

Title:

Busting Publishing's Biggest Myths

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Summary:

Rejection is never easy. But some authors can't separate themselves from their work, and take rejection letters very personally. I get many emails from disgruntled writers who can't get past their anger to figure out why their work was turned down in the first place. So before you spend hours sticking pins in your editor voodoo doll, see if you recognize yourself below....

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Article Body:

Rejection is never easy. But some authors can't separate themselves from their work, and take rejection letters very personally. I get many emails from disgruntled writers who can't get past their anger to figure out why their work was turned down in the first place. So before you spend hours sticking pins in your editor voodoo doll, see if you recognize yourself below:

The complaint: "Editors practice age discrimination. I'm over 50 and editors believe only young authors can write for children."

The truth: Editors are interested in finding good books, period. It doesn't matter how old the author is. Take a look at the lists of award winners (ask your librarian, or do an Internet search for Caldecott or Newbery Awards) and note the ages of the authors. Many didn't start writing until their kids were in school full time, or took up writing as a second career. Editors also know that the best stories come from years of life experience, and older writers have more to draw from. Yes, occasionally a book written by a teenager will make the news, but more often than not it's the novelty of the author's age that gets the publicity, not the quality of the writing. And why does the editor know your age in the first place? There's no reason to mention it in your cover or query letter, unless it has direct bearing on the story. If you're writing historical fiction and you actually lived through the events in the plot, or your nonfiction book is based on years of study in the subject, then your age is a plus.

The complaint: "I'm a man, and editors think only women can write children's

books."

The truth: Sorry guys, but this one's a little ridiculous. Again, look at that list of award winners. Men are well-represented. Glance through the names of editors in Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market published by Writer's Digest Books. Lots of men there too. The only time your gender might be an issue is with the readers themselves. For example, teenage boys might not buy a science fiction/adventure story written by a woman, or middle grade girls may think a man can't possibly pen a series featuring four adolescent girls at summer camp. They're wrong, but you can always use your first initial instead of your name to fool your audience.

The complaint: "They're just wrong about my writing! All editors want these days are famous names, not quality books."

The truth: Yes, many editors (especially those at larger houses) have to be concerned with making money for the publisher, and so rely on a certain number of established authors each year to pay the bills. But they also know they need to find new writers, because those standbys aren't going to be writing forever.

Sometimes it's almost impossible to interpret a rejection letter, and one or two form rejections does not mean you're a failure. Editors are people too, with personal tastes and the need to balance each list by subject matter and age group. However, several rejections in a row deserve a closer look. Are you submitting to appropriate publishers, who actually publish the kind of book you've written? Have any of the houses on your list recently published a book very similar to yours? Is your manuscript riddled with typos or grammatical errors? Even though a copy editor will fix these before the book's published, sloppy presentation can give an editor reason to reject a manuscript when she's got 50 others sitting on her desk waiting for her attention.

In most cases, though, it's the writing that gets the manuscript rejected. And since it's the editor's job to recognize good writing and help those authors make their books even better, there is a chance (admit it!) that the rejection is deserved. How can you tell? First of all, if you get personal comments about your manuscript in the rejection letter, take those to heart. Play devil's advocate and assume the editor's right, and see if those changes improve the work. Secondly, get objective input. Join a writer's group, get a professional manuscript critique, or pay for a personal critique session at a writer's conference (most Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators workshops--www.scbwi.org--have optional one-on-one critiques). Take writing classes, read books on writing. Do whatever you can to learn how to judge your work and make it better.

The complaint: "Publishers aren't interested in publishing books that will help kids."

The truth: Whoa! If children's book publishers didn't produce books that benefit kids, they'd go out of business in a heartbeat. Of course, we can all walk into a book store and find books that aren't worth the paper they're printed on, but that's true of any product. (Have you ever bought a T-shirt that disintegrated in the first wash, or a DVD player that self-destructed in a week?) I'm not saying that's a good thing, but our society seems to tolerate a certain amount of drivel in the marketplace. However, all publishers prefer commercially-appealing books that also have substance. This complaint consistently comes from writers whose goal is to "help kids," or teach them how to grow into solid, caring citizens through their books. This is admirable and even desirable, but very often the message is heavy-handed and preachy. The message smothers the story, and the book ends up sounding like a lecture. It's simply not good writing. Try reading several popular books with a message embedded in the plot (ask a teacher or librarian for recommendations) and work on the writing-improvement suggestions above.

The complaint: "I'm disabled/poor/have had a hard life and want to share my story, but no one will listen."

The truth: I imagine it's difficult for an editor to reject a manuscript that comes from someone who has struggled with adversity and is still determined to follow their lifelong dream of becoming a published author. The tough circumstances themselves don't work against the writer (very often they contribute to powerful stories) but an author's unique situation cannot outweigh less-than-stellar writing. What's on the page is what matters the most. If your story is too personal (it's about your life as an adult, or you haven't extracted the universal feelings and crafted them into a story that will be relevant to a wide audience), the book simply won't sell in the children's market. Again, learn what makes a quality children's book and get objective feedback on your manuscript. Remember, no one owes you a publishing credit just because you took the time to write a book. Writing is hard work, and requires self-education, practice, and persistence. There's no shame in putting aside a manuscript that simply won't sell and writing something new. Every published author has a drawer full of those, and enough rejection letters to wallpaper an office. So join the club- it's worth the price of membership.