

Letter from America Autumn 2012

In the past year, my writerly self-loathing has reached new lows. Or should that be *highs*? If I weren't such a total mouth-breathing idiot, I'd know.

My agent has been trying to sell my first novel. These efforts yield a steady stream of rejections to my inbox. Editors have explained their decisions in a variety of ways. The plot/setting/character (circle one) is fascinating, but the plot/setting/character (circle one) isn't quite believable.

Some have said they liked the book, but that they just can't sell "women's fiction" these days. The first time I received that particular stripe of rejection, I said "*Really?*" to the computer screen and waited a few seconds like I might get an answer. Had I written *women's* fiction? Would a novel about a female character, written by a woman, attract only those readers who owned lady parts? But, of course, this probably wasn't the real issue.

"They have to say *something*," my agent explained. "You know, to justify the rejection."

"You think so?" I was fishing. *Please tell me again that the book is good, that I didn't waste two and half years writing it. Or just tell me that I have good hygiene.* That would have been cool. I could have lived with that.

What she said instead was, "Five years ago, the book would have been a slam dunk. No question." The change could be explained, she told me, in one dirty five-letter word: *E-book*.

Up to now, I'd been excited about the online revolution of the literary world. When my short fiction was published online, rather than in a print literary magazine, way more people read it. And to clarify, I mean *waaay* more. I'd receive messages from high school friends and ex-boyfriends and my dry cleaner. "Hey Kathy. Your story was, um, interesting. Did this actually happen to you? I don't remember you owning a llama. Let alone a machete."

Okay, I didn't say these readers *liked* the stories. Or that they even understood that fiction means something is made up. My point is that they read them. And isn't that what we writers, introverted exhibitionists that we are, dream about? A readership? The more people who read a story, the more chance that a successful writer/reader transaction can develop. We say to the readers, "Hey, don't you think the world looks a little bit like this?" And if we're very, very lucky, we hear faint voices from the darkness that say, "I do." And "I do." And "I do."

But in the market-driven world of novels, as opposed to the high art/low-finance realm of short stories, digitalization has had a different impact. My agent explained that E-books operate on a publishing model that didn't exist five years ago. The downloads cost very, very little. And those "cheap" Kindle E-books take a toll on new writers.

Here's why: Publishers have to sell mass quantities to make profits. This means they rely more heavily than before on writers who already have well-known names, like Jodi Picoult or John

Grisham. These guys already have built-in fan bases who'll buy lots and lots of copies of new work. The other method publishers favor for selling lots of copies is to put out a book that might become the next movie and t-shirt and back scrubber franchise. These are typically Young Adult novels with vampire/werewolf/troll/zombie/circus/gladiator/fairy themes. New writers of literary fiction for adults find themselves squeezed out.

Right now, I have five friends who are also first-time novelists and whose agents also are trying, without success so far, to sell their novels. I find some solace in this. But then I hate myself for that. Why find comfort in others' failures? Wouldn't it make more sense to find comfort in their successes?

I have decided instead to hate the French. For their great skin. And their lack of obesity. And their adorable pursed lips. And most of all for the foresight they had to protect their publishing industry. With actual laws. According to a June article in *The New York Times*, the "Lang law" went into effect in 1981, and it fixed prices for French-language books. "Booksellers — even Amazon — may not discount books more than 5 percent below the publisher's list price, although Amazon fought for and won the right to provide free delivery.... Last year as French publishers watched in horror as e-books ate away at the printed book market in the United States, they successfully lobbied the government to fix prices for e-books too. Now publishers themselves decide the price of e-books; any other discounting is forbidden."

The result? "E-books account for only 1.8 percent of the general consumer publishing market [in France], compared with 6.4 percent in the United States." Moreover, French-language book sales have increased 6.5% over the past decade. According to *The Guardian*, "France has more than 3,000 independent local bookshops and 400 in Paris, compared with around 1,000 in the UK and only 130 in London." I don't have the numbers for the US, but one can assume they look like this: ☹

Presumably, new French writers aren't struggling with the same obstacles as we are. They're just eating their baguettes that never make them fat, and strolling down the Rue-de-Blah-Blah to cash their royalty checks. Maybe it's just that the French make everything look easy, but doesn't it seem like we ought to be able to concoct a model that facilitates E-books and new writers?

Hey, on the bright side, back here at home, *The Toronto Star* reports that Random House has joined with Fremantle Media to launch Random House Television, a new channel that will provide a platform for TV shows inspired by those vampire/werewolf/troll/zombie/circus/gladiator/fairy stories. The July article says that publishing giant MacMillan plans to follow suit.

I fluctuate between hating myself for writing a novel that I fear, way deep in my gut, just isn't good enough and hating a culture that would depose a venerable literary tradition that facilitated the likes of Ernest Hemingway and Flannery O'Connor for the sake of a \$1.99 troll. Not that I think I'm in that venerable tradition. Or anywhere close. Gah. God bless America.... Cripes. Did this whole thing sound bitter? I hate that.

Thankfully, there are initiatives like X, a new website dedicated to marketing short stories as downloads for e-readers (see the ad in this magazine). Not only will the site offer a back catalogue of published stories, but it will also feature previously unpublished work. It capitalizes

on digitization in the best ways. Stories that might have had small readerships can now potentially find larger audiences, maybe ones beyond the writers' home countries.

Long live the short story!

Heck. It just might.

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