

## **REJECTION**

Rejection is the dark door at the center of creative writing through which all who hope to survive must pass. Even the most successful writers have been rejected many times, and developing a healthy attitude toward rejection is essential to every writer. “Success is distant and illusory,” as Joyce Carol Oates points out, “failure one’s loyal companion, one’s stimulus for imagining the next book will be better, for, otherwise, why write?” (2003, 73).

Because writing is essentially a communicative act, most beginning creative writers want to share their early efforts with someone else, usually family and friends. Not surprisingly, these efforts are generally met with unqualified approval. A writer’s sense of the power of rejection arrives only when someone close to her is courageous enough to say, “That phrase sounds like something I’ve heard before” or “Maybe you should add a little bit of description here.” This first expression of qualified rejection is also the most basic, for it introduces the essential idea that writing can always be improved.

The necessity of rejecting or revising one’s early drafts becomes much greater for the writer enrolled in a creative writing course. At this stage, the writer must also learn how to discard advice that he believes will ultimately injure his work: what aspects of a piece of writing can be defended, what deserve to be eliminated, and what need to be modified.

For those writers who decide to share their work with an audience larger than a classroom of fellow students, a great deal of rejection awaits. Perhaps the most basic form of dismissal in the larger arena of creative writing is the rejection letter sent with a returned manuscript. These notices run the gamut from the very brief—a handwritten “No thanks” or a photocopied slip of paper implying that the editors would be happy to never see one’s work again—to elaborate apologies and explanations about why, this time, the writer’s piece could not be printed. Interestingly, many letters of rejection are longer than letters of acceptance, and a

writer who receives the former should consider how much time an editor has invested in commenting on her work. Often, these encouraging letters of rejection ask the writer to submit again and mark the beginning of a writer-editor relationship that ultimately leads to publication. Some writers save their rejection letters in a box, some burn them, some even paper their walls with the things. This last act, a fascinating combination of despair (Everyone hates me!) and chutzpah (But I don't care!), suggests something of the difficult balance a working writer must adopt toward publication. There is even a literary journal, the *Dead Letter Office*, that only accepts manuscripts that have already been rejected (a rejection notice must accompany all submissions).

The lesson here is that there are different levels of rejection, and experienced writers come to distinguish between them. They learn to recognize the important fact that not everyone will be a fan of their work, that race, class, gender, artistic predilections, and whether or not an editor is having a bad day all affect the likelihood of publication. As writer Sue Lick put it in an e-mail to the authors: "I try to tell myself manuscripts are like shoes. If I were selling shoes, I would expect a lot of people to walk by without buying them or even trying them on. Writing is the same way. It usually takes more than one submission to find the publication for which the manuscript fits perfectly" (2003). The smartest writers also use rejection letters as an opportunity to meditate on their writing. Does a pattern of editorial commentary emerge over time? Perhaps editors keep remarking, "Your characters are unconvincing" or "You need to tighten the lines of your poems." If so, how much of this commentary is the editors' inability to recognize a writer's individual style, and how much does the criticism reflect real problems that the writer needs to address?

Of course, rejection in creative writing is not limited to rejection letters. There are few aspects where rejection is not a real possibility. Any serious writer will be rejected for a grant or literary prize (see "Contests"). Fellow writers, both friends and strangers, will inevitably dismiss a particular piece of writing. And if a writer wants to teach creative writing for a living, still more rejection awaits. With hundreds of candidates seeking a single position, competition is fierce, and rejection is far more likely than acceptance even for writers with graduate degrees and significant publications.

Ultimately, it is how one handles rejection that determines whether or not one will continue on as a creative writer. The initial impulse may be to

retreat. However, experienced writers learn to disconnect criticism of the work from criticism of the writer: rejection of the work is not equivalent to rejection of oneself. Poet Michael Dennis Browne lauds the work of psychotherapist Thomas Moore in helping writers overcome their sense of failure. Moore writes: "Ordinary failures in work are an inevitable part of the descent of the spirit into human limitation. Failure is a mystery, not a problem. Of course this means not that we should try to fail, or to take masochistic delight in mistakes, but that we should see the mystery of incarnation at play whenever our work doesn't measure up to our expectations. If we could understand the feelings of inferiority and humbling occasioned by failure as meaningful in their own right, then we might incorporate failure into our work so that it doesn't literally devastate us" (Browne 1993, 48).

Learning to handle rejection gracefully, to *learn* from it, makes us more human. And after all, since all writers get rejected, at least in this one instance we're all in it together.