

Writer's Block

©

Marjorie Doyle

Writer's block. It's not a mysterious impediment to creative flow, an aphasia that buries rich words in wooly linings, but a block erected stone by stone across the publishing fields. Scaling that verbal Stonehenge is not easy. Writers are stymied by the cautionary tone of submissions guidelines. We spend too much time and too many words re-working queries and covering letters, trying to face down the Holy Trinity of Negativity: not here, not now, not *you*.

My last book was a collection of personal essays. I routinely wrote covering letters as the manuscript progressed. Paralyzed with fear, I crept along the keyboard, stripping down my personality, making a eunuch of myself so I didn't put off the reader who was judging me. By the time I was ready to approach a publisher, I had 149 covering letters. I self-censored with a red-lead: Cocky. Prudish. Sycophant. Bore.

The query is your **one** attempt to sell your story, writer's guides warn. Even heaven offers more flexibility – you can be rusticated to purgatory and try again later.

Submit a brief pitch. So you sum up your memoir in a sentence. 'Course you wouldn't need to query if you had an agent.

“Dear Agent: I'm clumsy at query letters...,” but there's nothing in the response to suggest an appreciation of my integrity: Closed. No room at this inn.

I cower before websites of literary magazines.

Do not, repeat, do not send manuscripts in July or August. Envelopes that arrive during that period will be returned unopened. This is not rejection, this is pre-rejection. (Isn't there a commandment against that?)

We accept one percent of one percent of what we receive.

*No manuscripts, **please**.*

Send a reading fee.

Do not submit electronically alternates sternly with *Submissions other than electronic will be...* What? Fried in spam and sent into cyberspace?

And other dizzying demands: *Hard copy only. Disk only. E-mail only. Do not send attachments. If sending attachments...* **Do not call this office** is inevitably followed by a telephone number, suggesting that behind this edict hovers a diabolical nun who likes temptation.

Not all magazines are dogmatic.

Read the mag to see if we're a good fit. Because if you're okay, we're okay.

This is not a stuffy journal. Have fun. But there's nothing on the website to suggest pleasure lies this way.

The speed of e-mail makes response seem slower. The mute mail box shouts "No New Messages." Once only have I received an immediate answer. I'd queried an editor whose e-mail address was sitting prominently on a website, posted there no doubt by a keen assistant not yet schooled in Preventive Publishing. The answer to my tentative inquiry was: *do not write Ms.... again.* I had unwittingly found my way to the inner sanctum – and popess – of an illustrious magazine, and in so doing had violated the office as if I'd burgled the premises and plunked down my letter on her desk.

The consistent theme in the publishing world is: go away. A bulky triumvirate of publishers, editors and agents stand like bouncers at the gate to the business. You can't dodge by. The industry dreads drowning in pools of ink, fears smothering in unwanted paper; they get too many words from too many people. Maybe the process should be refined so that lex workers can spend less time on queries and more time on their manuscripts. Initiate a levelling system, a national examination administered by the trade. Ever after writers can head their queries with "O levels in Fiction" or "A Levels in Poetry."

Writers need to be trained in the publishing ring to take it on the chin, get up for one more round. Trained, too, to interpret replies. Consider this year-long communication (true story, real files) that crawled from a publishing house to an eager writer:

"In house support looks good."

"Manuscript's passed the next stage"

"Other editors here impressed."

"Key readers on board."

"Various stakeholders like it."

"Publication board is with us."

"It remains now for us to convince the marketing and sales department."

Well, heck, what about the guy who fills the water cooler – can't he get a peek at it, too? Each response came only after delicate inquiries. I wrote sweetly, cultivating a tone cribbed from model letters in my grammar school english text.

"Hello. I'm wondering, if it's not too much trouble, if you could – at your convenience and not a moment sooner – and let me say I'm sorry to be writing at all (and I apologize if reading this is interrupting your work) – let me know, just a word will do – one word, really – about my manuscript?"

I soldiered on through the publishing mire. When truly cowed and the last vapours of confidence had dissipated, I lowered my font size to wrap my letters in appropriate meekness.

Just a quick note to inquire

Hello: I'm not sure if you remember...

Dear/Sir Madam: I'm sorry to be a bother...

I hope you don't mind my writing...

I'm wondering if there's any response

Marjorie Doyle's ultimately successful query resulted in **Reels, Rock and Rosaries: Confessions of a Newfoundland Musician.**