

On feeling energized by rejection



Author and literary agent Kate McKean discusses switching between professional hats, trying again and again while knowing that she might fail, and keeping her eyes on her own page.

June 6, 2025 -

As told to Scarlett Harris, 2366 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Newsletters](#), [Beginnings](#), [Mentorship](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Day jobs](#), [Money](#), [Failure](#).

You wanted to be a writer. Why did you become a literary agent, where you're dealing with other people's writing all day?

I have wanted to be a writer since I was 8 years old. And once I got to college, my sister, who was in publishing at the time, was like, "I don't think you want to be a high school English teacher when you grow up. I think you should get an internship at the university press at your college." So I did. I got an inside look at how books were made, and I was like, "This is something I can do while I write so that I won't be a starving artist." Because I was never going to be a starving artist. I just like eating. I knew that as a literary agent I would have a lot of freedom in my career, and that I eventually could even work for myself. I wouldn't have to work in New York. I could just do anything I wanted. And that has turned out to be true.

Let's talk about side hustles and the freedom that has allowed you. In addition to agenting, you have your writing and your newsletter. How do you juggle it all?

However I can. I've been an agent for almost 20 years so I can be choosier with the projects I take on because of where I am in my career. I have a lot of clients who are very well-established. I don't have to hustle quite as much on my agent side, so I have the freedom to do the writing side as I see fit, whether that's at 6:00 in the morning, or 6:00 in the evening, or 2:00 in the afternoon...

Does your boss have any issues with that? Or are you effectively an independent contractor, and as long as the work gets done, you can do whatever?

I've effectively always been an independent contractor, and [Howard Morhaim](#) has been my boss and mentor now for almost 20 years, and he's not over my shoulder checking my work. He would be if there was a problem. But luckily, that hasn't been the case in many, many years. And as long as my clients are happy and the money is coming in, for me and him and my clients, then it's fine. We're very close. It's a wonderful relationship.

How do you manage when your main gig is commission-only? Have you kind of amassed enough of a client base that that part of it is fairly steady and you can agitate your side-hustles more?

It took about five years as a full-time, commission-only agent before what I was earning felt like a paycheck. Before that, it was just like, "Oh, maybe you get paid this week. Maybe you don't," depending on when the publishers' checks come in, because I only get paid when my authors get paid. After a while, I sold more books.

More books were out in the world earning royalties, and that kind of snowballs. Now it feels like a full-time paycheck sometimes. Some months are more robust than others. Nobody likes to send checks in December and January. So you've got to plan for that. That freedom means I can hustle wherever I want to and do things for free or not for free, or whatever I want on the creative side—but I also always have to have an eye on what's happening two or three years down the line, because what I sell now pays off in a couple of years.

How did the early days of agenting when you weren't earning a living wage jibe with your initial goals of not wanting to be a starving writer?

I did nothing but stress out about how I wasn't writing anything. I stressed about not writing for a decade. I didn't have the spoons to do anything except worry instead of write. And I didn't have the maturity to go, "You could stop worrying and you could just write whatever you feel like." I was worried about, "If I have one hour to write, I better write something that will eventually get published." And that kind of stress just paralyzed me, and then I didn't do anything for a long time.

In *Write Through It*, your book about navigating the publishing industry, you write that you have 4,717 unread queries. How do you even approach tackling something like that?

I have to look at one query at a time, because that query exists only within itself. It doesn't exist in comparison to everything else. You don't want to do what I call "the best of what's around," because the best of what's around might not be salable. It might not be marketable. It might not be these other things. I work hard to try to just evaluate what's right in front of me and to not evaluate it as whether something is good or bad, but whether I can sell it. Or, am I the person to sell it right now? I'm not the person to sell a lot of really good things.

Do you find that it takes the joy out of reading at all, or are you able to take off your agent's hat when you're reading for pleasure?

I always have an agent's hat on, and I have figured out a way to enjoy it. There are certainly things that I can enjoy purely for pleasure, but I will always look at something and be like, "How did somebody make this? How did this story work? Why does this story work? Why do I like it? Why do I hate it and everybody else likes it? Why does this cover attract me?" I'm always kind of poking at it, and I find that enjoyable.

You've written several books before that were put in a drawer, and now you've got two books coming out, *Write Through It* and, in 2026, the picture book *Pay Attention to Me*. When it rains it pours, right?! So talk to me a little about that—how did you find the will to keep going?

It was not easy, and I had some dark nights of the soul. The book that didn't sell right before *Write Through It* really threw me for a loop. It was an adult novel, and I love it. I worked really hard on it. My agent liked it. We sent it around, and it didn't sell. There was definitely a point where I was like, "Maybe I am not a good writer." And it's funny because I was just talking about how I reject good things all the time.

But as a writer, I couldn't put that hat on in that moment. I was like, "Maybe I just won't ever publish a book. Maybe this dream is just not in the cards for me." And it was really tough to face that. Instead of paralyzing me, that energized me, and I threw myself into more writing just to write *anything*. I had the newsletter in the works—which I had in the back of my mind thought, "Maybe this could be a book one day."

After *Write Through It* sold maybe six months later, I was at lunch with an editor who I had known for years and I mentioned my picture book. She's like, "You should have your agent send that to me." I did and she bought it. I don't think [the books] are related in any way except for timing and coincidence, but it did feel like I just needed to open the door, and everything came flooding in. I may never sell another book. That might be my future. But I'll keep trying.

We've mentioned hats a couple of times, so what kinds of hats are you putting on for each aspect of your work? Are you able to easily slip between each or do you try to have days or blocks of time where you only work on one

type of thing?

Logistically speaking, I usually have separate writing time. That's usually siloed off because then I can turn off the notifications and the emails and I don't have a call scheduled... I'll just leave the house if it's a weekend. The newsletter and book promo kind of comes in when I need to do it or when I can do it. I often write my newsletter the day before it publishes so I can let it marinate overnight, and then I post it in the morning. That's integrated into my workday. My author experience has informed my agent experience, because I'm at the receiving end of a lot of the things that my clients are. I'm like, "Oh, *that's* what that feels like. Oh, *that's* what you're hearing. That's the question you want to ask in ways that I just wasn't privy to before." When I'm switching between the hats, I'm trying desperately to remember who I'm talking to. Am I talking to my reader? Am I talking to a contract negotiator? Am I talking to an editor, or my client, or am I talking to the picture book reader?

How do you advise your clients and other writers to overcome that feeling of desperation to sell a book, any book?

You have to think about the day after the book comes out, and what your life will be like if you wrote this book that you don't care about. You've got to talk about that book for a couple of years, and it will always be your first book. If that's the case, it will always be on your track record. And if it does well, that's great. But do you want to keep writing more of that kind of book? One published book does not open the door to all published books.

How do you advise other writers—especially people that don't have a freelance or content writing background, which is constant rejection—to grow a thick skin?

It comes with practice, unfortunately. One of my suggestions is to submit a lot so that you get a lot of rejections and then you get more used to it. More submissions betters your chances of a yes. A lot of form rejections might say something like, "I didn't have the vision for this," or, "This is not a fit for my list right now," or something like that. Those are just kind placeholders for, "I'm not the right agent for you." They are not placeholders for, "This is the worst book I've ever read." The rejections don't mean that.

One quote I laughed at in *Write Through It* is, "I began to realize that I might never publish a book! Me! A literary agent with an MFA! With my own fancy agent!" It's kind of the opposite of imposter syndrome. You know you had all the tools in your arsenal yet someone just wouldn't give you a chance. What advice would you have for people who feel confident that they're putting their best work forward and it's just not happening for them?

Publishing is a retail industry. It's not a meritocracy. The publishers buy books to sell in a store for people who will buy them, and your book might not fit that mold—either ever or right now—and you can't do anything about that. You don't know that two weeks before an editor saw your book, they bought another vampire book, and they can't buy another vampire book right now. It's not because you've missed the trend or your book isn't good. You have absolutely no control over that timing. When I'm faced with that absolute lack of control, I kind of give it up. If I have no control, then I'm going to do whatever I want. I really encourage writers to do that, because then they've pleased and enriched themselves.

What about professional jealousy? That's somewhat inextricable from the feeling of, "I have all of these things, I'm a better writer than *that person*, I've been published in more prestigious outlets—yet they got a book deal or a residency or a prize and I didn't." Can you talk a little about that?

I've had professional jealousy every moment of my professional life. There's always been an agent who had the client I wanted, the success I wanted. That has been motivating. It's just my personality. I'm motivated by that, and I've been able to kind of unpack why I want those things and work through it in therapy.

For writers, it's eyes on your own page. That person's deal is not your deal. And you might think that as soon as somebody hits the [bestseller] list, they automatically get a check for a million dollars. It's publishing. That is literally not what happens. Luckily, I have the industry knowledge to know that, and I can just kind of wave

that off.

Why do you need an agent? You go into why other writers need one in the book. But you already know all the ins and outs of deals and contracts.

The number one motivating factor for me getting an agent was that I did not want to call up people I knew in the industry and be like, "Hi, I wrote an amazing book. Would you like to read it?" Because that is awkward. That alone is worth 15% of my money to give to an agent. I also like the idea of not having to negotiate my own contracts and not talking about money. Being on a phone call or an email with an editor saying, "No, can I have more money for my book, please?" is a thing I would happily not do given the choice. I think that everybody is happier that I am not my own agent. Me, the editors, everybody. I need a team just like everybody else.

Kate McKean recommends:

crocheting

birdwatching

Not Like Other Girls by Meredith Adamo

Star Trek: The Next Generation

hot yoga

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