

# Liberty States Fiction Writers

New York - New Jersey - Pennsylvania



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## President's Column



I hope everyone has had a wonderful summer. For myself, I find that the days are lazy and not much gets done. I take my laptop out into the yard with all the best intentions and end up talking to the neighbor over the fence or being distracted by either some noise in the neighborhood or a noise in one of the trees.

**Read More . . .**

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## Road Story

### On the Road to Publication by Gary Frank

I love driving. So get in and let's hit the highway. See all those billboards advertising *The Thunderbirds*, *Lost in Space*, *Star Trek*, *Bugs Bunny*, *UFO*, *Underdog*, *Godzilla*, *Chiller Theater*, and the *Channel 7 Afternoon Movie: Monster Week*? That's what I grew up on. A steady diet of science fiction and fantasy television. Is it any wonder when I started writing that's where I leaned? It's funny. I have no stories about reading great literary classics, mythology, or reading much of anything when I was young. It wasn't until I was in my teens that I really started reading for pleasure. Once again, I explored science fiction and fantasy, especially works by Ray Bradbury,

**CRITIQUE GROUPS: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly by Jennifer Talty, aka Jenni Holbrook and Hollie Brooks**

**How to Survive Rejections by Kathy Kulig**

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★**Current Bestsellers**★

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**Publishers Weekly**  
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**Washington Post Bestsellers**

Edgar Allen Poe, J.R.R. Tolkien, and H.P. Lovecraft. Usher's *Passing* and *Stinger* by Robert McCammon kicked me down the path of the supernatural that I had started down with Lovecraft and Poe. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In 1981, I started writing a very ambitious "tie-in" novel that answered the question of who would win if the *Enterprise* encountered the Death Star. The *Enterprise* had help from the *Battlestar Galactica* and my own Starship, the *Astro 1*. The battle was early on in the story, and most of the hand-written 500+ pages were the adventures of the *Enterprise* and *Astro 1* crews. Needless to say, the last I looked at it, it was painful to read, but that was where my writing career began. I loved the idea of telling stories, of making up characters and sending them on quests, be they in the future, in magical worlds, or in this one, tainted by darkness.

The years in between were spent writing a lot of short stories and building up a handsome file of rejection letters. This part of my writing career was like driving through the plains. Quite repetitive and not much to see, but you've got keep driving to get where you're going. In 1993, I started working at a bookstore and became friends with my coworkers, Jim and Maria, who turned me on to mainstream fiction. I read a lot over the next few years and, in 1995, I wrote a novel called *What's Real* that dealt with a group of friends, death, reality, and secrets. In 1996, I wrote *Insert Title Here*, a novel about a musician, his ex-girlfriend and a crazy stalker fan. Somewhere in there, I won second place in the Philadelphia Writers Conference Fiction Short Story category with a piece called "Like Outer Space."

I submitted query letters, chapters, and a synopsis for *Insert Title Here* to a number of agents and got more rejections.

In 2002, while training for a 100-mile bike ride, on a cold, rainy February morning, I wondered what *Insert Title Here* would be like if I changed the stalker to something other than human. I thought, "This'll be easy. I'll just change a few things and we'll have a really cool horror novel." I was wrong about the "easy" part. In reality, after a complete rewrite and numerous revisions, my novel was finally done and emerged as *Forever Will You Suffer*. I'd often heard the myth that in order to get a novel published, an author has to have written and published numerous short stories so that the publisher would believe that writer had a fan-base ready to read a novel. I never really believed that. Turns out it wasn't altogether true.

Then, in 2003, pieces began falling into place. I went to the HWA Bram Stoker Award weekend, learned about horror, met some great writers, and discovered the Garden State Horror Writers. Two years later, the GSHW had a table at the World Horror Con that was held in New York City. I pitched *Forever Will You Suffer* to an agent, an editor, and the VP of Medallion Press. The Monday after WHC, I got the call that Medallion Press wanted to publish the book. I was ecstatic. Two years later, *Institutional Memory* came out from Medallion. In a way, it all happened fast and painless, like when you're looking for a street and suspect it's miles away and suddenly, you're there.

I'm a firm believer in intention and the Law of Reflection. When I'm writing or creating, I'm being the most authentic me I can be, and the Universe will reflect more of that energy (and hence, "success") back and my life will look like I wish it to. When I wanted an agent, one showed up in an unexpected way, and she was excited to represent me. Now I've got the first book of a dark fantasy series done and a second on the way. The highway looks clear and the weather's beautiful. I'll grab a few maps and start driving. Who knows where I'll end up. But that's the fun of it: the exploration of a story, the discovery of where the road leads and where it ends. Turn the radio up 'cause I'm driving this highway all life long!

**Gary Frank** is the author of *Forever Will You Suffer*, a supernatural, time-shifting tale of unrequited love gone horribly wrong, *Institutional Memory*, a story of cosmic terrors in the corporate workplace, and the co-editor of *Dark Territories*, the new anthology from the Garden State Horror Writers. He's also written a number of short stories, including "Stay Here," which received two Stoker recommendations, and was published in the 2005 Garden State Horror Writers anthology, *Dark Notes* from New Jersey. Occasionally, he can be found as an associate editor of *Space & Time Magazine*.

A member of the Horror Writers Association since 2005, Gary has also been a member of the Garden State Horror Writers since 2003, where he spent two years as president. He recently joined the International Thriller Writers and the Liberty States Fiction Writers.

When he's not spilling his imagination on the page or working the day job, he's playing guitar. He's currently at work on his third novel, but that's another story.

Novels:

*Forever Will You Suffer* (Medallion Press. 2006)

*Institutional Memory* (Medallion Press. 2008)

Short Stories:

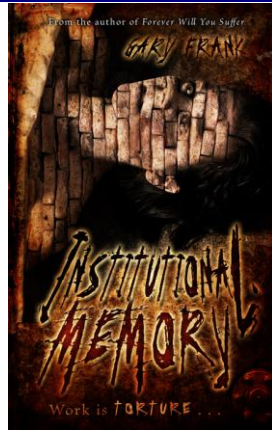
"Stay Here" (GSHW anthology: *Dark Notes*)

Other Bits:

"On Writing Horror" (WD Press): Roundtable discussion on new horror authors

Website: [www.authorgaryfrank.com](http://www.authorgaryfrank.com)

Blog: <http://writingthroughhell.blogspot.com/>



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## ★This Month's Articles★

### President's Column Gail Freeman



*Gail has been writing for twelve years and is a yet to be a published author. Ms. Freeman served as President of another writing organization for two years and has also served as Vice President, Treasurer, Special Events Chair, and Hospitality and Critique Chair in that organization. On a national level, Gail was one of the founding staff members of the Romance Writers of America's electronic newsletter, eNotes and served as editor of that publication for a number of years. In 2005, she was awarded the RWA's prestigious Service Award for her commitment and volunteer efforts. She also chaired the RWA's 2007 Chapter Newsletter Contest and the 2008 ad hoc committee for reform recommendations and changes to that contest. For*

I hope everyone has had a wonderful summer. For myself, I find that the days are lazy and not much gets done. I take my laptop out into the yard with all the best intentions and end up talking to the neighbor over the fence or being distracted by either some noise in the neighborhood or a noise in one of the trees.

The Board has been sort of lazy as well. We've handled the day to day operations of LSF Writers and not much else. This month we passed the PPM for elections which are now open for nominations. If you wish to run for the Board, you have until October 1<sup>st</sup> to submit to any Board member. You must include a brief, really brief bio for the ballot. It should be between 100 to 250 words. In next month's column I will list the candidates and explain the voting process.

Now that school has started and vacations are over, it's time to think about other things. For instance, does anyone have an idea for a program they'd like to see implemented? When we started, the current Board had all sorts of neat things they wanted to see done. For the most part we've accomplished what we set out to do. It's your turn to give us some ideas. What can we do to help you to be a better writer? Is there a speaker you are dying to hear? Is there a program we can set up that will help you achieve your goal? Is there some type of tecko stuff that would make your life easier? Speak to any Board member or send an email to [contacts@libertystatesfictionwriters.com](mailto:contacts@libertystatesfictionwriters.com) and we'll look into it and see if it's something that's doable.

*Gail*

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*the past eight years she has been a member of the RWA Communication Committee. After being out of high school for twenty years, Gail went back to college and obtained her associate degree in accounting. A lifelong resident of the Jersey Shore, Ms. Freeman believes in happy endings and working towards your goals, no matter how long it takes.*

## **The Art of the Hook by Irene Peterson**



*Jersey born and bred, Irene Peterson comes from the center of the state where all the pools are above ground and all the front doors come from Home Depot.*

Let's discuss how you're going to attract the attention of the editor or agent to whom you've selected to send your beloved manuscript.

Plain truth?

If you don't grab 'em within the first couple of paragraphs, chances are they won't bother sticking it out to read more than a couple of pages. Maybe less. Editors don't have time to waste slogging through something that doesn't grab them right away, set the adventure and action and mood, and show them that the writer (you) has a voice and knows how to use it. Stuffing back-story into that first and second page, explaining and describing all that has happened to the hero and heroine since they were born, will probably put the editor or agent into a temporary coma and that is not what you want.

Even if the story is wonderful, a simple, ordinary, non-compelling first sentence could mean death to the manuscript. This is *not* the place for "It was a dark and stormy night." What you have to do is dangle the bait of an unusual opening line to get their attention and keep it with a terrific hook. Then reel them in by telling a good, fast-paced story.

In keeping with the fishing analogy, how's this for an opening line? "Call me Ishmael."

Terrific opening hook.

Who is this guy? He's commanding you to call him by this one name, not suggesting it. It is an imperative. You have to call me Ishmael because this is my story and I'm telling it in the first person and you've been ordered to pay attention to my name because it's gonna be important and *Moby Dick* is a bloody thick book. Got it?

So you are compelled, first by the author, then by the character, to continue to read. That is a superior hook.

Another opening hook, this time from a romance, *Kisses to Go*. "Give me a boost, Lutrelle."

Another imperative, not only to the reader this time, but to someone in the story named Lutrelle. Someone wants this Lutrelle to boost him/her up.

Boost is not a common word. It sticks out, catches your interest because it's not used every day. And the name Lutrelle. Not ordinary, either. Who is this Lutrelle, how big is he that he can give someone a boost, a lift up? Puny people can't give anyone a boost. Another reason to read on. What's going on "up there" and who needs to see it so badly?

There ought to be action in that first sentence, or dialogue that is punchy and entices the editor's interest.

The next lines are "Uh-uh, girlfriend. You don't want to see what's going on in there."

What's going on in there?

We also get a little bit of information about who wants the boost and what kind of person Lutrelle is from the dialogue.

Something's going on that she won't want to see, but now our curiosity is aroused and we really want to know what's going on. So will an editor. There's no messy explanation, no unnecessary dialogue or description clogging the story after that, either. When the heroine sees what's going on inside that apartment, she acts quickly. We're dragged into her world, and an editor or agent will continue to read. There's action, little description so we know what's going on and how the heroine's life has changed in this brief opening scene. But we know there's going to be more and from this hook, it's going to be interesting.

The opening of the book has to be full of action or dialogue that pulls the reader in. The worst thing you can do is give the reader a time line full of backstory as to how the heroine got to where she is now. Describing in vivid detail what she's wearing, what the setting is, who is with her and what they're wearing—unnecessary and sudden death to the reader. These elements can be added judiciously later on, sprinkled into the story when necessary. But not right away. Too much information that has no action means no hook.

When do you use description? When are you allowed to get into narrative? You have to think about the pacing. After something really moving or exciting has happened, there is time for contemplation and introspection by the characters. But not too much. Romances and mysteries in particular need introspective characters, but not to the point where you put the reader to sleep or make them toss the book across the floor.

The fictional goal, motivation, and conflict might not be evident in the opening scene of the book. There is no law that says it has to be there, but if the writing is tight enough and you haven't chased the reader away with dull dialogue, internal and external, the writing should be crisp and clean, with enough impetus to draw the reader along. Starting your story in the middle of a conversation or in the midst of intense action will do this. Many times an editor will throw away the first scenes until she gets to something she feels starts the story. If she has to dig through thirty pages to get to the beginning,

however, I doubt she'll go that far.

Think about how your story starts. Is there action or mind-numbing description? Do we see the color and shape of the main character's eyes or the fear raging in them? Can you lose the first ten pages of the story? If you can, leave them out from the start.

But wait. There are other places for hooks.

Not only do you want to begin your story with a real grabber, you also want to keep the momentum going, keep those pages turning. How? You have hooks at the end of each chapter. They don't necessarily have to be cliff-hangers, but they should make the reader want to continue reading.

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, newspapers not only carried the news of the day, they had fictional stories chapter by chapter in them. Sherlock Holmes made his appearance in the newspaper, and most of Charles Dickens's characters first saw the light of day in serialized newspaper stories. These were included in papers to keep the readers buying. If the news wasn't terrific, the stories were. And every single chapter ended with a hook to keep the reader on the edge of his seat. Holmes and Moriarity battle it out on top of Reichenbach Falls. Both men fall. Who survives? Tune in tomorrow for the next chapter. You'll find out whether it is the hero or the villain. You need to know if *anyone* survives.

It's the same with daytime soap operas and television shows like *General Hospital* and *Grey's Anatomy* and *House*.

The action stops after an hour, but it is not resolved. Dr. Cuddy is replaced as head of the hospital. The new owner is some rich guy who isn't into healing people. He only wants to make money. At first, nobody knows what he's like. Heads will probably roll when he takes over. He insists that Greg wear a lab coat and tie. You know *House* isn't going to put up with that stuff, but you must watch next week or tomorrow to find out what's going to happen.

It's the same with the chapters of your stories. Make the reader need to continue reading.

One of the best tricks is to stop the action in the end scene without resolution and move on to another character in the next chapter. If the Navy SEAL is dangling from a cliff and the bad guy is aiming a gun at him, switch the next chapter over to what the heroine is struggling with. By cutting off the dangling scene, you force the reader to read on just to get to where they're back with the SEAL on the cliff.

And the heroine has her own problems working against her. She'll have to keep trying to resolve them and we'll have to read on to find out how she's going to do it.

The action, the dialogue, the progression of the plot are all yours to develop.

Words to the wise: Think of hooking the reader with tension and unresolved conflict. Do not delay the action with a long shower, technical malarkey about the interior of the space ship, the early abuse of the antagonist at the hands of his/her religious fanatic parent. Drop those cold showers, drinking gallons of half latte mochaccino whatever, going to a "special place" to be alone...these bring the story to a complete stop.

If your character needs to wander the English countryside in the morning fog, please let there be a hole for him to fall into. If the space ship is full of dials, toggle switches, and doohickeys, let one of them malfunction. If the suspected killer has just slipped away into the night, have him/her kill a dog for no apparent reason.

And if your heroine has got to take a shower, make it quick or make it with the hero.

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## Saris and Curries for American Readers by Shobhan Bantwal



*Shobhan Bantwal has four books published to date by Kensington, with two more on contract. Her articles and short stories have appeared in The Writer, Romantic Times, India Abroad, Little India, and New Woman magazines. Her short fiction has won honors/awards in contests by Writer's Digest, New York Stories, and New Woman. Her debut book, THE DOWRY BRIDE, won the 2008 Golden Leaf Award.*

In the American fiction market brimming with Caucasian, African-American, even Latino characters, there are few that are Indian. Despite the rising popularity of ethnic fiction from Asia, it is still a mere fraction of the thousands of fiction books churned out by American publishing houses each year. So when I decided to step into the difficult-to-penetrate realm of fiction, I knew it was going to be a serious challenge, especially since I took up writing at the late age of 50.

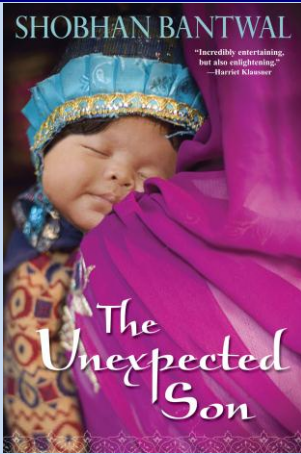
As a naïve neophyte I had no clue as to how I was going to capture the attention of agents and publishers with my mainstream stories when the publishing world expected every South Asian author to write somber literary fiction. My fiction was a rare jumble of genres—multicultural commercial women's fiction with romantic and literary elements. I simply call it "Bollywood in a Book."

Amazingly enough, despite many rejections, a highly reputable agent, the late Elaine Koster, who was once a publisher for Penguin and launched the careers of such famous writers like Stephen King and Khaled Hosseini, loved my writing and signed me on. Consequently my book rights were sold to Kensington Publishing.

But despite my editor and agent's enthusiasm, I was plagued by doubts. Not many American readers know a lot about Indian culture. Was I capable of educating them about India without turning them off? Could I write convincing love scenes? Would Indian characters wearing saris and *kurtas* appeal to romance readers? I realized I would never find out unless I tried to introduce all of the above ideas to my potential audience.

I incorporate the concepts of arranged marriage, spicy cuisine, superstitions, virgin brides and grooms, India's notorious caste system, and hot-button controversial subjects like dowry and female-fetus abortion to make my fiction not only more intriguing, but vivid and educational at the same time. I believe





readers have curious minds and truly want to learn. Nonetheless that learning needs to be combined with an absorbing story, the right dose of emotion, and engaging characters.

By doggedly pursuing my colorful hodgepodge of genres and cultures and topics, I have gradually managed to capture the interest of a growing number of readers. They are an appreciative audience, eager to dive into a different kind of story and learn about other cultures.

And while I entertain my readers, it has been a marvelous educational experience for me. Promoting my books to a mainstream American readership is hard work, often frustrating, and very expensive. But there is immense satisfaction in stirring interest and reaching more readers with each new book.

My latest book is *THE UNEXPECTED SON*, the story of an Indian-American woman who wakes up one day to a shocking truth: she has a grown son in India, a child she had been told was stillborn 30 years ago. Should she reveal her secret past to her family and risk losing them by returning to India to meet her hitherto unknown son?

***Shobhan Bantwal** has four books published to date by Kensington, with two more on contract. Her articles and short stories have appeared in The Writer, Romantic Times, India Abroad, Little India, and New Woman magazines. Her short fiction has won honors/awards in contests by Writer's Digest, New York Stories, and New Woman. Her debut book, THE DOWRY BRIDE, won the 2008 Golden Leaf Award.*

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## CRITIQUE GROUPS: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly by Jennifer Talty, aka Jenni Holbrook and Hollie Brooks

Critique groups are a part of every writer's vocabulary. We are always looking for "constructive criticism," or some kind of feedback that will make us better writers. Help us get published. That is the idea, and in a perfect world, that is what would happen. The problem is critique groups tend to focus on the "words on the page" aspect of critiquing rather than on developing rich compelling characters and a strong plot with intense conflict. While it is important to learn how to write an active sentence over a passive sentence, how to "show" instead of "tell," or how to get rid of those nasty dangling modifiers (whatever they are), it is more important to develop your ideas into strong stories through a great voice that will take readers on a ride they won't soon forget.

### Different types of critique groups:

I have been involved in many critique groups. Some worth the time and energy. Others not so much. Critique groups tend to spin their wheels. The group meets once a week, or once a month, and they discuss and re-discuss the same things over and over again without really ever reaching the end. Or maybe it is an on-line group where the writers send the chapters at the end of the week, and then they each critique (or line edit) each other's work. Then they either rewrite that chapter, or go on to the next, and then at the end of



**Jennifer Talty co-created Who Dares Wins Publishing with NY Times Best-Selling Author Bob Mayer, an independent Flex Publisher and helps run the day-to-day administrative side of the company. She is published in romance under the pen names of Jenni Holbrook and Hollie Brooks. She also teaches Creative Writing at various writing conferences across the country. She is the Rochester's Writing Examiner for Examiner.com and does freelance editing and technical writing.**

**She received a BS degree in Business Education with a concentration in Marketing and Sales from Nazareth College of Rochester. She taught Business Applications at both the High School Level and in Continuing Education. She was a co-leader of Distributed Education Clubs of America and worked with students in developing marketing, sales and public speaking skills. After leaving the teacher profession she worked as product and sales trainer for various hardware and software companies and was the regional merchandising representative for Buena Vista Entertainment. She has also done contract work for various companies doing technical writing, bookkeeping and sales invoice tracking.**  
[www.jenniholbrook.com](http://www.jenniholbrook.com)

the week, they swap work again. The critiquing is focused on those words, but not the whole. Other groups spend their time discussing, and discussing, and trying to talk the writer into changing a character or a plot line because it is what they would do as writer, instead of looking at what the other writers really want to accomplish with their stories. The idea of a critique group should be to better the writing and better the story.

The key to a successful critique group has three elements:

1. Constructive Brain storming
2. Constructive Story and Character Development
3. Constructive Feedback during the writing process

Most critique groups do not follow this structure.

### **The Ugly:**

The Ugly critique group isn't really ugly, but generally serves no purpose other than a chapter-by-chapter or scene-by-scene critique. This is the most common type of critique group and while I call it The Ugly, I think it is very important for a new writer to be involved in one of these types of groups if only to learn how to write. That is all that passive versus active voice, Point-of-View, learning Narrative Structure, dangling participles, etc. All of these things are important to writing, but it doesn't matter how well you structure a sentence, if you don't have well-drawn characters in an exciting plot, the reader won't care. With that said, a writer can always take a class on writing, or read a book on writing. I recommend for learning how to write *Stein on Writing* by Sol Stein and a good grammar book. I also recommend for all writers, regardless of level, *The Novel Writer's Toolkit* by Bob Mayer and Donald Maass's *Writing the Breakout Novel* (get the workbook, great exercises).

The Ugly critique group, the writers tend to rewrite each other with the idea they are helping. While rewriting to show someone how to show-versus-tell is a good thing, keeping the words isn't always the right thing to do. Doing everything your critique group tells you to with your writing doesn't always make for a better book.

The other problem with this type of writing group is that they are mostly unpublished, and while you can learn a lot from the unpublished, they have not gone through the process of revision like a published author has when they get a revision letter back from the editor or agent—which isn't a line edit of your grammar and spelling, or pointing out your overuse of metaphors. The other problem with this type of group is that the writers in the group outgrow each other. This happens when one writer realizes, *Ok, my writing has gotten better but I'm still getting rejected because I don't have a sympathetic heroine, or my plot is contrived, or the agent really didn't connect with my characters, or my voice isn't strong enough, or flat, or whatever, so what do I do now?*

What also happens in The Ugly critique group is writers continue to focus on the words on the page because the entire focus of the group isn't the whole



book, but the sections they are critiquing. They don't look at overall structure of the book. Or how the characters arc from one turning point to the next. Sometimes The Ugly critique group is that group that gets together to "read" to each other once a week, or once a month. I think reading your work out loud is a good thing to hear the places you trip over. If you trip over them, so will your reader, and the only way to find that out is by reading aloud. The problem with this group though is that it is still focused only on a section, and writers will tend to re-write that section and then ask their group to look at it again. It is hard for writers to keep objective when they are constantly re-reading and re-critiquing the same things. Also you run the risk of being insulted when your idea wasn't incorporated or feeling like you shouldn't even give your opinions because your partners aren't listening to you so why should you bother? This shouldn't be a problem since everyone should be trusting their writer's gut, but it happens because writers are putting a ton of time in critiquing, so they want their advice to be used. But that thinking is bad.

Another danger is losing your own unique voice. This happened to me. I entered two manuscripts into the same contest. I finalized with the manuscript that had been my draft, never seen before by any of my critique partners. Now, the judge didn't know she was judging two entries by the same person, but on the score sheet of the draft she made the comment of what a strong voice I had and how she just felt in love with my story-telling. She also made a note that I had a lot of grammar errors, but the story was solid. The other manuscript, while it scored well, had been "critiqued to death" by my first critique group. The same judge said writing was solid, good sentence structure, etc, but that my voice was flat. She felt like she was simply reading words on the page. There was no emotion in my voice. In a nutshell, my voice had been critiqued out by my group, and it became a melding pot of everyone's voice combined.

Again, I think there is a place for this type of group, as long as you are accepting of what it is and that you will, as a story-teller, grow out of it.

### **The Bad**

The Bad critique group is the only type of critique group that I believe is "bad." I say this because it is the group where members have "agendas." The critiques are not objective and sometimes much bad advice is given. I've seen this happen with larger writer groups that meet once a month in a library or community center. These groups tend to be at one extreme or the other. Either it is a "feel good" group and the focus isn't on making corrections, recommendations, or strengthening the writing, but is about author validation. These group focus pretty much what is working, or what is good, or just trying to be nice when something really isn't that great. This is bad because it serves no purpose other than to tell a writer they are "better" than they really are. The old "blow smoke up the writer's ass" critique. The bad is barely noted. This does the writer getting the critique a great disservice. It also does nothing to teach others how to be good critiquers.

The other extreme is the group that likes to rip each other new assholes (pardon the language). This group is really bad because writers are self-conscious and depressed as it is, they don't need to be told they completely suck, their characters are stupid and morons, and the plot is the dumbest thing the group has ever heard of. This group can really destroy writers and should be avoided at all costs. You shouldn't go away from a critique session thinking about never writing again.

This happened to me. I asked a fellow writer to read my work. It was my first manuscript. I had never shared it with anyone, and I had no idea if it was good or not. The writer got back to me a week later with only three pages done. He said that it was the worst thing he'd ever read, and no editor or agent would get past the first paragraph before sending it through the paper shredder. There were no suggestions on how to improve or even what was wrong, just "you don't know how to write." I cried. For days. Couldn't write for a month and I had already sent a partial out to agents. I thought I was a moron until I got a rejection from one of the agents who told me "you have a strong voice and I really like the story line. However, your writing isn't where it needs to be. I suggest you take a class on craft, re-work this, and send it back to me when you are done."

Sometimes writers need pump themselves up by putting someone else down. This is bad. Even worse when it's someone who isn't an expert in the field. The Bad critique group should be avoided. The dynamics won't be conducive to growing and developing your writing. It also teaches bad critiquing methods.

### **The Good:**

The Good critique group is one where the writers are in tune with wants and needs of each other. They have discussed the path they are going to take, set up rules, and stick with them. They are honest (brutal) with each other and, at the same time, that honesty makes the writer walk away from the session feeling like they are making progress and are excited to go home and work. This group tries to avoid the group dynamics, which are impossible, but the leader steps aside and the followers take the lead sometime. They have goals, have stated them, for both the group and each individual. This group remembers that when they are working on someone else's story that it's not their story and therefore isn't about how they would write it, but about what the person writing the story wants to achieve. There isn't a lot of focus on the "words on the page" but on the story and characters and how they are developed. The parameters are set and respected.

The Good Critique group sticks with the three main concepts mentioned above that will make them successful. This group doesn't send chapter by chapter, but they brainstorm and work together to work out the kinks. That doesn't mean work isn't shared and critiqued, it is. Our work needs to be read. But the focus is on the story-telling, the characters, the plot. Many times these groups will meet once a month. Each time they meet they have a different agenda. For example, the first session might be brainstorming someone's



idea. Or character issues. Another session might be all about openings where each group member read everyone else's opening and then they discuss the areas that are working or not working, but the critique isn't filled with line edits, but more questions and comments that aren't supposed to be answered *per se*, but pondered.

This group consistently re-evaluates their system. They also keep it to a few writers. My rule of thumb is no more than five, otherwise you will spend more time doing critiques than writing. They are a team and, while each team member may have a certain role, it is not about one person tooting her own horn.

Everyone in this group learns to set personal feelings aside and get down the business of writing. They take notes, or record sessions, and keep track of where they are going. They also help each become better critiquers by telling their groups what they are looking for. For example, I tend to focus on plot and my characters are weak, so I ask those that critique with me to examine the characters and where do they fall short or are unlikeable, and what do you think would make them pop more? Whenever I give someone my work to read, I tell them the kind of feedback I want (and it's not "Please tell me this is good"). It's *Do my characters pop off the page? Did I wrap up all my subplots? Is my heroine coming off too bitchy? Is the tone in my voice consistent? Did I nail POV?*

This group also test drives new partners. There must be a trial run to make sure the group clicks. If it doesn't, what's the point?

### **How to find the right critique group**

The only way to find what will work for you is to try out a lot of different groups. Go to chapter meetings. Go to groups that meet in the library or community center. You'd be surprised how many groups do this and they are free. You can find them by looking in your local newspaper under what there is to do this week. Ask other writers. Go on-line. There are many writing groups on-line.

Early on I was involved with three groups; all ran things differently. I learned a lot of valuable lessons. Mostly I learned what kind of process will work for me. If you feel good in a group, that's nice. If you feel motivated to dig deeper into your work and really hone your art, then you've hit pay dirt.

My final thought on critiques groups...you will always need one. No matter where you are in your career, critique groups or partners are a huge part of your success. Find what works for you, and don't be afraid to walk away from a situation that isn't working. You will eventually find one that does.

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## **How to Survive Rejections**

Rejections sting no matter where you are in your publishing career. From the multi-published *NY Times* bestseller to the yet-to-be published author, most everyone gets rejections at one time or another.

by Kathy Kulig



*Author Kathy Kulig writes erotic romance for Ellora's Cave. Her stories enter both paranormal and contemporary worlds of passion and adventure. Her latest book, DAMNED AND DESIRED, was released in January 2010. It's the second book in the Demons in Exile series. Romantic Times Magazine gave it four stars and called it "Excellent storytelling". Her next book, DRAGON WITCH, will be released on September 15<sup>th</sup> at Ellora's Cave. She has given workshops and participated on panels at conferences, local writer's groups and at the Romantic Times Conventions. For more information visit her website: <http://www.kathykulig.com> or Passion Sense blog: <http://www.kathykulig.blogspot.com>*



Writers should not take rejections personally, but they do. It's unavoidable when they put so much of themselves into their books. Rejections are easier to survive if you think of them as stepping stones along your writing career or opportunities to help you become a better writer.

## HOW DO REJECTIONS MAKE YOU A BETTER WRITER?

Pat yourself on the back. If you have a rejection, you've taken the brave first step to becoming a published writer.

### Rejections

- make you strive to put out your best work all the time and not get lazy.
- teach you to slow down in your submission process. We all get excited when we come to THE END of a book. We want to begin sending out all those queries and partials. But rejections will quickly follow with this method. Let the manuscript sit for at least a few days, even better, a few weeks, then revise, revise, revise. Let it sit and revise again.
- help you to identify your strengths and areas for improvement--if you're fortunate to get feedback.
- motivate you to develop your craft.
- help you to grow a thick skin so future rejections are easier.
- help you to understand that rejections are part of the business of writing and publishing.
- make you humble.

## FOUR TYPES OF REJECTIONS:

**1. Form letters** – Forms letters could mean a few things. Most new writers get them while they're still developing their craft. Don't be discouraged. If you've finished a novel, you're way ahead of the curve. Developing your craft takes time. And with each book you write, you will get better. You can also get a form letter if your writing is good but you targeted the wrong publisher, editor, line, or agent. Another reason could be if that particular editor or agent simply doesn't have the time to comment, so they use form letters.

**2. Letter with comments** – I celebrate every time I get these kinds of rejection letters, especially if the comments give specific advice as to what worked and didn't work for them in the story. I've even had an editor or agent recommend that a manuscript could be sent to particular publisher or agent. These are gifts from the professionals. Study these comments carefully and with an open mind to see if they ring true. Whether or not they do, please send a Thank You to that editor or agent. They are extremely busy and for them to take the time to give any feedback means they saw some element of promise. You may be sending a future project to them.

**NOTE:** If you don't agree with the comments or if you feel the comments were rude, don't argue or send nasty emails back. I'm hearing on the social networks that writers are doing this. Why would you? Vent to your friends, not

to professionals you hope to work with in the future. That's professional suicide. Even if you don't expect to work with that agent or editor, word gets around.

**3. Letter with request to revise and resubmit.** This editor or agent definitely sees potential with your project. They may want to see if you can revise and also if you're receptive to revisions. Many writers mistakenly feel their work is perfect as it is. An editor or agent knows the market and knows what their house wants and what's selling in today's market. If you're not an easy person to work with, there are plenty of talented writers out there who are. Some argue that if an editor requests revisions, they should make an offer. For an established author, that may be true. But for a newbie author, I can understand why they don't offer a contract. I was asked to revise and resubmit without a contract and the revised manuscript was rejected. Sure I was disappointed, but I found it to be an excellent learning experience and well worth my time. I believe my writing improved, and I developed a contact with a publisher.

**NOTE:** Writers who are too rigid about their work and feel their projects are perfect as is, will remain stagnant, continue to make the same mistakes and limit their potential.

**4. No response rejections** – These are the toughest ones. Some agents are so swamped with queries and submissions that they've adopted the "no response rejection." If you don't hear from them within a certain amount of time, then they aren't interested. Then there are the no response rejections from editors and agents who have requested your manuscript at conferences or through queries. After a follow up email or snail mail letter, you still don't get a response from these submissions. Are these rejections? Or are they submissions that have gotten lost? I'd like to think they were set aside as a possible maybe, then forgotten. These are very frustrating, but also part of the business. Usually after a year, I mark REJECTED on my Excel spreadsheet.

#### **WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU GET A REJECTION:**

- Read it over carefully for suggestions and comments. They could help you improve your work. Ask writing friends to get their take on the comments. Maybe they see something you don't. Sometimes we're too close to our writing and can't see the same mistakes we continue to make.
- Send a thank you. That editor or agent took the time to review your work. It might not be right for them, but they took the time to evaluate your material.
- File it away. You may need it for tax purposes, but it's also good to compare comments from other editors and agents. Are they giving you're the same comments and suggestions? Are you making the same mistakes???
- Revise the manuscript if necessary and resubmit to new agents or editors. But don't get stuck revising and revising one manuscript. Begin a new project.

- Keep writing. New projects will help you hone your skills.
- Don't let rejections get you down. Email/call/text a friend, then get back to writing. Persistence will turn those rejections into a SALE.

\*To keep track of your submissions, I recommend trying out Query Tracker. (<http://www.querytracker.net>) I had been using an Excel spreadsheet, but Query Tracker is so much easier and more helpful. You can search editors and agents, add them to your list, record dates of your submissions and responses, and much more. And all your data can be hidden if you like.

### **SOME SAMPLES OF COMMENTS FROM REJECTION LETTERS AND HOW I RAN WITH THEM, OR NOT:**

When it comes to deciphering comments and suggestions I receive in rejections letters, it helps to think about them for a while before jumping in and rewriting the manuscript. These comments gave specific advice that I thought were very helpful one way or another.

“Thank you for sending me a portion of your manuscript. I enjoyed reading it. While your pages are interesting and well-written, after careful consideration, I feel that your project is not right for my list at the current time.”

Even though this seems more like a form letter, I think it's a step up from the form letters I've received in the past. (“Thank you, but your project doesn't meet our needs at this time.”) I could be wrong, but I don't believe an agent is going to tell you they enjoyed reading your manuscript or that it was well written just to be nice. So this gives me some hope. The part that my project wasn't right for her list could mean a few things. Either it's not exactly the type of story she likes, she didn't care for my voice, she knows the market is tight on this type of story, or the story is too far outside the box and she didn't think she could sell it. That comment is too vague to interpret, but a common one.

The next agent gave a long letter with very helpful and detailed thoughts and suggestions. Here's a snippet:

“I love that you're taking risks with the genre, and I think you're a good writer, but ultimately I found the story to be a bit too pat and not quite believable enough.”

She gave several more sentences detailing why, even suggesting a book to read. This was a huge help. And I have addressed many of the points she made. But some I left to be developed later in the story. I feel in a paranormal story elements of the world need to be filtered in gradually. Otherwise, you get an info dump in the first chapter when you should be getting the story moving.

“You're a competent author... the story starts too slow. You need a stronger 'hook' to draw the reader into your book. Perhaps the story should start immediately with her escape/her imminent departure or at the moment she meets Ethan, then feed in backstory. Her time with the professor isn't fast-paced.”



These comments were also very helpful. And if I included all the comments with the other agent, you'd see they'd conflict with each other. One felt I needed more information to demonstrate the heroine's reason for leaving and her ability to escape (backstory). And the next agent said I needed less background, actually none at all, and just begin with her escaping. Is it any wonder I'm having troubles with chapter one???

One more and I think you'll see a pattern.

"I love the premise and the writing is atmospheric but ultimately I just did not feel swept away by the story."

'Not swept away.' No hook? Bad pacing? As I decipher all of these rejection letters together I see they agree that the writing is good (not great, still working on that) and they liked the story premise. One thing that I think may be the stumbling block is the hook. Apparently, it's not there, the story starts too slow, at the wrong point, or the pacing is off. This is what I'm revising before I submit more queries.

So look at your revision letters as a means to help improve your story and make you a better writer.

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