

One Thing – Literary Edition with Stuart Brown

EPISODE 2. STEPHANIE CARDEL

<https://stuartjbrown.com/podcast/one-thing-literary-edition-2-stephanie-cardel/>

January 21, 2026: My guest for the second episode of “One Thing – Literary Edition” is Stephanie Cardel, the founder of Lighthouse Literary Agency, which represents authors of children’s (PB, MG, YA) and adult fiction and non-fiction for both the Christian and secular markets.

SUMMARY

In the podcast episode of “One Thing – Literary Edition,” host Stuart Brown interviews Stephanie Cardel, the founder of Lighthouse Literary Agency. She provides a “reality check” for aspiring authors regarding the traditional publishing industry.

1. Warning Against Scams

- Red Flags: Scammers often impersonate legitimate agencies (like Lighthouse Literary) to solicit money from authors.
- The “Golden Rule”: In traditional publishing, the author never pays the agent or the publisher. Any request for thousands of dollars for “rights” or “fees” is a scam.

2. The Financial Reality of Authorship

- Low Royalties: Authors typically receive only 5% to 20% of a book’s retail price. This often translates to just \$1 to \$2 per book.
- Agent Commissions: Agents generally take a 15% commission from the author’s royalties.
- Income Stability: Most authors cannot live solely off book sales unless they have multiple bestsellers; many agents and authors must maintain other jobs.
- Advances: Large publishers may offer an advance, but this is “against royalties,” meaning the author won’t see additional royalty checks until the book earns back that initial amount.

3. The “Long Game” Timeline

Traditional publishing is a slow process that can take years from start to finish:

- Querying: Agents may take six weeks or longer to respond to a query.
- Submissions: Once an agent signs an author, it can take months or even years to find a publisher.
- Publication: After a contract is signed, it typically takes 1.5 to 2 years for the book to actually hit shelves.

4. Best Practices for Querying

- Do Your Homework: Only query agents whose “wish lists” match your genre.
- Be Professional: Include essential details like genre, title, and word count; avoid generic mass emails.

- **Self-Publishing Transition:** If you self-publish a book, do not query that same book to agents later. Publishers generally want new, unreleased material because they fear the audience for a self-published work has already been exhausted.

ACTION CHECKLIST

If you are going to pursue the traditional publishing route, here's a plan with key checkpoints:

Phase 1: Preparation & Research

- **Finalize Your Manuscript:** Ensure your work is complete and polished before reaching out to any agents.
- **Identify Your Data:** Have your specific genre, title, and word count ready for inclusion in every communication.
- **Target the Right Agents:** Research agent "wish lists" and guidelines to ensure your work is a specific fit for their portfolio.
- **Prepare Your Materials:** If an agent is editorial-focused, be prepared to receive and implement professional revision notes or edits.

Phase 2: The Querying Process

- **Write Custom Queries:** Avoid sending generic, mass emails; tailor each query to the specific agent you are contacting.
- **Follow Submission Guidelines:** Strictly adhere to the agent's requested format to avoid giving them a reason to say "no".
- **Practice Patience:** Allow at least six weeks for an initial response and expect to wait three to five months for a response after submitting a full manuscript.
- **Plan Follow-ups:** Schedule follow-up emails approximately every eight weeks if you have not heard back after a submission.

Phase 3: Financial & Legal Protection

- **Verify Identity:** Check the website and logo of any agency contacting you to ensure they are not a scammer impersonating a legitimate agent.
- **Follow the "Author Pays \$0" Rule:** Immediately reject any "agent" or "publisher" who asks for money upfront for rights, fees, or publishing costs.
- **Understand the Flow of Money:** Confirm that payment should always flow from the publisher to the agent, and then to you (minus the 15% commission).
- **Manage Income Expectations:** Plan to maintain a secondary income source, as royalties often amount to only \$1–\$2 per book and may take years to arrive.

Phase 4: Strategic Planning

- **Separate Self-Published Work:** If you have self-published in the past, do not query that specific book; instead, start writing your next, unreleased manuscript.
- **Commit to the "Long Game":** Prepare for a timeline that spans 1.5 to 2 years from the date of a signed contract to the actual book release.

TRANSCRIPT

Stuart Brown: Welcome to One Thing – Literary Edition, a podcast that asks a simple question of seasoned literary agents: What is one piece of advice you would give to new authors? I'm your host, playwright and author Stuart Brown. Information about all my works can be found at my website, stuartjbrown.com.

On today's episode, I am very pleased to have Stephanie Cardel, the founder of Lighthouse Literary Agency. She represents authors of children's and adult fiction and non-fiction for both the Christian and secular markets. Her debut novel, *This Isn't Shakespeare*, is a YA Christian contemporary. So, Stephanie, what is your one thing?

Stephanie Cardel: Well, before I tell you my one thing that I wish authors knew, I want to preface it by saying that I get several emails a month from authors who are getting scammed by people claiming to be agents. One of the scammers uses the name Lighthouse Literary. They have a different website and logo than mine, and that's why I hear from these authors asking if they're legitimate and if they're affiliated with me.

But these scammers claim that they've heard from big publishing houses and that they have read the author's self-published book and that they want to publish it. And they want the authors to pay five, ten, fifteen thousand dollars for rights or something. And that's just not the way it works. So my one thing that I want authors to know and understand is how it works with royalties and everything, so that they understand behind the scenes and they can manage their expectations, and so they won't get scammed.

It may be a little discouraging, and I apologize for that in advance. I don't want to discourage any author from pursuing publication, but this is how it works and why agents are essential to the process. Authors submit their work to the agents, hopefully based on the agent's wish list and their guidelines. Please don't send generic queries to multiple agents at the same time. Do your homework. Make sure the agent is a good fit for your work.

Be sure to include the genre, the title, the word count. Agents get between 20 and 100 emails every week, depending on the agent, and most of those are queries. So we're looking for reasons to say no. Be professional. Don't give us any reasons. Most agents take at least six weeks to reply because of this overload and because most agents have to work other jobs. Agenting does not pay well. Agents only get 15% of the author's royalty. And authors only get 5% to 20% of the retail price.

If it's a big publisher, they usually base it on the retail price. And some small publishers will offer more, like 30% or 40%, but it's usually based on the net revenue. So that ends up being about the same. And what it ends up being is only one to two dollars per book, and agents only get 15% of that. I tell you this to help you understand why giving agents a certain amount of grace—having to wait a long time to hear from them—is very much appreciated. Most people don't realize that agents have to work other jobs.

Of course, if they sell a book that does really well or becomes a bestseller, then they're going to make some decent money, and so is the author. But most authors do not make enough money to make a living off their book sales unless they have multiple bestsellers. I have one author who still hasn't sold enough books to cover the \$20,000 advance that she got, and her books came out five years ago. So bestsellers are few and far between.

Getting published is a long game. And when you sign with an agent, your publication is not guaranteed. They prepare your manuscript for submission to publishers. If they're editorial like me, then they'll send you edits

and revision notes, and they'll start reading comparable titles, and they'll research editors that they think are a good fit for your manuscript.

Then, when it's ready, they're going to send out five to ten at a time to different editors. Sometimes they'll get a response right away. Maybe they'll get a full request, or maybe they'll get a pass. But most of the time, they're waiting three, four, five months for a response. I try to send out follow-ups every eight weeks. I used to send them out every six weeks, but agents have only gotten more overwhelmed, and so I went to eight weeks. So every eight weeks I send a follow-up. Sometimes they'll reply to the follow-up and say, "No, I haven't gotten to it yet." But most of the time, it's crickets for months and months and months.

So, if they do request the full and they read it and they love it and they offer a contract, then most big publishers will offer an advance. The advance is against the royalties, and it's usually a year and a half to two years before the book actually comes out. So you may get the advance with the signing of the contract, or you may get it in stages before the book comes out over that one-and-a-half to two-year period. And then when the book comes out, after the advance has paid out, the royalty checks will come. But you get royalty reports usually quarterly, or maybe twice a year. I have some publishers that only do twice a year. I have one that does it monthly, so it just depends on the publisher.

But they send the royalty to the agent, and then the agent sends it to the author minus their 15%. So never does the author pay the agent or the publisher. And that's the big takeaway that I want you to have. Please, never, ever—if someone is asking you for money, they're not legitimate. Please do not get scammed.

Stuart Brown: Stephanie, I think what you've said in a very succinct manner really helps new authors. As one myself, I've heard bits and pieces, I've been on discussion groups and you hear things, but this really lays it out. And I think for me, the key takeaway is the long haul. That this is not something you're going to submit to an agent and, even if they pick it up right away, you're going to go to Barnes & Noble and see your book on the shelves in two months. It takes a long time.

I think that's hard for people that are starting out because we want to see things right away. And you talk maybe a couple of years just to get to the point where a literary agent says yes, and now layer on months and years after that. That's a long time.

Stephanie Cardel: Long, long time. And when you're finally published, it's a long time before you get paid. It's different from what you see in the movies, for sure.

Stuart Brown: I thought movies—but that's real life, isn't it?

Stephanie Cardel: Not hardly.

Stuart Brown: Do you see more authors doing self-publishing, and if so, maybe because of everything you've just mentioned?

Stephanie Cardel: Absolutely, absolutely. I have one author that was a very successful self-published author. She was making six figures as a self-published author, and she wanted to be traditionally published because she wanted her books to have more reach. And so she contacted me and eventually I did sign her, and we have been on submission with her YA fantasy for two years.

And we keep getting full requests, but we have not had anyone take it to acquisitions, and it's just really frustrating. And she has said that she's going to give it another six months maybe, and then she's going to go back to self-publishing. She's very frustrated. Just didn't turn out the way she hoped.

Stuart Brown: Stephanie, I don't want to leave on a down note, but I think that it is very important what you've said and, I guess, a good dose of reality. Because people like myself go in clueless. I mean, when I started to do this, my goal was, I want to write a book and I think it's good and friends and others like it. But after that, I didn't know anything. So it's been a gradual learning process for me, and what you've said, I think, furthers that for people. So thank you very much for sharing your one thing.

Stephanie Cardel: I would just say one more thing, that if you do self-publish your book, don't query that book. Even if it's done really well, publishers don't want to publish a self-published book because they are afraid that you've already exhausted your fan base. So what you want to do is start on that next book. If you want to get traditionally published after you've self-published, it's got to be with a different book.

Stuart Brown: Okay, so that's going to be your 1.5 one thing.

Stephanie Cardel: That's right.

Stuart Brown: I've been speaking with Stephanie Cardel, the founder of Lighthouse Literary Agency. You've been listening to One Thing – Literary Edition, a podcast that asks a simple question of seasoned literary agents: What is one piece of advice you would give to new authors? I'm your host, playwright and author Stuart Brown. Information about all my works can be found at my website, stuartjbrown.com. I hope you will join us next time for another episode.

ABOUT THE HOST

Stuart J. Brown is an award-winning Connecticut playwright whose 10-Minute works have been staged across the country. He's also written four full one-act plays. You can see all his work at stuartjbrown.com.

Brown is a theater critic with the Outer Critics Circle and the Connecticut Critics Circle. Additionally, he operates the 24/7 online Broadway radio station, Sounds of Broadway (soundsofbroadway.com), featuring the best from Off-Broadway, Broadway, and London stages. His 'On Broadway' podcast features discussions with figures from the world of music and stage. He's aired more than 730 episodes since 2006. (broadwayradioprograms.com)

Additional podcasts include "One Thing with Stuart Brown" (stuartjbrown.com/podcast) with the latest edition focusing on the publishing and writing world. He asks a simple question of seasoned literary agents...

"What is one piece of advice you would give to new authors?"

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