

On Writing While Rejected

Alex Brianson

You know all those clichés about how, in order to succeed, you just have to try one more time than you fail? You just have to get up one more time than you get knocked down? You only have to contact one more agent, or one more publisher, than you get refused by? Well, Reader dear, they can fuck all the way off, and then fuck off some more. Because this shit is toxic.

I truly do not know how anyone younger than thirty manages to stick at this writing business, other than those who get lucky really quickly. Because the rate at which my ego is dissolving means I am about to achieve Buddhahood in a way other than waistline-resemblance. Rejection is acid. The searing pain of it when it happens for the umpteenth time. The branding of your soul with a deeper, darker 'R' than it had the last time gives it a kind of perverse archaeology – the deeper you go, the less there is of you to find.

Now, you may think that at age 49 – and yes, bitch, that's a genuine 49 and I'll be owning my fifties soon enough, thank you, this November – I'd be a tough old Joan Crawford. And of course as for her, famously informing the Board of PepsiCo that she wasn't going to be a pushover, this ain't my first time at the rodeo. But it's rejection of a very particular kind, and I must admit I wasn't savvy enough to understand its sadism in advance.

In my previous career, rejection is rife – job interviews, perplexing occasions when you didn't get an interview even though you were better qualified and more experienced than the person who did (looking at you, LSE), journals that turn down your article. You grow a thicker skin, you move on.

But in academia, you will absolutely NEVER have an article rejected without being given the reasons why, in writing. You will be given feedback that you can then either use or reject, and rework your piece, and resubmit it – sometimes to the same journal, and sometimes to another. If it's good enough – and yes, defining that can be a dark art, with different interpretations according to theoretical or methodological bias – it will find a home eventually. In my academic career I knocked out over 30 peer-reviewed articles (and many other sorts of publication), and I never wrote a single one that I could not resubmit successfully after thinking honestly about any critique I'd received first time round. I even attained the Nirvana of acceptance at first review, by unanimous verdict of the referees, a few times.

In commercial publishing, this does not happen. Of course I knew before starting out that the logics of academic and fiction publishing are different. And of course I didn't expect to get lucky first time round (although equally naturally I did *hope* to be; some people are, but just not me, as it turned out.) But some agents or publishers never even acknowledge receipt of what you've sent them, let alone grant the courtesy of a rejection even when you politely follow up. Some have an automatic reply that says if you haven't heard back in 6 weeks, or 3 months (the usual time it can take), you can assume they'd rather eat a cup of cold cat sick than be in touch. At least then you know where you stand.

Some send you a bland 'not what I want personally, but it's a subjective industry, so keep at it' response, which is fair enough I suppose. Although it's also fucking frustrating,

because, Reader dear, I pay to access print and virtual databases of agents and publishers, and only submit to those who state explicitly they want the kind of thing I've written, and I put my research grant application skills to good alternative use by telling them straight out exactly why I chose to submit to them, and exactly how what I've written fits their stated criteria and interests.

But it turns out the absolute worst are the ones that give you hope. The ones that say 'ooh, this is great, fantastic characters, powerful storytelling, your writing is glorious'. That's what the last one said to me. Glorious. 'Your writing is glorious.' The ones that ask you to send the whole novel (most publishers or agents ask for up to the first 3 chapters initially). The ones that get you going full-spectrum Liza, singing 'Maybe This Time' in the shower. The ones that then make you wish your heart was cauterised, because they love it but it's too mainstream for them, when the last publisher you nearly-but-not-quite managed to get to say YES said the same but that it was too niche, and not the right one.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGHHHH.

Am I arrogant, thinking I have a right to be published? No. Unlike when I set out on this jaunt, I know now that my writing is good enough. I may never win prizes or catch anyone of note's attention. I'm still learning, and I'm sure I'll improve. But I know it's good. I've had several people in the industry on both sides of the Atlantic tell me that, to my face, as well as by email, referencing particular aspects of the book that show they've actually read it. So I know that for at least this one novel, I've managed to produce something good. Or even 'glorious', apparently. But still: UNFUCKINGPUBLISHED.

What about self-publication? Well, lots of really good stuff is self-published, via Amazon usually. But if you want to earn money from it, or even get it noticed at all, you need to be one of two things. Or maybe both. You need to be someone with existing market presence, who has enough fans to live off Patreon or some similar patronage site, which means in most cases having previously published more conventionally. Or you need to be good enough at marketing yourself to make a success of it.

And, Reader dear, there's the rub. I'm 49, with chronic illness and a disability. I'm also rather adrift in the virtual era, having grown up in an analogue world and worked in a profession that uses Twitter and so on but which relies primarily on good old-fashioned scholarship to build your presence and 'brand' (foul indictment of today's world, that, that one is supposed to monetise one's character and identity), even if said scholarship is downloaded and read on-screen more often than in hard copy. There is absolutely zero scope in my life for doing my own publicity in anything more than a one- or two-off way if I am ever going to have the energy to write at all.

So yes, Rejection is acid – but for me at least it's not primarily about the fact yet another person hasn't liked my work enough to actually take it on. It's because I'm going to have to try again. Again. And finding the energy, not to mention the brio, to do that once more requires so much strength I may as well be an Avenger.