

What do you do with your rejection slips? I've heard some writers use them to wallpaper the loo. Personally, I'd rather be constipated than ever look at them again...they *hurt!* Think about it: the precious story/poem/article that I've loved and laboured over for so long, my literary love child, is deemed 'not good enough' to face the world. This news is coolly delivered by a standard letter that may not even have my name on it.

Receiving a rejection doesn't mean I'm a bad writer. It does mean that the publisher or agent who's considering the submission I've sent, can't see my work making them megabucks. Publishing is ultimately a business, and, even with the best will in the world, money-and-profit is the bottom line.

But being a good writer is really about art; it requires craftsmanship and passion. Its primary purpose is usually communication – building bridges between people – but writing is just as valid when the author is working for her own pleasure or satisfaction. Measuring

the *only* reason you write: that road tends to lead straight to despair. There will probably be a mixture of motivations for your work, some public (the money, the glory), some private (self-expression or that special present for that special someone).

I've lost count of the number of people asking me for advice on how to get published. I give the best help I can, but deep down I'm bothered. Why don't writers feel their work is valid unless it's in a high street bookshop?

Being taken on by a big publishing house is exciting, but far from easy. A book contract rarely means giving up the day job. You might feel your editor is unsympathetic and is ripping your work apart until you hardly recognise it as your own. Royalties are 'held over' because your book just isn't selling, or you're told your title is being pulped.

There are so many good reasons for *not* being published – and the best of all is total control over your own work. Writing for its own sake becomes a satisfying, empowering experience. It means creating

because they were much more meaningful – and had a longer shelf life – than bath oils or chocolates.

As a properly published author – primarily of stories and novels for children – I was asked to run workshops and give talks at schools and festivals, and I took to producing small volumes of my poetry and adult short stories to bring with me. I didn't even try to get these published, just produced them as samples, using them as examples of being in control of my own work. A friend illustrated some of my adult stories (because grown-ups really do like pictures!), and I drew silly cartoons for some of my dafter rhymes. I took the whole lot down to the photocopying shop and had 50 of each printed.

This adventure into self-publishing didn't make a significant amount of money, but I earned my costs back and generated interest among those who bought them. Best of all there was the bliss of producing *my* work, *my* way. I'm just as proud of these as of my 'properly published' books. And this idea seems to

Heart and craft

Sometimes your written passion simply doesn't find a publisher. Novelist Beth Webb champions the writing-for-pleasure principle – and the importance of *not* being published.

the value of our creations solely in terms of publication and money is misleading at best, dangerous at worst.

So, what makes a piece of writing – any type of writing – really worthwhile? I believe that its true value is intrinsic and can be traced to why it was written in the first place. A story of murder, for instance, might be harmlessly cathartic when your partner goes off with your neighbour and leaves you in the lurch. A family treasure could be created when your five-year-old gets the mumps, and you make up that funny rhyme about a sick dinosaur. Equally, an excellently written job application will get you an interview, and a razor-sharp complaint letter gets action. Clear, concise instructions might save a life, and a poetic love letter might win a heart.

There is nothing wrong with being totally convinced that you've found a real money-spinning idea – as long as it isn't

word-art as you want it to be, with not a rejection letter in sight.

When I was in my 20s, I lived on a houseboat in Amsterdam. Those were the days: irresponsible, alternative living at its best! With no money for presents, we all made things for each other – it's amazing how inventive you can become when you have nothing. It was then I started to write stories – and they found immense appreciation.

Eventually, I came home to England and became a respectable member of society with a husband, a mortgage and four kids. But still, I wrote. I tried to comfort a seven-year-old with an allegory when his dad died. I entertained my own children with silly tales. Some pieces I tried to publish, but not all, because they didn't belong to the world 'out there.' They were private, just meant for one other person's eyes. To my knowledge, many of these stories have been kept and treasured

be catching on: I went to a poetry café recently where many of the participants had done the same thing – and they were selling!

Although going down this route is fun, there are a few essential rules. Self-publication is closely aligned to self-respect, so present your work as you would present yourself, and remember: these approaches aren't a second-rate option for 'failed' writers. They *are* important opportunities for honing your craft:

>> If you don't have a very good printer, use professional photocopying facilities. Go for quality paper, never less than 100 gram. And recycled paper is very good these days if you prefer it.

>> Make an interesting cover. With digital cameras and professional design programmes there is no excuse for dull presentation.

>> If you can't do a good design yourself, then don't! Ask around – you are bound

to know someone who can make an eye-catching cover in exchange for a spot of babysitting or a couple of bottles of wine. Again, most print shops will do it all for you at a reasonable cost.

>> Get the pages machine-folded, trimmed and stapled. Neat edges *do* make a difference.

>> Make sure you have proper storage – use a stout cardboard box and don't let the cat

family). I even know of an enterprising lady who writes up other people's family histories *for* them.

Making sure such projects are well-written demands total professionalism. The experience of producing them will also give you valuable experience and insights into your own work. The creative act of writing, whether you focus on fiction or nonfiction, is an end in itself – it brings

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sleep on top of your precious stock. Dog – or cat – chewed books are a real turn-off.

>> If you really want to go big and produce a whole novel, there's also internet publishing or print on demand.

Not interested in self-publishing but looking to maximise your work as a writer (not to mention your organisational skills)? Why not put together an anthology of your writing group's year, start up a really good community magazine, record your experience of illness to help others cope or write up your family history? (One branch of my mother's family emigrated to the USA in the 19th Century. I've often wondered about contacting them. I'd like to know more about my uncle the cop who was shot dead in a bar-room brawl – and perhaps they'd like to hear about their cousin who was an Olympic oarsman or the undefeatable village cricket team that was almost entirely made up from their

headaches and heartaches, but ultimately rewards with exhilaration. Whether you want to be published or not, there is no substitute for dedication to professional craftsmanship – being bothered to get every word as right as possible, whatever you finally intend to do with the piece. Most importantly, taking control of your work means you have a chance to communicate with the people who value what you have to say – not simply for the information that only you can give, but also for the crafting and effort you have put into it.

And, perseverance counts: you never know when you might be 'spotted' and asked to 'go big.' It has happened.

About seven years ago I began writing *Star Dancer*, a novel for teens about a Druid girl and her Downs Syndrome foster

brother in the late Iron Age. I wrote and re-wrote it, crafting and recasting until I believed it was good enough to publish.

I went to a literary consultancy that recommended me to a literary agent. My hopes were high, but the agent turned it down.

I sent it to several more. No joy. So I put the manuscript aside. I still loved my story, as did my friends and family and that meant a great deal to me.

At that point I accepted that I'd been lucky. I had a few children's titles in print but I believed my career as a 'properly published' writer was probably over. I decided to concentrate on mentoring and

teaching creative writing. I loved the work and it earned me a living.

I knew I'd still write for my own pleasure, visiting my own secret inner world where stories and poems itch and wriggle, longing to be born. I decided to let them out one by one when I had time, simply because I loved them, then I'd show them to whoever was interested.

Since then, *Star Dancer* has been snapped up by a top literary agency and is now part of a quartet of historical-fantasy novels published by Macmillan. But I think if I hadn't loved the story for its own sake, I'd have ended up angry, disillusioned, and, like so many excellent writers I know, putting the manuscript in the recycling bin and walking away from it – and from myself.

Several years down the line, I'm still not sure what made the difference for the manuscript of *Star Dancer* – maybe relaxing about what ultimately happened to my work made it stronger? Perhaps trends in the book world had changed and the timing was right? Who knows?

Exploring the myriad fascinating and fulfilling ways in which writing can be used, need not exclude dreams of shelf-space in Waterstone's. On the contrary, the skills learned this way provide an excellent apprenticeship. A good writer refuses to accept the feeling that her work – and therefore *she* – isn't good enough. She defines her readership, and uses each piece of writing in the best possible way. This may mean some fine stories and poems will never be published, but they will go on communicating...which, ultimately, is the reason we write.

I'm often asked if I would still keep writing if I wasn't a mainstream published author. I can honestly say I did, and I would. I am hopelessly addicted to my stories and it gives me a huge amount of pleasure to share them. But it doesn't matter if no one else is interested. It's *my* addiction, it's *my* writing. ■

Beth Webb has just published her 12th novel, *Fire Dreamer*, the second part of her *Star Dancer* quartet for teenagers. She is a former journalist and radio broadcaster, and has been teaching creative writing for 17 years in the UK, as well as mentoring emerging writers in Africa (with the British Council and the University of Lancaster). Amongst her former students are several published and prize-winning authors.

