

The Upside of Losing

Humiliations of a B List Writer

by Cynthia Rogerson

My editor invited me to lunch recently. I was cautiously excited. I'd sent her the manuscript of my new book just a few weeks earlier. She'd published me before and I anticipated a celebration. Plus we were going to meet in Bad Girl's Bakery, my favourite place to eat cake. So confident was I feeling, I played the generous loser card before she even opened her mouth.

'Listen, don't worry about hurting my feelings if you didn't like it. I know it's not everyone's cup of tea,' I lied.

My book *was* everyone's cup of tea! It was so brilliant, the film rights would be snapped up before Christmas. She smiled enigmatically, laughed a bit, then said:

'The writing is very good, some lovely images, but the narrator is just too unlikable.'

'Oh, I know,' I lied again. It was a memoir, for God's sake. *The narrator was me*. I was proud of my flaws. 'But some readers might identify with her,' I tentatively suggested.

'Oh no, I don't think so,' she said firmly, still with that bright, almost-conspiratorial smile, as she knew I'd just been pretending I thought my book was publishable. 'The narrator is way too cold and selfish. After a while I just didn't care about her. Readers want sympathetic characters. Also the book as a whole doesn't go anywhere. There's no overall sense of meaning or cohesiveness. No progression.'

‘Well, that’s kind of the point,’ I said, feeling my face grow pink. ‘It’s not a novel, it’s not contrived like that. It’s trying to reflect what life is. The stumbling from one set of circumstances to another, all the time wondering if I was doing it right.’

I then decided she was too prudish, too conventional, hence her ridiculous insults. But as if psychic, she quickly added:

‘The reader hated it too. *Hated it!*’ She hooted with laughter and people turned to look at us. ‘Here, I brought her report.’

And there it was, in black and white, a list of reasons to never publish my book.

I couldn’t finish my cake. I needed wine. But within hours, the whole scene began to make me smile. When I imagined it as a scene in a film, I laughed out loud. I was like the writer character in *Sideways*, raw with rejection and glugging the wash-back from other people’s wine tasting. I loved that guy! Being rejected made him much more likable. Who loves a winner? I’d use this café scene one day in a story.

On a good day, I consider myself a B list writer. I win occasional prizes, get decent reviews, have six books published. Each of my books has garnered its own particular cluster of accolades. One was translated into six languages, another became an audio book, another was distributed in WHSmith’s airport shops. My darlings tried so hard for me! But none of those accolades mean a thing if one measures literary achievement in terms of sales figures. And let’s face it, if you are not selling, no one will want to publish your next book. You’ll be an old maid, shunned by all men because no other man has wanted you.

On a bad day, in a realistic mood, I admit to myself I am probably not a B list writer. I may not even be a C list writer. My sales figures always start promisingly, then rapidly sink into

oblivion. The paper and stamps used for my royalty statements probably cost more than my books earn me. A few years ago my publisher wrote to say my first out of print novel would be reincarnated on kindle. The following year, another publisher wrote to say the same about my second novel, which was also out of print. Having novels out of print is humiliating. They sit on Amazon, brazenly announcing my failure, costing one pence. *How much are they paying you?* That's how my dad greeted every announcement of a sold story. The answer was always *Not much. Sometimes nothing.* Another pinnacle of pain was reached when I was told six boxes of my novels were about to be destroyed, unless I cared to purchase them. One of these novels had been a Woman's Hour adaptation and been shortlisted for Scottish Novel of the Year. Echoes of Ozymandias, though surely this kind of fading was supposed to happen in a thousand years, not three years after publication.

When my first novel was published, I wanted it to do well so badly, I bought copies for full price to bump up my sales figures. One day I couldn't find it on the shelves. What if some fan tried to find my book and couldn't? I ordered six copies at the sales desk, saying I'd heard it was really good and intended giving out copies as gifts. I was asked for my email so I could be notified. He looked at my email address, which is my name, looked at my book order and smiled a pitying smile. I blushed and pretended it was just a silly joke. Silly me!

I see my books in charity shops sometimes, and then I see they are still there three months later. In bookshops like Waterstones, I have a habit of removing my book from its unobtrusive slot on the R shelf, and placing it boldly cover-up on the tables with the best sellers. It's a knack I developed years ago. I pretend to put it down absentmindedly while

picking up one of the bestsellers to read the back cover. Then I put that down too and just slowly stroll off.

Once, at the suggestion of my publisher, I offered to sign my books in the Princes Street branch of Waterstones in Edinburgh. A place that is, for me, the equivalent of St Peter's to an un-lapsed Catholic. I was given a pen, some stickers saying SIGNED BY AUTHOR, and encouraged to sign away. I remember feeling important. Here I was, the unnoticed famous author modestly signing her own books in Waterstones. The next year, I offered again. This time an employee accompanied me, and so witnessed my humiliation as I discovered every one of the books I'd signed last year was still on the shelf. There were no unsigned books by me. 'Never mind,' I said, and smiled as if it didn't matter one whit. Because proper writers don't really care about material things like sales, right?

Once I was invited to the Lake District to read from my new novel, and all the way down on the train I felt like a proper writer. Strangers living 400 miles away were paying to see me! But the actual event was a little anticlimactic. An audience of three people. One was an old man who snored all the way through my reading.

Once at the Edinburgh festival, I was paired with an author who wrote popular historical romances set in Glasgow. My book was a satire on hospices set in California. I wasn't sure why we were deemed a good fit for a shared event, but I was thrilled to see the huge room fill. All was going gratifyingly well until the question time. None of the questions were for me. Not one. I stood next to him, smiling like a ninny. But the worst was yet to come. After the event, we sat at adjacent signing tables and I watched as several hundred people queued for his table. Only one person loitered around my table, and I'd married him so he

had to. He pretended to buy several copies of my book with money I slid under the table to him.

Have any of these humiliations disheartened me? Only momentarily. I like feeling invisible and I'm happy with my position on the writerly spectrum of success. I've exceeded my own expectations just by being published. I'm not being modest - I believe in the quality of my work - but I don't *need* validation, much as I'd like it. The harsh truth is, some literature is rewarded with wild public acclaim and some is not. Some *terrible* writers are rewarded with wild public acclaim, and some genius writers are only discovered posthumously, if ever. That is how the cookie crumbles. It's hard to see a pattern or predict a winning formula, which is partially what makes the whole shebang so exciting. Of course I'd like more sales - all B list writers would - but I don't yearn to experience the pressure of an A list writer trying to produce another best seller to match his previous one. That would be hell and worse - it might make for poor writing.

Meanwhile, I've re-written my memoir substantially. Removed a third, written a new third, and altered the slant. I'm convinced it's an improvement. Losing makes you try harder and that's got to be a good thing.

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