



“The How-To Magazine For Screenwriters”

## **An Interview With Literary Agent Caren Bohrman**

**By Glenn Bossik**

Scriptologist.com recently spoke with Caren Bohrman, one of the most successful and experienced literary agents in the film industry. Her career spans over two decades, and she has helped bring many films from script to screen.

Bohrman gives personal attention to the screenwriters she represents. She spends time getting to know them and their work. This enables her to match screenplays with producers who are seeking scripts for production.

Bohrman’s main sales tool is honesty—a quality that has helped convince producers to buy scripts from the writers she represents.

**Scriptologist.com (Q):** Which screenplays have you sold and gotten produced?

**Caren Bohrman (CB):** I have been agenting for about twenty years, and in that period of time, I have been involved with over 175 screenplays that have gotten produced. It’s everything from *The Fugitive* to the film, *Warlock*. There was *Crazy/Beautiful*, *Buckaroo Banzai*, and *The United States Of Leland*. We’re presently doing *Used Guys*, *Moving Elliot*, *Twice Burned*, and a remake of the movie, *Ten*.

**Q:** How did you become a literary agent?

**CB:** I was going to be a journalist. I did a story that was censored by the federal government. Then I got my first job in the film industry as a receptionist in a literary agency. [The agency] represented about 200 clients. I read everything that came to the agency. Four months after that, I was promoted to an assistant. Four months after that, I was made an agent. I was responsible for forty-five female writers and directors—the young television writers. Most of them are now running studios.

**Q:** How did you start your own literary agency?

**CB:** I got fired from my first job as an agent after four years because they said, ‘You’re too honest. So, we can’t trust you anymore.’ [This] taught me about the lack of integrity in Hollywood. I’m very straightforward and honest. So I decided I was going to prove to these people that you can be honest and straightforward and still be very successful. I went on to open four or five different literary departments at talent agencies that did not have literary departments. They were all wonderful departments where we were putting together series and feature films, and representing novelists like Irving Wallace. Then I decided it was time to open up my own agency.

**Q:** Was journalism part of your educational background?

**CB:** Yes. Journalism, business, and film.

**Q:** Did you major in journalism in college?

**CB:** Yes.

**Q:** Which college did you attend?

**CB:** I went to Sonoma University. I come from a family of news people. My father was an anchorman. My brother is senior vice president of CNN International. However, my mother has always been a writer for television and screen.

**Q:** She’s produced as well?

**CB:** Yes, she is.

**Q:** What advice would you give an aspiring screenwriter trying to get an agent?

**CB:** I’d say send query letters. Keep your query letters as short and to the point as humanly possible. Don’t try to be too clever or too cute because we get so many of these each day that we really want to see the nitty gritty concept. Also, I highly suggest that young writers include self-addressed stamped postcards with the query letters [instead of] envelopes. A postcard is a lot easier to respond to.

I always read query letters, but I generally will not read a new client unless they come to me with a referral from a studio executive, an attorney, a producer, another client, somebody I know. Once in a blue moon, however, there’s a query letter that does hit me the right way. It may be easier for the people on your [Web] site to query larger agencies that have the manpower in their reading departments.

**Q:** Do you read the scripts yourself?

**CB:** No one else reads here but me. I read hundreds and hundreds of scripts a month.

**Q:** Are there any stylistic or structural qualities you look for in the work of a screenwriter?

**CB:** If there are a lot of typos, I think that's bad. It seems a little unprofessional. I always say, 'The cleanest you can make your script, the most professional looking, the better.' I actually do notes on my clients' scripts. I'll do page notes, which is kind of unusual for agents. I'm happy to get involved in the creative process. It's time consuming, which is another reason I limit the amount of clients I represent. I think it's very important that an agent be tuned into and know a client's script just as well as the client does in order to sell it in the marketplace.

**Q:** Do you have a preference for genre?

**CB:** No preference. Everything in this town is cyclical. Everything sells at different times. I find, for example, that romantic comedies may not sell as well at the end of the year as they do at the beginning of the year.

**Q:** What should the writer and agent expect of each other in the business relationship?

**CB:** First and foremost, total and complete honesty. I think keeping each other filled in as to what's going on within the town and as it applies to each writer's career is very important. I talk to my clients either by phone or email two to three times a week, if not more than that.

**Q:** So, you catch up on their progress and revisions?

**CB:** And how they're doing. There are boundaries, but there also is a personal connection. If I know how my clients are feeling and what they're thinking, I can help them to promote their ideas and to progress to a screenplay or dissuade from things they're working on if I think that there are competitive projects out there. By strategizing with a client about their career, both the writer and the agent come up with ideas they may not have come up with on their own.

**Q:** What type of background would you look for in a screenwriter you're considering representing?

**CB:** I have a soft spot in my heart for young writers who are trying to get in the door. So, I always try to give them some guidance or help if at all possible. I work extensively with professional, working writers who have sold screenplays.

**Q:** In terms of educational background, would there be anything specific you look for?

**CB:** No. I don't believe you can always be taught how to write. Your craft can be honed. And I think that courses and seminars like [Chris \[Soth\]](#) gives, and things you're doing with your [Web] site, are very, very important. I have wonderful writers who have come out of the American Film Institute, USC, NYU. I don't really think it's a level of education. I really think it's trying to hone your craft and establish yourself as a viable entity.

**Q:** Maybe you could tell me what would transpire between you and a production company during the pitch phase and the contract phase of a script sale.

**CB:** I probably speak to 200-300 people each and every day. This is a combination of producers, writers, and studio people. These conversations take place between e-mail and the telephone. If I have a spec script I'm going to be submitting, I will have a list of people who I will call and pitch the script. If they're interested in seeing it, it will be delivered to them the next morning or that day. The script generally gets read overnight. I then get a call from the producer who's read it. The next morning, we talk about it and we decide if it's something that we want them to take into the studio. And then we talk about which studio executive to take the script to. There are times where I will call that studio executive along with the producer. Sometimes, I will just let the producer call them. Once we have interest from the studios, I start the negotiating process, which will go on for eight weeks or so before you'll have contracts that are ready to be signed. I recommend that an attorney be brought in somewhere during this negotiation period to assist the writer as well.

**Q:** Traditionally, has there been anything that would seal the deal? Something that would prove that this script is marketable and has a pre-established audience?

**CB:** I think things with franchise potential, or material that is branded, is always helpful. The reality is that a really terrific screenplay will sell. It doesn't need to have anything else more for it. You want it to be able to attract an A-list cast. You want it to attract an A-list director. Sometimes we go out and find that talent and that director first. For example, we have a project right now that Jay Roach is going to be directing and Ben Stiller and Jim Carrey will be starring in. That package doesn't hurt. Nine out of ten times, you will decide a script needs to have elements attached prior to actually sending it to studios. With the way the spec market has been working lately, it's always beneficial to have elements attached to the screenplays.

**Q:** You mean actors and directors as the elements?

**CB:** Yes. A-list actors, directors.

**Q:** Would you say specs scripts have a chance in this remake-driven adaptation market?

**CB:** Absolutely.

**Q:** So, there's still hope for aspiring screenwriters?

**CB:** The hope should be as strong as it ever was, even if it's a little bit more difficult and if it takes a little bit longer because you need to attach the elements, or you want to attach the elements. The most important thing to do is to get the great material to a really strong producer who believes in the material and understands it. The 800-pound guerilla producers are your best bet in most cases. Scott Rudin. That sort of producer.

**Q:** Is there anything that helps you establish rapport with these producers?

**CB:** As a writer or as an agent?

**Q:** As an agent.

**CB:** Constant communication with the producers. If they're looking for something specific, I will send it to them if I have it. If I don't, I won't. I think they really respond to that. That pertains to samples for open writing assignments, as well as the kind of spec material they're looking for.

**Q:** Would you say your working methodology fits into the old Hollywood ideal of looking up actors who have played a specific type of role when you need an actor who has done that?

**CB:** I look at things a little more out of the box. I generally do not look at actors who have played a certain kind of role to play that role again. I try to go to the opposite extreme and say, 'This person has never played this role. Maybe this person would be great for this role.' I think there's a lot of creative thinking that needs to go into agenting. Without that, scripts are going to fall flat. I work very closely with other agencies in town and management companies that have great talent. We'll go out and say, 'This person has never played this role. This is an A-list person. Maybe they've always wanted to play a good guy or a dramatic role or a comedic role.' Sometimes, you find out that that's very much the case and it works very well.

**Q:** Have you recruited writers who have won major screenwriting competitions?

**CB:** I am not a huge advocate of the screenwriting competitions. I think screenwriting is competitive enough. Competitions just put more stress and strain on the writers. I *have* signed people who have been finalists in the top six [screenwriting competitions] and people who have won a lot of different screenwriting competitions. But I never read them on that merit alone.