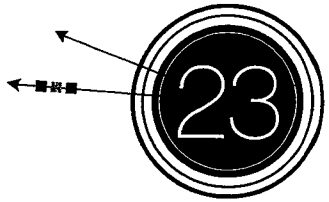


ON PUBLICATION, REJECTION, AND BEING STUBBORN

"I've been rejected thousands of times. You have to accept that as part of the arrangement, and allow it to make you more humble—and stubborn to succeed."

—Steve Almond

My first book had only been available for about a week when I drove into Philadelphia for my initial bookstore reading, the preliminary leg of a very modest—meaning no limo driver and no expense account—book tour. Still, despite the lack of airplane rides or five-star hotels, I was excited. Years of dreaming and hard work had led to this moment.

My publisher had hooked me up with a long-standing, well-respected independent bookstore in center city, though in retrospect someone should have checked to see how the shop had been doing "lately."

I admit to a measure of dismay when the manager met me in an ill-fitting, pilled sweater at the front of an empty store and then walked me up a flight of steps to a narrow, dingy second floor. It wasn't the small number of cheap folding chairs that caught me up short, or the rickety podium. It was the vast array of "gently used" pornographic books and

magazines that lined the walls. Though the main floor of this once-thriving bookshop contained the finest contemporary and classic literature, it seems the second-story skin books were paying the electric bills.

I won't dwell on the disappointing details of what followed. It was simple: No one came. Okay, one personal friend and his wife showed up a bit late, but they were also friends of the bookstore owner, so it is hard to say if they were there to see me, to see him, or to have a glass of wine, which is what we did when it became apparent that my reading was a total bust.

Live and learn, I thought. Maybe Sunday is a bad day for a bookstore reading. Maybe bookstore readings don't sell books. Maybe every author faces an empty room when trying to do a bookstore appearance.

I tried every justification to bolster my flagging spirits as I walked back to my sister-in-law's apartment that Sunday afternoon, down Walnut Street, toward Rittenhouse Square, where I hoped to grab a cup of coffee and just forget it all

But I saw the dang-blasted line a half block away. Hundreds of young couples, many, but not all, with strollers or toddlers, snaking along the sidewalk, into the sparkling new Borders bookstore, the one with the comfy chairs and coffee shop. I had to walk right by the line, and then, as if there was a lesson to be learned, I had to walk in, to see the line snake all around the first floor of the chain bookstore, up the steps, and once more around the second floor, until it ended at a wide table, where children's author Chris Van Allsburg, flanked by four store employees, was signing copies of *The Polar Express*.

Thousands of copies.

He seemed very nice.

Perseverance Furthers

Aside from being a funny story to tell my friends—especially those friends who are discouraged when their first poem, essay, story, or book doesn't seem to get as much notice as they had fantasized—the story is also useful to illustrate the importance of obstinacy and perseverance.

Though for a day or two I was tempted to write about nothing but polar bears and arctic trains for the rest of my career, what I eventually did with this experience was return to my desk and write five more books. None of them has been as wildly successful as Allsburg's picture books (and, by the way, he deserves the success), but I'm still here, still plugging.

Now some of you are probably thinking, "That's easy for Dinty to say. He's publishing his books. I'm still waiting to publish my first essay, and those two rejection letters last month really hurt."

Trust me, I've received over five hundred rejection letters in my writing life—and I still receive them, of course. And yes, my gut sinks every time I open one. But had I stopped writing stories and essays after the first fifteen rejections or so, where would I be now? Still nursing my wounds, unpublished, and wondering what might have been.

As author Steve Almond says in the quotation that begins this chapter, you must allow these rejection moments "to make you more humble—and stubborn to succeed."

On Loving What You Do

So, if you do get stubborn, what do you need to know about the ways and means and inner workings of publishing your own writing?

Well first, you have to love the work itself. If you don't truly enjoy moving words and sentences around on the page—similar to the way you delighted in moving wooden blocks and plastic trucks around on the living room carpet when you were five—then you are going to have a hard time persevering through the ups and downs and inevitable setbacks.

I have had students in my classes over the years who didn't take pleasure in the act of writing but somehow got it into their heads that it would be fulfilling and wonderful to *have written*, to be a published writer. Well, it does feel good, but I'm not a big fan of putting the cart before the horse.

Yes, every writer has bad days, slow stretches, but if you don't have days when the writing itself is its own reward, when you would do it even if there was no such thing as a magazine, book publisher, or reader, then you may want to reexamine why you are trying at all.

Assuming that you are a writer who likes to write, one who feels the thrill and energy of finally getting an idea clear on the page or carefully crafting the perfect scene, then the next thing you need to do is stop thinking about rejection *or* acceptance.

Novelist Barbara Kingsolver says it very well:

> Close the door. Write with no one looking over your shoulder. Don't try to figure out what other people want to hear from you; figure out what you have to say. It's the one and only thing you have to offer.

What to Know About Submitting Your Work

The first and best advice on the process of submitting and finding your work published is found in the two chapters

before the one you are reading now. You must cultivate a practice of careful writing and vigorous, painstaking revision to make sure the piece you submit is as absolutely crisp, fresh, and flawless as can be. The competition is doing this, so you need to do so as well.

Here are some additional guidelines to save effort and increase your chances at success:

- **Know your magazine:** Editors have often expressed grief over the wasted paper and postage (and time) when work is submitted that simply does not fit the guidelines. Even if your essay was the finest ever written in the history of letters, there is no chance of seeing it published in a literary magazine that publishes only poems. That one is pretty obvious, though you might be surprised how many folks still get it wrong. More subtle is whether the magazine in question only publishes prose of a certain length, or whether it focuses on work that promotes Christian values, or whether the periodical is or is not willing to consider work with a particular political slant. Some magazines want only stories about rural life, while others insist on a hip, urban voice. You can learn about magazines—what they desire in terms of genre, in terms of length, in terms of subject matter, and how they want submissions to arrive—by reading books such as *Writer's Market*, by studying the magazines themselves in the library and bookstores, or by requesting sample issues. The time this takes will be well worth it in the long run.

- **Keep your cover letter simple:** It is customary to attach a short cover letter to the front of your manuscript (though even this is changing some with electronic submission systems). The cover letter should be brief and to the point. "Dear Editor (or Editor's Name), Enclosed is my essay entitled "The Essay," which I hope you will find suitable for publication in your magazine. I have been reading *Well-Respected Magazine* for many years now and am always delighted by the range of intelligent nonfiction I find within the pages. My work has been previously published in *Small Magazine* and *Very Small Literary Journal*. If you decide not to publish my work, please recycle the manuscript and use the enclosed SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope) to let me know your decision. Sincerely, I.M.A. Writer."

- **Let the Work Do the Talking:** You may note that the sample cover letter above doesn't describe the content of the submission or try to convince the editor of the essay's merit. That's because the work itself has to convince the editor, and if the work needs to be described and explained in the cover letter, it is likely not clearly enough written. One exception might be if you are writing an essay about the birth of a lamb and want to point out that you were a sheep farmer for twenty years. Or if you are writing about issues related to children with autism and felt it helpful to mention your own experience as the mother of a child with autistic disorder. Background information on the author is sometimes useful, but don't try to sell your work the way someone might pitch a movie or sell a car. And whatever you do, don't include confetti stars,

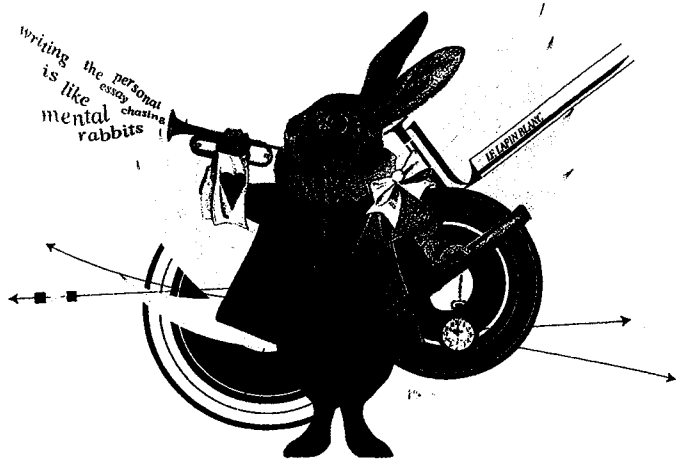
glitter hearts, or pictures of your two cats in your submission envelope. That marks you as an amateur, and editors are looking for serious, seasoned writers, not gimmickry.

- **Use Plain Jane formatting:** Use black ink, a clear and common font (12 point Times New Roman is the most often used), and margins of about 1 inch on all sides. Double-space your manuscript and print on only one side of the paper. At the top of the first page of your manuscript show your name, your e-mail address, your mailing address, your phone number, and a word count. Page numbers are usually appreciated.

- **Eliminate all grammatical and spelling errors:** Even if you aren't gifted in this area, you can buy lunch for a friend who has an eagle eye and good spelling skills in return for a thorough copyedit. Editors often review hundreds of manuscripts a week, and you don't want to annoy them or make them impatient. Would you show up at a job interview with your shirt buttons undone and your belt unclasped?

- **Avoid carpet bombing:** The successful authors I know send work to selected magazines and journals, based on their understanding of the submission guidelines and editorial needs. They don't mail off forty copies of an essay to every magazine imaginable. Choose your targets wisely. And if an editor sends you a polite note asking "to see more work," don't send everything you've ever written back in a cardboard box. Choose wisely and judiciously here as well. When you send only your *best* work, the odds of acceptance go up considerably.

- **Put Rejections in Perspective:** When you do—and inevitably you will—receive that cold, discouraging rejection slip, feel free to have the inevitable emotional reaction, but then let the more rational part of your brain process what has occurred. There are really two choices here, and either one is as possible as the other. Work gets rejected because it is not good enough (yet), because the author sees clearly what she is up to and what she is trying to convey but has not found a way to include the reader in on these moments (and editors are the stingiest, pickiest of readers). If that is the case, then put the writing aside for a week or so before attacking it with fresh eyes. You *can* make it better. But work is sometimes rejected because a particular editor just wasn't the right set of eyes for your writing, or the magazine has been inundated lately with more good work than it can handle. Don't assume the editor is always right, and don't let a rejection slow you down. Learn to view your own work honestly and clearly, and you'll know which choice to make.



CRAFTING THE PERSONAL ESSAY

A GUIDE FOR WRITING AND PUBLISHING CREATIVE NONFICTION

DINTY W. MOORE

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For Susan A. Moore Smith
with love and gratitude