Agented and On-Submission: A Special Kind of Torture (Part II)

Final Outline

Event Title: Agented and On-Submission: A Special Kind of Torture

Event Description: Finding an agent is surely the end of the journey, right? You’ve got an agent, you’re on submission, and now what? Our panelists discuss feelings of both excitement and angst, and answer these vital questions. As an agented author on submission, what are the best ways to handle the uncertainty of publishing? And what are best practices to combat imposter syndrome and stay focused on your individual journey before, during and after submission?

Event Category: Artistic & Professional Development

Event Organizer and Moderator

Shinelle L. Espaillat: Shinelle L. Espaillat completed an M.A. in Fiction at Temple University. She is a 2023-2024 Baldwin for the Arts Fellow and a 2022 Kimbilio Fellow. Her stories have been nominated for both Pushcart and Best of the Net Prizes. She teaches at Westchester County Community College in NY. Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in midnight & indigo, Pleiades Magazine, Torch Literary Arts, Tahoma Literary Review, Two Hawks Quarterly, Minerva Rising, The Westchester Review, Ghost Parachute, Cleaver Magazine and Midway Journal, as well as in the collections How Higher Education Feels: Commentaries on Poems That Illuminate Emotions in Learning and Teaching and Shale: Extreme Fiction for Extreme Times. She is represented by Annie Bomke of Annie Bomke Literary Agency.
Event Participants

**Moe Shalabi:** Mohamed (Moe) Shalabi is a Palestinian-American author, educator, neuroscientist, and former junior literary agent. He writes literary fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, and science fiction. Moe’s writing appeared in *The Nonbinary Review, Reed, Superstition Review, Hyphen Punk*, and *The Washington Post*. His short story *Palestina* was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Moe is represented by Kat Kerr of the Donald Maass Literary Agency.

**Eva Simone Freeman:** Eva Freeman is a writer whose work has appeared in *Granta, Citizen, The Catamaran Literary Reader, Salt Hill Journal* and *Black Renaissance Noire*. She has an MFA in fiction from the University of Maryland and a BA in English from Yale University. She has received support from the de Groot Foundation, Hedgebrook and Kimbilio. Her debut novel, *Magic Hour*, is represented by Lauren Abramo at Dystel, Goderich & Bourret. She is a former award-winning producer for ABC News and currently lives in Brooklyn with her family.

**Gail Upchurch:** Gail Upchurch is a writer of young adult and adult fiction. She is a 2022 Kimbilio Fellow, winner of the 2022 Taint Taint Taint Magazine James Baldwin Award, a finalist for the 2022 Pen Parentis Fellowship, a 2021 Tin House YA Scholar, a 2021 Community of Writers Scholar, a finalist for the 2021 Crystal Wilkinson Creative Writing Prize, and winner of the 2021 Tupelo Quarterly Prose Open Prize. Besides this, her short story “The Cottage” has been nominated for a 2024 O. Henry Prize. She holds a Ph.D. in English from Binghamton University’s program for writers, an MFA in creative writing with an emphasis in fiction from Chicago State University, and a BA in English from Howard University. Gail has recent short stories published or forthcoming in *The Missouri Review, Obsidian: Journal &
Ideas in the African Diaspora, Tupelo Quarterly, Taint Taint Taint Magazine, Torch Literary Arts, and Sequestrum and is currently at work on a young adult novel and a linked short story collection. When she’s not making up stories, she is a professor at Prince George’s Community College in Largo, Maryland, an assistant nonfiction editor at Tupelo Press, and the chapter lead for the Maryland Chapter of Women Who Submit. Gail is currently represented by Lucy Irvine of Peters, Fraser & Dunlop Agency.

Moderator Opening Remarks:
Thank you all for being here, and for still being excited to talk about writing and publishing, combatting conference burn-out to join us on this last day of AWP.

The original idea for this panel grew from a Slack channel for agented writers who are on submission, so thank you also to Shondra Walker, for recognizing the need and creating that channel. Though I had published several stories, and know well the coppery taste of waiting, it never occurred to me that signing with an agent would open a whole new world of impatience, rejection, and hope. That Slack space, full of venting, commiseration, celebration, advice and support, serves to highlight a shadowy subset of the writing community, those waiting on the cusp of everything. We thought it would be helpful to share this part of the writing experience: what happens after you get the agent, but before you get the book contract. Who knew that navigating this space would be so complex? It helps to know that others are traveling similar, torturous journeys. When we delivered Part I of this panel, two years ago, we heard a number of questions that we didn’t have the opportunity to address, and so we thought we’d like to follow up with Part II, a
deeper dive into murky waters. I am grateful to Eva Simone Freeman, Moe Shalabi, and Gail Upchurch for agreeing to share their brilliance, and invite them to share their own opening remarks.

**Participant Initial Remarks**

**Moe Shalabi:**
Hello all! Thank you so much for joining us today. This is my second year hosting a panel on this topic and I am still in the throes of the publishing world. Still waiting for a yes from editors.

We hear so much about all the authors that break through with traditional publishing. Social media is filled with seemingly overnight success stories and it’s easy to mistake the process for being easy. The truth, on the other hand, is not as hopeful. So much, in fact, is happening behind the scenes, sometimes years in the making. A lot of authors who eventually post their Publishers Marketplace book announcement may already have multiple shelved manuscripts that they worked equally as hard to get published, only for them to end up nowhere. And each manuscript might have endured years-long intervals of being on submission with editors at publishing houses only to end in rejection. These are the stories we don’t hear much about, mainly because many authors are discouraged from disclosing them. Today, I will talk to you about what happens to your manuscript when on submission and how you can take advantage of your time before despair reduces you to a husk.

**Eva Simone Freeman:** My husband and I popped a bottle of champagne to celebrate my signing with an agent. We bought another one to open when the book was sold. It has sat for many years in our
refrigerator looking sad and forlorn. I’ve thought about drinking it several times since. Getting an agent is not the last step, but it is a very important one. A good agent should gather responses to your work – both good and bad – and share them with you. After the first round, if you detect patterns or common concerns within the editor’s feedback, your agent should offer you the opportunity to revise your manuscript. They should also protect your interests, pitching you for smaller projects while you wait for the bigger one to sell. A good agent is your advocate, friend, therapist and mentor. The writing life is complicated, mysterious and at times downright ludicrous. But all of us have something to say, and everyone on this panel is invested in helping you find the right avenues in which to say it.

**Gail Upchurch:**
In the three years I’ve been an agented author, I have learned two valuable lessons: 1) landing an agent is not the end of the journey, and 2) you still are a fine writer whether your agent manages to sell your book or not. The latter has saved me from despair on more occasions than I’d like to admit. I’m interested in discussing the partnering relationship between agent and author, author agency, and the creative enterprise. That is, when your agent offers notes on your manuscript, how do you know how much to bend and how much to stand your ground when it comes to revisions, especially if you want to be published with a big five publishing house?

**Moderator Questions**
1) Everyone has their own “How I Got My Agent” story. Please share your story with us: the steps you took to find your agent, and the process from query through contract.
2) Could you discuss your relationship with your agent? How did you develop that relationship? How involved is your agent in your editing process?

3) This is a two-part (okay, a three-part) question. How long have you been on submission, or how long should writers expect to be on submission? Should you work on another project while on submission, and if so, should the new project be in the same genre as your first book?

4) How do you handle an R&R? Does it guarantee an acquisition?

5) What is your approach if your relationship with your agent becomes problematic?