



## The Best Advice I Received as a Writer

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**T**WO PIECES OF ADVICE have stuck with me more than any others, and both came from the same person, though at different times, and in different circumstances. I pass them on regularly to other writers, just as I'm going to do here.

The first piece of advice was: *When your first book is published, everything will change. People will come to you.*

This was in response to me despairing that I'd never get anywhere with writing. Despairing that the novel I had been working on for several years – my first – would never find a home. Despairing that it took a lot of effort to submit poems to magazines only to be rejected. It took effort, too, to find review work, to be commissioned to write features. The whole business of writing and the writing life was really, really hard. I felt I was spending all my time and energy approaching people in publishing and asking them to take a chance on me. With every *No* – and there were many at that time – I grew more despondent, and more tired. How to keep going? What was the point?

She had no easy answers to this, because there aren't any. But what she said that day helped me, in part because of that careful use of tense: *When your first book is published, everything will change.* She spoke as if it was a certainty that a book by me would be published someday, and that if I could reach that milestone, the going was likely to get easier. And she was right, on both counts.



I won't claim that my life changed, that the book raced to the top of the bestseller charts and was made into a film. Nothing like that happened. But with a book to my name, organisers of small literary festivals invited me as a speaker. They paid my travel expenses to get to their events — something that had never happened before. I was asked to write guest blogs about writing the book, to run workshops about editing it. I still had to pitch myself in addition to these invitations, but the rate of rejection went down. In many ways, everything *did* change.

And this is related to the second piece of advice she gave me, when she had become an editor and was the person who was going to publish that first novel. She said: 'People are reluctant to be taste-makers.'

To go out on a limb with a new voice and say, 'Yes, I think this person can write' — there's exposure in that. To be the first. Much better to wait for someone else to take the risk and then step in afterwards and join the fanfare. But she took that risk, she *was* a taste-maker, stepping forward to say, yes, she thought I could write and she would publish my novel. That taught me that a big part of getting our writing into the world is to find the people who will say *Yes*. And the people doing this work, taking risks, are very often independent publishers.