On Unsolicited Submissions

© Anna Genoese, March 2010
anna@annagenoese.com
Please do not reproduce or distribute this text without permission.

I was so appalled the other morning when I read a blog post that had been linked on Twitter in which unsolicited submissions were described as "junk mail." I was pretty on board with the rest of this particular post. But it lost me with this statement. (I'm not linking, because I'm not calling this person out. This person is just the latest in a long line of people who talk about slush like this; the proverbial straw breaking the camel's back.)

The phrase was used in an analogy—like, imagine if, on top of dealing with your, you know, "real job," you also had to deal with 30,000 pieces of junk mail every year.

Unsolicited submissions are *not* junk mail, and if an agent—or editor—allows unsolicited submissions, then, in fact, *unsolicited submissions are part of the job.*

We use "unsolicited" to mean that an author can send anything to an editor or agent at any time. It does not have to be specifically requested. Lots of editors and agents do not accept unsolicited submissions; those editors and agents do not have slush piles (physical or virtual). They have things they have requested from authors they've met or spoken to some way or another.

However, if you want to split hairs—and I almost always do—any "unsolicited submission" is actually, technically, solicited. Agents and editors who accept unsolicited submissions *want those submissions.*

I have personally never pulled anything out of my slush pile that made it to publication. I've certainly pulled things out of the slush that warranted a second (or third) look, and I've sent revisions letters, and I've requested other manuscripts by authors who I found in the slush. I know a lot of editors have found really great stuff in the slush. Many authors, *particularly* in the romance genre, started out in the slush. You know whose first published book was an unsolicited submission? Nora Roberts (`http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/419634-PW_Nora_Roberts_A_Celebration_of_Emotions.php`).

It's important, albeit sometimes tedious or irritating for the people who have to go through it. Yeah, sometimes it's really bad. Sometimes it's literally written in crayon. Sometimes

it's clear that the author didn't do any research about the editor or agent to whom they are submitting ("Dear AGENT" is a clue; I used to sometimes get cover letters addressed to editors at other companies, amongst other telling details.)

Regardless: It is not *junk.*

Of course, I wrote a bunch of blog posts years ago about how editors and agents technically don't get paid to read submissions. Unsolicited submissions are almost never a priority, because there are money-making things to be done first. Clients, authors, meetings, manuscripts that need to be edited, conferences that need to be attended, etc. Yes, it sucks for authors who send in unsolicited submissions that they are on the bottom of the to do list. That's how it is, though. Life is hard.

Just because unsolicited submissions are not urgent or directly connected to money-making doesn't make them junk mail.

A separate issue is the behavior of the people submitting their work. Do I even need to write a blog post about this? Don't be a rude jerk. Everyone's got a life, and being an asshole isn't going to further your career aspirations in any way.

And, hey! The same goes for editors and agents. Being jerks to aspiring authors isn't nice—or, if you're the kind of person who doesn't care about being nice: being a jerk to an aspiring writer isn't good business practice and will get your name up on the Absolute Write boards (amongst other places) as a jerk faster than you can say, "Oops, I have acquired a reputation for being an unethical, mean, rude, underpants-showing ass!"

I agree that it sucks for authors, because writing is such a personal thing. (And, hey! Business is also a personal thing. What did Michael Scott say? "Business is always personal; it's the most personal thing in the world.") So when an agent or editor says they'll get back to you in six months, and then you never hear a thing, it hurts. It's rough. It's not just being outright rejected—you're being ignored like you don't even matter.

You do matter.

I'd really like it, though, if aspiring authors could remember that agents and editors work really hard, and aren't perfect. Sometimes they lose their patience. Sometimes things fall by the wayside. Sometimes they say that they're going to get back to you on your submission in two months and it takes eighteen. Seriously. It really does suck for everyone involved.

Unsolicited submissions aren't junk mail.