

The 3-Minute Formal Pitch

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My first narrative nonfiction, *Beyond the Darkness*, was published with Bantam in 1995, Random House, Simon & Schuster UK, Pocket Books and others thereafter. After landing a six-figure deal, the book was published in nine languages. *Beyond the Darkness* was well-received and commercially successful and is still finding after-market success with its intended audience. I am currently represented by Jill Marsal, founding partner at Marsal Lyon Literary Agency.

THE SPARROW'S LENS

Narrative Nonfiction

120K words/75% Complete

The Executioner's Song by Norman Mailer, *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote,
Under the Banner of Heaven by John Krakauer

It is July 24th, 1984, Pioneer Day in Utah. Dan Lafferty has always used violence and the word of God to control his wife and children, but now he has reached a new and frightening threshold, has abandoned the family, denounced his faith in the Mormon Church and taken up with a handful of religious zealots. When he converts his brothers to his new extremist views, the youngest of the Lafferty wives, Brenda, pushes back. Dan and eldest Lafferty brother, Ron, claim they are acting on orders from God. They storm Brenda's home and ritualistically take the lives of Brenda and her baby girl.

Seven-year-old Rachel, Dan's oldest daughter, has endured the chaos of her home, her father's religious fanaticism and his unpredictable rage. The chain that keeps Rachel and her family tethered to this monster is a complicated vortex of fear, hate, duty and love.

Angie Fenimore is studying psychology. She stumbles upon the scene. Across the street, an entourage of armed officers and TV reporters outside the courthouse. Clad in orange jumpsuits, chained and shackled, Dan and Ron Lafferty are unmistakable with their disheveled, wild hair and matching, matted beards. Dan Lafferty

turns, and for what seems an eternity, grips Angie's gaze within his. She feels strangely violated. The disturbing intensity in Dan Lafferty's stare leaves her shaken. A phantom ache, a long-buried abscess from her childhood pricks at her. Angie is all too familiar with the inevitable helplessness the family must know. She throws herself into victim advocacy and finds no peace in trying desperately to fix God's mistakes.

Twenty-five years after the murders, Rachel and Angie's paths cross. It is a moment of divine recognition. There is a powerful connection of destiny—of sisterhood. Rachel knows that Angie has come into her life to provide healing. Angie and Rachel both know they have a shared destiny and a twin story to tell.

Rachel is forever tied to the headlines and to the shame of bearing the Lafferty name. She feels the tremors of the disease and begins to crumble as her faith in God is challenged.

Angie must make sense that God allows these things to happen, and Rachel fears she cannot survive the coming-apart, the recreation of self that must occur if she is to see anything but her own father in the mirror.

Dos, Don'ts, and Never-Evers

Lisa Mangum, managing editor at Shadow Mountain, once calculated that she'd sent over 100,000 rejection letters. With that kind of competition, you don't want to tick off all the wrong boxes. This isn't a comprehensive list, but adhering to these protocols will serve you.

- Don't say anything about anyone who loved your project. Don't talk about feedback you've received—ever. They're not interested. They want to know if your project piques their interest.
- Be professional. Dress like a professional. Act like a professional. Look like a pro. Be a pro.
- Don't ask pointless questions, or any questions if you can help it. Write down what they request and then look it up on their website later. Say yes and then sort out the how. For example, if you don't know what a proposal is, Google it, or ask on the FB Live Q&A.
- Don't argue with their feedback or defend manuscript flaws if they point them out. They are doing you a huge service if they provide any feedback for how you can improve your pitch.
- Don't try to engage them in chit-chat. They'll likely be polite, but they'll also be annoyed. They don't want to hear about your misadventures in Iceland. Stick to the script.
- Use present tense in your pitch. And pitch with your real name. They don't care what your pen name is, and they don't want to hear the story about how you came up with it.
- Smile, breathe, enunciate, and slow down. If they miss a word, they will likely check out for 20 seconds. That's what human brains do. If they check out for 20 seconds, they probably won't request pages.
- If you trip up, that's okay. Pause, and go back to the beginning of the line you were on when your words got tangled. If you are nervous, say so very briefly, and then continue.
- Remember, while they hold the keys to the publishing kingdom, they are also human. They're in the biz because they love books, and they love writers.