Rejection Letters

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`http://nikkinumbernine.livejournal.com/` once asked a question, and I answered it. Here's the text:

> I have written a historical romance novel, and I got to pitch it to an editor at a romance writers convention, and she invited me (and everyone else, I'm sure) to submit, so I did. It took five months, but she just sent me the nicest rejection letter I've ever gotten.
>
> > *Thanks very much for the look at TITLE and I'm sorry to say no, because I loved the plot. However, the style throughout was flat and unevocative and often sounded quite contemporary. A good historical should give an impression of its setting that will transport the reader back in time and I just didn't see that here.*
> >
> > *Best of luck, though, and please keep us in mind for future projects. You might want to rework this with the above advice in mind, though, since the plot is fine.*
>
> This is definitely the most helpful and most encouraging rejection letter I've ever gotten, and I think the editor is a peach for giving me the feedback. I'm very grateful for that, really, because I know she didn't have to do it.
>
> But—what does it mean, exactly? It's absolutely my intention to do some revision based on her advice, but I'm not quite sure what to do. Flat and unevocative . . . ? Does she mean I should use more flowery language? More descriptions of things, like the clothes, and the settings? More of the period-appropriate vocabulary? Help, please!

Very often, rejection letters are oblique. I know mine sometimes are. The majority of the time, when I write an oblique rejection letter, it is because I requested the book from the author

(at a convention or at a bar, or maybe I was on a date and the person I was out with said, "Oh, I wrote a novel!" and I rolled my eyes and ordered another martini), and the book is not good.

Now "not good" means any number of things, but usually it's just that the book has any number of problems. I try to mention at least one problem that the author can work on while writing the next manuscript. I don't usually mention more than two problems, because, as much as people may say they'd rather know what's wrong with their manuscripts than have someone write them a short, polite letter, it's just not true. No one wants to get a letter in the mail with a long list of their flaws, and that goes double for your *baby*.

The other reason I don't write more in-depth rejection letters is that *it's not my job.* Yes, it would be very nice of me, but I am not paid to write every author an in-depth rejection letter that bears more resemblance to an editorial letter than to a rejection.

Almost every single person I know in publishing wants to do that when they start out. Really. We all (pretty much) begin our careers thinking that we are going to help everyone and always be polite and always give the most constructive feedback we possibly can. Then we write really nice rejection letters, and get *burned.* No, really, we do. For every note I get that thanks me for the time I spent writing a brief rejection letter, I've gotten a note that's incredibly insulting. Sure, one bad apple, etc. etc.—but come on. I'm a person too, and it's very frustrating to write a two-page rejection letter and get back a five page diatribe on my skills.

(And, you know, the insulting, mean, rude letters are not always from unpublished authors. I've received them from people who should *really know better.* And? Sometimes they aren't letters that are mailed to me. Sometimes they are public posts in blogs *that I read* that the author *knows* I read. It's not just me either—it happens to lots of editors.)

Blah blah blah. Okay, so the other big thing that happens when an editor writes a longer, or more in-depth, rejection letter, is that the author mistakenly thinks it *is* an editorial letter and that we want to see the manuscript again once they have fixed the one or three things we mention in the rejection letter.

Unless an editor says "It would be great if you revised this according to the suggestions above and resubmitted to me," chances are good that the editor does not want to see it again. I know that *I* do not want to see it again, for likely it has far more problems than the major ones I listed, and you would be better served revising, learning from the process, and then writing another book integrating what you have learned.

This is not always the case. Sometimes you will revise your book and it turns into something completely different and incredibly awesome.

But probably not.

And I am always far more suspicious and critical of manuscripts sent to me for the second or third time than I am of manuscripts sent to me the first time. When a manuscript is sent for the third time, I lose my patience and send a form rejection. Especially if it's three times in less than a year. I fully subscribe to the theory that if you are going to be rewriting a manuscript that you've already sent around that's been rejected a couple of times, you should put it on a shelf for a few months (or a year) and then go back to it after writing at least one other thing.

(That is, if you plan to revise it at all. People I know have sometimes decided that it's just not worth it. Then they have moved on to other projects that are usually much better. Unless they are really terrible, awful writers, and then their next project, while better than the one before it, is still bad.)

Think of writing like any other talent. This is not originally my idea—an author brought it up in a conversation we had once. It works really well. You can hone your writing skills, the same way you can hone piano-playing skills. But some people who love playing the piano will never be good enough to do anything but pick out "Heart and Soul" on their Casio, while other people will be able to join local music groups, or have the right skills/talent to join a rock group, or will have talent that flourishes and is amazing and they'll become famous, while yet others will have the right skills/talent to teach piano, while yet others will never, as long as they try, be able to do *anything.* I, uh, belong to that last group. At least, as far as piano playing goes. I have a tin ear.

Some writers have tin ears. Some writers write wonderful blog entries and terrible fiction. Some writers only write short fiction. Some writers only write long fiction. Some writers only write historicals. ETC!!

Anyway. This is an excellent rejection letter. It's encouraging, constructive, and will help you become a better writer. It is not oblique.

> I’m sorry to say no, because I loved the plot.

Your basic idea is very good.

> the style throughout was flat and unevocative
> and often sounded quite contemporary.

This is a problem with a lot of historicals—even published ones! It's very difficult for many writers to write vibrant and believable historical novels. The most common problem that I have noticed in historicals that are submitted to me is actually this problem! All the dialogue and narrative is very contemporary, but the setting is 1272 Occitania (or whatever). It's very hard to find a balance between historical accuracy and the contemporary to either idealize or villainize (or both) historical time periods.

(Of course, there are also the crazy folk who write their historical novels in Medieval Scottish English dialect. Those novels have a niche audience and . . . that's about it. Maybe there are one or two of those that have become bestsellers, but that's an exception, rather than the rule.)

Another problem that goes hand in hand with this one is the problem of research. Both published and unpublished historical authors often don't do enough research, which results in people who know anything about the particular time period cringing. OR! Or authors do too much research and then want to cram in every single thing they know about the time period. Which results in everyone cringing.

> A good historical should give an impression of its setting
> that will transport the reader back in time and I just
> didn’t see that here.

This is *world building.* It's not about flowery language. It's about adding in the details that make the world your characters live in *real.* World building is not just something that sf and fantasy authors have to do—it's something every author has to do. I have never been to Olathe, Kansas, so if someone writes a book about Olathe, KS, I want there to be details that make the setting come alive in my mind. I want to be able to picture what it looks like and understand the way the characters feel about their location. The same goes for the time period. I wasn't alive in the 1960s, so if I read a book set in Olathe, KS, in the 1960s, I don't just need to know about the town and the roads and whether they are dusty or muddy or sandy—I also need to know about

what's happening in the rest of the world and what that means to the town and how people are reacting to it. How does the air feel? What kind of technology is common to the characters? What are they wearing and how does it fit and does the material chafe the skin? What kind of slang is popular and where do the words come from? Are most of the people native to the area or do they come from other places? If they come from other places, what bits of their original culture have they brought and have those bits been integrated into the common culture?

. . . and the same goes for the 1860s. And 1760s. And 1560s. Ad nauseam.

Then the question becomes, how can you convey these things to the readers without boring the crap out of them? There's no easy answer to that! Read a lot of historical novels and see how those authors do it. Then take their techniques and make those techniques work for you.

This is a link to a page of links (`http://www.squidoo.com/fantasyworldbuilding`) that are geared specifically toward fantasy world building—but they can really come in handy for anyone trying to world build. There are many links to sites about things like geology, planetology, history, linguistics, religion, magic . . .

The best website I've ever seen for world building is Patricia C. Wrede's Worldbuilder Questions (`http://www.larseighner.com/world_builder/index.html`). No matter what you write, you can very likely benefit from going through this site and answering these questions about the world your characters live in. Even if you don't use 99% of the information you come up with, it's going to add another dimension to your writing.

Yes, it's a lot of work. No, it's not easy. If you want to do something easy, go stick a paperclip up your nose or something. Writing isn't easy. It's a lot of hard work. You have to have discipline and be dedicated. Blah blah blah, duh.

> Best of luck, though, and please keep us in mind for future
> projects. You might want to rework this with the above advice
> in mind, though, since the plot is fine.

Sounds to me like this editor wants to see the project again once you've revised it! (If this editor *didn't* want to see the work again, it's more likely that the suggestion to rework it would not have been made. Plus, that's twice the editor complimented the plot!) So revise and send it in! The worst that can happen is a form rejection.

And, of course, no post on rejection letters is complete without a link to Teresa Nielsen Hayden's essay "Slushkiller" (`http://nielsenhayden.com/makinglight/archives/004641.html`). It's an excellent post on the secret language of rejection letters.