

WHERE'S THE DOWNER DEPARTMENT?

By Robert E. Gelinas, Publisher, ArcheBooks Publishing

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Some Advice for Aspiring Novelists

As a Publisher, and the Editor-in-Chief of my publishing house, a good portion of my day is consumed with the review of queries and book proposals for acquisition. Even though we clearly state in our submission guidelines that we don't accept material that doesn't come through established Literary Agencies, that little tidbit of information doesn't seem to deter many aspiring authors from sending me their pitches.

Most unsolicited submissions get quickly deleted or are sent a polite rejection/no-thanks reply, informing the writer of our submission policy—but on occasion (and I know I'm going to regret sharing this) something catches my eye and I give it a more thorough look. Once in a Blue Moon, that which catches my eye turns out to be something worth seriously considering. OK, Major Disclaimer: this rarely happens. Most of the time what I'm sent causes me to race my finger to the "Delete" key faster than I can get to the Mute button on the TV remote when the billionth "DITECH" commercial intrudes upon the serenity of my home*.

Therefore, this brief article is an urgent plea from me, on behalf of all publishers and editors in the world in similar circumstance, to all the aspiring writers in the world determined to send us your projects, i.e. this article is specifically about what NOT TO SEND.

Guaranteed Rejections

The Downer

Chief on the list of books that should never be published is the "life of despair memoir/angst" novel. It's obvious how these things come to be. Someone goes through a hard road in life, they wrestle with their own demons, they experience pain/loss, disappointment and rejection, cellulite, whatever—and misery loves company—so they feel the need to both purge and share. Makes perfect sense.

Admittedly, not every book has a happy ending, or should. These depressing tomes are best described as the venting of the soul, each one filled with a lifetime of sadness and morbid reflection. And for some strange reason, believe it or not, these books just don't seem to catch on in a "bestselling" sort of way. I mean, when was the last time anyone walked into Barnes & Noble, hungry for a great new book to take home and sit in their favorite easy chair and enjoy, and so they went over to the information desk and asked the sales clerk, "Where's the Downer Department? I'm looking for a real depressing story that will make me want to put a gun in my mouth?"?

* The National Institute of Standards (NIST) has determined this increment of time to be the smallest interval possible to measure, replacing the "nanojiffy."

It doesn't take a licensed psychotherapist to understand that it was probably very therapeutic for the writer to sit down and get all that bile and pus out of their system and on paper, as well as their sincere need for others to hear the tragedy of their existence and thereby sympathize and empathize, and who knows, perhaps even learn a great lesson about mistakes in life and love that could possibly be avoided by others. What these tortured souls don't realize is that the vast majority of the "middle of the bell curve" of consumer book buyers out there really don't consider this type of book their favorite form of entertainment. Oh sure, there's probably some Goth suicide-club or coven out there who fawn over this type of material and can't get enough of it. But for the most part...oh, let's be kind and just say it's not very *Mainstream*. And for the writers of such material, if you can't find a publisher who specializes in depression tales, don't think that for a moment that the rest of us are interested in being converted. It's a waste of your time, I promise.

"Oh hold on there, Bob," some argue, "but many great works of literature have dealt with the trials and tribulations of man's journey in life." Yes, but you're no John Steinbeck or Ernest Hemingway. Become famous and then people will want to know about your morose inner workings. Just keep in mind that advertising your psychosis and all your emotional baggage isn't the way to build and develop an audience.

The Coming of Age

For reasons very similar to *The Downer* book, many an aspiring writer was deeply impacted by their own navigation of adolescence, loss of virginity, loss of innocence, realization that there's a lot of stupid evil people in the world, or that there really is someone out there in the world that likes you and accepts you.

Don't get me wrong here. *Coming of Age* novels can be very good—IF, and only IF—the novelist can really find something unique and entertaining to bring to the table other than clichés. The metamorphosis from child to adult is a very turbulent period in anyone's life. THAT'S WHAT MAKES YOURS JUST AS ORDINARY AS EVERYONE ELSE'S AND NOT SPECIAL! Yes, that first kiss was special to you. We all felt that. You'll have no trouble whatsoever finding common ground and understanding with 99% of the references you wish to use from that period of your life. Been three, done that—that's the problem. The fact that these things moved you, and were possibly even quite monumental in your own catalog of memories, isn't enough. There has to be a STORY in there somewhere that tells us something we don't already know.

The Day in the Life

Maybe it's just me, but I really don't care for books that don't contain a plot or that lack anything even remotely resembling a storyline. Please don't send me manuscripts about, "this character's existence." If you want to write about people who never change, whose situation is stagnant, who have nothing to offer the audience other than anecdotal episodes or vignettes—please go to work in the television industry.

The most common “day in the life” submission I see on a regular basis is where the book opens with the main character in some new situation and/or environment due to some upheaval in their life, and then spend the next 300-400 pages learning to accept and embrace their new circumstances. These type of books come real close to being just Downer books, but at least most Downer novels have some thread of a storyline.

Child and Animal Abuse

In the land of freedom-of-speech and artistic license, there is an argument (albeit a legalistic one) that an author ought to be able to write about anything their twisted little imaginations can conjure up. While this is technically true, this “freedom” doesn’t obligate a single publisher to accept the author’s work for publication, especially if that publisher believes the work is going to deeply offend the target audience that publisher hopes will buy the book.

At the top of the list of elements NEVER to put in your manuscript except by very rare and delicate exception, is the murder or abuse of children or beloved animals/pets (killing sharks, wolves, snakes etc. is not what we’re talking about here). People don’t like it! It’s a turn-off, more negative than the mere depression instilled by the Downer book.

I’ve had to instruct some of my own authors, on occasion, to revise a scene due to some of these issues. “I’m sorry, but in this scene were the woman seduces Tommy, Tommy can’t be ten. He’s got to at least be fifteen or sixteen, maybe even older.”

Even if you lost your virginity at a very young age, perhaps even under tragic circumstances, and therefore feel this kind of material is pretty powerful stuff: PEDOPHILIA ISN’T ENTERTAINING to non-pedophiles. It’s icky. Are we clear on that one?

Even in the situation where you’re writing a detective novel where the villain they’re chasing is perhaps a pedophile, you need to tread very lightly. Most non-brain-dead adults already freely concede that any instances of child sexual abuse are horrific, and there’s nothing you need to explicitly depict in your story to convince them it’s not as bad as bad gets. So don’t.

The Carbon Copy

The most commonly rejected submission comes from the avid reader/fan turned wannabe author. This person has read every book by a particular author or thousands of them in a favorite genre and are ready to try their hand at it. Nothing wrong with that. The problem here is that their manuscript is merely an echo of other voices that we’ve all heard a million times. The effect these submissions have on an acquiring publisher/editor is the teeth-grinding, eye-twitching irritation you experience when hearing burnt-out clichés like “You go girl,” “Right On!,” “That’s what I’m talking about,” “Far Out!” “I lost another loan to Ditech!” and “This is just more tax breaks for the rich!”

Even in the context of established genres, there must be an element of originality in every author's work. There's a concept in writing known as "voicing," which we'll not delve into in great depth here (we'll save that topic for another article). But suffice it to say, an author must have his own unique voice—a stylistic element of their own inherent talents that shines forth in their writing. That's one of the most important things we look for! And if it's missing, what's left can sound very hollow and flat.

Welcome to My World

From: Helen Wannabe <hwannabe@aol.com>
To: publisher@archebooks.com
Subject: Query for my novel "Forgotten Arms"

Dear Publisher,

I have written a 280,000 word manuscript about the life of Lucy Livermore, a seventy year-old woman who grew up on a farm in Nebraska, who was raped by a farmhand at age 12, but never told anyone except her cat (who was the only creature in the world who thought she was pretty), then moved to Montana to raise Alpaca with her aunt Grace, the one on her mother's side who went stir-crazy one winter and killed all the Alpaca one night with a shovel. Lucy never had her own bicycle, and she experimented with lesbianism with the clerk at the seven-eleven, then became a prostitute at a truck stop, had her nose broken six times, got her Chlamydia under control, married one of her johns, who was a one-armed trucker twice her age and who was an alcoholic, and who suffered from post Viet Nam flashback episodes, especially during sex, and he also raised albino rats, but she faithfully stayed at his side even through all ten years of his cancer treatments (which came after the seven to ten he did in prison for the school shooting), only to find out he never really loved her, just his stupid rats! He dies. Ha! She donates all his rats to the reptile house at the zoo. After her hysterectomy and mastectomy and tongue piercing, when she's in her early 60's, at that point almost unrecognizable with liver spots, she reunites with Sherry, her old lover, the seven-eleven clerk, who Lucy coincidentally finds is living at the same trailer park she's in, just outside Reno, NV. Sherry's been through years of surgery herself, which stupid Medicare wouldn't pay for, and is now a man named Terry. They learn to accept one another, get their own double-wide with six cats, and start a pottery club that meets on Tuesdays at the VFW hall. The whole story all takes place in one day as a flashback, right before Lucy kills herself after killing Terry with a shovel. The end.

This heartfelt coming of age story is based upon much of my own life experience, but I've changed all the names. And don't worry, "Terry" is really OK. I made that part up. I promise. God told me to send this to you.

Sincerely,
H.W.

And some of you still wonder about the Literary Agency policy!