

# The Arts of Waiting and Softball

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published Southern Write newsletter (South Australian Writers' Centre) August 2009

I had no idea, when I started sending my writing out for publication, that *waiting* would become such a feature of my life. I'd heard about rejections. The most common stories that old hands tell are the ones about how many rejections to expect. I wasn't deterred by that. I had the beginner's touching belief that it would be different for me. Sadly, this belief was short-lived. I now have a very respectable pile of rejections. I comfort myself that they represent a badge of honour, a trade qualification, and that I am in good company.

But the thing that no-one mentioned to me was the waiting: the fact that interminable weeks and months and even years would pass before each rejection arrived.

I sent one short story to five journals. The first kept it for five months before rejecting it, the second for six months. The third, on the other hand, had it for less than two weeks. (I know it's perverse, but I found that even more demoralising.) The fourth kept it for three months, and the fifth accepted it. The story finally appeared in print nearly two years after the first submission. Not an unusual saga, I know.

Happily I discovered that I have unsuspected reservoirs of determination and optimism. I never let the story rest on my desk for more than one night. As soon as it was returned I checked it over for marks, wrote a new cover letter and sent it off again.

I am now in the business of sending out full length novel manuscripts. Generally, with a novel, you send a synopsis. If the agent or publisher likes it, then they ask to see the whole thing. I've been thinking about softball and I think a request to send the whole ms is the equivalent of getting to second base (just sending out a proposal at all is surely worth one base).

I wasn't terribly good at softball, but I did occasionally get to second base. It's a place where you really have more in common with the outfielders than you do with the intense action happening around the home-plate. After you've been sitting on second base for a few months you forget that you have any connection with the game at all. You wander around under the straggly eucalypts at the edge of the oval, avoiding magpies and wishing you'd brought a bottle of water. In the distance, busy

figures come and go. Occasionally a message arrives: ‘the mother is redundant – drop her’. So you prop your back against a tree and do your best.

Once I was stuck on second base (including two bursts of rewriting) for three years. I set up camp, determined to enjoy the peace and avoid the feeling that life was passing me by. After all, someone at home-base had my manuscript and might, you never know, be thinking of reading it soon.

When I finally got my rejection I trudged back across the oval feeling like Rip Van Winkle.

I have come to recognise a series of stages.

For the first month I feel buoyant, relieved to be back in the lottery. You have to be in it ... and so on.

By the end of the month I begin to feel a little anxious. Perhaps they never got my parcel? What if the big machine in the mail exchange chewed it up?

By the end of the second month I have developed a new set of anxieties. What if the particular reader who had my manuscript happened to put it down on the floor (I’ve seen a few offices by now) and then put something else on top of it? Or what if the cleaner (do they have cleaners?) threw it in the bin by mistake?

By the end of the third month I understand that the world is a bleak unhappy place and that the best of life is behind me.

During the fourth month I read someone else’s brilliant and recently published work and realise that my own is worthless, and the attempt to get it published an embarrassing fiasco. I have to restrain myself from ringing up to apologise and withdraw the manuscript.

During the fifth month it slowly dawns on me that waiting doesn’t preclude all other activity, that I can do better, that my NEXT ms will be good enough to carry all before it.

And herein lies the moral, such as it is: the only thing to do is to temper the smell of eucalyptus with the red-hot smell of a working computer.

Keep writing, as they used to say on the Argonauts.