

Publishing in the Age of Armageddon

By

Christopher Angus

The letter came out of the blue. It was from a regional publisher that had been considering my submission of a young adult novel for three years. The elapsed time wasn't a surprise. They had published one of my earlier books after a seven year "study" period. But when I opened the letter, I finally comprehended what a really tough business this is.

The publishing house had experienced a "freak accident" the letter began. Wow! I thought. They're actually going to publish something.

No such luck. A car traveling at ninety miles an hour had crashed through a brick wall, careened through the office of their President, through an interior wall, across the entire showroom and partially out the exterior wall on the other side of the building. While no one was hurt and the driver went directly to jail, the damage done to the business was extraordinary.

They were writing to tell me this because a number of manuscripts, including mine, had been on the President's desk at the time and had been destroyed. Could I possibly send them another copy? Such is the state of mind of any writer, I actually took this as a positive sign. My book was on the President's desk. It was still being considered! It's hard enough to get anything published these days, but actually having a book *run over* takes things to a new level.

It can take a while to break through. I know that. My earliest memory of my grandfather is of him poring over papers in his eighties through thick glasses. An immigrant from Russia, unhappy in his career as a dentist in Manhattan, he spent much of his free time translating Russian literature and poetry. Though he spent half a century at it, he never broke through. My childhood attic held stacks of those translations not one of which, to my knowledge, was ever published. His father had been accused of murder in czarist Russia in the 1890s. The family was exiled to Siberia, where my great grandfather established a successful business and the family became part of an intellectual community. Among the family's friends was writer Maxim Gorky, considered the father of Soviet literature. With a lineage like that, even if only associative, members of my family shouldn't have to have their manuscripts run over. Exiled to Siberia? Maybe.

At least seven members of my extended family have been writers. My parents, both college English professors, published many books between them. My mother wrote a series of murder mysteries and my father produced several works of well received fiction, one of which, *The Ivy Trap*, was considered for a movie by the likes of Gregory Peck and Lee J. Cobb. But their greatest success came with five anthologies they crafted

because they couldn't find exactly what they wanted for their own courses. At least two of the books became best sellers and continue to be used in university English classes.

When I bought my father's house in 1993, the home I grew up in, I was cleaning out the attic, about to throw out a box filled with old correspondence, when I discovered a file of letters from the 1960s. They were from writers my parents had corresponded with concerning purchasing the rights to stories for their anthologies. I was a writer myself by this time and pored over the contents like lost gold coins from a sunken Spanish galleon.

Here were signed, often hand-written letters from the likes of Saul Bellow, Heinz Huber, Wright Morris and others. One of my favorites was a single-spaced, typed letter from Thomas Pynchon, written on yellow, lined graph paper and signed by the author (I guess he couldn't go out in public to buy plain white paper). In it, he apologized for refusing permission to include a story entitled "Entropy" in one of my parents' collections. He wrote: "I have a funny thing about that story: I don't like it, and I regret having written it...it embodies a number of bad writing habits I still haven't shaken, and it would embarrass me now to see the thing come grinning and rattling out of its closet after six years." Evidently he got over the embarrassment, because a few years later I learned that "Entropy" had been published again after all.

The treasure trove brought to mind one of my mother's mantras: never stop sending things out; it keeps the mails interesting. These days it's email, but the principal is the same. Extending that advice, over the years I wrote to many authors whose work inspired me. To my surprise, most of them responded. I have letters from Farley Mowat, Barbara Tuchman, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard and John McPhee, among others. In a second letter to me, McPhee signed his name John Angus McPhee. Clearly, a lost relative.

Several years ago, I read about an author who had written twenty-seven books without getting any of them published. It gave me heart. I was only up to fifteen at the time, and while I had published four works of nonfiction, I had close to a dozen novels either rattling around my desk or out with various agents. The Guinness Book of Records seemed well within my grasp.

Before the collapse of western civilization following the stock market collapse of 2008, my agent called to tell me that he had been talking to a major publishing house about one of my thrillers. Half a dozen editors had read the book and were enthusiastic about it. One actually said he thought it could be the next *Da Vinci Code*. I went out to dinner.

That was the last I ever heard about it.

Of course, I sent out another copy of the book that had been run over. In a few years, perhaps after the present economic crash has run its course, I am sure I will receive another letter: "Dear Sir: We are sorry to inform you that due to _____ (insert phrase of choice) earthquake, volcanic eruption, ozone belt depletion, Armageddon, we will

need another copy of your manuscript. Please be assured we would not make this request if your book wasn't under serious consideration."