



Nauman's Nautica

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by A.D. Nauman

Thoughts on navigating the turbulent life of an author

(Nautica [noun] /'nawtika/-- navigation, seamanship)

(Nauman [noun] /'nawman/-- my last name)

July 31, 2023

Hi friends, and thank you so much for giving my newsletter a try!

Although I will be including newsy items about where I'm reading, etc., mostly I want to use this opportunity to share some of my thoughts on the writing life. I've been at this for four long decades—this writing and publishing fiction thing—and I'd like to share some of what I've learned in the hopes of being helpful to other authors who, like me, are striving to stay sane and solider on in this difficult/impossible profession we've chosen.

So, each month I'll include a short column about the writing life. Below are my thoughts on dealing with rejections. Hoping you'll find it useful!

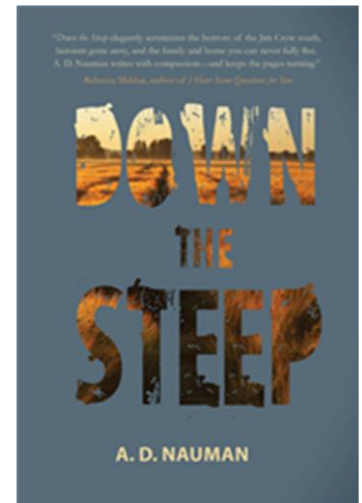
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Rejections and More Rejections:

Ways to Cope and Carry On

(by A.D. Nauman)

There are only two ways to fail as a writer. The first is to quit writing. As long as we keep working at it—reading, studying, listening, learning, thinking, observing, drafting, and revising, revising, revising—



Launch Party!

for *Down the Steep*

October 14th, 2023,

Saturday

4:00 pm

A.D. Nauman

in conversation

with **Abby Geni!**

at

The Book Cellar

(in Lincoln Square)

4736-38 N Lincoln Ave

Chicago, IL 60625



our storytelling improves, and success is increasingly possible. Even on our death beds, we can imagine a whole new appreciation for our work springing up posthumously—like Melville!

The second way to fail as a writer is to quit submitting. That's what happened to me in the 2000s. After publishing several short stories and then my first novel, I expected publishing to get easier. It didn't. The rejections kept pouring in, and at some point in the mid-2000s my subconscious struck upon a great strategy for avoiding these rejections: just quit submitting! Without being fully aware of it, I began to procrastinate when it came time to submit. Like a car running out of gas, I eventually drifted to a stop. By 2010 I'd published so few pieces (two, to be exact), that even my devoted sister had given up on me having a "writing career."

So, how to avoid avoidance? People share all kinds of fun strategies. Rebecca Makkai talks about having rejection competitions with her writer friends: the person racking up the most rejections in a month wins a pool of money. My friend Laurel DiGangi and I have started a tradition of responding to rejection emails, then forwarding them to each other (carefully *not* sending them back to the editors). We say all kinds of hilariously snarky things to the rejecting entities: we make fun of the journal name, the editor's name; we say we're sorry but a subscription to their journal does not meet our needs at this time. We hope their journal finds a home elsewhere. We wish them luck.

Of course, the rejections still sting. To prevent the gradual gnawing away of my soul, with the occasional sudden sucking of my being into a vortex of despair, I've learned some serious mental gymnastics. It's important to acknowledge how the rejections make us feel (i.e., like crap), but more important is attending to what they make us *think*.

Here is where my many shelves of books on how to cope with divorce have come in handy. In them I learned about thought distortions and how the thoughts we attach to life's disappointments can seriously harm our emotional well-being.

What does a rejection of your story *mean*? What conclusions do you draw? That your writing just isn't good enough? That *you* just aren't good enough? That you've wasted all your time working on something that turned out to be a piece of crap and come to think of it you're a piece of crap, too? That you tried your absolute best and produced something you thought was really good but look no one wants it so obviously you were wrong and your judgment must be off and you may as well quit and admit to all the nasty people you've ever encountered in writing workshops that they were right—you *are* a no-talent idiot—and you'll never, ever, in a million years, succeed?

Oh, those run-away thoughts! Down the chute we go, to the bottom of the game board. (By the way, a similar thing happens when some boyfriend or girlfriend breaks up with us. We begin with an honest, *Why?* and end up concluding we're the most undesirable person the universe has ever spit into existence.)

Here is one intellectually honest fact that can gate off the entrance to that chute: readers' judgments of our work are wildly subjective. Key word: wildly. This is a truth most people trained in literature—English majors, English professors, literary scholars—have difficulty fully grasping, because it seems to undermine the foundational beliefs of the discipline. Surely there is such a thing as an objective judgment of a literary work. Surely what's "good" about writing is a quality in the text that can be discerned by a smart, knowledgeable reader who reads closely. T.S. Eliot and his New Critic friends built careers on this notion.

In fact, many decades of research in cognitive psychology and literacy education (which I have a PhD in) demonstrate how readers' past experiences and prior knowledge, along with other variables, affect both their comprehension of and their responses to a text. This is not just "taste." "Taste" is a fairly static concept. This is "response," which fluctuates—our judgment of a text shifts over time, for various reasons that aren't rooted in the text. (I'll be writing more about readers' responses in a future newsletter.)

Here are some fun facts:

Once I accidentally sent a story to a journal that had rejected it a year earlier. On the second submission—of the exact same story—the editors accepted it.

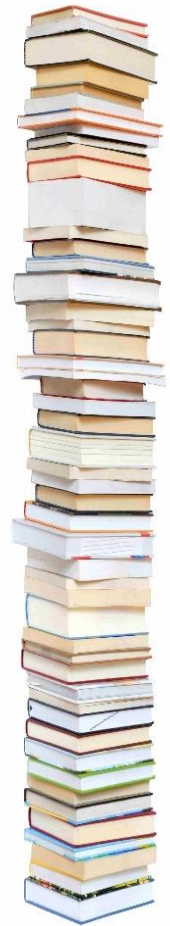
Recently I began resubmitting a story I'd abandoned in the mid-2000s, after dozens of journals had rejected it. Nearly 20 years after I wrote it, it was accepted for publication. The only change I'd made was updating a movie title.

Thirty-five years ago, I wrote a story about a young woman who was being sexually harassed at her job. The story kept garnering rejections, but I kept working on the piece; I really liked it and thought it deserved to be published. In the early 2000s, I shared it with my writing group at the time, and one group member (a woman) said I should set the story in the past, because sexual harassment doesn't happen anymore. She said, "This would never happen now—we have training" (again, early 2000s). So I shifted the story's time period to the 1970s. Still, no one published it. Then Donald Trump was elected president, and the "Me Too" movement began, and oh, look—sexual harassment does *indeed* still happen. (Insert screaming face here.) I started submitting my (now historical) story again, and it was quickly picked up by *Willow Springs*.

Another one of my stories, "The Cat," was rejected by about 10 journals. Then the brilliant Elizabeth McKenzie accepted it for *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and the story received special mentions in both *Best American Short Stories* and the *Pushcart* anthology that year.

(End of fun facts)

Long ago I came across a quote by Wayne Booth, whose book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, was read widely in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. He said basically that if a work of fiction is written well enough, everyone will like it. It's taken me decades to be able to say (now to his ghost), "That's not true." Perhaps what Wayne Booth meant by "everyone" was his circle of white, male colleagues who all shared similar experiences and beliefs, all inhabiting the same culture. In my lifetime, *Harry Potter* has been the only book that has come close to being universally liked, and



it was rejected by 12 publishers before it was accepted by Bloomsbury. That's just insane. Twelve editors *whose job it was* to spot commercial potential in a manuscript didn't see it in *Harry Potter*.

The main take-away here is this: Speaking back to our run-away thoughts, which cause excess pain after a rejection, helps ease the sting. And one of the primary assumptions our thoughts like to repeat is that a rejection means our writing isn't good enough. That's not an accurate assumption. Maybe a piece does need more work—that's for the writer to decide. Alternatively, maybe the rejecting editor is a member of some distant tribe who just didn't connect with that story.

Here are a few more pieces of advice for coping with rejection:

- Keep in mind that, by seeking publication, you've set yourself a very high bar. What percentage of the population gets anything published? Because we're all aiming so high, we'll inevitably miss the mark, many times. But look how high our flares have flown. Kudos to us for taking that risk.
- Realize that people who are not in the arts, which is most people (bankers, electricians, lawyers, teachers, cashiers), are not relentlessly pummeled by rejections. What we're doing takes incredible strength. Persisting in the face of what feels like unremitting rejection is an amazing feat that should be lauded. We are all superheroes.
- Whenever you catch yourself comparing your publication record to someone else's, *stop*. Really, stop. There is zero benefit to doing this. You may as well be stabbing yourself in the leg with an ice pick. There will always, always be writers "ahead" of us, and there will always be writers "behind" us. We need to focus on reaching our personal best, not someone else's.
- Do some deep self-examination as to *why* you write. Most likely, you'll come up with some version of this: "I can't *not* write." "I'm happier when I'm working on my writing than when I'm not." "I get ideas and I just have to put them on a page." Interestingly, none of these require outside recognition. Yes yes, of course we all want to be read, read widely, acknowledged and celebrated, but deep down, what compels us to write seems happily oblivious to that desire.
- Try your best to resist growing bitter. Bitterness will hurt you. (And we're back to stabbing ourselves with ice picks.) It is indeed highly annoying that so many editors fail to see the value in our work, but, like everyone else in the world, they're just a bunch of flawed and flailing humans. Most of them are also writers who are drowning in their own rejections. Compassion for everyone includes ourselves.
- Finally, remember: you are not alone. And with submission comes hope. Just keep swiping.

