

PITCH PERFECT

Seriously funny

There is much to learn from Christopher Stevens' professional approach to pitching, finds Kate Pain

When Christopher Stevens approached Michael O'Mara Books with *The Masters of Sitcom: From Hancock to Steptoe*, his anthology of Ray Galton and Alan Simpson scripts, he had all his ducks in a row: exclusive material with exclusive permissions presented via a well-structured pitch.

But this had been a long time coming; three years in fact, during which he read some 600 'lost' scripts. Driving this research was his life-long passion for the comedy duo's work. There wasn't a book deal as such, rather he, Galton and Simpson (whom he'd met when writing his Kenneth Williams' biography) agreed to 'just do it and sort out the practicalities later'. As Chris says, *The Masters of Sitcom* was a 'labour of love'.

And it is this passion that also set his pitch aside. Stevens says: 'No one wants to read something precious, pompous, reserved and distant. They want to read something alive and exciting. What sells as a pitch is the passion for the book itself.'

This was a lesson learnt from his agent, Heather Holden-Brown from the HHB agency, who when working with him on *A Real Boy*, a non-fiction account of his son's autism, encouraged him to write about subjects that stirred him in the same way he talked about them – advice which has stayed with him throughout.

The Masters of Sitcom: From Hancock to Steptoe, is the third of Chris's books to be signed by

Michael O'Mara. Editor Kate Moore admits that when she received the submission for *The Masters of Sitcom* via HHB, she immediately looked at it with a positive eye because, she says, Chris is a 'dream to work with'. He has a reputation for delivering quality copy on time, is receptive to editing and has a flair for publicity.

Additionally, his biography of Kenneth Williams, *Born Brilliant*, had recently been published and was a critical and commercial success, securing Chris public-profile status and suitable expertise for this anthology.

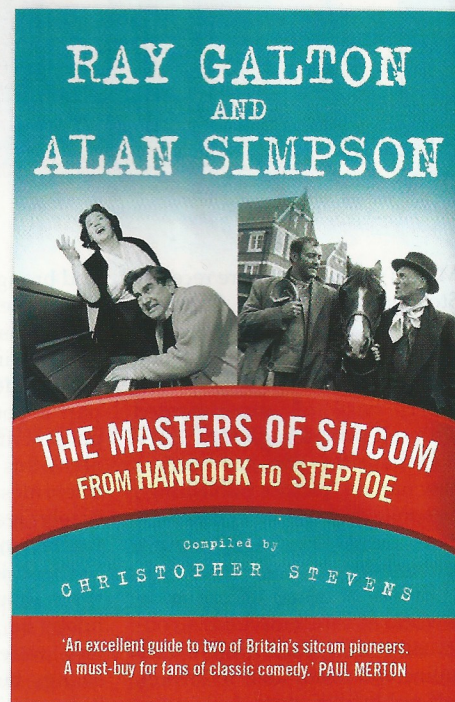
Galton and Simpson's exclusive involvement also lifted the submission. Kate explains that their work is perennially popular and so she knew there was a market for the book.

'By selling the book as an official, seminal volume, rather than A.N. Other book going over old ground, it immediately made it a more worthwhile project.'

The mechanics of the pitch

Michael O'Mara doesn't have formal submission guidelines, but nevertheless Chris presented his pitch for *The Masters of Sitcom* in a structured format (see below).

This three-tiered approach enabled Kate to grasp Chris's vision for the book in detail. She recalls that he also included a page on how publication in 2011 would coincide with several landmark Galton and Simpson anniversaries and provided an analysis of the



book's market and existing competition.

At the time, she replied saying: 'Chris, as usual, the proposal was a joy to read, so well written and packaged in excellent fashion with really helpful selling points.'

Kate did have concerns, however, regarding *The Lost Hancock Scripts*, published by JR Books in October 2010. She wanted to be sure that Chris's book had additional 'lost' material, so that this publication didn't steal his thunder. Chris and his agent reassured her that this rival featured only 10 scripts, whereas he had been working with 600.

In addition, Chris emailed a thorough breakdown of the quantity of exclusive material per chapter, which he summarised as follows:

'So that's all of Ch 1, about 10% of Ch 3, at least 80% of Ch 4 and (probably) 75% of Ch 6 that is completely unseen, unpublished and rescued from the Galton & Simpson vaults.'

It is, perhaps, because of this detail and precision that Kate has grown to have such confidence in Chris' work.

The editing process

When Kate received Chris's manuscript, she remembers that overall it was in good shape; the copy was 'smooth-running, interesting and fairly clean'. This was then sent to copy editor Rodney Burbeck whose job was to make the 118,000 words stylistically consistent. The edited manuscript came back to Kate six weeks later.

'At this point,' she recalls, 'I realised Chris's use of "chapter links" wasn't working – there were too few chapters in a manuscript of this

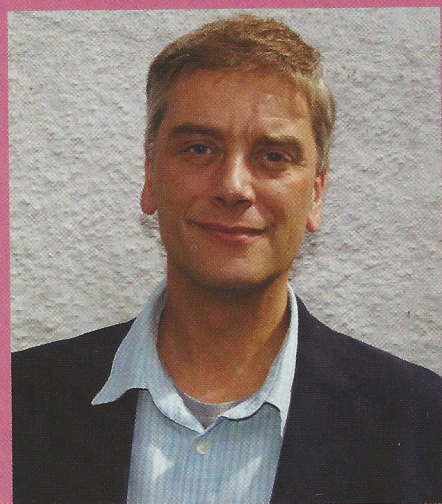


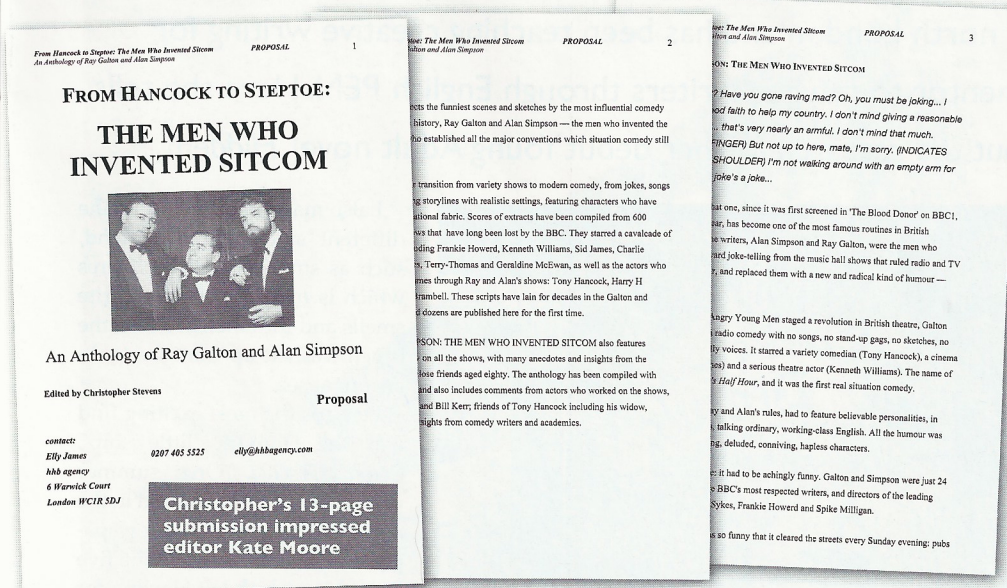
Photo James Stevens

Christopher's guide to pitching

- 1 Provide an in-depth explanation of what the book sets out to do and what is new about it. Present this as a narrative, as you are demonstrating your skills as a writer as well as sharing facts. At the end of the proposal, lay out the bare bones of the book: how long it is intended to be, when it will be ready, your background, your relevant expertise, promotional ideas and so on.
- 2 Bear in mind this is not the first thing the editor will look at, so boil this full proposal down and get the key points on to one or two pages. Present this as a précis.
- 3 Include at least a chapter of the book itself, to prove to the editor that it exists and is what the proposal promises it will be.

ACCEPTED

We talk to top agents and publishers about a recently signed author and ask what made the submission stand out



size – and some of the chronology was out.' Chris reworked the order of some content so that material from the early years came at the start of the book.

Kate also wanted to make more of Chris's narrative. She felt that at times it skipped over incidents and didn't give enough detail on the wider context of the scripts. Unlike Chris and Rodney, she was unfamiliar with Galton and Simpson's work and so was viewing the copy with fresh eyes.

'She asked for elucidation on hints and inside jokes,' says Chris. She asked questions that made me think, 'Ah, I've said something stupid there – of course no one who isn't already familiar with the material would understand that.'"

Additionally, Kate wanted to know more about the era: the background behind the scripts' genesis.

'What I love about this book is that it is part-memoir and part-anthology,' she says. 'Chris's interviews with Ray and Alan set their success in context, both historically and socially – there are some lovely snapshots of life in the 1960s. I wanted a bit more commentary to complement the scripts.'

Chris integrated some new material with his 'usual efficient yet sensitive manner' so that it blended with the existing text. Kate is quick to add that while this may sound like there was a lot of editing involved, in terms of the actual line-by-line edit, there wasn't. It was more about making suggestions on the overall picture, which Chris then carried out.

Publicity

Chris is heavily involved in the publicity of his books. He tirelessly sought celebrity endorsements for *Masters of Sitcom* and secured quotes from Paul Merton, Harry Enfield, David Walliams, Matt Lucas, Frank Skinner, Freddie Hancock (Hancock's widow), Barry Cryer, Graham Stark, Graeme Garden and Andrew Collins. 'An impressive list by

anyone's standards,' Kate says.

Chris has also gone the extra mile by making stage appearances, first for *Born Brilliant: the life of Kenneth Williams* at the Cheltenham Festival, then at the National Theatre's Cottesloe alongside Galton and Simpson for *The Masters of Sitcom*.

He attributes his enthusiasm for publicity to his journalistic background; Chris is currently a senior sub-editor for *The Observer*.

'I am very keen to publicise because I know what news editors want to feature in their paper – what will cause a splash,' he explains. But he adds, he can only do so much and a good publicity agent, such as Michael O'Mara's Ana McLaughlin, is vital to a book's success.

He says: 'Ana is extremely hard working, she really knows her stuff and is a lateral thinker who constantly comes up with lots of new ideas. The reason Michael O'Mara sells the books it does is because she is such a strong publicist.'

This praise also extends to Kate, whom he describes as an extremely hard-working editor who is very secure in her talent.

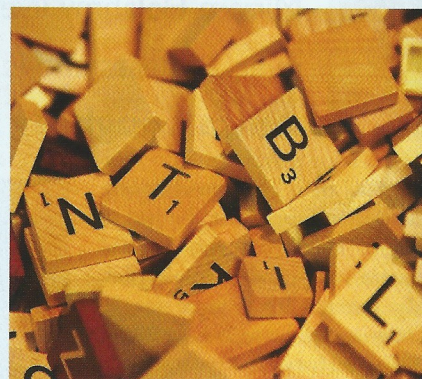
'She is not afraid to let you know something is wrong – that the point she is making needs to be addressed. Writers need that,' he says. 'It is such an introspective way of earning a living that sometimes you convince yourself that you are doing it the best way.'

All in all, Chris is a big fan of the Michael O'Mara team, and it would seem they are of him. Although it is a small operation with tight margins, they work very hard and sell a lot of books, he says. Moreover, 'they are sticklers for detail' – and perhaps this is where the real meeting of minds occurs. Between them, *The Masters of Sitcom* has left no stone unturned.

• *The Masters of Sitcom: From Hancock to Steptoe*, by Christopher Stevens is published by Michael O'Mara Books Ltd and retails at £20.

QUICKFIX
with Vanda Inman

Top titles



The first point of contact between a story and its reader is the title. Titles are so important they can often make the difference between a story being read or passed over for another, so it's important to spend time thinking of a title which will entice your reader as soon as they see it.

Titles have no copyright, so although you are legally able to use someone else's, it's always best to think up an original one of your own, although a twist on a well known title or song is often a good idea.

The title should, in some way, reflect the style, content or theme of the story. It can even be used in the first or last line, giving a sense of continuity throughout. Short titles are often more eye-catching than long, drawn-out ones.

- Cover a piece of paper in titles – just let them flow and be as creative as you can. Then make a list of your favourites for future use.
- Take five of the titles and outline stories to follow.
- Read a published story and think up five different titles for it. This is a good exercise for writing groups. Discuss the most popular and analyse why it was successful.
- Study published stories and work out why the author used that particular title.
- Write a story using the title in the first and last lines.
- Try to avoid titles which have been used before – make yours fresh and original.

Ensure your title is the tops!

Vanda Inman runs distance-learning courses and a critique service through her company Write Space. Visit www.writespace.co.uk