

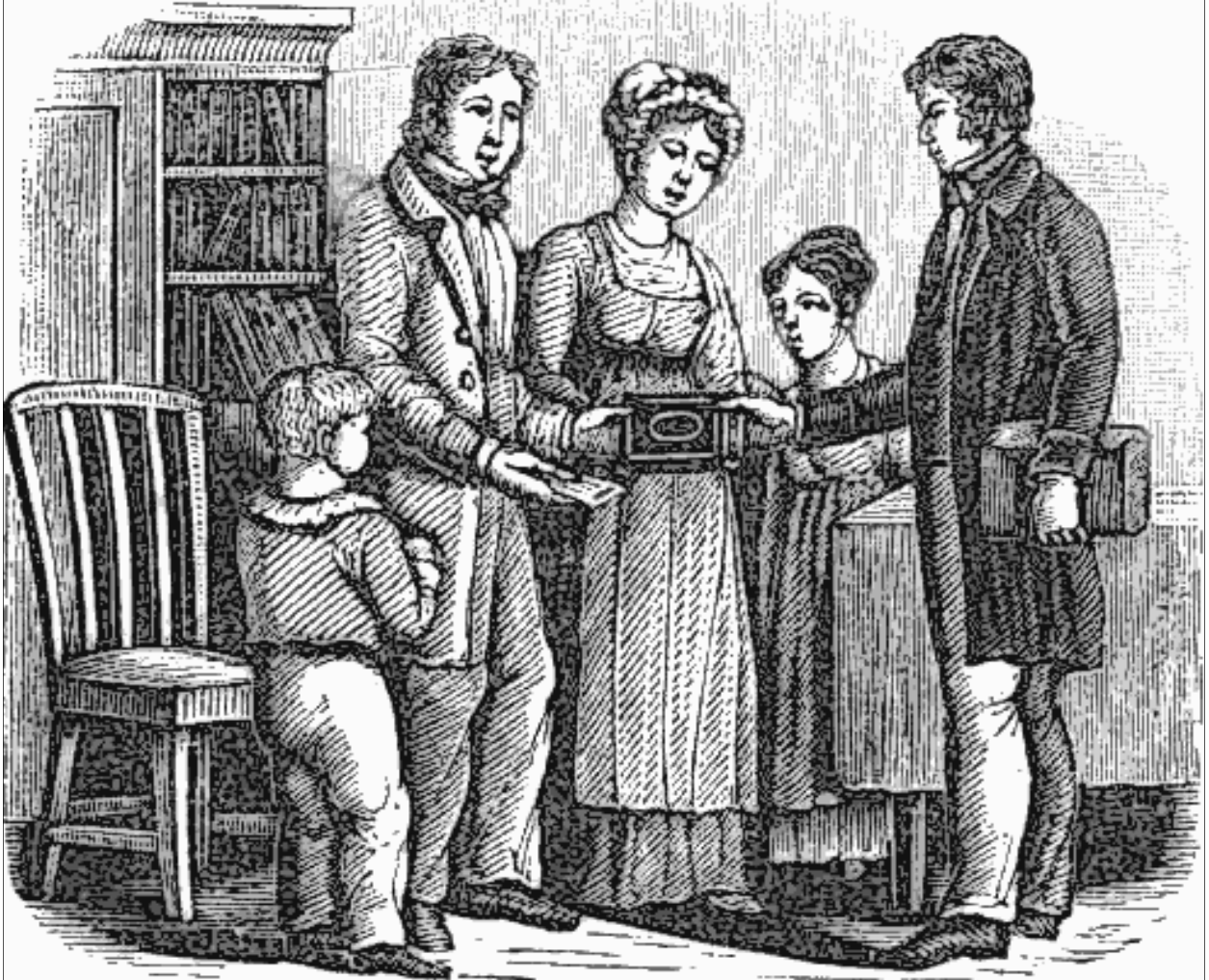
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Good books create knowledge, virtue and happiness

THE LOST ART OF THE COVER LETTER

-- By Jason Kapcala

You've just written the greatest story of your life, and you want nothing more than to see it printed between the covers of your favorite literary journal or magazine. All that's left is for you to push that little blue button on Submittable and send your creation hurtling through cyberspace to the Inbox of some eager and expectant editor.

Pump the brakes a second though--you might want to take another glance at your cover letter before doing anything you'll regret.

I'll admit I'm no expert on cover letters. My feelings about the genre come from the advice that was given to me back when I first started sending stories out, and from my past experiences working as an entry-level reader for an international literary journal. During that time, wading through the slush pile, I saw quite a few cover letters that left me scratching my head. I can't say for certain that any of them made me move an otherwise publishable story from the incoming pile to the rejections pile. Nor did I ever come across a cover letter so sparkling that it prompted me to look past a story's obvious flaws. But I was just one reader, and I can't vouch for any of my colleagues. I think the old aphorism when it comes to sending out manuscripts is probably one worth sticking to: you don't want to give the editors any excuse to reject you. That means closely editing your submission, following the formatting guidelines, and writing a cover letter that creates the right first impression.

Sometimes, we learn best by seeing what not to do. The following letters are representative samples based very closely on some of the worst cover letters I saw during my stretch as a reader. If you think I'm exaggerating here, guess again. If anything, these examples are tamer because I struggled to replicate what was so tone-deaf and baffling about them. Those letters were, already, quintessentially perfect in their awfulness. (Obviously, I've changed the names and titles and specific details to protect the privacy of the poor souls who wrote these letters.)

So let's look at our first example:

Dear Fiction Editor:

Please consider "Pollen" as a submission. "Pollen" is a self-contained excerpt from my novel, *Unclean*, which is represented by the XYZ Agency. I've previously submitted and you've encouraged me to send again. Thanks.

Willem DeFish—esteemed director of the MFA program at the University of Prestigious Writing and former chair of the Fiction Panel for the Very Important Book Awards for Very Important People—compared my novel to Guillermo Pfefferling's Pulitzer Prize winner, *Icehouses*: "There's much the same attentiveness to and empathy for the derelict and the desperately downhearted; indeed, when your magnum opus is published you'll likely be referred to as an author in the Pfefferling tradition."

Sincerely,

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Mr. Drinks-His-Own-Kool-Aid

So what's wrong? It's not a bad start to a letter, right? In fact, if this person had stopped after the first paragraph, it would be golden. This writer is probably the real deal. He'd been encouraged to send again. His novel is represented by an agent. However, he makes some poor choices in the second paragraph. First off, the person reading the submission is going to know who Willem DeFish is and won't need the rundown of his credentials any more than she needs a rundown of the writer's. When DeFish offered up that feedback (most likely in a workshop at The University of Prestigious Writing or during a guest residency or when judging a contest) he was probably looking to highlight some of the strengths of the piece while also pointing the writer toward Guillermo Pfefferling's novel, in case the writer hadn't already read it. Obviously Icehouses and Unclean share a similar aesthetic sensibility. However, that says nothing about the quality of this writer's work. In fact, the reference to DeFish's ethos as a one-time chair of the Very Important Book Awards and Pfefferling's Pulitzer do nothing but suggest that this is a writer who is caught up in notions of grandeur. It's name-dropping. The implied, between-the-lines reading says: "I'm so good DeFish compared me to a Pulitzer Prize winner. You'd be a fool not to publish me. I'm going to be the next Pulitzer Prize winner." With an ego like that, you're almost destined to become that guy or gal—the bitter one who we'll see more of in just a minute. But first, on to example two

Dear Mr. Editor Person:

I have just completed a novel, Blast, It's Overcast. It is the story of a rickety-but-mystical bridge of empathy built over the unrelenting waves of intolerance. This is an excerpt from that novel.

Sincerely,

Mr. Making-You-Crazy

Hold on, I need a moment.

Okay, to spend a significant amount of time on a novel, one you obviously care about and take seriously, and then sum it up with trite clichés and metaphorical abstraction, feels amateurish. This cover letter sends the reader the wrong message about the writer's competency, and it tells the reader something unsavory about how this writer views the work of writing. A reader might be interested in reading a story about two Hispanic boys who grew up in an intolerant White neighborhood, but a reader is definitely not going to invest emotionally in a rickety-but-mystical bridge of empathy or the unrelenting waves of intolerance over which it spans.

This novel excerpt read about as you would expect it to after reading the cover letter.

Let's look at example three

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Dear Editor:

Please consider the two attached stories for publication in your literary magazine. The first is entitled “Delilah and John Boy at the Ocean.” It is around 2000 words. Read this one first, because it is shorter. It will give you a sense of my aesthetic and literary concerns. The story evokes the richness of feeling that surfaces in even the most unassuming of romances, as evidenced by the first dalliances of a nine-year-old girl, who wrestles with the trifecta of affection, malice, and shame.

If that whets your appetite, try “Buds of a Wedding” on for size, which is around 4000 words. This tragicomedy further penetrates the dynamics at play between sexual partners, ominously insinuating that love’s strongest adhesive consists of nothing more than the need to play out highly dysfunctional, but reassuringly familiar, parodies of earlier repressed trauma. Walking the line between Realism and the avant-garde, this story hyperbolizes the bourgeois rituals of courtship, discovering truth through the microscopic lens of satire.

Sincerely,

Ms. You-Must-Be-Kidding-Me-Here

Look, I think it’s bad form to make fun of a writer who is hustling to get his or her work out there. Really, I do. So, I’m trying really hard here. But this is unbelievable.

Where do we start? Same problems as before. Grandiose sense of the writing’s brilliance and complexity; in-depth discussion of the story’s plot (which the reader is planning on reading anyway—it’s her job!); penchant for the abstract rather than the concrete (affection, malice and shame, you say?); and, in this case, a real desire to tell the poor, tired reader exactly what these stories do (as though that reader is not trusted to determine this on her own). In case she misses it, the reader should know that these stories walk the line between the real and the absurd, darkness and light, and so forth. In fact, the reader is even told in which order to read them!

(Note well: unless invited to do so, do not send multiple stories during one reading period unless they are flash fiction.)

There is another point to make here, though it is not directly about cover letters, so please, excuse my aside. When reading these pieces, I saw nothing that could be reasonably called Realist or absurdist. What I saw was a lot of pornography, which ranged from very silly (“Lancelot slid his sword into Guinever’s slippery scabbard”) to downright disturbing.

There is an episode of the popular television show *Two and a Half Men* that comes to mind where one of the main characters learns of a disturbing sexual rendezvous his mother had when she was younger. Her story starts, “You and your bother were in summer camp or somewhere and I was lonely, bored, and the circus was in town”; it ends, “I woke up in that Motel 6, clown makeup smeared all over my bosom. The Chinese acrobats, the strong man, and the little people had moved on to the next town.”

That story has nothing on what I read in these two submissions.

I’m no prude—I like a juicy sex scene and some coarse language as much as the next reader, maybe more—but there is a line between “the richness of feeling that arises in even the most unassuming of romances” and the kind of stuff they film in the back of seedy San Fernando Valley warehouses. It’s not even a particularly fine line. Simply put: no reader should need therapy to get over your submission. Parts of “Delilah and John Boy at the Ocean” were explicit in their depiction of pedophilia. Needless to say, I didn’t even bother reading “Buds of a Wedding.”

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Let's look at one more less-disturbing-but-still-ineffective example, a short one...

To whichever graduate school lackey is reading this: you know you're just going to throw this out, so why don't you just go ahead and do it already?

Sincerely,

Ms. Anger-Managment

Most readers will be happy to oblige this writer.

So what's the take away from all this? There's a lot more to lose in a cover letter than there is to gain, so don't try to do too much. One of the best cover letters I ever read went something like this:

Dear Fiction Editors:

I am a former coal miner who loves to write. Thank you for considering my story.

Sincerely,

Mr. Breath-of-Fresh-Air

Why is it good? It's not just the brevity (though that's nice, too). It's memorable in all the right ways. This person presumably has stories to tell—he's done things in his life. His letter is cordial and professional. And he loves writing. There's no telling if he has any skill or creativity at this point, but you can't help but want this guy's story to be good.

Another good option is to stick with the typical form letter, as follows:

Dear NAME OF FICTION EDITOR (It's worth looking this up):

Attached for your consideration, is my story, "TITLE OF STORY." I have recently had work published in _____, _____, and _____. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

NAME

Again, I'm no expert. There are probably others out there who would give you different advice. But if you want my two cents: keep it simple, and play it humble. Don't give the readers a synopsis. Don't tell them that your piece is perfect for their magazine or vice versa. Don't beg or insist. And don't attempt to wow them with your charm and your acumen (and your impressively long list of accomplishments). The people reading these cover letters can look at a bio and shrug it off as though the author had tattooed his credentials on his forehead, nipples, and knees. Remind the editors which story is yours, tell them where they can contact you if they are interested in publishing it, and do your best to get out without hurting anyone, least of all the characters in your story who, undoubtedly, deserve a good home.
