



Karl Whitney

Rejection

WHenever I'm about to open a letter from a publisher to which I sent a proposal, or an email from an editor to whom I pitched an idea, I take a moment to steel myself for rejection. *Here we go!*, I think, and take a deep breath.

Several years ago, I wrote a nonfiction book proposal and bundled it with a few pages of sample material. I sent it off to a publisher that seemed particularly suitable for the kind of book I was writing – an exploration of my home city of Dublin – and, eventually, received an envelope in response from that publisher. Inside the envelope was an A4 sheet of headed notepaper on which was printed a stock rejection of the kind they must have sent to most other writers whose proposal or manuscript never made it beyond the slush pile.

A year or so later, the same proposal, the same book, was accepted for publication by a publisher, in fact the *same* publisher that had initially rejected me.

What changed? You could say that it was the fact that I had spent the time between rejection and acceptance working on further sample material — but my recollection is that I thought of the rejection as definitive and I decided instead to work on a series of articles based on the chapter outlines. Fairly certain that it wasn't to be a book, I concentrated on what I actually *could* do – pitch long pieces to literary journals – rather than on the elusive book deal.



I kept the book proposal on file, tinkering with it occasionally. Eventually an editor at the publisher asked if I was working on a book, and I was able to send him a proposal, and that led to a deal.

The irony wasn't lost on me. But I also recognised both the arbitrary nature of the pitch – the person who rejects a proposal one day might look more positively on it the next, or your proposal might simply find its way to the right or wrong person – and the fact that what I was proposing a year on from the rejection was significantly more fleshed out, more convincing. There was more sample material included, for a start, and more of a track record of publication. (The two were connected: the published work made up much of the sample material.) It looked more like a book, in other words, and that's important when you're a writer who hasn't written one before.

Rejection is familiar to every writer. It was already familiar to me when I first sent out my book proposal, as it is to so many other freelance journalists who pitch ideas to editors. Sometimes you can learn something from rejection, sometimes you can't – often it's nothing to do with you, or the quality of your writing. It just doesn't fit a certain editor at a certain publisher on a certain day. Others will be interested, even if it takes some time to find them.

That said, unremitting rejection can be an overwhelmingly bleak experience. How does one cope with that? Perhaps it's useful to have a variety of projects underway and at different stages. Switching to something else – beginning a new proposal, writing some reviews, penning a light opera – could be a way of putting a rejected idea aside for a while before you go back into battle.

I ask myself what I've learned from rejection. It might seem an obvious point, but there's a need to persist, and by persistence I mean continuing to pursue your own ideas, and, ultimately to value your work highly, regardless of the response. Because, no matter who you are, and how long



you've been writing, there'll be other rejections to come. The ideal state would be to pay scant notice to rejection and acceptance alike, to be above all that, to take everything in your stride. But we're only human.

Don't over-anticipate rejection, but don't be too surprised by it either. If it comes – or rather, when it comes, as it undoubtedly will – accept it, shrug, and move on.