



Letter to My Readers

Sarah Duncan

DEAR READER,

I wanted to write to you because I was listening to a radio programme where an as-yet-unpublished writer was discussing their unpublished state. The interviewer asked about the writer's feelings, their experience, their relationship with publishers, and the writer's struggle generally. I'm not downplaying the difficulties of getting published, or the importance of publishers and agents, but it struck me that not once did they discuss, or even mention the most important person in the publishing cycle in my opinion: you, the reader.

Because I write for *you*, dear reader. You are the most important person to my writing. My first draft is a cobbled together ramble that only I could love, and my second is hardly any better. But by the time I'm coming to my third draft, I am writing for you, the reader.

I see writing for publication as a contract between the writer and the reader. It's rarely explicit, but it's no less present for being unstated. I, the writer, make up stuff that I hope will inform, entertain, scare, thrill or amuse the reader. To do that, I spend quite a lot of time reworking the raw material my imagination has provided into something that, I hope, works for you.

And in exchange, yes, you give me money but also your time and attention. Instead of reading my novel, you could be lolling on the sofa with a bottle



of wine watching television — a novel will take at least as long to read as watching a film. Your leisure time could be spent going for a walk, or chatting with a friend, or baking a cake, or exercising while listening to your favourite podcast. There are so many other things you could be doing with your time apart from reading my novel, the least I can do is be aware of you when I'm writing it.

That means a story that unfolds in a way that has you reading until three in the morning, even though you know you've got to get up early. Writing characters that live with you until they're as familiar as your own family. Making up places so real you can touch the walls and smell the scenery. Writing that makes you nod with recognition: *I've thought that; I've been there; yes, that's how it is.*

I'm not claiming I achieve this all the time – I wish! – but that's my aim. When a reader writes to complain that they've tried to go to a museum featured in a novel and it wasn't there – because it doesn't exist, except in that book – or when a reader wants to know what happened to my characters next, after the story ended: that's when I know I've fulfilled my side of the contract.

Publishers and agents, libraries and booksellers are all vital parts of the mechanism of getting us together, a bit like a literary dating agency, but essentially there's just me and you, and our contract with each other.