

# Keep hope alive

‘The great secret of writing is not becoming a writer; it’s staying a writer.’ —Harlan Ellison

**A**USTRALIAN WRITER Janette Turner Hospital developed what she called an “emergency drill for bad times.” In addition to compiling famous rejections, scathing reviews and other humiliations suffered by noted writers, Hospital’s drill included taking time to console herself, trusting her instincts and remaining defiant. When all else failed, Hospital proposed this strategy for dealing with multiple rejections or rotten reviews: “Have one stiff drink, say five Hail Marys and 10 ---- yous, and get back to work.”

Keeping morale up over the course of a project, or career, is a daunting task. Many writers can’t, and fall by the wayside. Something that distinguishes working writers from terminally discouraged ones is that the former stay at their desk. Those who persist don’t do so blindly. They develop coping strategies, ways to keep hope alive. Some are surprising. Here are eight of them:

**1 Create a consolation file**  
 During seven years of repeated rejections at the outset of his career, Frederick Busch kept close at hand a list of every publisher who had turned down Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*. As the list of publishers who returned his own work grew, Busch sought solace by reviewing Lowry’s. That list—the one Lowry’s agent sent him after concluding that *Under the Volcano* was unpublishable—included:

Farrar & Rinehart; Harcourt Brace; Alfred Knopf; Houghton Mifflin; J.B. Lippincott; Little, Brown; Random House; Scribner’s; Simon & Schuster; Duell, Sloan & Pearce; Dial Press; and Story Press.

Many writers like Busch and Hospital make a hobby out of compiling information about fa-

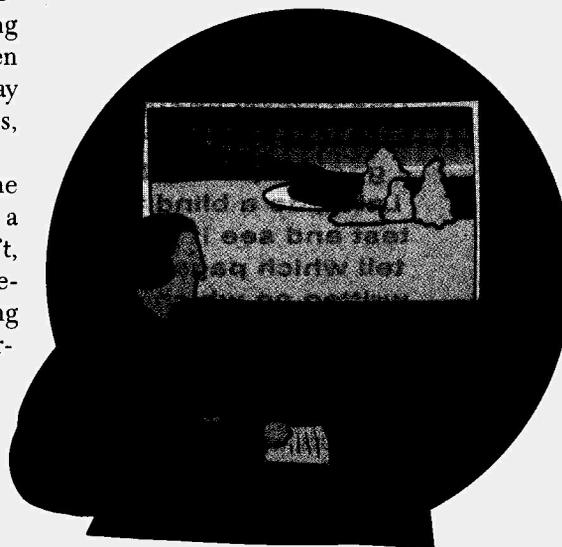
first novel (*The Perfectionists*), she refused to represent the author any longer; that Thackeray had to pay to have *Vanity Fair* published; and that a *San Francisco Examiner* editor returned an article to Rudyard Kipling with a note saying, “This isn’t a kindergarten for amateur writers. I’m sorry, Mr. Kipling, but you just don’t know how to use the English language.”

Reading not just about the rejections but the anxiety, frustration and despair (AFD) of famous writers is most encouraging.

**2 Study the acknowledgments**  
 Most readers skip the acknowledgments page in books. Writers devour them. Acknowledgments can be a treasure chest of useful and reassuring information. Here is where, explicitly or implicitly, writers are most likely to admit that they suffered from AFD syndrome and to suggest how they got beyond it.

They routinely acknowledge those who encouraged them, who supported them and who kept their spirits up.

I’ve just finished reading a delightful memoir called *The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio*. The confident writing style of its first-time author, Terry Ryan, made her text read as though it just flowed from her pen. But in her acknowledgments at the end, in addition to relatives, friends and teachers from high school, Ryan thanked her agent for unusually



amous authors who suffered repeated rejection. One called his compilation a hair-shirt file. On bleak days when all seemed for naught, he opened that folder and reviewed its contents. This tactic is surprisingly common among working writers. They read a lot about published writers who were once unpublished writers, looking for consolation more than for guidance. I, too, have a file with information like this. Its contents remind me that when Gail Godwin’s agent was unable to sell her

energetic help, a colleague for “unflagging enthusiasm and hard work on my behalf,” a manuscript consultant who helped her “in more ways than one,” an Internet columnist “who was there when the first word struck the page and pushed me to write the second,” and a friend of her mother’s who “patiently reviewed my drafts and offered support of a kind I could get nowhere else.”

Studying acknowledgments confirms three things: 1) the authors felt discouraged while writing their book; 2) they sought, and received, support from encouragers; and 3) their spirits revived enough for them to complete their book.

**3 Bone up** Flaubert liked to wax eloquent about the integrity of the artist. He also once upbraided a friend for not befriending every man at the Comedie Francaise—for which he wanted to write—and sleeping with every woman.

Most of us aren’t in a position to pull that one off. But we can become more familiar with key people in publishing by doing our homework. This means going to hear published writers speak, especially those who will discuss the process of writing and submission as much as the product. It means reading not just books about writing and writers but those about publishing, including memoirs of editors and agents. Browsing *Publishers Weekly* and PublishersLunch.com also can help you learn about how the publishing industry works.

Attending workshops and conferences offers an opportunity to mingle, connect and learn about the writing profession. There, you are likely to meet colleagues, teachers, even possible mentors. They can give you a sense of how

people in the business perceive the world and some insight into the best way to approach them.

**4 Be professional** Agents and editors are swamped with submissions from dilettantes. This is good news for those who approach them knowledgeably. The more professional you are when contacting an agency or publisher, the more seriously your submission will be taken.

Established agents typically get 100 or more submissions a week. That sounds discouraging. But here’s the good news: More than 90 percent of these submissions are not worth a second look. Some are obviously part of a mass mailing. Others are completely

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inappropriate for the agent in question. Still more are filled with errors, are sloppy in form or accompanied by an inappropriate letter (cute, chatty, chummy, etc.). If you’re doing your job, you won’t be competing with everyone who has contacted that agent, only the small minority who do so professionally.

This calls for doing more homework. An agent or editor can tell pretty quickly if you are among the 10 percent who do. The bane of agents and editors is fledgling writers who make little effort to find out who they are and what interests them before making contact.

In the Google era, there is no excuse for being anything less than well informed about agents

or editors whom you approach.

“I am always impressed when someone has taken the trouble to find out that I represent a writer they admire and whose work has some kind of affinity with theirs,” observed agent Stuart Krichevsky on AuthorsOnTheWeb.com.

“It takes you right out of the pile of letters and e-mails that come flooding in daily that have clearly been sent to every agent in the known universe ... and helps us recognize you as a professional. That’s really what you’re asking—to be taken seriously. The best way to do that is to show that you know who we are and take our work seriously.”

**5 Go easy on yourself** Going easy on yourself means not returning to your desk immediately after receiving a demoralizing rejection. Not setting your standards so high that you can’t reach them. Not duking it out with your inner censors on each and every occasion.

Take a 12-step approach. Don’t look too far down the road. Don’t look further than tomorrow, or even sundown. Accumulate writing as you accumulate savings: gradually. “Abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish,” suggested John Steinbeck. “Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page for each day; it helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.”

Don’t worry too much about your frame of mind. Write on good days and bad. Later, do a blind taste test and see if you can tell which pages were written on which days. Few writers can.

**6 Be tactical** One afternoon when Fran Lebowitz visited Sotheby’s, an employee showed her a manuscript by Mark Twain that they planned to auction.

What Sotheby's couldn't figure out was why the author had scribbled little numbers in the margins every few pages. They were about to ask a Twain scholar. Don't bother, said Lebowitz. She'd tell them. Twain was counting how many words he'd written. The Sotheby's man thought that was absurd. To prove her point she challenged him to count the manuscript's words and compare them with the scribbled numbers. These two figures matched. The man from Sotheby's wondered if this meant that Twain was being paid by the word. "It may have nothing to do with being paid by the word," Lebowitz suggested. "Twain might have told himself he had to write this many words a day, and he would wonder, 'Am I there yet?'" Like a little kid in the back of a car. Are we there yet?"

How did Lebowitz know this? Because she counted words, too. Many writers do. Ernest Hemingway recorded his day's output on the side of a cardboard packing case: 450, 575, 1,250. Joseph Wambaugh strives for 1,000 words a day, as did Anthony Burgess and Irwin Shaw. Evelyn Waugh and the young Norman Mailer went for 2,000.

Word counters may seem extreme, but their systematic approach to writing is more the norm than the exception among professionals. They know that resisting the temptation to leave their desk is the hardest part of their job. This is why writers come up with so many strategies to keep themselves going, no matter how absurd they might seem to civilians.

Early in his career, novelist Erskine Caldwell found it easier to write if he stayed in motion: taking buses all over the country, debarking now and again to scribble words on paper. For a time, Cald-

well took night boats between Boston and New York—the Fall River Line, the New Bedford Line, the Cape Cod Line—and considered it a writing tonic.

### 7 Indulge dubious motives

After he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, Saul Bellow, who was the younger sibling of two wealthy businessmen, told a friend, “All I started out to do was show up my brothers.”

One of the more challenging aspects of being a writer is having to acknowledge one’s less-than-stellar motives. Ego. Anger. Envy. Spitefulness. Showing off. To name just a few.

Over the course of her distinguished career, Margaret Atwood made a hobby of collecting reasons for writing that authors mention in their autobiographies, press interviews, on talk shows and during “conversations in the backs of bookstores before the dreaded group signing . . .” From the long list Atwood recorded in *Negotiating with the Dead*, a few of my favorites include:

- To make money so I could sneer at those who formerly sneered at me.
- To show the bastards.
- To justify my failures in school.
- To act out antisocial behavior for which I would have been punished in real life.
- To make myself appear more interesting than I actually was.
- Because I was possessed.

“There is no wrong motive for writing fiction . . .” said John Gardner. “No motive is too low for art; finally it’s the art, not the motive, that we judge.”

**8 Get busy on your book’s behalf** Aspiring writers generally see getting published as the answer to their prayers. Veteran authors know that this is when

their problems begin. The unfortunate truth is that once publishers put a book in the marketplace, they don’t necessarily back it.

In an early draft I called this section “Suppose they published a book and no one noticed?” It happens. Far more books are ignored than promoted by their own publishers. Among major trade publishers especially, abandonment is the rule, not the exception. Authors of neglected books then have a choice. They can retire to a corner and whimper about lack of support from their publisher. Or they can get busy on their own behalf. They can force their publisher to support their book. Anita Diamant did just that. As unsold copies of Diamant’s novel *The Red Tent* were about to be shredded, the author came up with the names of a thousand rabbis she thought might be interested in her biblical epic. Many were, and told others. *The Red Tent* went on to become a major bestseller, with 2 million copies in print.

If you are lucky enough to get published, and I hope you are, but unlucky enough to have your book be neglected, take a leaf from Diamant. Approaching your publisher on a “What can I do?” basis is far more productive than blasting them for their indolence. Develop your own marketing strategy. Contact reporters whose interests dovetail with your book. Request more comp copies to mail out and generate buzz (ask your publisher if they’ll at least pay postage). Create a Web site. Search for other Web sites that attract those who might be interested in a book like yours. Arrange your own signings. Do a regional tour, driving yourself and staying with friends or at the Motel 6. Most publishers are practical-minded. If you present them with a proposal for a sub-

stantial amount of publicity at a bargain, they will pay attention. They know better than anyone that such efforts can pay off.

Twain, Whitman and Hemingway were diligent self-promoters. So were Lillian Hellman and George Orwell. Imagine what use history’s literary self-promoters could have made of today’s online resources. Web sites galore for Twain. Pop-up ads for Whitman. Streaming video of Hemingway boxing. Lillian Hellman sharing her war-time exploits with iVil-lagers. George Orwell discussing *Animal Farm* on Salon.com.

In the best of all possible worlds, one’s book would shoot so far above the other tens of thousands of books published every year that authors would have no need to toot their own literary horns. Should this not happen, as it probably won’t, and authors don’t take an active role in promoting their work—who will?

You could say that peddling your own wares is beneath you, that it’s your publisher’s job, not yours. And you’d be right. You’d also be a writer on the path to oblivion. Your book is your child. Any parent will do almost anything for their child. So should any author. You are the only person in the world who is 100 percent committed to your book. Act like it. Get busy on its behalf. Reach out to readers.

It is your good fortune to be writing in a time when there are more ways than ever for those who write to communicate with those who read. #

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