

One Thing – Literary Edition with Stuart Brown

EPISODE 5. JEN NADOL

<https://stuartjbrown.com/podcast/one-thing-literary-edition-5-jen-nadol/>

SUMMARY

In this episode, Stuart Brown speaks with Jen Nadol, a literary agent from the Unter Agency, about the critical roles of pacing and urgency in fiction. Nadol argues that while conflict and tension are necessary ingredients, urgency is the “engine” that truly propels a reader through a story.

The Framework for Urgency

Nadol suggests that writers (and those crafting query letters) should evaluate their work using three specific questions to ensure the story doesn’t “meander”:

- What is the main character’s goal?
- By when must they achieve it? This establishes the “ticking clock” that creates sharp pacing.
- Or else what? This defines the stakes; the consequences of failure must be high enough to keep the reader invested.

Key Advice: Start in the Action

A common mistake Nadol sees in queries is a “long lead-up” where authors spend too much time setting the scene. Her recommendations include:

1. **Cut the fluff:** Instead of showing a character waking up and driving to work before a major event (like getting fired), start the story at the moment they are fired.
2. **Use internal dialogue:** Context and backstory can be woven into an active scene through a character’s thoughts and reactions rather than through static exposition.
3. **Be willing to move your opening:** Both Nadol and Brown share personal anecdotes about discovering that their “true” opening lines were actually several pages into their initial drafts.

Summary Table: Conflict vs. Urgency

Element: Conflict/Tension

Description: Obstacles and complex character backgrounds.

Nadol’s Perspective: Necessary, but can feel “mushy” without a driving force.

Element: Urgency

Description: The “ticking clock” and high stakes.

Nadol’s Perspective: The essential engine that keeps a reader flipping pages.

TRANSCRIPT

Stuart Brown: Welcome to 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 work can be found at my website,

stuartjbrown.com. On today's episode, I am very pleased to have Jen Nadol of the Unter Agency. Welcome to the program, Jen.

Jen Nadol: Thanks Stu.

Stuart Brown: So Jen, what is your "one thing"?

Jen Nadol: So, the one thing that I'm going to talk about today deals with pacing and urgency in your story. And the one thing that I would encourage writers to think about is: What is the engine driving your story? I think some writers, myself included, tend to start developing a story by thinking about characters or conflicts between those characters—what might make for an interesting story to follow or develop or pursue. And we might come up with ideas that inherently create conflict, like characters from opposing backgrounds or families who fall in love, like your classic Romeo and Juliet, or a character who witnesses a murder, or a character who develops amnesia. And in all of these very basic scenarios, there's conflict and tension, which are the right ingredients for a story. But urgency, which is what creates the sharp pacing in a story, is different from conflict or tension. It's the driving engine of a story that really propels the reader forward.

Stuart Brown: So, let me see if this is what I'm getting from what you're saying. So urgency — could that be something where everything you said, but an author is maybe writing too much about this certain conflict or this situation and not really getting to the meat of it? "Here's the conflict, here's the tension, and let's move on"—that they're kind of just milking it too much?

Jen Nadol: It can be that, but I think more what it is, is that aside from or in addition to the conflict and tension, you need to have a goal, you need to have a ticking clock, and you need to have stakes. So, I think what I see sometimes in queries and, honestly, in my own writing, is you put something together where you've got these two characters that you be there — it's a romance where one or both characters have all kinds of baggage, either from childhood or from prior relationships, or something about that pairing and they have to overcome these things to be together. So that's conflict and tension, but without something more to the story — a ticking clock that says they have to resolve this stuff by this time, or else this terrible thing happens. And this terrible thing has to be something more than just "they don't get together" because that's not a high enough — those stakes aren't high enough to really give the story the oomph it needs to keep the reader flipping through the pages. If all you have is two characters who are trying to overcome obstacles to stay together, the story feels a little bit mushy. There's nothing to really drive it forward; you're just kind of meandering with these characters as they try to find their way, but there's nothing pushing you through it. Kind of one way that I like to look at it, and I think this is a good framework for putting together queries too, is to think about:

- What is my main character's goal?
- By when? What is the ticking clock? Is somebody moving away? Do they have to figure out if they can be together before that person moves?
- Or else what? What are the consequences if they don't achieve this goal?

That way, you make sure that you have both conflict and tension, but also urgency and quick pacing in your story.

Stuart Brown: I guess it also is that the reader wants to finish the book. If it just meanders here or there, it's like, "Okay, this is nice... I hope they get together with this romance," but that might not carry it through to the end. But if there's that urgency, then I need to know because I'm getting invested in those characters and I really want this to happen, so I have to find out what happens at the end.

Jen Nadol: Right. It's, again, what propels you through the story and keeps you riveted to the page. It's kind of like the cliffhangers that you might see at the end of TV episodes where it's like, "Oh my God, this thing has happened, I have to stay here to see what's going to happen next". That has to be in your story, and it's that ticking clock and those high stakes that create that.

Stuart Brown: For a book, can there be more than one, or should it really be focused leading up to that one single urgent event?

Jen Nadol: No, there can absolutely be more than one. I mean, it's great if you can keep developing things that are a ticking clock and when they surmount this, then—oh my God—there's this other thing that happens, and the next thing that happens. You see that a lot in action-adventure type stories. Something like *The Hunger Games* will have many urgent things that happen and many ticking clocks as each day something else urgent presents itself. Or, you can just have one that you're leading up to, but if you do that, the stakes have to be really high so that the payoff for the reader staying all the way through the story to get to that...

Stuart Brown: Are you saying that in a lot of the queries that you get, authors are not really doing that much with that principle? That they are more meandering and just hoping you as the literary agent like the concept, like this character?

Jen Nadol: I mean, I wouldn't say I see it in all, but I see it in a good number of queries. And it's a lot of times a reason why I pass, because I don't feel like there's enough at stake in the story or there isn't enough urgency. I think a lot of times authors probably don't realize that this is a missing piece of their story. They have put together something that feels very full and meaty because they do have complex characters with complex backstories and a lot of tension and conflict. And when that's not enough, the missing piece is often this urgency that doesn't create a pace that will keep a reader or an editor invested.

Stuart Brown: Jen, is there anything else that you want to add to this "one thing" of pacing and urgency?

Jen Nadol: The other thing I would add is something that you alluded to before, which is getting to that urgent event faster rather than waiting, waiting, waiting to get there. Another thing I do see related to pacing and urgency in a story is writers who take too long setting the scene. I think the best way to open a story is to drop a reader right into a very active scene. So, for example, rather than starting a story where maybe the character makes coffee in their kitchen and has some conversation with their spouse and then drives to work and then at work they get fired—just have them get fired. Open the story with the scene where they're being fired and let us understand the context from their internal dialogue, their external dialogue, their reactions in that moment, and cut the whole big lead-up.

Stuart Brown: It's very funny you're saying that because I'm revising my book right now and I think on page four I just have something happen. From feedback I received, it said, "Okay, Stu, that is the opening paragraph". I'm not waiting; it's only on page four, but it's like, "Let's do this now and then kind of backtrack to see if that makes a better opening".

Jen Nadol: Yeah, totally. Actually, in my first book—because I was a writer before I was a literary agent — my first book, when I was querying it, some agent that I had sent it out to sent it back with feedback and said, "This is your opening line". And it was a good, like, three or four pages into the book. And when I looked at it, I was like, "Oh my God, she's right, this book would be so much better if I start right here". And that is the opening line that the book was published with.

Stuart Brown: Well, I know I will take your advice to heart and I hope listeners also do. So, Jen, thank you for sharing your literary “one thing” today.

Jen Nadol: Thanks so much for having me, Stu.

Stuart Brown: I’ve been speaking with Jen Nadol, literary agent of the Unter 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’ve been your host Stuart Brown, playwright and author. Information about all my works can be found on my website at stuartjbrown.com. I hope you will join us next time for another edition soon.

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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