

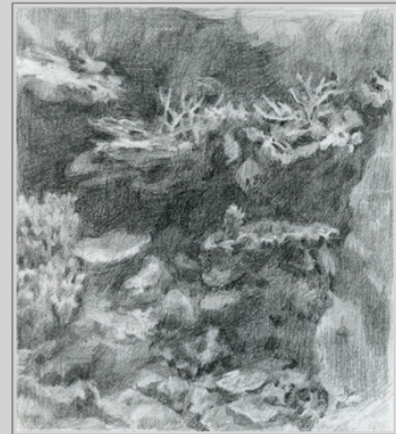


What Does an Ethical Business Look Like When Agents Charge?

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*Driftless
Literary*



2026-2027

It has long been verboten for agents to charge a reading fee or charge clients for representation—and it still is. But since the AALA's Canon of Ethics has been revised



dramatically, one has to ask: Would it actually be *more* transparent, kinder even, for agents to charge what amounts to a consulting fee?

Earlier this summer, I spoke with Jaclyn Gilbert at [Driftless Literary](#), a boutique literary consultancy. She started the firm in 2021 after leaving the New York publishing scene for coastal Connecticut for family reasons. She specializes in helping literary authors who are most likely to find a home with small and independent presses, where the advances are so low it's not worth agents' time to consider them. While she doesn't call herself an agent, her work aligns with that of an agent. Clients pay a flat consulting fee for her to help place their work at a publisher; she doesn't earn a commission. Authors keep 100 percent of royalties, rights sales, and future earnings.

Here's a condensed version of our conversation, edited for clarity.

Jane Friedman: I didn't know about Driftless until I talked with your client Jim Hanas at AWP and he showed me your [catalogue of authors and projects](#), which is very handsome. It was fascinating to me that here is this person from inside publishing [Hanas is a former marketing executive at HarperCollins] who presumably knows everything there is to know about how publishing works, and he is your client, getting assistance. How did Driftless come into being?

Jaclyn Gilbert: I had published my first book about two years earlier, and I had a second book that was ready to go out, and I had a bigger-name agent at that time who was really pressuring it to not only be ready on a certain timeline, but also [for me] to make commercial edits to it. I did all of that, and it came very close to finding a home but didn't. It was basically abandoned within a year after that.

As someone who's been in the industry, who's even worked at a literary agency, I know my experience wasn't an isolated event. I wanted to start thinking about a space that could foster more process-oriented work and still have an agenting arm. Other authors I knew who had similar experiences, they helped me conceive of Driftless almost as a dream collective.





You know, the money has to come from somewhere. I wasn't starting off my business with a set of funds. But I wanted to see what would happen if I just took a few projects. ... I realized most of the projects that I was taking on weren't going to make much more than \$1,000. So that started to inform my business model. Over time I realized I'm not an agency, but I'm a consultancy that is really targeted in the small press landscape and the [independent publishing] landscape, where I've built connections at presses where a \$5,000 advance is at their upper limit.

There's so much talent out there and people that, you know, that's where they see their work and are underserved by the commercial agenting industry. There is room to work with me on a very selective basis. I only take on six projects a year for a set of hours that takes into consideration all that would be needed to prepare that project for submission to places that expect work from Driftless.

Does that mean you're doing editorial work?

In the beginning I was putting in hours and hours of really uncompensated time, and I couldn't sustain that. So my standard is higher for how finished the work needs to be. If I see the potential in a project and an author says, "Hey, could I work with you as an editor to start?" I am open to that, but that's a separate process. I do have different services that are contained within Driftless. I even do coaching, where I help people have greater accountability in their process, as they develop their project. I've done day retreats as well, where I'll help somebody map out the story.

But the consulting package is pretty specific. Most of the time is spent closely evaluating the market that it aims to serve, to think about all the comp titles, think about the submission letter that's going to position it effectively in a very crowded market space. And also to really articulate why Driftless. Most of our work is genre defiant, and it embraces risk, so it's doing something different with form than you would typically come across in a bookstore.

Then I'm planning how I'm sending it out to places and building momentum. The placement process is about four and a half months of work and includes 10 to 12 editors on a list that's highly curated between my insight and connections and where the author sees



the work. If they want to add new editors in, they can, but it is separate, sort of like pressing restart.

Part of why this conversation is so timely or important with the trends you're seeing is that word *agent*—it is so broad, the amount of work it's meant to cover, you know? Like, it's pretty insane. So I think it does make sense why there's a lot of people [getting into] services. [Some agents want to] steer a project to have the highest potential for a sale so the commission can be higher. If you're going to empower the author to be their own agent, that's kind of how I think of [my work], how do you help the author steer things if they're not necessarily looking for a commercial blockbuster.

You mentioned a curated list of publishers. Are those relationships that you've had for some time? Are you branching out to new publishers? I saw on social media you went to London Book Fair, and maybe you're getting introductions to more?

When I was at Janklow & Nesbit, before my MFA, and even before that, I went to the Columbia Publishing Course, where I had a lot of interaction with editors still in the business today, like Emily Bell. She's now at Astra, but before that she was at FSG. Lindsey Schwoeri, who's at Viking—they were all in my class. So I've had a lot of connections, or I've had a lot of continuity in different ways with fellow travelers who've had different journeys in the industry. Some of those connections have been present for years, you know, over 10 years.

Then, at Janklow, I interfaced with a lot of foreign publishers as well, which was part of why Granta had reached out right before London Book Fair to ask for a meeting, and then that allowed me to have some other meetings with Fitzcarraldo and Jonathan Cape (PRH UK). But that is a newer market I'm delving into, because it is an investment. Driftless, while it is viable, at the moment the goal is really sustainability because profit isn't the main focus. I have to be really measured on when I can invest in exciting opportunities like the London Book Fair or other international ones. But this was a year of growth, which was really exciting.





And crossing paths with Jim, first as a client whose book I placed with Coffee House, and now that he's off on his own advising the small press world, you know, he's been extremely instrumental in helping me think about viability and how to be as clear as possible in my communication.

You mentioned you only take on six projects a year. How many clients come to you cold?

When we opened up, it was all referral based. It's only myself and Adrian Shirk, my colleague. I'm the founder and I run the business, but she's my partner in taking on projects and developing them. ... We are working together to build our wheelhouse with projects that are right for us, but we can't blast on the internet that we're open for submissions, because there's only two of us.

Authors do have the option of going into the website and uploading their work [for consideration]. It's a pretty small sample, but that's enough for us to tell whether we want to request the full. I would say that what we've taken on this year has come to us through other channels, like authors who know other authors. Many of them are established authors who either have a previous book published or are very close to having a first book published because they've have a lot of credits in journals and other places, but who have had a lot of difficulty or frustration finding a mainstream agency to represent the work. So they're really ideal for us as a consultancy, to help them get through the barriers, let's say, of a small press that only takes projects on Submittable. But because I have forged a close relationship with them over the past six years, I can go directly.

Is it fair to say you prefer to keep a low profile?

Yeah. The overall message is quality over quantity, process over profit. We need to have all the resources of our time and energy available to optimize the odds of a placement. So for that reason, we only take on a few projects where we really see a strong fit. It's not like, "Oh, this person will pay us, so therefore we'll do it." That's definitely not how we work. There's a high level of selectivity. We want our visions to be aligned with the people that come to us. We want it to be high-quality collaboration. If someone has a lot of impatience about how fast this could happen, that's also not the right fit, because the process is really



built around publishers who are under-resourced and have very long timelines for evaluating and being able to offer on a book. So it can take six months to a year or more to work with us. There could be an author who's very much like, "I want to have results in three months," and that's also not the right fit.

It seems like you've created a unique business that would be hard for others to replicate because of your background, your relationships and your knowledge.

It's definitely tailored. Adrian and I talk about this all the time. There's an existential, philosophical question: What does it mean to make art? Like, how do you make it? How do you marry your writing life with your publishing one? These are questions I wrestle with so much, because I'm trying to create headspace to write. The questions are so interesting and keep it going.

Samuel Beckett said, "Fail better." That's really how I feel about it. This is very much a model built on failure in the same way that art is. Like, you don't really get anywhere until you keep trying, and you have to embrace rejection. And so I have to keep doing things that don't work to figure out what does. There's no way I could be here with a model I feel is viable without the five years of dealing with issues of burnout, trying to create better boundaries for the business, all these other things that needed to happen so that I could say, "Hey, this is the space that does run countercurrent to the traditional publishing landscape."



Jane Friedman [Edit profile](#)

Jane Friedman has spent her entire career working in the publishing industry, with a focus on business reporting and author education. Established in 2015, her newsletter [The Bottom Line](#) provides nuanced market intelligence to thousands of authors and industry professionals; in 2023, she was named Publishing Commentator of the Year by Digital

Book World.

Jane's expertise regularly features in major media outlets such as The New York Times, The Atlantic, NPR, The Today Show, Wired, The Guardian, Fox News, and BBC. Her book, [The Business of Being a Writer, Second Edition](#) (The University of Chicago Press), is used as a classroom text by many writing and publishing degree programs. She reaches