



Rejection

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WHEN I COACH WRITERS, I advise them that if they're seeking publication, they'll need to expect some rejections. There will be at least one or two 'no thanks,' I tell them, muttering under my breath, *more like one or two dozen*, so it's as well to be prepared. Most writers accept this, but once a particularly stropy writer said: 'Why though? Why is rejection inevitable?' I gave the usual explanations about market forces, but the question stayed with me, and eventually, in the wee small hours, I came up with my game-changing theory. It's called the Rejection is Actually an Essential Part of the Process theory. I'm aware that the name needs some work.

Think about it. Everyone who ever made it big was rejected at least once; usually loads of times. Some of their rejection stories have passed into legend: J. K. Rowling turned down by twelve publishers; Stephen King pinning his rejection slips to the wall, until the nail could no longer hold their weight; Beatrix Potter self-publishing *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* after countless kick-backs.

So many massive bestsellers were originally rejected: *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Life of Pi*, *Little Women*, *The Bell Jar*, *Lord of the Flies*, *House of the Spirits*, *Moby Dick*, *Twilight*, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, *Gone with the Wind*... I could go on. I will! *The Help*, *Dune*, *Watership Down*, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*... *The Guinness Book of Records* lists *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as the most turned-down bestseller. After 121 publisher rejections it went on to sell five million copies.



Of course, there are *coughs modestly* plenty of less-bestselling writers with similar tales. My first novel was rejected by ten agents, and once one finally took it on, countless publishers then said no. My third and fifth novels were also rejected by pretty much everyone. (It looks from this that all my odd-numbered books have been, like the odd-numbered Star Trek films, complete rubbish. But it's because publishers generally ask for two books at a time so they're committing in advance to publish the even-numbered ones.)

Although you occasionally hear of the rare unicorn whose debut book was accepted on their very first try, rejection is – as all the evidence shows – the far more likely response. And thus my light-hearted theory, which suggests we think of rejection as not simply an unpleasant obstacle on the road to publication, but actually an *essential* part, because it seems almost impossible to get published without first having been turned down.

This is of course based on nothing more than correlation and would not pass muster in any academic journals. But on a serious note, I do think it's far more productive to regard rejections as stepping stones, a sign of progress, rather than the closed doors they're more often perceived to be. A rejection can be celebrated as a sign that we're now actively in the game, before we plunge back to submit our work once more.