

Reflections on Writing: What's Your Score?

When the late, great writer and poet, David W. McFadden, won the 2014 Giller Prize for Excellence in Poetry for *What's the Score?* (Mansfield, 2013), my first poetry manuscript was still out in left field without a literary home.

“David,” I asked, “what advice can you give me?”

“Just keep writing and sending them out.”

David was right. I kept writing and sending them out. Eventually, I scored. Seven years, twelve manuscript submissions (six full manuscripts, six excerpts), and three title changes later, my debut poetry collection, *some conditions apply*, was placed with Inanna Publications for Spring 2020. Thank you, Luciana Ricciutelli, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief. What seems like a long wait is the necessary production schedule for most small presses that work with minimal staff on shoestring budgets for the love of literature. After seven long years wafting in the ethers of Submissionland, these three more years will pass quickly.

I share with you what I've learned about the submission process.

Know Why You Write

Writers write for many reasons. Reading and writing for me are inextricably linked. I write because I read, and I read because I write.

At the age of two I could recite the entire *Tale of Peter Rabbit*. By age five I was reciting the metered verse of A. A. Milne and choosing books with the children's librarian. By age ten I wrote and illustrated my first fiction for my younger cousin on a folded piece of paper. It was about a bunny—a nod, of course, to my beloved Peter Rabbit—although not a plagiarized knock-off. Many writers, after all, learn to write by imitation.

Throughout public school I buried myself in books to avoid bullying from classmates. I was poor, poorly dressed, tiny, and easy to pick on. Mercifully, the children's books in my piano teacher's study compensated for the books I didn't read under the controlling eyes of the wicked-witch-of-all-librarians at my junior public school.

In high school I wrote poetry and songs influenced by Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Buffy St. Marie, Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Richard Fariña, Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsberg, et. al., back in the early days of Margaret Atwood, CanLit, and CanCon before the internet. Sadly, my English teachers, although an improvement over grade school, were not stellar. Nor was I a diligent student.

In university I wrote research papers. I became a music therapist and wrote reports, proposals, and more research papers. I also wrote songs—many songs—throughout the 35-year tenure of my clinical music therapy practice. But the poetry in these songs was functionally pragmatic, not necessarily artistic.

I often turned to poetry and fiction as an antidote to the dry research I needed to read to keep up with my field. I didn't write for art's sake until much later. My first literary poems published in 2010. My first flash fiction and non-fiction prose published in 2016. I've snagged some awards for these literary efforts along the way.

But publication and prizes are not why I write. I realize I write because I have always written. And I always write in response to what I experience—what I think, see, read, hear, and feel. As a music therapist I needed to write research, journal articles, think pieces, proposals, and support letters advocating on behalf of patients and clients. Now I write for art's sake.

Know Where You Submit and Why

Nothing gets accomplished without taking care of business. Much ink has gone into distinguishing between the art of writing and the business of writing [read: submitting]. The art of writing in the absence of the business of submission is equivalent to a story consisting of accumulated events with no plot or resolution.

Submit writing strategically. Know that journal editors and book publishers are people just like writers. Indeed, many are themselves writers and poets. If not writers or poets, they do love reading.

Read the journal and book publications where you plan to submit. Familiarize yourself with their editorial preferences. And pay attention to submission calls and the writing of guest editors. Submit where you want to join the conversation.

Submissions vary, typically comprising a cover letter and the writing content. Submission guidelines matter; read these carefully. Include in the cover letter all information requested, but be concise. Personalize your submission cover letter with positive comments about past issues or books you particularly enjoyed reading. Editors and publishers work slavishly and deserve support. I repeat: be concise.

Do not ask for or expect critique for the writing you submit to literary journals and publishing houses. They are far too busy to routinely provide feedback. Grow your writing skills in workshops and courses designed for this purpose. Be grateful, however, for any unsolicited advice and encouragement you do receive.

Submit writing that is ready for publication. I submitted my first poems and stories as I wrote them, which was premature. Few of these early [read: rudimentary, undeveloped] pieces of writing were published. These submissions did, however, stoke the coffers of Canada Post and some journals for reading fees.

Speaking of fees...

Reading submission fees for journals are increasingly more common. Writers must support the infrastructure of the literary arts by buying books, journals, and tickets to readings. I have bought my weight in books and subscriptions many times over. Sometimes, however, I must rotate subscriptions amongst my favourite journals or cannot afford them at all. Sometimes I can't submit when a reading or contest fee is required. Understandably, I win few prizes. I do the best I can.

But do as I say, not as I do. Do pay reading and contest submission fees if you can. Subscribe and donate to your favourite journals and literary reading series and festivals. They all need your support.

Help other writers by pointing out potential submission opportunities. Help them, and they will help you in kind.

Rejection Happens

Embrace Margaret Atwood's boast that she could wallpaper her office with the rejection notices she received. Rejection is an inevitable consequence of submitting. Consider your writing submissions as your personal lottery ticket, one that you have a chance of winning only if you submit. Consider rejection as an opportunity to re-submit.

An experiential conference workshop with dance therapist Judith Koltai-Peavy enlightened me. She instructed us to prance around the room to energetic music, greeting everyone we encountered with *Hi, do you want to play with me?* to which we respond *Yes!* After an improvised dance, we move on to repeat this interchange with the next person. We were subsequently directed to respond *No!* when asked if we wanted to play, to which the seeker responds *Okay!* and gleefully dances to the next person. I realize with this exercise that rejection needn't be hurtful and that seeking with a playful spirit matters more.

Journal editors carefully curate each issue. Your writing must fit the tenor of the journal generally, as well as be a good fit with the other writing in any single journal issue. Rejection doesn't mean your submission is unworthy, but it may be a poor fit for a particular editorial vision.

So, what's a good fit?

Publication is a quirky, whimsical, and mercurial process. Almost nonsensical. Here's just how capricious this process can be. A journal accepted one poem I sent from amongst a submission of five poems. When marking the acceptance in my records, I noticed the very same poem was amongst another submission of five poems I had sent to the same journal one year earlier. Seriously. The very same poem that was accepted for publication was rejected by the same journal the year before. Go figure.

Don't give up. Regardless of the writing genre, embrace David McFadden's advice to "just keep writing and sending them out." This task is part of the business of writing.

Celebrate Acceptance

Publication, like punctuation, is where writing logically ends.

Acceptance brings credibility, affirmation, and welcome monetary compensation (however small) to offset the high cost of printer ink. Savour each acceptance, but don't rest on your laurels. Don't stop writing and submitting.

When publication entails a process of editorial back-and-forth and final page proofs, welcome this opportunity to work with the editor, knowing he or she has experience with many writers. Embrace this close scrutiny of your work. Consider the suggestions offered.

Acknowledge all success without falling prey to jealousy. Celebrate your success and the successes of all the writers you know. We're all in this together.

What's Your Score?

Seven years since writing for art's sake, here's how my numbers crunched as of June 2017 when my manuscript was finally placed.

Rejections:

67 journals rejected 476 poems (some simultaneous), 1 short story, and 1 essay; 11 publishers rejected various iterations of 1 poetry manuscript

Published or Forthcoming:

23 poems in 3 anthologies and 8 journals; 2 flash fiction in 2 journals; 2 essays in 2 journals; 1 poetry collection

Active Submissions:

35 poems (some simultaneous) to 13 journals; 1 short story to 3 journals; 1 nonfiction book proposal

I invite you to tally your score and embrace the reality check. Better still, Merlin Homer (David's widow) suggests engaging in friendly competition amongst your writer friends to see who can accumulate the most rejection notices one year from when you begin. Try it.

With a heartfelt thanks to David McFadden, let's all keep writing and sending them out.

Blog post by Mary H. Auerbach Rykov, 29 June 2017, revised for Brockton Writers, 6 November 2019.