ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON REJECTION

by Catherine Ryan Hyde

Catherine Ryan Hyde is the author of twenty published and forthcoming books. She is best known for her novel Pay It Forward, which was adapted into a Warner Brothers motion picture starring Kevin Spacey and Helen Hunt. Her newest releases are When You Were Older, Don’t Let Me Go, When I Found You, and Second Hand Heart. Her backlist novels Funerals for Horses, Earthquake Weather and Other Stories, Electric God, and Walter’s Purple Heart have been re-released in ebook format. She co-authored, with publishing industry blogger Anne R. Allen, How to be a Writer in the E-Age… And Keep Your E-Sanity. catherineryanhyde.com.

It might sound like dwelling on the negative if I say I received 122 short-story rejections before my first acceptance. But, for writers just starting out, it’s important to hear. If you know I was rejected more than a thousand times while placing fifty stories, it might be hard for you to justify giving up after five rejection slips.

I think the most damaging misconception about rejection is that your work has been judged as “bad.” You feel insulted. You feel you’ve been told you’re not good enough for that publication. But in reality, you don’t know how it was received. You were not present behind the scenes to know.

I’ve done a small amount of editorial work. From that limited experience, I can suggest a couple of other meanings:

• I didn’t like it. So what? I’m just one opinion. I don’t like Ernest Hemingway, but he did irritatingly well in spite of my objections.
• I liked it, but didn’t love it. It’s hard to quantify why we fall in love with a piece of writing. I do know this: If we dated someone who didn’t fall in love with us, most of us would not conclude we were unlovable. We’d assume others might feel differently.
• It was a good story, but definitely suited to a different type of publication. On the one hand, it pays to do your homework here. On the other, submission is always a shot in the dark. If it’s literary work, and a literary magazine, how will you know unless you try?

• I liked it but I couldn’t sell the other editors on it. Surprisingly common. Your story almost always has to impress more than one person, and we all know taste is a tricky proposition, on which no one seems to agree.
• We all liked it, but the big cheese editor had other, inexplicable, ideas.
• We had eight stories in committee review, and space for four. So we were reduced to such methods of judgment as “are we overbalanced on first-person stories in this issue?”

It could have been any one of those situations. It could have come within a hair’s breadth of acceptance. (I once had an editor, while accepting a story, tell me he’d come within “a hair’s breadth” of taking my previous submission. I’d figured he hated it.)

But here’s the part that perplexes me: We never rip open the envelope, see that printed slip, and think, “Hmm. I’ll bet it got all the way to the final cut and it’s being returned to me with the gnawing regret of several editors.”

Just about every one of my rejected stories has gone on to be published. Without further revision. Some were rejected a handful of times. Others garnered over fifty rejections before finding a home.

Here’s what I learned, and I wish I had understood it earlier: The more I like it, the more likely I am to have trouble finding a home for it. Who knows why? But it shows that my own perspective on my work doesn’t tell me enough. And if I rewrite it because an editor says the ending is too “resolution evasive” (yes, I really have been told that—I couldn’t make a thing like that up), that editor probably still won’t take it, and the next one will say the ending wraps up too neatly. (If our dates don’t fall in love with us, we don’t keep changing ourselves until they do. Well, hopefully we don’t.)

Here’s what I consider to be my ultimate rejection story: Shortly after selling Pay It Forward to Simon & Schuster, I sold them a second novel, Walter’s Purple Heart. Which the same editor at Simon & Schuster had rejected years earlier. And he knew it. The work hadn’t changed. Only the timing had changed.

So the only conclusion we can rightfully gather is that the editor in question doesn’t choose to publish that particular work on that particular date.

And yet we’re human, so it drags us down. I like to assign a time limit for being dragged down. For forty-eight hours, I get to indulge my depression. Then I have to send the work out again. In the long run you can take any approach at all to rejection, so long as you don’t let it win.