



BOOK PROPOSAL

TIPS & TRICKS

STEVE LAUBE

BOOK PROPOSAL TIPS & TRICKS

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Book Proposal Tips and Tricks by Steve Laube

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve is a literary agent and president of The Steve Laube Agency and has been in the book industry for over 35 years, first as a bookstore

manager where he was awarded the National Store of the Year by CBA. He then spent over a decade with Bethany House Publishers and was named the Editor of the Year. He later became an agent where he has represented nearly 1,000 new books and was named Agent of the Year by ACFW. He was also inducted into the Grand Canyon University Hall-of-Fame by their College of Theology. In addition, he is the publisher at Enclave Publishing, an imprint of Gilead Publishing, and also serves as president and owner of The Christian Writers Institute. His office is in Phoenix, Arizona.

1

FOUR QUESTIONS
A NON-FICTION
PROPOSAL MUST
ANSWER

While there is infinite variety in the content of a book proposal there are some common elements that should be found in them all. First let's take a look at the big questions a Non-Fiction proposal must answer.

1. WHAT IS THE BIG IDEA?

Trying to find something unique and never before addressed in book form is nearly impossible. But each proposal needs to be clear what the book is about. You'd be amazed how many proposals I've seen where they try to hide the "pay-off."

If the book is about a dealing with difficult people [agents], lead with that. If it is about potty training, lead with that. If it is about church planting, lead with that.

2. WHO ARE YOU, AND WHY DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO WRITE THIS BOOK?

This is another way of describing the dreaded word “platform.” Do you have the credentials to be an expert on the topic? Are you out speaking regularly to sizeable audiences on the topic? Do you have a blog or a newsletter that speaks to this topic?

I ache for the writers who approach us with a book on a theological topic that they have worked on for 20 years, while they have had a career as a car salesman or some other unrelated occupation. It doesn't mean the writer isn't any good, but the credibility factors in when the buying public takes a look at the book before buying it.

Platform, in essence, is presenting to the agent, the publisher, and the marketing department the size of the audience you can bring with you to the book, which usually translates into measurable sales.

One caveat...some books do not need a platform to be published. Often there are books where the concept or the title is bigger than the writer. But even then a publisher is going to want to know what you, the writer, can do to sell copies of the book.

3. WHAT MAKES YOUR BOOK UNIQUE?

If you've defined the big idea and have a platform on which you are standing to tell the world of your book... then why your book and not Mr. Famous Author and his book on the same topic?

I remember once seeing a great proposal on grief and suffering. But when we looked at the comparable titles, there was nothing in the proposal that could make it stand out against the 50 well-known titles already available. Doesn't mean the book idea wasn't worthy, only that it would struggle to get a foothold without something extra.

4. HAVE YOU WRITTEN THE BEST BOOK EVER?

Okay, maybe that question is a little unfair. But here's the reality. A majority of the proposals that agents receive are not very well written. I'm sorry to be the one say it. That is why an extremely well written book makes me sit up and take notice. They stand out simply by the quality of writing.

Put your book through its paces. Consider hiring a top level freelance editor (like those found in the *Christian Writers Market Guide*). It will not be cheap, but do you want it to be cheap? (The old adage is that you get

what you pay for.} And even then don't expect the freelance editor to be a magician and convert your turnip into gold. It may still be a turnip.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

Recently we had a first time writer, never before published, receive a nice contract because they answered all four of these questions perfectly. A great idea, with a good platform, positioned strategically for the market, and delivered fantastic sample chapters.

Now it is your turn.

2

FOUR QUESTIONS A
FICTION PROPOSAL
MUST ANSWER

In the last chapter we dealt with the non-fiction proposal, now turn to those who are putting together a novel proposal.

If you compare these two chapters, you'll see why a one-size-fits-all proposal template isn't always helpful. There are differences between the two types of proposals. Please try not to shoehorn a novel proposal into a non-fiction presentation.

1. WHAT IS YOUR WORD COUNT?

Think carefully before you put down a number in your proposal. I don't know how often I've seen someone propose a 270,000-word manuscript—or on the other end a 27,000-word manuscript. (One zero can make a big difference!)

Your novel may be complete and you are just telling the agent or editor its length. But your word count might be a reason it is being rejected!

Here is a simple rule of thumb. Take your word count and divide it by 300. The answer will be the approximate page count of a printed book. Therefore, a 270,000-word manuscript becomes a 900-page doorstop. And a 27,000-word manuscript is more like a booklet or short story of 90 pages.

You might say, “But in e-books the page count doesn’t matter!” True. But e-books are one format...and not the only one. Major publishers still sell more than 50% of their fiction in printed form.

What is the ideal length? It depends.

I can hear the cry, “Steve! That is a singularly unhelpful answer!”

But it does depend on your genre and whether you are targeting a particular publisher. If you want to write for the Harlequin Love Inspired romance line or suspense line your manuscript should be around 55,000-60,000 words. If it is their historical line it can be 70,000-75,000 words.

If you are targeting the longer form novel your story should be between 80,000 and 100,000 words. There is often room for more than 100,000 words, but don’t go overboard.

But if you are writing an epic fantasy and want Enclave Publishing to grab it, the length can go higher, because that genre lends itself to longer stories (hence the word “epic”). For example, the new novel *Embers* (Book one of the Abiassa’s Fire series, published by Enclave) by Ronie Kendig came in at around 132,000 words. In printed form it ended up being 448 pages long (in a 6x9 trim size) when it was released.

If you are writing a novella, then of course, the short length is appropriate.

That is why I must answer, “It depends.”

2. WHEN WILL YOUR MANUSCRIPT BE COMPLETE?

If you are a first time novelist, never before published, your answer should be “The manuscript is complete and available upon request.” Agents and publishers rarely will take a book from a debut author unless it is already complete.

Why? Because you might have spent 15 years perfecting your opening chapters but the story falls apart on page 200. We have to have confidence in the whole story before we represent it or before a publisher will contract it.

If you are an established author with a track record with major publishers you know to pick a reasonable

completion date that you are confident in achieving. A publisher will look at your delivery date and add one year and begin planning for which season your book would release to the market.

3. WHAT IS YOUR UNIQUE STORY HOOK?

What is about your story that makes a reader salivate in anticipation of reading? Some call this “high concept” but not all novels are “high concept.”¹ (Read Randy Ingermanson’s excellent article “What is High Concept?” for a full explanation.)

Unfortunately, it is hard to come up with that story pitch that doesn’t sound like all the others. Darcy Patterson wrote an article identifying the “29 Basic Plot Templates.”² Which is why novels can tend to sound the same if you are not careful.

A few years ago I was at a writers’ conference taking 15-minute appointments all afternoon. At one point the room emptied and only myself and one other editor remained. We stretched and yawned at the same time and began to laugh at that.

1 <http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/blog/2008/03/31/what-is-high-concept/>

2 <http://www.darcypattison.com/plot/29-plot-templates/>

Then the editor showed me a small card where this editor had made quick notes all afternoon about their appointments and the pitches presented. It had a list that looked a bit like this with tally marks beside them (This is not the actual list, but a representation of it):

Prairie romance III
Single girl looks for love I
Tornado IIII
Kidnap II
Drowning I
Losing ranch I
Angels vs. Demons I
Cancer IIII
Death in Family II
Big City setting I
Small Town setting IIII

The editor then said, “Where is the originality? They all start sounding the same.”

You see the problem? Of course you might argue that this is a problem with the novels already being published. To a point that is true.

But if you go into the general market and look at the break out novels of recent years you’ll often find a common thread of them being a unique story or set-

ting. Consider the following: *Gone Girl*, *The Help*, *All the Light We Cannot See*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Goldfinch*, and *The Book Thief*.

Below is the hook we used with Ginny Yttrup's novel *Words* at the top of her book proposal.

**Sticks and stones can break my bones,
but Words? They can always heal me.**

A child whose silence holds the truth captive...

An artist whose work speaks the agony of her past...

Will they let the truth set them free?

Following are the first lines from the novel:

"I collect words. I keep them in a box in my mind. I'd like to keep them in a real box, something pretty, maybe a shoe box covered with flowered wrapping paper. Whenever I wanted, I'd open the box and pick up the papers, reading and feeling the words all at once. Then I could hide the box. But the words are safer in my mind. There, he can't take them."

That proposal sold quickly and the book later won a Christy Award for "Best First Novel" because the writing is amazing. Which leads me to the last question.

4. IS YOUR WRITING AMAZING?

I do not expect you to actually answer that question in your proposal, but the execution of your idea has to be truly incredible. The bar of success is set very high and it isn't something that can be dashed off in a few hours and tossed into the marketplace. It can take years to learn how to write well.

I've said it before, some are born with the gift of writing and with a nudge here and there they can create something wonderful. For the rest of us it is something that must be learned. Learned through failures, missteps, false starts, and manuscripts that should be buried in the compost pile in the backyard.

I know many writers, and am privileged to represent a number of them, who have toiled for years to get to the point where their ideas and their writing skills combine to produce the novels the marketplace wants to read. It can be an arduous journey. I hope you are willing to take it!

3

HINTS FOR A GREAT
COVER LETTER

Here are a few suggestions for you to consider when approaching an agent. Remember to use these as hints...do not follow them slavishly as if a literary agent is going to spend their time critiquing your cover letter.

By the way, we make a distinction between a cover letter and a query letter. A cover letter is what goes on top of a longer proposal and sample chapters. The query letter is a stand-alone letter that goes by itself to the editor/agent without a proposal or sample chapters. We happen to prefer the cover letter along with the rest of the package. Why? Because a query only shows that you can write a letter. A proposal begins the process of showing that you know how to write a book.

Address the letter to a specific person. If, for example, you are sending something to The Steve Laube Agency, simply address the appropriate agent. Every proposal

will cross the desk of the designated agent eventually.

Don't waste your time or the agent's time. Do your homework! If you are submitting to an agent, visit their web site and follow their guidelines!!! We cannot emphasize this enough! Make certain to spell the person's name right. (We've had people spell my last name (Laube—pronounced “lobby”) as “Laub” “Labe” “Lobby” “Looby” etc.)

If you use a market guide book or some online database listing of agents or editors, make sure you have the most current information because addresses do change (go to the web site). Our main office changed its mailing address in February of 2007—and we still discover that material is being sent to the old address. You would be astounded by the number of calls or inquiries we receive from writers who have not done their research.

Whatever you do, do not say your book is the next *Purpose Driven Life*, *Eat Pray Love*, *Left Behind*, or *The Shack*, or that it will sell better than *The Da Vinci Code*, *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. That shows an ignorance of the market that is best left alone.

In addition, please do not claim “God gave me this book so you must represent or publish it.” We are firm believers in the inspiration that comes from a faith-filled life, but making it part of your pitch is a big mistake.

THE 4-PART COVER LETTER

PART 1

A simple introductory sentence is sufficient. Basically you are saying “Hi. Thank you for the opportunity...”

PART 2

Use a “sound bite” statement. A “sound bite” statement is the essence of your novel or non-fiction book idea in 40 words or less.

The fiction sound bite could include:

- A. The heroic character
- B. The central issue of the story
- C. The heroic goal
- D. The worthy adversary
- E. Action
- F. The ending
- G. A grabber
- H. Or a twist

The non-fiction sound bite should include the main focus or topic. (See Chapter 1)

One suggestion is to describe the Problem, Solution, and Application.

If someone were to ask about your book you would answer, “My book is about _____ (write in your sound bite.)”

PART 3

Tell why your book is distinctive—who will read it. (Targeted age group...adult, teen, youth)—point out what's fresh, new, different.

One suggestion would be, for your intended genre, read a number of recent books in the same genre as your own to familiarize yourself with market.

PART 4

Give pertinent manuscript details. For example:

- A. mention whether or not book is completed (if it is not, then give an estimate as to when it will be finished)
- B. word length of the complete manuscript, even if it is an estimate (approximate – round off the number)
- C. pertinent biographical info
- D. tell the agent if it is a simultaneous submission
- E. let the agent know they can discard the proposal if rejected.

Keep letter to one page!

Please don't use narrow margins or tiny print to fit it all on one sheet. That is silly. We once received a cover letter written with an 8-point font and 1/4-inch margins. It was virtually unreadable.

4

THE POWER OF
A REFERRAL

It has become common for a number of literary agencies to no longer accept unsolicited proposals. Instead they state, in their guidelines, that they only take proposals via referrals or from meeting someone at a writers conference.

Our agency continues to keep the doors open to any and all who send material following our guidelines. It can be a challenge to read all the incoming proposals but I prefer to say “We don’t like to say ‘no’ unless we’ve seen it. But we do have to say ‘no’ 99% of the time!”

One way to cut through the mass of sub-missions we receive is to have it come to us from a client or an industry friend’s referral.

Referrals can take many forms. While this discussion may seem obvious I do think it can be instructive in different ways.

THE GENERIC REFERRAL

This type of referral is occasionally used by someone who has been approached by a friend, or a pastor, or another writer at some event. Instead of being the one to tell them “it needs work” they say “send it to my agent.” A mistake is often made at this stage of not telling the agent that you’ve made the referral! So the new writer approaches and says “your client xxxxx said you would love this book.” Which means we need to ask the client if this is really true or not.

It is hard to say “no” to someone, especially if they are a family member, or a friend, or someone with whom you go to church. But just giving them the name of an agent is not really a referral. It is a lead for that person to use. And that person may then use your name as a door-opener...without you knowing.

One interesting mistake is made by a few writers in their pitch to us. They use the list of Christian literary agents provided by Michael Hyatt (if you want the list you have to sign up for his newsletter) and that is a great list. The mistake they make is saying “Michael Hyatt sent me to you.” Not really. He didn’t personally tell you to send us the proposal. It was taken from his list. You’ve be surprised how often we agents see this “referral.”

THE PERSONAL REFERRAL

The above scenario is the same, but this time the client has sent me a note saying “expect a call or an email from this person.” That can be helpful.

But...remember that your endorsement of this person holds weight. At least be sure to have read the material before doing your writer friend the favor of making the introduction.

This happened recently, but the proposal had not been read. The first paragraph of the novel had vulgar language in it which made it one that I was not interested in. If the referring person had read it, they would have known not to recommend that project to me.

THE QUALIFIED REFERRAL

We have a number of clients who have come to us in this fashion. The client or industry friend has a good writer needing the services of an agent or even a new agent. My advice in this case is to be very selective and careful with those you recommend to your agent.

I am very happy to follow up with these kind of qualified referrals because I know they are not made lightly. These people do not send anyone other than the truly exceptional. This situation happened just last week and enjoyed a great conversation with potential representation a result.

This is the type of referral agencies are describing when they say “by referral only.” They are quality referrals made by qualified people.

5

A DAY IN THE LIFE
OF AN AGENT

This is an actual picture of the pile of proposals our office received over a 30-day period...during a slow time of the year. The stack of books next to the pile include self—published books sent for review (consideration).



That did not include the myriad of email submissions we received (many simply ignoring our guidelines) or inquiries from those who used the contact form on our web site (many of those ignoring the request to “Please do not copy and paste your entire manuscript into this form.”)

Or the poor soul that failed to proofread their email before sending this sentence, “I would like to send you my quarry letter...”

Nor does it include those that did an Internet search and called us. Recently we got a call that went something like this:

Agency: This is the Steve Laube Agency...

Caller: What kind of agency are you?

Agency: We are a literary agency.

Caller: What does that mean?

Agency: It means we represent books to publishers on behalf of our clients and manage our client's careers.

Caller: Oh good. I do comic strips...and they are really unique...[caller's voice gets faster and louder as they talk]

Agency: Well, we don't represent artists or comic strip artists.

Caller: But I'm a philosopher too!...[further explanation followed]

Agency: Well, we [caller interrupts]

Caller: And I'm also a musician with over 500 songs to my credit.

Agency: Unfortunately, we do not represent musicians at this time.

Caller: But I was named Rock musician of the year...

Agency: We're sorry but it does not appear that our agency would be a good fit for you.

Caller: You want to listen to my stuff for free on Myspace?

Agency: I don't see how that would be a good use of our time.

Caller: Someday someone will discover it and make millions.

Agency: We wish you the best in all your endeavors...

The day before, the office received a call from an aspiring author who was a psychic who had an “amazing” personal story to tell...oh, and by the way, they also have two novels done and five children's books ready and waiting.

Meanwhile I looked at my to-do list compiled that previous Friday in preparation for hitting the ground running that Monday morning:

We were waiting for final contract paperwork on four new book deals.

We had three authors whose proposals would get thumbs up or thumbs down at a pub board in the next week or two.

We were waiting for proposals from fifteen clients (all in development over the previous couple months).

We needed to have “career counsel” conversations with at least ten other clients. (All very different in scope and intensity.)

We needed to make the “do we represent?” decision on five successful and published authors who had approached us and the same decision on at least a half

dozen excellent unpublished authors whose full manuscripts had been reviewed and were sitting on the floor near my desk...staring at me (they were not in the picture at the beginning of this chapter).

And that was just the to-do list and did not include the necessity of reviewing cover designs and marketing plans for forthcoming titles. Nor did it include the contracted clients who were wrangling with their editors over any number of issues (everything from copy edit/grammar questions to editors not returning a phone call).

Don't get me wrong! I'm not complaining. In fact, every day can be quite exciting. But this chapter is for those who wonder why agents take so long to make representation decisions. I've written about rejection on the Agency blog and no agent takes the process lightly. But a little understanding and self-education would make every writer's experience while approaching an agent a little more tolerable.

When I was done, over 98% of that stack pictured at the beginning of this chapter wasn't ready yet. It didn't mean they weren't good. Only that they weren't ready. The competition is fierce and a little extra effort to learn the craft by going to a good writers conference, or taking a class from The Christian Writers Institute (which can be found online at www.christianwritersinstitute.com).

Realize this is a marathon, not a sprint.

6

ENDORSEMENTS:
HOW IMPORTANT
ARE THEY?

How important are endorsements? (Those “blurbs” on the back of a book that exclaim “A real masterpiece!”)

Let me answer with a question. When you are browsing a book title do you look at the endorsements or notice who wrote the foreword or introduction? I suspect you do without realizing it. And if you are unfamiliar with the author, but you know the endorser, then you are more likely to give this new writer a try.

In its early self-published days, *The Shack* by William Paul Young gained tremendous benefit from a glowing endorsement by Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*. It made me pause and think, “If Eugene Peterson makes such a claim, then maybe I should pay attention.” So, as a fan of Eugene Peterson for nearly twenty years, I paid attention. I believe that endorsement is still on the

front cover of *The Shack* (which ended up selling one million copies as a self-published book and another ten million after being picked up by FaithWords).

HOW MANY DO YOU NEED?

How many endorsements should you get? One or two meaningful ones are best. Sometimes your agent can help you secure them. Sometimes your publisher. But it is best if you get them yourself from the folks you know.

The more recognizable name the better.

And the earlier in the creative process the better. Years ago, while an editor for Bethany House, I presented a proposal at a pub board meeting. Unfortunately, I did not get a good initial reception from the team. Then I asked the members of the group to look at the endorsement page in the proposal. This writer had secured endorsements from James Montgomery Boice, R.C. Sproul, and John MacArthur, each a highly recognized author and speaker, particularly within the Reformed Theology tradition. The pub board members exclaimed, “Who is this guy?” They had never heard of the writer of the proposed book, but they knew the endorsers. Those endorsements turned the tide in favor of offering a contract to the author!

Recently I talked to a very well-known author who gets about four to five unsolicited requests for forewords

or endorsements each week. I read somewhere that Annie Dillard, the Pulitzer Prize winning author, can receive as many as 40 in one week...and most of them for books by writers she does not know.

Whatever you do, don't (please don't) claim in your proposal that you can get endorsements from Rick Warren, Max Lucado, Beth Moore, and Francis Chan unless you already have them in hand. Many visible leaders have tough restrictions from their board of directors regarding their endorsements (especially those who are part of a Christian ministry). They don't want their name associated with a book that could ultimately reflect negatively on the author or their organization.

And if you are frustrated by that policy, let's make it more personal. Imagine if you had endorsed a book by Bernie Madoff...and now that he has been sentenced to 150 years in jail, what does your endorsement of his book say about you?

Endorsements imply a promise that what is in the book is worth your time. This means that endorsements that only use initials ("A.E. from St. Louis") are all but useless. And so are endorsements from your dentist, unless your book is about dentistry. An endorsement from your minister is suspect, unless yours happens to be a well-known author. (What if your minister doesn't like your book and refuses to endorse it? Will you still want to attend services?).

Also try to avoid sneaking family member endorsements who have a different last name as a way of padding the list. You will be found out and your integrity will be suspect. This is not the time to “pad the resume.”

Can you sell your book without endorsements? Of course. But in today’s market, every little bit helps.

7

THE WILD PITCH

In honor of the Great American pastime, I thought it would be fun to explore the art of pitching.

A couple years ago I was watching a Major League baseball game and the pitcher unleashed a horrific throw that sailed about eight feet *behind* the batter. It floated to the backstop without a bounce and everyone in the stadium wonder what had just happened. It looked like the pitcher lost his grip and could not stop his delivery. In baseball terms this is classified as a wild pitch.

Unfortunately, many writers unleash a pitch on an agent or an editor before it is ready to deliver. Let me list a few actual letters I have received.

“Save for the Bible, the book you’re holding in your other hand is the most important work you’ll ever read! Let me know what you think.”

“I sincerely doubt you will engage in any business with me, just because that’s how sick and sordid the industry has become...I mean, I produced the piece of work, you didn’t. Now, I challenge you to do your job.”

Subject line of the email said: “DON’T READ THIS.” [So I didn’t.]

“I came across your listing on the internet. You would not have been my first choice...”

“All my literary efforts...are stirring works caught in the vortex of disintegrating modernity. Each work is a mixed genre, essentially fiction-fantasy-history, with an environmental twist, and many young folks.”

“This novel is...an enjoyable romp with outrageous characters and themes that just about anyone can identify with; including sinister ‘friends,’ insane parents, existential nausea, jealousy, and sexual frustration.”

A good pitch, on the other hand, is delivered with focus and precision. Think about it for a minute. A baseball pitcher starts by learning how to grip the ball. Then comes the best way to actually throw the ball. Some adjust their arm angle to achieve the best way to maintain the right speed for that particular pitch. Don Sutton, a great pitcher in his day, was not known for his overpow-

ering arm but he learned that the genius of his delivery came from his legs and core body strength.

Each pitcher finds his own comfort zone and type of pitch that works for them. Some are all about speed (Randy Johnson, Steve Carlton, Sandy Koufax), others are all about curveballs or change ups. And some are about placement in, or out, of the strike zone. Or like Mariano Rivera who had a wicked split fastball.

Much like a major league pitcher you must work on your delivery. Find the best way to pitch your idea in such a way that it is easy to catch. Focus. Precision. Intent. And a pitch that is really strong.

Let's carry the concept one step further. Each pitcher is different, just like each writer is different. For every Nolan Ryan, strikeout artist, there is a Wilbur Wood, whose knuckleball pitch was almost impossible to hit squarely. But each pitcher uses the same fundamentals of grip, arm speed, leg strength, and follow through.

Play ball!



FIVE REASONS WHY
YOU MAY NEVER
GET PUBLISHED

There are many factors that go into the acquisition, development, and sale of a new book. But the majority of ideas never get to that point. I thought it might be helpful to review some of the most common issues we've run into.

1. YOU WON'T DO THE WORK

Writing a novel, a non-fiction work, or even a short article isn't a casual enterprise. It takes hard work to do it well. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, has made popular the notion that it takes 10,000 hours of work before finding success. While it isn't an exact formula there is some truth to this assertion. Do the math.

If you work at your writing craft for 20 hours a week for 50 weeks it will equal one thousand (1,000) hours x

10 and the calculation reveals nearly ten years of hard work to feel like you have a chance.

Unfortunately, we run into writers who have dashed off something during a lunch break and think it is worth millions.

2. YOU ARE HARD OF HEARING

In other words you won't listen to critiques and suggestions and are unteachable. I cannot count the number of times I've made the effort to provide a few suggestions in a letter to a prospective author only to have them fire back with an angry missive questioning my intelligence or my Christian faith. Or there are those who simply refuse to accept editorial input claiming that the editor is incompetent, or worse.

The other day a writer cold called me by phone and pitched their idea. I gently suggested the title needed help and they bristled a little. Then they unveiled more about their story and I had to suggest that it would be a tough sell to base a novel on a 6th century Egyptian copper scroll that claims that Jesus was married and had children.

The writer got angry and begin defending the authenticity of this scroll and that I needed to open my mind. Let me suffice it to say that the call ended quickly thereafter.

3. YOU AREN'T READY

I thought of titling this section as “You Aren’t Good Enough” but that wouldn’t be fair. See number one above. It is a frequent error to submit a book proposal and sample chapters before it is well crafted and critiqued.

This is a danger of taking a first time project to a writers conference and pitching it before it is ready. A “false positive” (an editor or agent saying to send the proposal after the conference) gives the impression that it is ready when the agent or editor is really offering the opportunity to look at it outside the pressure of a conference. It doesn’t mean they are offering a contract. That doesn’t mean you don’t attend that conference! Instead it means that you view your pitches as “practice” not as a “sales exercise.” At least not until you’ve “done the work.”

For a non-fiction author especially it can be that while the idea is good, the platform from which they speak and minister is not “big enough.” It takes time to build that visibility but the publishers aren’t going to wait in most cases.

4. YOUR IDEA HAS ALREADY BEEN DONE

This can be painful. You may not realize that your story line is already in a forthcoming publisher’s catalog. Or

your non-fiction idea which filled a niche, has just been published by a well-known author.

For example, one time I was looking at a marvelous proposal (well-written from an author with a modest but relatively successful platform) on the topic of the Grace of God. That same week the new “Publisher’s Weekly” came out with a front cover ad for Max Lucado’s new book called *Grace*. That is what is called a “category-killer.” The popularity of Lucado makes it very hard for another book on that topic to come out for a while.

Or to refer to the example in #2 above...there was a novel called *The Da Vinci Code* that made the same suggestions about Jesus. In other words, “It’s been done.”

5. AGENTS AND EDITORS ARE BLIND TO YOUR GENIUS

I readily admit that there are some great books and authors that I let get away. This business is more an art than a science. We have to learn to trust our instincts. And most of the time those instincts are spot on. However, a few get away for whatever reason.

The bottom line is that if you do the work, have a teachable spirit, are fully prepared, and with a unique idea...number five on the list shouldn’t be a problem.