

On resisting the pressures of the market



Writer and literary agent Jaclyn Gilbert on resisting easy categorization, honoring the gray areas, and sustainably incorporating feedback.

December 23, 2024 -

As told to Jancie Creaney, 3064 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Beginnings](#), [Business](#), [Collaboration](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Process](#).

You are the founder of [Driftless Literary](#), an agenting collective committed to helping authors develop experimental or genre-bending work. What was your vision for the agency and what did it take to get it up and running?

I started Driftless in 2021, when I was in the wake of a lot of transition, spiritually, professionally, as a new parent and as a writer. In my early twenties, I went to a program called the Columbia Publishing Course in New York, and that was basically how I landed my first job in the industry. But after many years of committing to that path, I realized how unsustainable it was for me, not only financially, but creatively. In 2013, when I left publishing to get my MFA, and afterward—when I published my first novel in 2018—I came to see my path through an entirely new lens, a kind of double lens as both an editor/writer.

Moving forward, I knew I wanted to provide authors with the care and attention most agents are unable to provide around the writing process, focused as they are on bringing in sizable commissions around a future book sale. This incentivizes agents to make edits that serve the market, not based on what the work is asking for at its core, and I wanted to be able to offer this as an agent, to carve out a particular niche for this focus.

Driftless began as an experiment for creating a process-driven space for empowering authors to stay true to their vision in ways the traditional market hasn't yet made space for. The year I started Driftless, I was working as a freelance agent through a boutique agency on an hourly basis that wasn't sustainable. When I left that agency, my current list of authors wanted to follow me. But early into [the agency's] inception, I also quickly learned that it wouldn't be possible for me to work on a commission-only basis on experimental projects that tend to sell for marginal amounts. I also knew that the care I wanted to provide authors with as an editor far exceeded what I could provide within a standard agenting package, which was a breakthrough for me in terms of the structure I would need if I wanted Driftless to exist and grow alongside a rapidly changing industry.

Over time, I came up with a strategy that creates individual plans for the authors we represent for a flat fee informed by the market and our mutual goals for collaborating on the publishing process. We are very selective about the projects we take on, between 4-7 per year. Now that the agency has grown into a collective of three agents—me, [Adrian Shirk](#), and [Christine Kalafus](#), both of whom are authors and offer a specific set of skills to round out our model—we work in unison to collaborate with our authors to finish the final editing stages of a project to ensure it's ready for submission, as well as tailor a comprehensive list of publishers that span the literary mainstream, independent, and small press markets. Knowing that our projects are destined for smaller publishers, we also waive our commission on the first \$1,500 that comes in to ensure authors receive back their upfront investment in our services moving forward. We want authors to feel that by investing in us they are investing in themselves, that they can walk away from the submission process clear-eyed in their vision, knowing

that no matter what happens they didn't change their work for a capricious market. I don't think you can quantify that mentality as an artist; it's what allows you to keep writing through uncertainty, keep submitting despite obstacles, keep searching for your community among readers and fellow writers.

On Driftless' website, you write, "The editorial insight is meant to amplify and celebrate a work in progress rather than omit ideas rooted in market-based fears." I like that phrase, "not omit ideas," which I take to mean allowing space for the unknowable. Do you think a reason the publishing industry is so risk-averse has to do with low tolerance for nuanced literature? Is the fear around market value a fear of complexity?

Definitely. I think you really razor into this question well. It is another guiding impulse for why I wanted to create something like Driftless within an increasingly commercialized landscape. As a writer, I faced this issue the most when my second unpublished novel was on submission. This second novel—the one that has not yet sold—received the same feedback from larger-scale trade publishers that it was too quiet, that there wasn't enough action or plot-based salability to sustain a larger readership. But when I took a step back to think about what they were saying, I realized that it was less about "plot" and more about the resistance to ambiguity in our contemporary marketplace because this book dealt with a lot of gray area around the question of Amish forgiveness in response to human atrocity, and what it means to free ourselves from past narratives that no longer serve us.

This generalized feedback from editors—that the work needed to be louder to sell—was hard for me to confront as someone who reads literature that lets me sit in the gray area, challenging me to ask more questions than it does provide answers, opening me up to the vast unknowns of the human conditions, the ironies we can't clearly pin down or contain, hard as we might try. And the industry doesn't like this, because their goal is to market a book, and often that requires taking a stance on things, rather than working together to consider what the book is trying to do and building a vision and platform around that. The industry wants to feel clear on what ideas they are advocating when they publish a particular book, rather than what are the core philosophical questions the work is asking the reader to grapple with and inhabit.

When a bookseller calls a book *too quiet* this usually means: "What do we write for the sales copy on the back of a book?" Or "How are we going to plug this into a measure algorithm for our marketing plan?" Ambiguity becomes a big deterrent that way. I think we're also living in a climate of extremes—a fear-based political climate at odds with the inherent unknowns of artmaking. There's a huge middle, a wide gray area, within the edges of extremes, and when you're not in a specific camp about something, or you aren't taking a stance on it in the work then, there's a sense that maybe it's not as valid. But why can't we allow multiple points of view to coexist in a given work, just as we allow paradoxical dualities to coexist in our human condition as we navigate our mortality, grief, and loss?

In our current climate, there's also a resistance to nuance as it relates to genre. Mainstream publishing insists on classifying books across a broad commercial to literary spectrum that needs more sub-genres to diversify and celebrate world literature. Our current labels are designed for the ease of bookstores for reaching a target market—in terms of which book will be easy to read or popular and likely to sell out (commercial books), and which books are designed for readers looking for more out of their reading experience (literary books)—a classification that is far too broad to serve a much wider gamut for literary artmaking today. As it stands, genres exist as placeholders for market-concerns, not as true markers of what a book is or can be when it is absorbed inside a reader's mind separate from what they expect. I am curious about how we can work together to open people up to the possibility of reading something that they might have never picked up or thought they'd enjoy otherwise.

With your knowledge of the agenting world, and experience navigating pushback regarding marketability, how do you approach your own work as a writer now? How has this shifted your perspective and process?

From a kind of concrete market perspective, I knew the industry wasn't serving writers, especially out of MFA programs where you're given all this freedom to tell your story in different ways and are encouraged to embrace your individual process—but once you leave your MFA community and consider publishing—whether that means submitting on your own to small presses or querying agents—you start getting all of these voices from the industry that are super confusing to reconcile.

Before my second novel went out to publishers, I struggled with this myself. My agent wanted me to change the gender of a character and take out my favorite parts of the book according to market factors—mainly her desire for the book to sell to a book club market. I remember telling myself: this is just what you have to do sometimes; you have to reconcile with the market if you want the story to reach a larger audience. But then when the book didn't sell I was left with the knowledge that I'd changed the core of my work for an end goal that not only didn't enhance what I was trying to do, but fundamentally undercut what I loved best about my project. I felt a kind of dead energy around the manuscript afterward—one I'm just starting to find the energy to reinvigorate now. It required writing a whole other book quietly for the past three years, with the support of my colleagues Adrian and Christine. As a result, it's asking me to go far deeper into my process, informed by my vision for *Driftless* as a space that lives in the gray, along with my struggle to write simply for the sake of it: because it enriches my life, giving me the energy to do what I love and share that energy with those I love, hoping it gives them something to build from and out of, too.

More than ever, I am on a journey to align my writing with the process of *Driftless*: which is that failure and rejection are at the heart of everything we do as artists, but you can't change your work for an illusory outcome. The most important thing is that we keep working. A book deal is separate from the work of showing up for your voice, separate from capitalism, because we can't define our worth through a published book, only through the joy we feel when we make space for our inner lives to flourish.

Having been on both sides of that writer-agent dynamic, what are your thoughts on processing editorial feedback? You used the word 'prescriptive' before—do you have rules for how to incorporate critiques and suggestions while staying true to a vision?

One of the things that has become definitive for me around starting *Driftless* is that I don't ever want another writer to look back and feel regret that they conformed to another person's feedback. To the point where they would always wonder what it would have been like to have stood by what they believed in. I feel the same about my work. I'm at a point now where I've done the thing where I pleased my agent. I've made changes for market factors that I don't think were worth it in the end, even if a book had sold and I'd made a lot of money on it. In the end, we need to find our readers, to build community from that space—and my job as the agent is to provide that community by asking the right questions. When I'm reading, more than whether it will sell, I ask: Can I help the author do this even more clearly? How can I help amplify the voice, the structure, the language? I welcome authors to come back and say, hey, that's actually not the direction I want to go, or, I see what you mean, but I meant *this*.

In offering feedback, my goal is for it to be always generative, for it to align as closely as possible with the original intentions of the work, allowing me to determine not just what I take on, but why and how I take it on long-term.

It's like part of your job within *Driftless* is to help the writer not become distracted or clouded by all the noise.

Exactly. And it's good practice for me too, because I really struggle with incorporating feedback that is focused on what the work wants rather than what the reader desires separately. Another writer whom I trust could say something really prescriptive about what they want from my writing, for instance—and tempted as I am to listen and follow their direction, I've also learned to listen only to the feedback which sparks something within my own process, regardless of whom the feedback is coming from. If the feedback sparks a question lurking below the surface of the work I hadn't yet discerned—suddenly illuminating it, I will think: yes, that's a really good question, I do want to go deeper with that. But if the feedback doesn't provide the spark—and I realize that I'm going to have to perform massive surgery to make it work—it's probably not organic, threatening to take me away from the core of the project. So much of the real work is separating voices that are generative from those that aren't—and when we do it right—taking in that which serves the fire, and letting go of that which distracts—we are filling ourselves with the energy we need to return to the drawing table again and again. The more I write and edit and agent, the more I believe we have to go where the energy is, both inside and outside our process, holding tight to it if we're going to stay true to ourselves and build community with the right readers along the way.

In an interview with L'Esprit Literary Review, you said, about working on your most recent manuscript, "I let myself write a kind of monologue that asked for repeated expansion." Could describe this idea or sensation of a repeated expansion and what that looked like for you?

It's really interesting you say that because I'm actually at a crossroads with this idea in general, which I think is part of finding my voice. This is hard for me and actually makes me a bit emotional to consider in a larger sense. I guess that with this project, I felt something bigger than me when I was working on it, a voice that felt a bit, unbridled, one that needed more space than I was giving it, or was allowing myself to give it. When I say repeated expansion, I think I mean, something that needs more room to exist outside of linear time and space. That which you can't name or easily contain. This otherness inside of us.

But it's hard to manage this process on the page. When I think about revision, I think we have these specific scenes or moments or ideas that want to add up to the story we are exploring within us in ways that feel largely unknown. We have to sift through a lot of inner monologue to get there, a lot of fear and censorship. But beyond that space, there is the chance for expanding into an otherness that becomes transformative—for me, it feels like a particular interiority hungry to beat out beyond the page. I feel most alive in the language, and in the images and emotions that want to ripple out of that space. It fills me with joy, one that runs counter from the desire to contain, measure, or control. Expansion is the other side of myself I've been in constant dialogue with since my teens; my achievement-focused-side, which stems from years of competitive distance running at odds with my most poetic, human impulses.

It's reassuring to encounter an agency like Driftless, to see a commitment to the advancement of literature that is unconventional, by mainstream standards.

There is a lot of sparkling imagery around what success looks like in publishing. But for 95 percent of published writers on this path, it doesn't look like what we see online or in bookstores at all. Through Driftless, I want to create more transparency around what the actual process of publishing looks like. Even when you're getting published, it's actually really terrible for a lot of people. They're grieving the process of letting go of something that has lived inside of them for years, something that is sacred, and when you go into the market, you are asked to challenge your values, to shift your attention away from the quiet work of writing to the outward enterprise of marketing and publicity. Suddenly you're expected to spend more time on social media than you ever imagined you would. Suddenly you have to advocate for yourself in all of these uncomfortable ways to stay on top of the process with your publisher, all while bracing yourself for the unknowns of reviews and sales that threaten to take you away from your writing process.

As writers we have to learn to compartmentalize this space separate from the artistic space that we write from. I want Driftless to be a community that helps authors do that by educating them on everything we've learned as an agency on their behalf, as well as giving them strategies for conserving their energy so they are saving the bulk of it for their writing, the thing that gives them meaning and purpose moving forward. In December 2024, we are going to start a series of online classes for writers available through our website. We want writers to become their own agents at the end of the day, deciding what path feels right for them season by season, project by project.

Jaclyn Gilbert recommends:

Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway - to get out of linear time

Investing in a pen you love to free-write until you can no longer read what you are writing

Mixing up texture of paper (ledgers, napkins, onion thin journal paper)

A favorite loop to walk to think + record ideas

Looking for a particular type of bird (common or not) while walking

Name

Jaclyn Gilbert

Vocation

literary agent, writer

□