



Rejection

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BACK IN THE 1990S I worked as an editor for a literary publisher. One of my jobs was sending out rejection letters to aspiring authors whose books had been sent to us and found wanting. This was most of them — we were only a small outfit and with the best will in the world could only publish a handful of new titles a year on top of submissions from our contracted authors. It was, of course, impossible to read everything that came in — I was responsible for deciding the fate of anything from fifteen to thirty full-length manuscripts a week, on top of my regular duties of editing, copy-editing, proofreading, writing blurbs and briefing designers. I have heard other publishers and agents proclaim loftily that they read everything they are sent, but I don't believe them — there would be no time to do any actual publishing at all if that were the case. More plausibly, I recall hearing of one publisher with an unusual way of separating the wheat from the chaff: straight to the reject pile went anything with an exclamation mark in the title; anything in which the main character appeared on the first page; and anything set in or *posted* from Cornwall.

I like to think our methods were a little more discerning. I may not have read every manuscript all the way through, but I read all of them some of the way through, and certainly never rejected anything unexamined. The golden rule for dealing with the year-round deluge, was not to keep anyone waiting more than three weeks for a reply. Disappointment is far easier to take when it comes swiftly and no one should have to chase up bad news.



I can still remember the form of words we used for our brief, photocopied rejection letter.

Dear X

Thank you for sending us your manuscript, but I'm afraid it is not suitable for our list.

I am sorry we cannot give reasons for our decision — we receive so many submissions.

It struck me at the time as being somewhat terse, and as this was the era of the typewriter not the computer, there was no disguising its impersonal nature. But it was at least honest. And if, of course, the manuscript had been deemed interesting enough to merit a thorough read, the reader's report would be included to give the writer the benefit of some useful feedback.

I felt more than somewhat sympathetic towards the recipients of these polite 'No, thank yous', as I had been on the receiving end of a fair few from agents and publishers myself by that stage in my writing career, and was familiar with the plunge in spirits that accompanied their arrival. And it occurred to me to wonder, each time I signed one of these letters, how many disappointed writers would remember my name with hostility, and how many invisible enemies I had made during my tenure as queen of the slush pile.

I can only hope that, like me, they were not deterred from trying again, and promise them that finding a publisher, that first thrilling step in a writing career, does not mean an end to rejection, but instead a growing familiarity with its new and ingenious forms.