

“The 86th Time is A Charm” Advice to Would-Be Authors

William Rawlings

The quote which forms the title of this essay is from Steve Berry, whom I greatly respect both as a writer and as one who knows how to play the complex game of book publishing. He said it to a newspaper reporter for the *Brunswick News* in late 2002 several months before his first book, *The Amber Room*, was published. Steve was referring to the fact that he'd written the book some eight years earlier, and had received eighty-five rejections from publishers before having his book accepted by the eighty-sixth. *The Amber Room* went on to make the *New York Times* best-seller list. Steve later confided to me that he didn't consider it his best work, and that if he had it to do all over again the book would have been very differently written.

That quote and Steve's comments to me have stuck in my mind over the years for a couple of reasons: Talent has less to do with “success” in writing than does perseverance, and what we perceive as “success” is often driven more by commercial considerations than any other single factor. Many writers, at least those who have not become completely jaded, still believe that good writing will attract eager publishers and their words, once in print, will create a legion of enthusiastic fans. Unfortunately, that's not the way the system works.

The list of famous authors who early in their careers suffered rejection after rejection is astounding, considering their later fame. They include such diverse writers as J. K. Rowling, John Grisham, Margaret Mitchell, Louis L'Amour and C. S. Lewis. The problem basically stems from this—conventional publishers are in the business to make money, not to promulgate good literature.

An author without a solid track record of sales is an unknown quantity, but without a book or two in the marketplace, he or she can't achieve a track record. Even then, the number of really good authors who never hit it big is pretty amazing. I discovered this a couple of years ago when I volunteered to be a reader/judge for well-known writers' organization's annual book contest. Entry was open to all the group's members, and any published book could be submitted. There were both famous and well-known authors and others whom I'd never heard of. For 4 months I scarcely came up for air, spending nearly every free moment plowing through an enormous stack of books.

I fancy myself a fair judge of writing skills. As it turned out, some of the very best books were penned by the unknowns, and some of the very worst written by authors whose works are consistently seen on “best-seller” lists. Some of the most “successful” authors were great writers; others not so. The things this latter group seemed to have in common, however, were publishers with large advertising budgets and good connections within the retail book marketing industry.

The world of writing and publishing is changing—I am not sure if it’s for the better or worse. Self-publishing was formerly the kiss of death for a would-be writer; now it’s mainstream. With some notable exceptions, conventional bookstores seem headed down the path of phone booths, having seen their glory days in the past. The place of e-books in the whole picture is still evolving. Perhaps in a decade or so things will have sorted out, but those of us who love writing don’t have time to wait.

So, here’s my advice: Persistence and a strong ego are the best route to success for an aspiring author. Rejection and seeming defeat are part of the game. The key is perseverance with your eyes on the distant goal. If you’ve not read Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers*, you should. He repeatedly refers to the “10,000-Hour Rule,” pointing out that many of those whose accomplishments we admire got there by dedication, hard work and learned experience, perhaps aided by a lucky break here and there. That could be me or you.