



Rejection

Richard Lambert

I CAN FIND NOTHING GOOD to say about rejection. Only that it is awful, appalling, wounding. I only wish I had the self-assurance and self-confidence of the Argentinian football coach Marco Bielsa who eloquently wrote: ‘Being successful deforms us as human beings, it relaxes us, it plays tricks on us, it makes us worse individuals, it helps us fall in love with ourselves. Failure is the complete opposite, it forms us, it makes us more solid, it brings us closer to our convictions, it makes us more coherent’. Unfortunately, for me, rejection has only managed to increase my self-doubt.

I didn’t always have such a negative response to rejection. In my twenties, I sent out work with optimistic determination. The rejections stacked up – from editors, agents, publishers – but that didn’t deter me. I wrote more, approached more editors, agents, publishers. Perhaps I have blanked out the disappointment, although I don’t think so. I simply persisted, regardless. However, at some point, in my thirties, when the anticipated breakthrough into publication did not arrive, the rejections grew harder to take.

Still I persisted. There were minor accomplishments but the rejections continued. And now there was a difference in my response. At some point I began to internalise the rejections, to believe in a way I hadn’t when I was younger, that the editors, agents, publishers were right — my work wasn’t good enough; of course they didn’t want it. The rejections began to affect me. They began to fray me.



I should not take it personally, perhaps. But writing *is* personal, for me anyway, and to most writers I know. It draws on the deepest parts of myself, the most childlike and childish, the most personal. So of course rejection is intolerably painful.

When I was thinking for this podcast about the rejections I've received, among the thousands (and it *is* thousands) I recalled the very first one. I was sixteen or seventeen and I entered the WHSmith Young Poets Competition. I sent off my poem and, foolishly, expected the prizewinning notification. The date of the prizegiving approached. The date of the prizegiving passed. I checked the entry form — all entrants would be contacted with results. I phoned the organisers; they'd received my poem but neglected to respond. The sense of deflation was huge. The feeling passed and I continued happily on my way as a writer, sending out to editors, agents, publishers. Thirty-odd years later and the last rejection I received was on Friday night via email, which I read after a long, hard week, not the best time to receive such a message. It was from an editor of a magazine who had previously asked me to send more work but who this time sent a standard cut-and-paste rejection. This time, the disappointment was deep; I felt it in my stomach. There is no way to beat it, unless I simply give up sending work out, which I am as incapable of doing as I am of dealing with rejection. It's part of my writing life, appalling, wounding, and it eats away at the soul.