Representation: An interview with new literary agent Tracy Crow

Tracy Crow, with her corgi puppy, Hope. The puppy is the newest furry member of the household, but hope is always something Crow looks for in the writing she represents.

Two years ago, Tracy Crow, an author, former Marine, invited me to be a part of the MilSpeak Foundation ON POINT Women Warriors Writing Workshops she took around the country, offering a free weekend of writing instruction to women veterans and veteran family members. The workshops, in Tampa and Charlotte, were creatively inspiring and a hell of a lot of fun, not only for those who attended but for the cadre of instructors she'd pulled together. I'll never forget being a part of that team.

At every venue we met scores of women writers, many of whom had already met Tracy in one capacity or another. They'd either attended a previous workshop, had hired her for her book doctoring skills, or had served with her in uniform. And at each location she added more people to the list of writers she offered to coach, inviting them to join online workshop groups or to send her their manuscript for one-on-one review. She seemed tireless.

The workshops were for writers who'd never taken any serious writing instruction as well as writers who had already been published a number of times. For Crow, it seemed a desire to be creative and to improve your skills was the only requirement for her attention.

Crow has often helped writers with finished manuscripts find homes for them. She'd also applied her skillful pen to help guide a manuscript from unsellable to sought after.

Eventually, she realized she'd been on a pathway that led to one thing—officially becoming an advocate for writers and their work. Tracy has now opened the doors to Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC and is now representing more than a dozen authors. I wanted to talk to her about that.

While I spoke to Tracy over the phone, she apologized for the hullabaloo her furry friends were making in the background. Since they are often the subjects of her social media posts, I already knew there were any number of things a black lab, a yellow lab, a beagle-anatolian shepherd, and a corgi puppy can get into when their mom's back is turned. Most of the time, I couldn't actually hear them through the connection, but evidently, as soon as we started to converse, they had all decided it was time to gnaw on their bone chews. I can only imagine what that sounded like.

How many books have you helped bring to the market?

I can tell you that just prior to my making a decision to become an agent, I had helped place four books in eighteen months. And that was when I really started thinking seriously about it. But what helped me make the decision, was when [an author] I was working with asked me if I'd feel comfortable opening the door for her for a particular publisher. Just prior to that, a different author's book had come out and I realized that something in this book had been left out. I felt, at the time, that it wasn't for me to say anything and I figured the publisher would catch it, but they didn't and that left me feeling responsible. The writer didn't have an agent, but I'd turned her over to the publisher, assuming they would take care [of the missing piece] but they didn't. The bottom line is, when [the new author] asked me to help her with a publisher, I told her I was at the stage where I really felt guilty if I wasn't able to walk a writer through the entire process. If I'm not an agent, I can't represent the writers the way they deserve.

I did end up helping [the author] get her book in front of [the publisher], giving her instructions to call me with any questions because it can be a complicated process. So now, her book is with them and in their publishing pipeline. A few months later, I realized I was ready. So I formed the LLC and I haven't looked back.

Are you mostly getting submissions from word-of-mouth or are you on Agentquery.com or any of the other agent solicitation sites?

I'm on Publishers Marketplace, but I'm getting as many manuscripts as I can comfortably handle. When you've gone through an MFA program and all of your MFA writing friends realize they have an agent among them, things can go a little crazy. They all start sending you their manuscripts and they all start referring their friends. And these are all excellent writers. I mean, really, really good writers. So it's not like I have to go digging and searching as a lot of new agents might have to do. A lot of good work is coming my way. Of course I follow the latest trends, but I don't really need to go searching for manuscripts. In fact I have to be very selective. I'm boutique. It's just me. So far. And there are only so many hours in a day, only so much I can read at a time. And I have this thing—that is, if I say I'm going to read your work, that doesn't mean you're going to hear from me in six months. You're going to hear from me within 10 days. Ten days to two weeks at the most. That's a pipeline I need to keep moving. I can only read so many, and handle all of the other work I do during the day, like sending out pitches to publishers, doing research to find the right strategy and the right fit with publishing houses and certain editors and their preferences with what I have as clients.

I also have a number of clients in various stages. I have some who are finished and their work has been pitched and their manuscripts are being read by the large houses. I have several who are finishing first drafts, but because they have already

written or published heavily elsewhere and I know their work and their quality, I have agreed to sign them for their new book.

Then I have one young man, who is only 22, brilliant, came to me as a referral but the work needs a lot of editing. But because the concept for this six-book series is so brilliant, I couldn't say no. I told him that this is going to be a six-month-long, intensive, MFA-level instruction and revision effort, and if he was up for that, then I would sign him. So this is intensive for both of us. Every day I have a couple of hours of editing and instruction for him. But the concept [for his series] is so brilliant. I was pleased that he had gotten 455 pages to this point, but we just have to up the diction, up the level of quality of the storytelling. The story is all there.

So I have all of these different clients in various stages. It's like having a bunch of plates spinning at different speeds, and you've got to keep each one spinning at the right speed for that particular client. It's a little crazy.

You're not just representing writers, teaching writing, you are doing developmental editing as well. You can't get much more full service than that.

Yes. It used to be that I would charge for developmental editing. I can't charge for that anymore since forming the literary agency, and that was a big part of my financial income that I had to give away in order to do the agent thing. From an ethical standard, as an agent, I can't charge someone for any sort of reading or editing. I either agree to represent you and take the work as it is and we work on it from there or we don't. Anything else is unethical. There's a lot of developmental editing projects I've had to walk away from because I knew the writer wanted to be my client at some point, but I couldn't do both.

I've told others to go through an additional rewrite, and bring it to me and if we're that much further along, then I can do it. It's just this one, young 22-year-old that I've agreed to go this heavy with.

What kind of work are you most attracted to?

The kind of work that I would have the easiest success in placing would be military writers, or writers with military stories, because that's what I know the best and that's where I have the most contacts, and the community for support and all of that. But I have clients who are writing science fiction or fantasy that I'm excited about. I have clients that are writing upmarket women's fiction. I have a romance novelist and a cozy mystery writer. The only things that I'm not interested in representing are crime or anything horror related, or anything that's too violent.

Recently I had to turn away the cleanest manuscript I've ever seen in my writing life by a very, very famous writer because there was so much gratuitous stuff that I knew I couldn't advocate for it.. Then the next day, I'm saying yes to this young kid whose quality of writing is not there but the story is brilliant, and I want to help prepare him and get his work ready for the world. Some decisions are pretty easy and simple to make, but most of them are hard. Anytime I have to say no, it gets me in the gut because I've been on that end and I know what that feels like.

Of course, I'm receiving no's all day. I'm sending pitches all day to editors and hearing … 'you know that's great but it's not quite close enough to what we want for a romance,' or 'It's on the fence,' or 'If it was only this,' or 'If it was only that.' I'm getting rejections all day, which just means I have to switch up my pitch or find a new way to approach it. And that's usually what it takes, just the right moment of timing.

It’s like when I was selling real estate (in the 1990s). It feels a little like finding that perfect buyer for that perfect home. When it happens, it’s a no brainer and the buyer says ‘of course it’s this house’. Connecting a manuscript with the right editor and publisher feels a little like that.

What kind of things would a writer do that would cause you to reject the manuscript?

A lot of writers, especially if they’re new, will completely ignore what you’ve put out there as instruction for how you wish to be contacted. I understand it, because I’ve been at every stage of this. I understand how hard it can be, so I’m very forgiving and I don’t automatically reject anyone … unless they describe the work as a crime thriller … because I’m not subjecting myself to that. I’m not into hard crime and horror.

Aside from that, it’s the writing. I had to turn away a fellow grad school friend because the manuscript was fairly well written but the story didn’t hold together. I know that in order for me to help that writer get the manuscript to a level that I could represent it would require a lot of work from me. So when I’m looking at a manuscript, I have to ask myself, how much do I love this work? How much of myself am I willing to give to it?

I’m beginning to understand why so many people are getting rejections. If the work isn’t slam dunk there, agents don’t have the time or they don’t have the skill to give the work the developmental edit it needs.

I should mention that Tracy is a former assistant professor of creative writing and journalism and has years of experience guiding authors to greatness. She told me a story about one writer whose work was under consideration with an editor she knew. The editor told her he’d read the manuscript but was going to reject it because he felt something was missing. When

Tracy read the work, she said the problem looked obvious to her. She consulted with the writer and made a few thematic suggestions. The writer made the changes, and now the book is in the publishing pipeline. She went on to say this:

How many agents have the time or the developmental chops to make something like that happen? I understand now why so many writers are receiving rejection after rejection. No. No. No. No., and they have no idea how to fix something that could be great work. Agents and editors simply don't have the time, or a teaching background in most cases, so the writer never hears from them about what is missing.

And this is what I thought I could gift to my clients. If I see really solid promise in the writing, the language, the way the writer makes connections, the way the writer develops characters on the page, if they're indelible to me, if they speak to me—yet certain holes are obvious—then I'm going to give it everything I've got. If the writer demonstrates the ability to take it to the next level, then I'm open to it. Most agents would not have the time or energy for that.

When did you officially start as an agent?

I formed the LLC at the end of May. Since then the manuscripts have come in, I have had all this reading to do and I had to decide who would be my first clients. The first few weeks were just reading, reading, reading. I started pitching around early August, so we're just really in the first weeks of this. We have gotten really close already. There was a lot of talking and back and forth, and I thought we would be getting an offer from one, but it turned out to not be the right fit. I feel really good about this manuscript and it's being considered at several other houses right now.

All of this takes time. And editors will take weeks to read something, then they send it to others to read, then it goes to marketing and they have all of these discussions before

they ever contact me. So even though we started pitching in August, we're just beginning to hear back from editors and publishers.

What about marketing? When you look at the manuscript, you look for good writing, good character development, but are you looking at marketability in terms of how much money the book could make? There's a lot of literary work that is wonderful, but will never make any money. How much does that impact your decision?

There are publishers who will entertain books like that and I would go there first with a certain type of manuscript. I don't really think in terms of market because it's so slippery and I'm not following exact trends. I'm looking for the best story, the one that's going to stick with me. If I can remember the details and the characters, then I know there will be other readers who will feel the same thing. If it's the kind of book that would make a good book club discussion, then I feel that a number, at least a handful of publishers might be interested in it. So it's just a matter of finding the right one. The perfect buyer for the perfect home.

I know it's always frustrating for a writer when they find out that the marketing department was involved in the reject. They think, how am I going to compete with that? I just think that every book will find its way into the world. I know it may sound really woo woo—I tell my clients, if you're going to play with me, you're going to have to understand the woo woo parts—I tell them, if this is all about money for you, you're going to be disappointed. If this is about getting your work into the right vehicle to get it into the world, I'm your agent. We're going to find a vehicle that makes sense for your work. We also have to allow for the mystery of it. We can't force it. The only thing I can force is to make sure I'm working every day for these writers. I can only ensure I'm opening as many doors and making as many opportunities for these writers as I can, since I'm the gatekeeper—the only way

they’re going to get to these publishers.

This is a background kind of question but, I was just wondering. Why did you join the Marine Corps?

Well, I actually wanted to join the Air Force, because I thought I’d look better in blue. They had military police and police dogs, and I wanted to get involved with that. But I found out there was a six-month waiting period. I didn’t have the patience for that. So then I went down the hall and talked to the Navy recruiter. Same thing. Six-month waiting period. Then I went to talk to the Army recruiters and they also had a six-month waiting period. I was actually walking out of the building when the Marine recruiter stopped me and said, “You’ve checked out everybody else all morning. Aren’t you even going to ask me any questions?”

Remember, this is 1977, I’d never had a single family member in the military. I looked at this recruiter and said, “You have women in the Marine Corps?” And he said, “Come on in here. Let me show you a film.” Three weeks later I’m at Parris Island.

How long were you in the Marines?

Ten years.

Tracy Crow, center, with attendees of an On Point writing workshop.

Back to the agent stuff. Do you think you’re close to placing something now?

I feel like I’m getting so much good feedback from my romance writer’s book. It’s the military version of The Ya Ya Sisterhood. It’s really intriguing, it’s really good, and it’s

written by the first woman JAG (Judge Advocate General) officer to go into combat and it was down in Panama. It's her first book. I met her in one of my workshops we held in Tampa. She's been workshopping with me for a year. When she finished the book, she came to me.

I do these free workshops every month … four pro-bono workshops every month with these different women veterans groups including military spouses. So, she'd been working on this book for a year and she asked if I would look at it in terms of something I might want to represent. I told her I absolutely want to represent this.

She's also writing a cozy mystery … it's not bloody … it's not violent and it also has some amazing redeeming qualities in terms of the storyline that I'm always looking for. I like it when the story demonstrates a higher purpose. What's the point? Are we just adding to the noise out there, or are we enhancing something?

But this author is really in her lane with the cozy mysteries and I expect she will write one a year and will eventually sign a multiple-book contract with someone.

I'm close with several books, but I know that my authors are counting the days and anticipating my weekly emails.

I do something that I don't think any other agents are doing. When I've had agents, I could go months without ever hearing from anybody. So, I send every one of my clients a Thursday weekly update. They're going to hear from me every Thursday. They're going to know what pitches went out and who we heard back from. Now, if I have an editor that is showing interest, I'm not going to make them wait until Thursday for that. Every one of my clients will be getting their Thursday updates.

That's unheard of!

I know. It's not fun when you don't have a bunch of good news.

It’s not fun when you have rejections to report but at least they know. Those who have had agents before, they’re blown away by the level of access and weekly check-ins. Now, the clients that have never had an agent, they don’t have anything to compare it to, so they’re just …‘Thanks for the update!’

I know what they’re feeling. Every time they check their email. Is there going to be something? I know that feeling. But at the same time I want them to have access and know they have an agent who is working for them every day and every week and they’re not just a client. They matter to me.

You also have to prepare them because sometimes this process can be slow, and other times it feels like it happens overnight. Editors move, they change publishing houses, and then all of a sudden that editor who I knew there who had to say no, can suddenly say yes to something over here. You just have to wait and you have to have faith in your work and faith in one another and give it that time to find its right, perfect vehicle into the world.

It sounds like this is exactly what Tracy Crow should be doing right now. Is that how it feels?

Since I got my MFA in 2005, I’ve had at least a dozen friends say that I really should be an agent. My husband would ask me why I wasn’t an agent. I have to tell you this feels really good, to feel like I’m the champion of these writers and I can go around telling people, ‘You’ve got to read this.’ It feels so good to cheerlead and to champion on behalf of writers who maybe would have been rejected maybe dozens and dozens of times because the market is so flooded with stuff. It’s joyful. It really is.

Is there anything you wish I’d asked that I haven’t asked you?

I’m really impressed with what I’m reading today, as opposed to what I was reading in 2005. Back in 2005, when I would read that writers were getting rejected, it was like they wanted to

jump off a bridge or something. Now, what I'm reading is that writers are like … Next? They may not know why they were rejected but they're not giving up. They have stories to tell and I'm seeing a difference in attitude. It's almost like writers today, and I'm sure I'm generalizing too much, writers almost have this attitude now, that they're going to write regardless. And maybe it's because of the freedom the self-publishing pathway has opened up and offered. It's almost like they will try the traditional way but the traditional way is not going to be the final gatekeeper. And I love that. I applaud that. I want to encourage that. I tell all my writers, look, we may be going this route, but let's not get so hung up on this that we miss other possibilities. Stay open to however it unfolds. I just admire how many people know they are good writers. They know they have stories to tell. I just admire the attitude of writers today, which is … 'I'm gonna go write another book.' That the most important thing is being creative and allowing that creative opportunity, and not allowing people like agents or editors to steal your joy from that.

I'm wondering if the discipline you're seeing and this determination is because your clients have some kind of military connection. Do you think it's because of that, that they are so determined?

At this point, the dogs went berserk. There was barking, the sound of nails sliding across the floor and a brief bit of chaos. Tracy was shooing them out of the room, telling me to hold on because she really wanted to answer that question. When she came back, I didn't have to remind her what the question was. She jumped right in.

What I'm seeing in various chatroom groups, various Facebook groups, there's a level of frustration at times, yes. But I'm noticing that people are saying, 'I'm still writing, I'm still going,' and these people aren't military. It's just a major change. I have friends who stopped writing after their first rejection. They haven't written since 2005. Now, it's almost

like I'm seeing a different attitude that what is more important is the creativity. And they're saying, what if things fall apart and nobody ever gives them this validation they think they need to continue their work … and I've been there, I've needed that validation too. They still know they have a self-publishing pathway that is gaining in esteem if the work is good.

[Self-publishing is] no longer considered so negative. In 2011, I published my first book that way and was scared to death my academic creative writing colleagues would discover that I had, and I would lose my job. I just think the self-publishing avenue has taken a little bit of the pressure off because they know there's still a way they can do it. They know they can still reach readers and still find their own market. I love it!

It's clear that Tracy loves the work. You can see the amount of heart she gives when she's with writers in her workshops or any writer gatherings. People flock to her and appreciate the energy, joy, and support she gives. This agent thing is the right path for her.

Tracy says if you'd like to query her, send her a synopsis of your work. She'll give it a read and if she feels like it's something she can advocate for, she will ask for the manuscript. She said she's reading queries and manuscripts from writers all the time. Contact her at Tracy@TracyCrow.com and include QUERY in the subject line.

Tracy Crow is host and producer of the podcast, Accept Your Gifts: The 22-Minute Podcast for Inspiring Your Most Creative Life, a twice-weekly program with listeners in 12 countries.

She is also the founder of Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC, and the president and CEO of MilSpeak Foundation, Inc., a 501

(c) 3 organization dedicated toward supporting the creative endeavors of military servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

Tracy is the author/editor of six books to include the novella, *Cooper's Hawk: The Remembering*; the popular history, *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan* with co-author Jerri Bell; the award-winning memoir, *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine*; the military conspiracy thriller, *An Unlawful Order*, under her pen name, Carver Greene; the true story collection, *Red, White, & True: Stories from Veterans and Families, WWII to Present*; and the breakthrough writing text, *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story*, in which Tracy combines her skills and experience as a former Marine Corps officer, award-winning military journalist, author, editor, and assistant professor of creative writing and journalism. Tracy's short stories and essays have also appeared in a number of literary journals and anthologies.

She has a B.A. in creative writing from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and an MFA in creative writing from Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina. She and her husband, Mark Weidemaier, an MLB lifer, live on ten storybook acres in central North Carolina with their four dogs – Cash, Fenway, Hadley, and Hope.

The interviewer- M. L. Doyle

M.L. Doyle calls on her years of serving as an Army Reservist to write about women in combat boots. Mary is the author of The Peacekeeper's Photograph, The Sapper's Plot and The General's Ambition in her Master Sergeant Harper mystery series. She has also penned The Bonding Spell and The Bonding Blade, in a planned three-book Desert Goddess urban fantasy series. Limited Partnerships, is her four-novella erotic romance series.

She co-authored the memoirs of two brave soldiers to ensure their stories keep their proper place in history. The memoir, I’m Still Standing: From Captured Soldier to Free Citizen, My Journey Home (Touchstone, 2010) with Spec. (Ret) Shoshana Johnson, an African-American POW of the Iraq War, was finalist in the NAACP Image Award. She also co-authored with Brig. Gen (Ret.) Julia Cleckley the story of her rise through Army ranks from humble beginnings despite great personal tragedy. A Promise Fulfilled, My Life as a Wife and Mother, Soldier and General Officer was published in 2015.

Mary’s essays, reviews and interviews have appeared in The War Horse, The Goodman project, and O-Dark Thirty. She is part of the fiction editorial panel of The Wrath-Bearing Tree.