

Handling Rejection



When you start out as a writer you hardly know what to expect, and even when you get a response to work you have sent out (mostly you just don't hear a thing) it is difficult to know what to make of the rejection letter. Rejection is frustrating and it can also be very damaging. If you are a practising writer, then like death and taxes, rejection is certain, normal and even unavoidable. But how do we handle it...?



Carl Tighe

When I started writing as a free-lance I used to blue-tack rejection slips to my wall. I did this partly out of contempt for the miserable buggers who had refused to publish my work, but also because I was puzzled by the rejections. I used to wonder what, exactly, did they mean? After about two years I stopped. I ran out of wall space: they were taking over the place. And by this time it had become clear to me that the rejections did not mean necessarily anything much, except that they were not planning to publish my work. While they were trying to break the news as politely as possible, they were reluctant to be specific about their reasons because they feared that if they told me why they were not taking my work, I would disagree, want to argue, debate, discuss, try to persuade them. Now, if I were to put up my collected rejections, Hadrian's Wall might just about be large enough, maybe.

Editors are often very unhelpful. Here are some examples from my experience:

Sorry, this story has been with us for six months now, but you see it went to the bottom of the pile by mistake and got lost for a while. But now we have finally got around to it perhaps you would like to resubmit it...

Sorry we were going to include this in issue number 65...

This has been done before, of course...

I liked the... but in general it's a bit too... for our readers.

Not this. Have you got anything else in the pipeline?

Sorry. Full up, no matter how good your story might be. Try again in six months.

There are so many stories on this theme, and we've published our fair share. Don't think we want another...

The worst response is: Silence. But don't kid yourself. That is also a rejection.

Remember, editors certainly do not know more than you do about your work. But they often see the work more clearly than you do – you are very close to what you have written, too close to see it clearly. They can usually distinguish poor quality writing from an experiment that does not quite come off. They almost certainly recognise poverty of ideas and second hand characters. They know what they have published and when an idea has been done too many times or too recently. They certainly know more than you about the context (markets, readership, fashion, style, subject matter etc.) in which they are publishing or performing.

Often Rejection is part of what I call Beginner's Tax. That is, it is the price writers pay for getting to know how things work the painful way. That is putting it politely. One of the most common reasons for rejection is that the writer has failed to research their market properly and sent it to an inappropriate place. Don't send a stage play to the radio, don't send a radio play to the stage. Don't send a short story to a theatre offering to adapt it - they don't have the

time, the energy or the imagination necessary to visualise an adaptation. If you want to offer an adaptation, then do the adaptation and send that. Don't send a raunchy tale of steamy lesbian sex to the *Christian Science Monitor*; don't send poems about alien invaders to *The Watchtower*; don't send stories to a poetry magazine; and don't send hard tech sci-fi stories to romantic fiction magazines. Don't send poems in praise of David Cameron to *The Guardian*, etc.

Think about how your piece of work will fit into the publication where you want to place it. If it is a stage play, ask, can it be performed on stage or would it be better on radio. When I worked in the theatre a lovely sweet lady used to send me a play - the same play - on a regular basis. The reason it was rejected was always the same - it contained the stage direction: 'At this point the mountain collapses, rock and stone burst in the windows, the walls of the school collapse, crushing the entire village. There are no survivors.' On TV and film you can do this - it is expensive, but it can be done. On radio you can do this, as long as you have someone there to tell you what it is you are hearing - otherwise it is just a noise. But this was not a film or a TV play, and it was not a radio play. This was a stage play. How was this to be achieved on stage? She had no idea, and neither did I, but she could not understand that it was a problem. She said, 'But they do that sort of thing on the TV. I've seen it.' Well, yes, they can do what looks like the collapse of a mountain on TV. But on stage?

However, the fundamental reason for most rejections is that the writer has not read enough around what it is they are trying to write. To be a writer you must be a reader. There are no two ways about this. It is not an option. You must read. Professional writing is not an entertainment, or a hobby. Reading is an essential part of the work. Most freelance writers spend their mornings writing and their afternoons reading. You need to know what has been done and what can be done, and you need to know how other authors did what they did. And the only way you can find out is by reading. The general rule is: if you write plays, then read plays; if you write stories, then read stories; if you write poetry, then read poetry. But read everything else as well.

It may come as a surprise to find that there are established categories of rejection. They vary from place to place, but understanding these categories will certainly help you decide what to make of the responses you get to your writing. I spent more than two years reading scripts for radio and TV at BBC Wales. We had five basic categories of rejection:

- (a) Praise the play, but say, it needs rewrites
- (b) Praise the author and say, maybe soon, but not yet and not with this play
- (c) Neutral rejection saying that this is not quite right for us, the programme is already full, no slots for next six months, no money etc
- (d) Script returned with negative or discouraging remarks from readers attached

- (e) Outright rejection - script simply returned and writer actively discouraged from submitting anything again.

The situation is this. As a freelance reader I got about £5 per script (OK Yes, we are going a back a bit...). Some scripts were just a few pages, barely an outline, others were massive, running up to nearly 200 pages. There was no bonus for finding a good script, and for this paltry fee I was expected to wade through some terrible drivel at unknown cost to my patience and mental stability. For the most part script readers are writers, and they are genuinely looking for nuggets of talent and diamonds among the dross. Like everyone else they have bad days and they make mistakes, but an experienced reader (like an experienced writing tutor) will tell you within a few lines whether the script is likely to be any good or not. Experienced script readers said they could judge whether it was worthwhile reading the whole play on the strength of the first half page of dialogue. Certainly by the end of the first page they had a very clear sense of whether the writer knew what they were doing. The next five pages merely confirmed that opinion. They were nevertheless obliged to read it all.

If you have not heard anything about your play or story or novel after 1 month, ring up the theatre/publisher and ask to speak to the person responsible. If there has been no action after 2 months ring up again and ask to speak to the person responsible. If after 3 months there has been no sign of life, and you feel that they are not taking your work seriously, ring up and ask to speak to the person responsible. If they cannot satisfy you at this point, then write a polite note withdrawing the play/story and asking for its immediate return. If they cannot deal with the play/story within three-six months then they are not really interested and you lose nothing by taking your work elsewhere. It is their loss; it is not yours; so don't feel bad about it. You can't afford to let your work sit around idle for months on end. You struggled to make it and now, if you are to survive and prosper, it must earn its keep.

If you ask for the script to be withdrawn and nothing happens, if they mess you around, fail to read your work, fob you off for months on end, don't be afraid. If necessary go to the theatre or the publisher or the magazine and demand that they return your work, demand that they put it in your hand this very minute. Then sit back and enjoy the fun as they focus their minds on the impossibility of a writer withdrawing their work. The Shame! The Red Faces! And then enjoy the increasing embarrassment when they realize they do not even know where it is! But, think hard before you do this, and whatever happens don't leave without your work. This is not a stunt where you can afford to bluff and it is not something you can do a second time. When you have done this, you must expect never to darken their doors again.

In my personal experience Theatre Clwyd holds the record for failing to deal with a script dithering and lying over a period of 9 years (no, the script never arrived here; yes it was accepted; no we sent it back to you; yes there will be a production, we are costing the designs now; no we have never heard of you or your play). And in that case my decision to withdraw the work (I turned up

at the theatre and demanded the return of the script) was followed by a very nasty letter of rejection. You must expect sour grapes.

If your work is rejected, and they tell you why, then be thankful because it is a bonus; mostly they do not do so. I had one letter that read: 'Your story is too long, but if it was any shorter we would not like it any better.' At least somebody has taken the time and trouble to write. If they show you how you can improve your work, remember, they don't do that for everybody. The advice may lead nowhere, but someone somewhere took note of your work and treated it seriously. That is a substantial courtesy in a rather less than courteous world: so consider the advice very, very carefully.

However, if, when you read the comments on your script you may suspect they have not read your work. You are probably right. I had a package returned un-opened by a literary agent who wrote: 'I am sorry but I really don't feel in sympathy with your writing at the moment.' I was tempted to point out that in order to feel sympathy he would have to actually open the manuscript and read it, but clearly there was no point. In fact, there is never any point in arguing. Pointing out to that they have misread, have not followed the plot, got the characters' names wrong etc will not endear you to them. The BBC was particularly conscientious about these things, but publishers are rather cavalier, and theatres, in my experience, are frankly inadequate in this. Basically whatever they say, you have no choice but to grin and bear it: no amount of kicking, screaming, moral blackmail or intellectual debate will change their mind. But you are not obliged to send them anything else.

I mentioned that there were 5 basic categories of rejection. There is in fact a 6th, sometimes called the Yosser, named after a character in Alan Bleasdale's TV drama *The Boys from the Blackstuff*. Yosser was a brickie who was always saying 'Gi's a job - I could do that'. This is where the Rejection comes from a reader who is a frustrated writer, one who delights in telling you how they would have done it so much better, and generally does not shirk from informing you of how brilliant they are and how rubbish you are. This rejection is designed to make you feel you have irretrievably squandered an opportunity, that you are a nitwit and a nincompoop and that you are so hopeless you should sling your laptop now. This rejection may be cunningly worded to look like an invitation to rewrite, but in fact it is designed to put you off altogether. In other words, it has little to do with what you have written. If you get one of these, ignore it - and don't let them get their hands on your work ever again. If the reader could write it any better than you, they would have done so in the first place, and they would not be doing their present job. They would be famous – or at least respected – a well published literary figure, they might be in Hollywood or they might even be millionaires. But the fact is they didn't and they aren't. Mercifully most editors are sensible, so a Yosser is fairly rare.

Writers of the past have encountered rejection, and it has never been pretty. Charlotte Bronte (age 20) sent a collection of her poems to the editor / Poet Laureate, Robert Southey (age 62). He told her:

Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it. To those duties you have not yet been called. You will then not seek in the imagination for excitement.

She wrote afterwards that she felt ashamed she had ever troubled the man with her 'crude rhapsody'. She almost abandoned writing completely, and it was to be fully ten years before she triumphed with *Jane Eyre*.

Gertrude Stein, on the other hand, was made of sterner stuff. Her early rambling and repetitive poem - 'I am only one, only one, only one' - caused the editor to reply:

I am only one, only one, only one. Only one life to live, only sixty minutes in one hour... Having only one time, having only one life, I cannot read your manuscript three or four times. Not even one time. Only one look, only one look is enough. Hardly one copy would sell here. Hardly one. Hardly one...

Stein, who put herself on a par with the authors of *The Bible* and with Shakespeare, was a tough cookie and hardly dented by this rejection.

When James Joyce's *Dubliners* was rejected he wrote to his publisher:

I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having a good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking glass.

But when Joyce's publisher tried to get an endorsement for *Ulysses* from George Bernard Shaw, Shaw replied:

In Ireland they try to make a cat cleanly by rubbing its nose in its own filth. Mr Joyce has tried the same treatment on the human subject.

Perhaps the prize for the best put-down goes to Samuel Johnson, who wrote to one author:

Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original and the part that is original is not good.

But the prize for the best scream of rage must go to D. H. Lawrence, who after the rejection of *Sons and Lovers* wrote:

Curse the blasted, jelly-boned swines, the slimy, the belly wriggling invertebrates, the miserable sodding rotters, the flaming sods, the snivelling, dribbling, dithering, palsied pulseless lot that make up England. They've got white of egg in their veins, and their spunk is that

watery it's a marvel they can breed. Why, why, why was I born an Englishman?

Hats off to Lawrence, I say.

Writers have no cause for great confidence in agents and publishers. We often assume that literary agents and publishers are in business to find and nourish literary talent and to publish the best that has been thought and written. But the truth is mundane: nice writing is a fine thing, but agents and editors are trying to find a book that will sell. They are trying to find an author who will earn them money. They are thinking of their pension and their bank balance.

Literature and Profit are not often compatible, and often the publishing world greets a masterpiece with nothing more than a shrug. Franz Kafka sold only a couple of stories in his lifetime: William Golding took *Lord of the Flies*, his fifth attempt at a novel, to 21 publishers before it was spotted by Faber & Faber. Joyce took *Dubliners* to 32 publishers. J. P. Donleavy took *The Ginger Man* to 36. Dr Seuss's *And to Think that I Saw it on Mulberry Street* was rejected by 24 publishers. Richard Adams' *Watership Down* was rejected by 7 publishers. John Grisham's *A Time to Kill* was rejected by every major publishing house, and Wynwood publishing printed 5,000 copies before they went bankrupt – it was only when film companies showed an interest in his as yet unpublished *The Firm*, that Doubleday signed him up and he went on to become the biggest selling US author of the 1990s. Faber, who had published Yann Martel's earlier work turned down *Life of Pi*, so he took it to Canongate Books – it proved to be his most successful book.¹

Paul Harding had trouble getting his debut novel, *Tinkers*, published. He signed with Bellevue Literary Press, a small publisher, but *Tinkers* remained so obscure that *The New York Times* Book Review ignored it completely. But it won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize. Over a 3 year period the Limerick civil servant Donal Ryan got 47 rejections for his first two novels, but eventually an intern at Dublin's Lilliput Press fished *The Thing About December* out of the slush pile, and an editor at Doubleday Books took interest in *The Spinning Heart*. Eventually he got a two-book deal, and the Booker Foundation put *The Spinning Heart* on the Man-Booker Prize long list.

J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was turned down by 15 publishers before being accepted by Bloomsbury. But even then Bloomsbury only offered Rowling a meagre £2,500 advance. After the success of the Harry Potter novels Rowling began to write under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith and received the standard brush off letters from publishers. In 2016 she published two of her rejection letters in order to encourage new writers. The first letter was from Creme de la Crime publishers, explaining that they had become part of Severn House

¹ Carl Wilkinson (ed.), *Observer Book of Books*, Observer Books: London, 2008, p.28.

Publishers and were therefore not accepting any new manuscripts for consideration. This is a fairly common problem and it is often very difficult to keep up with which conglomerate owns which publishing house and the attendant changes in policy. However, the letter from Constable & Robinson, says it could not publish *The Cuckoo's Calling* with any hope of 'commercial success', and suggests politely that Galbraith should 'double check in a helpful bookshop' or in the twice yearly 'buyer's guide of *Bookseller* magazine', about who the current publishers of his fiction genre are. It ends up by adding that 'a writers' group or writing course may help' to get constructive criticism of this debut crime novel. Rowling has something like seven million twitter followers, so this is a cause of severe embarrassment for the publishers concerned. My point is that if this kind of thing happens to J. K. Rowling, then it can happen to anyone.²

It is a well-established phenomenon that in order to become respected, in order to gain a sensitive and sensible following, in order to interest publishers, writers (and other artists) often have first to become successful with another publishing house, or better still to become safely dead – though this is a strategy most are reluctant to explore.

There is no science to judging new literary work. Editors like what they like. They guess at how the reading public will respond to new work. But if writers had relied on established agents and reputable publishers very little of what we now think of as 'Modern English Literature' - the modern classics - would ever have seen the light of day. Self-publishing has long been the writers' answer to poor agents and reluctant publishers. In the past it has been a lifeline for Walpole, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Thackeray, Robert Burns, Walt Whitman, Virginia Wolf, Gertrude Stein, John Galsworthy, Rudyard Kipling, Beatrix Potter, Paine, Byron, Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, W. H. Davies, Zane Grey, William Carlos Williams, Stephen King and Susan Hill.

These are just some of the writers who paid for the publication of their own work or who set up their own imprints to get their work published. If they had not done this we would never have seen *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Dubliners* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. More recently, as the take-overs and buy-outs of the early 1990s began to show themselves in the way that the new publishing conglomerates dominated taste and publication, writers have increasingly been forced to make their own arrangements rather than stick with the behemoths. James, Fenton, Christopher Reid, Timothy Mo and Jill Paton Walsh all 'made other arrangements' for their work to be published.³ And if Roddy Doyle had not paid a small press to publish it, *The Commitments* would never have become the success it is. Jill Paton Walsh's self-published *Knowledge of Angels* was even short listed for the Booker Prize.⁴ More

² www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-35899243: 'JK Rowling shares Robert Galbraith rejection letters'.

³ R. McCrum, 'Publisher be Damned', *The Guardian*, 3 May 1995, p.4.

⁴ P. Finch, *How to Publish Yourself*, Alison & Busby, London, 1987, p.19.

recently EL James first self-published published *Fifty Shades of Grey* as an e-book before it was taken up by a 'proper' publisher to sell 125 million copies world-wide. Andy Weir's *The Martian* was published chapter by chapter, for free, on the author's own blog page, before it became an audio book and finally got published and turned into an award winning film.

The problem with self-publishing is finding the money up-front, editing to a high enough standard, printing sufficient copies to get your initial outlay back, persuading reviewers to look at books from an unknown publisher, getting a distributor to take on the books, then getting your money or the unsold books back from the bookshops. But in spite of these problems, with publishing in such a mess and the book market fragmented to impossibility, we certainly are looking at help-yourself time.

In addition to self-publishing, the Internet and on-line publishing are also proving to be a kind-of salvation for writers, by-passing the power and taste of the big publishers. Amazon, for example, has a self-publish facility that has been welcomed by new authors. Also Kindle Direct Publishing gives authors up to 70% of the purchase price, allowing authors to retain copyright in a non-exclusive deal. In the US authors now collectively earn more from e-books than authors handled by the so-called Big Five publishers. Amazon's e-book sales are said to be worth a million dollars per year in the USA alone.⁵ On the other hand just because your work is posted on the Internet it does not mean that anyone will ever find it, look at it, or that you can actually make money from it.

The first writer to post his work on the net was probably Keith Hunter of Withington in Manchester who published *Scannan* in 1997.⁶ But Stephen King is the one who will be remembered for believing in 2000 that an honour system of payment for internet instalments would work. He then rather publicly withdrew his Internet novel after realising people were happy to read his work without paying. It does however seem likely that within a few years there will be software available that will allow writers to get paid for their work on the Internet. But how they get a readership is still likely to be a problem.

You might also like to think about how you present your work. Here are some comments I collected from authors' letters – they are all absolute turn-offs for editors and publishers – and no, I did not invent them...

My doctor suggested I might take up writing after my third nervous breakdown...

I wrote this just after my divorce, but I've changed all the names...

I've lodged a copy of this with my solicitor...

This is a re-working of *Gone with the Wind*...

I could adapt this novel as a play if you like...

⁵ D. Shaw, 'Is self-publishing coming of age in the digital world?' BBC News 9 February 2016: www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-35482345.

⁶ A. Cronshaw, 'Internet Writer', *South Manchester Reporter*, 10 August 2003, p.9.

I could adapt this play as a novel if you like...
My dog/budgie/goldfish/rabbit died recently and so I thought...
My next door neighbour says this is the funniest story she has ever...
My mom / my teacher says I am a great writer....
I've had an offer from Hollywood and my agent is negotiating the film rights...

Remember:

- writing is a very tough business
- other people don't always know a good thing when they see it
- if you believe in your work someone will eventually agree with you
- pig-headedness (of the right kind) pays off in the end
- always be polite – it is so unsettling, and so very irritating for editors, when an author is polite; and for a writer it is so gratifying to know you occupy the moral high-ground
- always take the rejection slips off your work before you send it on to the next publisher.

When I have finished something I want it out there, working, earning its keep. My policy is to always have a stamp, an envelope and an address, ready to send work out to another publisher. Provided I am not taken up with rewriting because of the reader's report, I try to turn work around within 24 hours. If work comes back to me on Monday morning, it is generally in the post to another publisher by the next morning. It is a matter of pride, dignity, confidence, an unwillingness to be beaten. I am bloody minded about this. I tell myself they have let a masterpiece slip through their fingers. I keep things in circulation until they sell or until I decide to rewrite them. If there is another way, I don't know about it.

However, the best way to handle Rejection is to avoid it. The main underlying reason for not getting published is often identical to the main reason for under-performance in university study - simply that the student /writer did not carry forward and apply what they learned and did not pay sufficient attention to the fundamentals. The five common basic mistakes apply equally to coursework and to publication:

- ◆ Poor research of the market
- ◆ Not following the Style Sheet
- ◆ Ignoring experienced advice
- ◆ Poorly presented manuscripts
- ◆ Lack of dedication

Often rejection is simply the price writers pay for not knowing the practical side of the business: it is that is the case you are just wasting paper, time and postage. Consult *The Writers Handbook* and *The Writers and Artists Yearbook*. Look at the magazines / theatres / agents / publishers you are

intending to submit to. Don't be afraid of rejection: it is part of your work. Embrace it. Or as Zadie Smith puts it, the trick is to learn how to 'fail better'.⁷

To be a writer you should have some talent, and you should apply that talent. But above all you must be very determined. Filling in finance forms, checking submission guidelines, researching the market, following Style Sheets, meeting deadlines, dealing with editors, pitching and presenting, and endlessly editing and re-submitting manuscripts can be tedious. These things are not what writers prefer to do, but as a professional writer you will need to do them all. It is much the same at university. For each new module, engage even with the parts you do not find so interesting. Remember knowledge is cumulative: it is about carrying forward what you have learned to the next module and to your next piece of writing. Often success in writing is not about brilliance, but about the persistent application of whatever talent you have. If you want to succeed, that is how it really works...

⁷ Zadie Smith, 'Fail better', *The Guardian*, 13 January 2007.