

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Slush pile confidential

So your novel's been turned down 100 times? Don't worry about it, you're in very exalted company.

BY DAWN RAE DOWNTON

Woody Allen flunked film-making and English at New York University. Elvis Presley got a C in music in high school. Salé and Pelletier came second before they came first. Pepsi Cola has gone bankrupt three times. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was rejected 121 times before it went on to sell three-million copies. The Peter Rabbit books sell five-million copies in 35 languages annually, but Beatrix Potter herself had to produce the first run when she couldn't find a publisher.

Aspiring writers everywhere know these things. Does it make them feel any better? It should, and it doesn't.

In my case, it didn't help a bit. What did it matter that one day, after a long and distinguished career in rejection, I, too, would prevail?

In the clearing stood a boxer. But around him, the entire publishing industry was going down to rot.

For the past couple of years, the "Whither CanLit?" debate has weighed on the problem of Chapters returns; the Indigo-Chapters buyout; big-box retailers vs small independents; e-books vs real books; the Incredible Shrinking Indigo.ca vs the northbound creep of Amazon.com; the loss of book-review pages in Canadian newspapers; and the occasional windfalls for new novelists – whose careers may collapse under the weight of expectation.

Lately it's such a dizzying, high-stakes cycle of doom and redemption that the erstwhile hand-wringing by publishers, retailers and writers alike seems naive.

Remember the Don't Tax Books outcry all those years ago? Did writers really think books might escape the Tories and the GST, and then the Liberals too?



That the industry might thrive? Nah. No one knows down like a writer knows down.

All the same, just now I'm pumped. I have a two-book contract with one of Canada's foremost publishers. The American rights have sold. Today the U.S., tomorrow the world.

Those are my successes. They may be substantial – or, on the CanLit merry-go-round, they may be dust in the wind. Inarguably, they make up a short list.

My pile of rejection slips is larger. I had 87 rejections on short stories.

Not 87 stories rejected or one story 87 times, only a few stories a few times each. A mere handful.

I'm wistful, because what I know is this: a sorry, stalwart history makes a manuscript worthy.

I'd report in to my writer friends on my latest rejection stats. I was shopping a book proposal too – I had a big numbers game running. And I'd be feted: not just for my doggedness, but because here, obviously, was a real writer.

Without slings and arrows and insults and every door in the world slammed in his face, a writer can seem a mere dilettante, unworthy.

In Canada, at least, rejection is thought by writers to be some measure of above-market class.

A personal guide to the rites of rejection

Writers everywhere love the legendary Chinese Rejection, said to have actually been sent: “We have read your manuscript with boundless delight. If we were to publish your paper, it would be impossible for us to publish any work of a lower standard. And as it is unthinkable that, in the next thousand years, we shall see its equal, we are, to our regret, compelled to return your divine composition, and to beg you a thousand times to overlook our short sight and timidity.”

They know it’s a joke, but they believe it.

Altered thinking, as the psychiatrists say? You bet.

The New York agent Betsy Lerner tells a wonderful story that illustrates just how punch-drunk you can get after a lifetime of rebuff.

When Harvey Penick was offered a \$90,000 deal on his little book of golf homilies, he and his wife talked it over. They told their agent they wanted to go forward with the book, but they’d need time to arrange a second mortgage on their house to come up with the money.

Here’s the really impressive thing about my 87 rejections on short stories: all at once, I sold nine.

Those seem to have sold on their own merit, before anyone knew that after 20 years of slog as a freelancer, I’d become an overnight success, with – never mind mere literary stories – a big deal, two-book contract.

How I got there? The usual. By being rejected.

I had 49 rejections from Canadian publishers of *Diamond*, the first book I tried to sell, and 18 rejections from Canadian literary agents – chicken feed compared to the numbers boasted by writers who’ve been in the game longer.

Precisely one agent wrote me any sort of reply, a kind and thoughtful one that showed she’d read my pitch, even chewed on it. Mostly, I didn’t get rejections at all, only silence.

Some replies, though, were long, aggrieved, strange.

Of the few publishers in Canada who still review unagented work, many warn they’ll only look if no one else is.

Bow to rules like that, I say, and you’ll be getting your 49 or your 87 rejections over the course of 49 or 87 years, rather than a few months.

One editor didn’t forgive my pragmatism.

“Simultaneous submissions,” she wrote, “pose problems for everyone involved – the least of which is that it would be easy for us to assume (and be insulted) that you have no real interest in being published by our publishing house in particular.”

Someone else complained that since I’d posted my manuscript privately on-line (for the convenience of any editor wanting to see the whole thing, quickly), I’d made it available to the world.

Wow. Who knew on-line marketing was so effective? I kept rejections like these. They reminded me that this was a game, sometimes a really goofy one. They won me respect from my writer friends, incredulity from outsiders.

My rejections were contrary, too. In my stories: “phrasing too tight,” “Writing too loose,” “Relies on a surprise ending,” “Needs a snappy ending.” As for my book manuscript: “I think we’ve had enough books like this,” “Not many books like this get published; there’s no market.”

The Atlantic Monthly has the swankest rejection slip out there. Elegantly typeset, it’s centered on a small, spare page of 24-lb classic white linen:

“Though the manuscript you sent has not found a place with us, we thank you for the chance to consider it. Best of luck in placing it elsewhere.”

It’s a memento you can frame; many writers do. Writers wallpaper their houses with their rejection letters. Hemingway thought of it first.

I queried on, sending my book proposal around the world. I knew what I was doing, having once run a federation of writers.

I also knew, from my mom, to “turn over every rock. You never know what might be hiding there.”

Worldwide publishers hid themselves as best they could, much as they had in Canada.

International agents were slightly more approachable than international publishers (in Canada, the reverse is true). But the U.S. is the U.S.: impenetrable and incomprehensible to the average Canadian.

Ireland has big problems with its premier e-mail server; everything bounced.

Germans love CanLit, but German agents don’t do e-mail at all. Australian and New Zealand agents were cheery and helpful. It figured; many of them were going out of business.

Other than those Down Under, there's a mire of agents around the globe, easily accessible on-line, who love you – as long as you pay them just to have them look at your stuff.

The best exchange I had was with an agent from the London office of Peters Fraser Dunlop, brokers for Margaret Drabble, Ruth Rendell and Julian Barnes. She followed my on-line link, read the entire manuscript, and within three days reported in – saying she'd loved, but that distance was a disadvantage.

For the most part, Canadian writers should start in Canada. Perhaps they should. The trouble is, all too often they end up there as well.

"For new writers," says Colleen MacMillan of Annick, the children's press, "the challenge is enormous. There's less risk in going with authors who already have a measure of success in the marketplace."

Still, she says, new writers can make it into print. "Good writing makes the difference." Perhaps it can.

One editor told me I'd written the best pitch letter she'd ever seen. She rejected me anyway – of course.

It's simply a matter of numbers. Agents and publishers, on average, reject a whopping 99 per cent of what they see.

Even rarified literary magazines offer little better odds. The Malahat Review out of the University of Victoria publishes three per cent of what gets submitted. Descant, out of Toronto, gets 300 manuscripts a month and prints a handful.

"Everything is rejected several times by several publishers in various territories in the world," says the Toronto literary agent Beverley Slopen.

"Even books that are published in one or more territories and do well are rejected or have been rejected dozens and dozens of times in their life span."

When Slopen decides to sign a project or a writer, she has to factor in her own stamina. "I have to calculate how many rejections I can withstand before I'm tempted to give up."

She has to love the book, be energized by it in the face of the nays to come. "In that sense, I reject a lot. How many times a week can you fall in love?"

Lots of publishers loved my manuscript.

That's what they said: We love it, we can't use it.

Diamond was, after all, about death. I'd had a friend die young, suddenly, and I wanted to write about it.

Outside Canada, death could be a big deal. There's been the success of *Tuesdays with Morrie* in the U.S. We had *Angela's Ashes*, not *Angela's Golden Years*.

We even had best-selling Dave Eggers expounding on his death memoir's cachet and profit margin, that "while no, he is not the only person to ever lose his parents, he is currently the only such person with a book contract."

But in Canada, even the publisher who bought my *Diamond* turned it down first.

And there's the secret: Success in the book industry is all about serendipity.

Dinah Forbes, my editor at McClelland & Stewart, guesses that M&S amasses a slush pile of 1,500 submissions a year. "Most years we publish zero, nada, nothing from the slush-pile."

Perhaps 15 per cent of non-slush submissions see the light of day. An agent will get you in, might even get you bought. But agents, too, are nearly a closed shop.

You can try dodging the slush pile by mailing direct to an editor, by name; or by being known elsewhere, in newspapers or broadcast; or by being recommended by a writer friend who's made it in.

Knowing someone counts for a lot in this business. But in my case, I didn't have a friend in the world; the point was that I'd just lost my best one. All I had was her death book.

I tried the direct-mail approach, but to the wrong editor.

Somehow, serendipitously, my proposal made its way across the hall to the right one.

Hmmm, Dinah said, about death. Did I have anything else? I showed her an outline for a second book, an account of my mother's childhood in a Depression-era outport in Newfoundland called *Seldom*. Dinah liked that. It had prospects in the market.

Newfoundland publishers were already interested in it, and in my death book too. M&S outbid them, buying *Seldom* and *Diamond* both – and I have the rejections to prove it.

Dawn Rae Downton's Newfoundland memoir, Seldom, comes out in Canada next month, and in the U.S. in November. Her memoir Diamond comes out the following spring