

Confessions of a Slush Pile Reader

by
Jennifer Carr

For one semester I was your typical volunteer graduate-student fiction reader at a respected literary journal. I'd stop by the journal's little office and pick up my loot—three “packs,” each containing seven manuscripts. Attached to each manuscript was a log sheet with the author's last name and first initial, and columns in which I was to record my comments as well as whether I passed the submission on or sent it back. Though I was never told expressly the number of manuscripts I should pass on to the editor each week, I understood that it should be one or two, no more than three.

I became a hard-core editor after reading my first three manuscripts. It was not difficult to separate the bad from the rest, but my evaluation skills (and self-doubt) kicked into overdrive when it came to separating the good from the really decent, and finally the best from the really decent.

The thing is, I was looking for brilliance. The anti-graduate writing program folks are going to hate this, but I got this brilliance theory from one of my professors at Emerson College, where I got my (cringe) M.F.A. After a general discussion of writing, my professor applied her litmus test for each story's success: Is it brilliant? Are your details brilliant, the setting brilliant, the adjectives and adverbs brilliant? Is your title brilliant? And if not, write 150 more titles until you find one that is. We killed many trees in that class. I applied this brilliance theory to all the manuscripts I read.

But, you say, you were supposed to be merely looking for the best of the really decent—why get caught up in this “brilliance” thing? The reason, I answer, is that the minute your story found its way from the slush pile to my three-pack, it wasn't about you anymore. It was about me. Whatever I passed on to the editor represented *me*. (Okay, I know it represented you, too. But first in this process it represented me—my skills, at the least as an editor, at most as a writer.) Was my secret hope to somehow be “discovered”? Maybe. Judging from the brilliance of the manuscripts I for-

warded and the brilliance of my comments on these manuscripts, possibly—just *possibly*—the editor would, after reading a few of those I passed on, say, “Wow, this reader's brilliant,” then ask if perhaps I had a story of my own. “Why, yes,” I would say, handing him my story, which he'd publish, and which would then attract the attention of various agents who would clamor to represent me in my first book deal and—well, you know, the dream.

All right, we'll get back to your story, which would be waiting for me on the kitchen table, next to my fresh cup of tea when I woke on a Saturday morning at 7 A.M. Although I had that small pocket of a dream, I also had a more realistic desire: to do my job well, which meant getting through the pile of manuscripts by noon, separating the best from the really decent.

The first thing I would see is your cover letter. Maybe I shouldn't generalize, but since this is based on personal experience, let's consider it an informal, unscientific study. Cover letters almost always clued me in to what I'd find in the manuscript. It also clued me in to the type of author behind the manuscript. I'd say there were five types of cover letters:

- *The professorial*
- *The highly credentialed*
- *The dummy (which might be coupled with the professorial and/or highly credentialed)*
- *The novice*
- *The ones-like-me (I keep trying to make this process be about you, but here I am again)*

Before I explain the few telltale characteristics of each type, I should mention that while my desire was to *pass on* brilliance, my fear was to *pass by* brilliance—or what someone at the literary journal would have thought of as brilliant if I'd been smart enough to pass it to him or her. I had huge fear each time I started reading, particularly the work of

those writers with professorships, credentials, and/or chummy language in their cover letters. I figured at least half of these authors would run into the editor at some cocktail party—possibly in the future, but with my luck, days after receiving the blind rejection I'd sent them—and mention how the story they'd sent initially to the journal had just been picked up by *The New Yorker*. The author would pat my editor on the back and say, "Just wanted to be clear that I gave you the first shot. Too bad, eh?" Then I'd get fired, or whatever they do to disgraced volunteers.

But I'm trying to make this be about you, so back to the five types.

The professorial. These cover letters mentioned where the author taught, sometimes the old advance degree stomping ground as well. They sometimes included impressive credentials. Evaluating a professor's work didn't give me the rush of power you might imagine. Instead, I dreaded reading the manuscript because I was afraid it was going to be so brilliant I wouldn't even get it.

The highly credentialed. These were concise and full of credentials I dream of having. This type of letter intimidated me, because even if I hadn't heard of the author, there was a voice in the back of my mind that said maybe I should have, and that the editor would find out later I'd sent a rejection to Joyce Carol Oates or the like. Frequently the stories proved why the authors were highly credentialed in the first place.

The chummy. These letters tended to mention the editor's novel, or the last time the author and editor spoke. I'd been warned about false chumminess—that I should try to discern a real chum from a wanna-be chum—and, in either case, to not let it influence my reading of the manuscript. Unless, of course, it was a real chum.

The novice. These letters were frequently long, describing how great the story was and what personal drama inspired the work. I'm not saying that this information is never appropriate, but in my experience the length of the cover letter was in direct opposite proportion to how much I enjoyed the story. About half the time these cover letters mentioned simultaneous submission. This let me know that while this author had taken the all-important step of researching the market, finding it written somewhere that simultaneous submissions were okay "if noted," the author hadn't yet quite put two and two together that it's best *not* to note this. (I know the Powers That Be are grumbling right now.) Think of it this way: When we who are just starting out become highly credentialed, chummy, professorial types—*then* we should note this. But for now I think we can relax under the "If I should ever be so amazingly lucky . . ." clause in the beginning writer's survival guide.

The ones-like-me. Your cover letters: short, sweet, to the point, clean white paper, maybe one or two small publications. I recognized you immediately: You're me. When I

read your manuscripts, I rooted for you. Well, I rooted for everyone, but these were the manuscripts I felt I could read with real objectivity. I didn't feel wedded to my insecurity that the manuscript was obviously brilliant and that I was missing the point. And when I did find a story I thought was brilliant, I suddenly hatched another small dream that this story would not only make publication but would make



The Best American Short Stories series, and I'd be hailed as an up-and-coming editor who had a knack for discovering genius in the slush pile, and all the literary journals, even the "slicks," would be clamoring to have me on staff. . . .

Sorry, I digress. I should mention that this group had a subclass of those who sent beat-up, reused envelopes and frayed, sometimes edited manuscript copies. Despite the often slim chance of a piece's publication, I always saw the presentation of a submission as a testament to professionalism. When sending your manuscript for publication, you're essentially "applying" for space in the journal or magazine. Would you use these same shabby standards when applying for a job? I know how expensive sending out manuscripts can be, but whenever I received these recycled hybrids, I had the instant impression that these authors had doomed themselves to failure—that their attitude must be, I'm not going to get published here either, so why should I be expected to shell out another buck fifty?

Of all the letters, the highly credentialed, chummy, professorial types (separate or all in one) gave me the most pause. *Pause* in slush pile reader-speak means that, though the reader doesn't particularly love your work, you enjoy some time (unbeknownst to you) in the "maybe" pile, where you might make it through the first level of the unsolicited submission hierarchy. These manuscripts I'd read and reread, taking into account my personal taste versus the taste of the literary journal.

The novice manuscripts gave me pause, too, but for a different reason: When sending rejections, I felt that—in my small, anonymous way—I was contributing to the breaking down of this other struggling writer's self-esteem. And I didn't have the time—or authority—to write to individual authors and tell them what I thought was missing or confusing or too fantastical in their stories.

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While cover letters typically forewarned what I'd find in the manuscript, I was open to surprises, and frequently I was surprised. Despite my impression of the cover letter, what mattered most was the quality of the writing. I'd heard how important it was to have a gripping first sentence, a gripping first paragraph, enticing the editor and leading to a moving and satisfying story—but I never realized how *essential* it was, and how a lack of this strength up front is more than likely an indicator of a lack of strength in the manuscript as a whole. Though credentials and clout might get you a leg up sometimes, success still comes down to the power of the writing.

I cringed each time I sent a rejection to a highly credentialed or a chummy professor, and, frankly, I cringed each time I gave the editor a story by a newcomer. But I had my own bottom line: I would do nothing I couldn't speak to. I had specific reasons for each rejection and specific reasons for passing on each story I gave to the editor (in case anyone ever asked). Occasionally a cover letter influenced me to pass on a story I didn't believe in; I did this if the letter made me believe the author really had a connection to the editor that I had to acknowledge. But with each, I wrote an honest appraisal of the story's strengths and weaknesses in my view and attached it to the manuscript.

So, from one who has been in charge of a stack of photocopied rejections, my advice for those attempting to jump the slush pile heap is, Keep sending out. Be brief and concise in your cover letters; if your desire is to throw the slush pile reader into a tizzy, mention the last time you and the editor were out for cocktails. But also, my best advice: Write good stuff. If one slush pile reader doesn't recognize it (forgive us, we're a frenzied lot), another one will.

Close to the end of my slush pile reading tenure, I read a great story by a writer who was somewhere in between the highly credentialed and the ones like me. I'd finished writing my evaluation and was gathering his submission package together to pass on to the editor when I noticed tiny writing in the lower right-hand corner of the SASE. I examined it and found it was an acronym for the story's title. I'd stumbled upon his manuscript tracking system. I'll admit my initial thought was negative, that he was readying himself for rejection. But then I realized that he had developed a way, it seemed, of not taking rejection personally, but systematically. As I handed his manuscript to the managing editor, I thought, In this sea of rejection, this writer's going to stay afloat; his story, as well as his approach, is brilliant. ✍

*Jennifer Carr is a fiction writer who currently lives in New York. Her work is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner* and *Fish Stories*, and she is a recent recipient of the Nebraska Review Fiction Award.*