From an onlooker, if you were sitting in my office watching me, you'd be bored out of your mind. Most of what I do involves staring at a screen of some kind—either my computer screen to check email or my e-reader machine to read manuscripts. That's pretty much what I do most of the day. When I'm not doing that I'm on the phone. Or standing in line at the post office. That's my daily outing. Otherwise, I'd probably be at least 20 pounds heavier than I am.

You are currently query only in submission policy. What stands out to you in a query and pushes you to request a manuscript?

There are a lot of factors. There's got to be something compelling there. More often than not, it's in what the story is about that I'm being pitched. Every once in a while, I'm swayed. I admit that attending certain programs can overcome an initial reluctance of mine where the plot doesn't necessarily sound like my cup of tea. It could be that someone has either attended or graduated from the Vermont College program or the program at Hamline, especially genre writers if they've been through the Clarion Workshops. That will perk things up.

At the heart of it, there's got to be a story I'm interested in exploring. There's got to be a plot that I want to know what's going to happen, or a character that's going to make me want to cheer them on or cheer for their downfall the whole way through.

I know writers get very frustrated and spend an awful lot of time banging out their query letters. I do think it's good because it's a useful exercise. But I also think that some of them get so caught

up in it that they lose sight of what they are actually writing. You can sometimes recognize a query that's probably been reworked a thousand times and not necessarily for the better. It's reworked with a lot of book advice coming at it.

Really, it's pretty simple. Tell me what your book is about and why I should read it. Too much of the time I see blocks of text wasted in a query letter about who an author is and what their family life is. That's not compelling to me. I've heard recently there are several query letter guides that tell you that *is* important. I couldn't think of any worse way to get my attention.

How many queries do you receive per week? From those, how many manuscripts do you request?

I receive fifty to sixty a week easy. It's probably less than one percent that I request. It is very, very rare that I ask for things these days. It's really got to have something that gets my attention. I have a very full client list. It's not that I don't have room for more, but I don't *need* any more. I want to add more, because I love getting to shepherd great books and great authors into the marketplace. But I don't have to. I'm doing well enough, I can live off what I've got. But why stagnate. That's boring. I've got great writers. To take on someone *new*, to add to that group, they've got to be great.

You have a self-asserted reputation of being blunt and telling it like you see it. Is that fair and can you let our members know what to expect from you and why?

You know it's funny. I don't know that it's entirely self-asserted. I think it was reported in an awful lot of places about me. At first, I was kind of surprised. When you're doing a conference and these one-on-ones and you've got anywhere from five to ten minutes, why would anyone want me to sugarcoat it? What a waste of ten minutes and whatever you've paid to have it done. I think I was really surprised at how many writers it turns out, that's what they want. That's totally alien to who I am and how I work. I have found ways of saying it that aren't quite as brutal.

There were a few conferences in my early days . . . I never told a writer to stop writing, but I certainly told them to abandon a manuscript here and there. Is that the right way to go about things? I don't know, but it's certainly the honest way. I always preface things saying that reading is so subjective. There are plenty of books that I love that people I meet just hate. That's the nature of the beast. One of the things that surprised me most especially when I started early was how much weight people gave to what I said. I'm just me. I'm just some guy. You're supposed to take what you can get from what I've said and move on.

I don't like to blow smoke. I think one of the reasons I've been successful is when I call up an editor about a book I'm representing, they know I love it. I'm not sitting here creating a lot of hype over something that's sub-par. I'm creating a lot of hype about something that I love. They may not agree, but they know that at least if I'm sending it to them that I'm passionately 120 percent behind it. I don't think authors should expect anything less from their agent. I wouldn't want to have a book that I'm trying to shop that I didn't feel that way about. I don't think it's fair to the author. So I guess the blunt reputation is earned, but I like to think people when they sit down across from me know I'm going to tell it like it is. Take what they can and what they want from it.

You probably have many examples from new writers, but what is the thing that makes you roll your eyes from the more experienced writers?

As far as behavior, I can't stand people who are unprofessional. This is a business. When people come in lackadaisical as though there isn't commerce at the heart of all this—that drives me nuts.

There is a level of decorum and professional behavior. The first time it happened I was completely appalled when I had a critique and the person across from me burst out in tears.

Wow! If I tell someone a manuscript isn't marketable as it is, there is a reason. If you're that thin-skinned, this is the wrong business for you anyway. As a writer all you do, your entire purpose is putting out a book, which then other people read and make opinions about and react to. If you're not ready for that, if that's not why you're doing it, then what's the point?

Do you represent illustrators?

I do have a couple of illustrators. For the most part my illustrators all write as well. I have not taken on anyone who is just an artist. I think selling art is much different process than selling a book. It's a much more constant process. You have to be out there beating the bushes every day as far as showing your client's portfolio. I think a lot of illustrator agents find work for their clients in other places especially in advertising where there's a lot of work for illustrators. The illustrators I do have all write. It's not that they can't illustrate other people's text, but they also write their own so I have something to shop.

How active are you in seeking new clients? How many new clients do you take on each year?

I'm pretty active. The percentage isn't high, but I do request manuscripts. I get a lot of referrals from my clients or friends. I'm always looking. There are four requested manuscripts in my submission folder right now. I actually just read a query letter today that I think I'm going to request as well.

I'm also not at all immune to reading news of a sale of something and going, "Damn! That should have been mine." I know I can't represent everybody, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to. As far as the number of clients in a year, I think last year I didn't sign anybody at all. This year, I've signed two already. Like I said, the one thing I can afford to be now is picky.

You've worked with many highly recognizable names and on award-winning work. What is the most rewarding part of your agenting career? And most challenging?

The most rewarding part without a doubt is getting to tell an author you've sold their book. That moment is priceless, especially for a first-time writer. I think the most important lesson I've learned about those phone calls is you always hold the phone at least ten feet away from your ear.

The disappointments are always when you have a book you love and you can't sell it. I've been really fortunate that I don't have very many of those. I think I have pretty close to a 98 percent sell-through rate. The books I go out with, I find publishers for. Sometimes it just takes time.

Anything I didn't touch on that you'd like out members to know about you?

I don't bite. Like I said, it's really very interesting that I have this reputation for not being very approachable. People who approach me incorrectly are not going to enjoy the experience. Don't come up and start pitching to me, because I don't do pitches. I'm not a Hollywood guy. If you want to come up and talk to me about the industry, especially if I'm at a conference, that's why I'm there. It's really strange to me that people will kind of sit off to the side and never come talk to me. That's why I'm there.