

A Writer's Vow

The goal of all civilization, all religious thought, and all that sort of thing is simply to have a good time. But man gets so solemn over the process that he forgets the end.

~Don Marquis

As writers, we may not remember the worst sentence we ever wrote. But we may never forget the worst sentence we ever spoke. It's only three little words, but every writer has at least mumbled them under his breath: "I give up." It's so easy to give up our pursuit of publication because the writing life is so tough. Yet, quitting speaks volumes about what we believe about ourselves -- and our work. "I give up" eventually becomes "I gave up," and that is literally a death sentence to any writer's dream of publication.

That said, when should you realistically give up on your first finished novel if it appears to be going nowhere?

Let's say your first novel absorbed three years of your life. You hired a freelance editor who once worked as an editor for a major publisher to make sure it was ready for publication. You expanded it, edited it and revised it again -- then again. You proofed it with a recently retired English teacher, tested its impact with multiple readers, and had a few journalists analyze it. You analyzed it, dreamed about it, and virtually memorized it. Finally, you submitted it (or at least the first three chapters) to an agent -- make that thirty-five agents. They showed some interest, but they all rejected it in the end. Reasons varied. Now what? Is it time to give up on your novel and move on?

Yes and no. Rejection may never happen that way to you. It happened exactly that way to me. How did I respond? First, I did what every self-respecting first-time novelist would do: I moped around the house for a week. Thankfully, I got tired of that, and then I reread all of my rejection slips. Yes, all thirty-five of them, and I looked for the silver lining. I was encouraged by what I found.

Several agents gave me insightful feedback that I didn't recognize at first blush because I was too emotionally invested in the work. Agents normally wouldn't take the time for this if they didn't believe the writing was sound. Many e-mailed me a few times to stay in touch and offer a few words of encouragement. And, yes, most sent a standard brush-off e-mail. One agent e-mailed me a rejection letter that started with "Dear _____." Even the space to drop in my name was left blank. A close friend affectionately refers to this as my "Dear Blank" rejection letter. Talk about feeling obscure. I felt like the poster boy for Rejected Newbie Novelists.

Yet, I clung to all of the encouragement I could squeeze out of those rejections. Next, I followed the advice of the one agent who cared enough to share detailed advice. I converted the entire novel from first person to third person omniscient narrator, refashioned the first chapter, expanded the story by ten chapters to develop the characters and enhance the transformation of the main character, and layered in multiple subplots to an otherwise linear story.

When I finished, I had a new novel ready for new agents. I sent it out again. How did the agents respond? Rejection. No "Dear Blank" letters, but rejection just the same.

Discouraged, I asked myself just how serious I was about this thing called "the writer's life." It's an easy question when things are running smoothly, but how do I respond when my work hits a brick wall? I realized that rejection, on any level, is a test.

It challenges the depth of our convictions, the clarity of our call, and the intensity of our passion to write.

But rejection is nothing if not a great teacher, so I knew I must learn from it. Ironically, this all happened around my wedding anniversary, which, in turn, reminded me of my marriage vows -- vows to never give up on my marriage despite the hurdles we would face. This got me thinking about creating a "writer's vow." Why not vow to never give up on my writing despite the devastating disappointments and setbacks of the writing life? So I sat down and vowed I would always work through rejection by writing through it. This was a breakthrough for me. I realized my status as a writer should not be measured only by the fruit of my labor, but by the labor itself. After all, with writing, the process is the end. This vow will keep me writing. And writing is the best way to get better.

Next, I wrote to the freelance editor who helped me reshape my book for advice. Her words were golden!

"It's unusual to write just one book and have it sell," she said. "You often need to get the hang of crafting a novel by writing several before you write anything that nears being publishable."

Then came the nugget that still rings in my ears.

"Most authors make the mistake of clinging too tightly to their first novel without continuing to write more. Publishers will want to see that you have a certain velocity to your writing and can consistently come up with plot concepts and craft them into manuscripts before they decide to invest in your first novel."

Have I made the mistake of clinging too tightly to my first novel? Have you? We must develop velocity to our writing.

So, what will I do with my first novel now? Give up? (There's that dreaded sentence again.) No, but I will give it a rest. In the meantime, I will write one or two more, knowing that my second or third novel may actually be the first one published. But that won't happen unless I fulfill my writer's vow.

Someday, when I have a novel published, I will return to my very first novel to see if it's as worthy of publication as my second book -- or if it's worthy of a rejection letter addressed to "Dear Blank."

~Jim Magruder