

Ten Percent of Nothing: The Case of the Literary Agent from Hell.

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Ten Percent of Nothing: The Case of the Literary Agent from Hell (review)

Jill Elaine Hughes

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Essential reading for aspiring writers and publishing veterans alike, *Ten Percent of Nothing: The Case of the Literary Agent from Hell* is a pot pourri of tight investigative reporting, police procedural, hard-luck tale and psychological criminal profile. Jim Fisher carefully balances all of these elements to provide a very readable exposé on how even the genteel world of book publishing is not immune to fraud and deception.

Fisher, a professor of criminal justice at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and a former FBI special agent, spins a compelling true-crime tale as he profiles Dorothy Deering, former proprietor of the fraudulent, fee-charging Dorothy Deering Literary Agency and perpetrator of several other literary scams. Deering, the first U.S. literary agent ever convicted of federal mail fraud in the United States, successfully used her "agency," vanity press and crooked kickback schemes to bilk millions of dollars from unsuspecting, unpublished (and often unpublishable) writers over a ten-year period, using her ill-gotten gains to fund a lavish lifestyle of luxury homes, five-star travel, expensive jewelry, prescription drug abuse and plastic surgery.

Fisher briefly outlines Dorothy Deering's history before she embarked on her life as a master con artist, from her modest middle-class origins in Kettering, Ohio, through several failed marriages, numerous dead-end jobs, a stay in a mental hospital where she met her last husband (and eventual partner in crime), Chuck Deering, and finally her first criminal conviction (embezzlement of funds from a former employer, for which she served no jail time).

What is so amazing about Deering's story is that not only was she already a convicted criminal *before* she opened her agency but she had no training in writing or publishing whatsoever—in fact, she didn't even have a college education. Shortly after her mental-hospital stay, Deering wrote a science fiction novel. Styling herself as the next big best-selling author, Deering bought a copy of *Writer's Market* to look up literary

agents. When she failed to find representation for her book from any of the non-fee-charging agents and then wasted her money on a couple of fee-chargers herself, Deering got an idea. . . .

Thus, the Dorothy Deering Literary Agency was born. With her husband (a failed used-car salesman), her younger brother (a con artist and fugitive already wanted on a fraud charge in Georgia) and her drug-addicted, ninth-grade-dropout stepson as her office assistants, Deering set up shop in Nicholasville, Kentucky. After placing her first advertisement in *Writers' Digest*, Deering soon found her mailbox chock-full of **[End Page 208]** checks for manuscript-reading and one-year representation fees from hopeful writers. She then expanded her business to include kickback vanity publishing schemes with "publishers" in Utah and Canada who took fees from authors but produced no books, and when those schemes petered out, Deering started her own vanity "press," which collected millions of dollars in fees but also produced no books.

How did Deering get away with it, and for so long? The fact is, there is nothing so gullible as a vain, unpublished writer. Also, when it came to representing herself as a literary agent, all Deering had to do to justify her fees (both to her "clients" and in the eyes of the law) was to occasionally shotgun copies of her clients' manuscripts to publishers whose contact information she found in *Writer's Market* or on the Internet. She then inevitably steered the rejection-crushed authors toward one of her vanity publishing scams so she could fleece them for even more money. With only about 1 to 2 percent of today's manuscript submissions getting accepted by legitimate literary agents (and only about 10 percent of represented scripts ever seeing the light of publication), small wonder that Deering had a nearly inexhaustible supply of clients.

The second half of the book details how FBI agents caught up to Deering and prosecuted her for mail fraud. Deering and her husband, son and younger brother...

narrative thrust—a little of the driving “force” from the epigraph. But the bold recreation of an “exotic” place and time in American history are real achievements for a first-time novelist. The novel deserves the generous critical praise it has received so far. (ES)

Ten Percent of Nothing: The Case of the Literary Agent from Hell
by Jim Fisher

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