

Dear Writer,

THANK YOU for letting us read your story.

Although we read 30,000 to 40,000 stories a year between standard and competition submissions (and thus are unable to provide meaningful individual responses), it is an honor and a thrill to see the incredible range of lives and voices represented in these stories.

All writers—including the established “names”—know that rejection is the usual for all kinds of reasons, one being that there are more stories than there are serious readers. Those who are committed to writing meaningful material, and are willing to work on the language that will deliver it most effectively, are writing something of value.

If you're a relative beginner:

We respect your determination to aim for publication, and we especially urge you to put your main focus on the writing itself. If you have wondered if you're wasting your time writing, please consider this: Absolutely no one has ever seen the world through your eyes except you, and when you die, most of your vision of the world will die with you, if you have not written it down.

So when you feel that writing is an indulgence, think again. This world is an outrageously rich, complex, interwoven place. No one person's experience encompasses the whole of it.

Keep writing! (Remember that we love publishing new authors! In 2003/2004, for instance, about 60% of the stories we chose were first publications for those writers!)

The info below is—as labeled—general information, not a response to this story.

Whoever you are, thank you so much for letting us read your work! We'll look forward to your next story!

General ideas on how to create your own best work:

- Take note of an experience, character, image, or bit of dialogue that engages you so much that you just have to write the story. (It doesn't matter how you find it—writing exercises, your dreams, internal or external events, whatever. Sometimes I suspect it's a bit like witching for water or catching a fish.)
- Give the story itself full rein. Let the characters express themselves, watch what they do, find out where they will take the story. (This will save you from getting to be/having to be the clever one, and—more important—makes the writing process one of discovery and of service to story.)
- Read a LOT, and focus on reading well-written material. You'll find your vocabulary growing; you'll learn different ways of shaping a sentence, creating an image, showing a character, refining dialogue.
- There are so many different kinds and styles of writing. Find what suits you. If nothing thrills you so much as a well sewn mystery, pursue that. If you want to write a rich comic strip that uses icons and unique observations to reveal disguised or the most ordinary of truths, go for it. If you want to explore your family's history, write a juicy romance, or to explore your most personal experiences and insights in a journal you keep religiously—all of those are worthy pursuits.

- What do you read, *really* read, in your own real life, that satisfies you? Chances are very good that that is the kind of writing you should dive into—and just reading them increases your understanding of how that work is created. The single most effective way to improve your own writing skills is—in my opinion—to read LOTS of the best of the kind of writing you want to do. (Also, take notice: What publications do you like to read? Those might be good places to start sending your work since you and the editors obviously have shared tastes.)

Notes about literary fiction, in particular:

Good literary fiction must be, of course, expertly written, but it must also be intellectually engaging and emotionally significant. I want a story to engage me enough that I experience the characters' challenges and concerns and situation, and feel that my understanding of humanity, perhaps my own humanity, has been deepened or broadened.

Character development is absolutely crucial. The setting and plot provide the time and place and challenges with which the character will interact to become—and reveal—him or herself. (In genre fiction, by contrast, there is more of an action formula—someone mysteriously dies, someone is wrongly accused, real killer is discovered—in which a character serves primarily as an *agent* of the action.)

Readers want to be treated respectfully. Never trick them. Never try to dictate the feelings they should have or the conclusions they should come to. A good piece of literary fiction provides an opportunity for thinking people to roll something interesting and meaningful around in their minds.

Words should be consciously *chosen*. Maybe “short and fat” is the right description; maybe “squat” is better.

Here are some common trouble spots:

- Don't force dialogue to tell your story. It will sound false: “Lois, your ex-wife, called today.” The reader will lose confidence in your ability to tell a story. Dialogue exists to let the reader hear what the character has to say, minus the ums and huhs. Listen to and write down what your *character* has to say.
- Triviality (If YOU don't care about the story, the reader can't possibly.)
- Lack of character development (Okay to have lightly done fringe characters, but the important characters must feel real.)
- Predictability
- Piece is not really fiction. (Most fiction has some roots in experience, however tenuous, but when a writer tries to stay true to fact, the story doesn't get a full life.)
- Writer is bent on delivering a particular message.
- Writer hasn't developed his/her skills adequately yet. (Don't let this stop you—just keep at it!) One specific: Check your use of adverbs. If there are too many, we'll think the writer isn't taking the trouble to find and use the right verb.
- If you're interested in writing a literary piece, don't aim for the clever story, don't try to show other people how good you are. Write something that affects you.

- Lack of familiarity with the writing a publication prints and with their guidelines. ALL literary publications are overworked and underfunded. Their guidelines are designed to help the pubs most thoughtfully and most efficiently read and publish stories. For instance, we don't publish poetry, stories intended for child audiences, mystery, romance, sci-fi, or fantasy. Some writers use graphic language or images to shock—we don't publish hate material or pornography.
- Don't try to get the editors' attention with anything other than your actual work. Splashy presentation gimmicks, either in format or font are not helpful. It's the substance that counts. And, in our case, with our online submission procedure, fancy formatting can actually get in the way of a successful upload.
- No need to try to charm the editors. Cover letters should be simple, friendly, polite. Mention any publications your work may have appeared in, but don't worry if it hasn't.
- Avoid clichés like the plague. Of course that *is* a cliché and sometimes in speech, even in dialogue, we will use them. But in narrative, they make editors cringe, briefly, as they reject. A silly, but simple way to help you recognize clichés or stereotypes is to imagine that someone who bugs you is saying these words in conversation. If you would think, “Oh, good lord, stop it. You are just spouting words. They're not even your own,” that's a pretty good indication there's cliché or stereotype involved.

Examples:

- A faint smile curling his lips
- His encircling arm
- The stupidest thing I ever heard
- Over my dead body
- Gut feeling
- Tall, willowy blond
- She stifled a sob
- Welfare mother
- He was a real psychopath
- Crocodile tears
- Her face framed by auburn curls

How to look at your story's strengths

Are the characters complex, believable as humans? If the characters are shallow, simple stereotypes and it is not possible for me to think that person had a grandmother who loved him or her, then I can't care about that character and her or his story in a significant way. They don't have to be developed to such depth—especially in a short story—that you actually know what the person's beliefs are, heck, you can't know that fully about someone you love or even yourself, but you must not make them into nothing by reducing them to a cliché. The literary writer's job is to deliver their characters' stories truthfully, skillfully, and originally. Know and love your characters—they will be generous in return.

In terms of character development, think of this: Say someone that doesn't know you imagines you've never experienced deep personal loss or put in a hard day's work, thinks you take cabs cause you've got money to burn. They dismiss you as shallow, lazy, self-centered. If you could keep from responding with anger, you might tell them about how it was when you lost your mother, what it was like to have to revise that story again, how your eye doctor reported to the DMV that you really shouldn't be driving, and how, yeah, I do struggle with balancing my needs with my family's, but we work it out, and I love my partner/parent/child more than I would ever dare let on, even to myself. And on and on. Don't make your characters into victims or fools, but don't let them be dismissed—discover the nature of their substance and show your readers—people who read literary fiction want to become involved. Let them do it.

Are there evocative images? What would you suggest an illustrator represent for this story?

Reading a story aloud will tell you if the story has a flow, a rhythm. Poets often make magnificent story writers. When you hear the words, you'll feel if there's a flow, a rhythm. There should be.

Although plot is lower on the literary totem pole than in, say, a mystery, what goes on in a story must follow some logic. A reader can get hung up on contradictions or serious inconsistencies. We recently accepted a story—a very fine story, in the end—which had some strong, ominous language scattered throughout that was never backed up by the story or even explained by the story: “they *made* him”, “he was not *allowed*”, a fearful sounding, “are you leaving me here?” all things that suggested the person was—literally—a hostage. In the end, what we discovered was that the person was held hostage by his own fears, but the language distracted from that important truth.

Does something important change in the story? This is literary fiction's version of plot. It can be subtle, but it must be felt by the characters and by the reader. (Navel gazing was an interesting idea for about 8 weeks in 1971.)

If this story caused me to dream about it, would there be something to try to remember to tell someone?

Is the story meaningful? Antonya Nelson said this: “[Literary] fiction ought to have the potential to change your life. It ought to make you a better human in the world. It ought to help you understand other people.” Not that you and I will come to the same conclusions, necessarily, because we each bring our own lives to the story.

When I look at a story we're considering for publication, I go through it and circle excerpts that grab me either because they are beautifully worded or because they capture something I think I've always known, but never thought, or expresses something new in a way that highlights a larger meaning, or touches on a personal experience of my own. Excerpting a story tells me, often, if a story will stick with me, if it matters to me.

Something else we do when considering a story is to jot down the story line. I'll do it myself and ask Susan for her version of the story line. We'll tell each other what we notice about the story. (If you do this in ten words or less, there's no pressure, but plenty to discover. I might write, for instance, Heavy drinker sees Virgin Mary on roof, crazy scary guy breaks in, drinker comes unhinged.) If you do this with a friend or two, you'll determine whether your readers are getting clear ideas from the story or if perhaps it's not tight enough. You'll also determine if the story is only single-layered. If every reader gets the exact same thing, there may not be enough depth or complexity and they may not be getting the opportunity to find their own value in the story. In the case above, for instance, another reader might say this: Man devastated by death of big brother tries to make contact with lonely anxious neighbor. An overly simple story wouldn't allow more than one understanding of it.

It is my belief that people who have the capacity to write good fiction are those to whom life is a big deal:

It's complicated, often moving, occasionally unnerving.

It's stuffed with contradiction, fear, love, challenge, possibility, pain, and grace.

Great fiction writers want to look straight at life and they want to write down what they see. They want to write it down so precisely that you can see it, too, from inside your own skin.

If that's you, please keep at it! You have no shortage of original material and your writing is important.

Here are some great books:

Charles Baxter's essays on writing: *Burning Down the House*  
John Gardner's *On Becoming a Novelist*  
Keith Johnstone's *Impro*  
Clark and McGaw's *Acting is Believing*

Fiction, like sculpture or painting, begins with a rough sketch. One gets down the characters and their behavior any way one can, knowing the sentences will have to be revised, knowing the characters' actions may change. It makes no difference how clumsy the sketch is—sketches are not supposed to be polished and elegant. All that matters is that, going over and over the sketch as if one had all eternity for finishing one's story, one improves now this sentence, now that, noticing what changes the new sentences urge, and in the process one gets the characters and their behavior clearer in one's head, gradually discovering deeper and deeper implications of the characters' problems and hopes. Fiction does not spring into the world full grown, like Athena. It is the process of writing and rewriting that makes a fiction original and profound.

—John Gardner, *On Becoming a Novelist*,  
(W. W. Norton & Company, 1983)

According to Merriam-Webster (underlining added for emphasis):

Main Entry: <sup>1</sup>cli·ché

Pronunciation: klē<sup>1</sup>shā, <sup>1</sup>ʃiʃ, kli<sup>1</sup>shā      Function: *noun*      Inflected Form(s): -s

Etymology: French, from past participle of *clicher* to stereotype, of imitative origin; from the noise of the die striking the metal

1 : a stereotype or electrotype; *especially* : a single stamp of which a number are joined to form a plate for printing a whole sheet of stamps at once

2 a : a trite or stereotyped phrase or expression; *also* : the idea expressed by it b : a hackneyed theme, plot, or situation in fiction or drama : an overworked idea or its expression in music or one of the other arts <such photographic *clichés* as indicating change of seasons by the transition from snow to fruit in the orchards -- John McCarten>

Main Entry: <sup>1</sup>stereo·type      Pronunciation: <sup>1</sup>sterē<sup>ə</sup>tīp, <sup>1</sup>stir-      Function: *noun*

Etymology: French *stéréotype*, from *stéré-* stere- + *type*

1 a *archaic* : STEREOTYPY b : a solid metal duplicate of a relief printing surface that is made by pressing a molding material (as wet paper pulp, plaster of paris, clay, or flong) against it to make a matrix and then pouring molten metal into the matrix to make a casting which is sometimes faced with a harder metal (as nickel) to increase durability -- compare ALUMINOTYPE, ELECTROTYPE

2 : something repeated or reproduced without variation : something conforming to a fixed or general pattern and lacking individual distinguishing marks or qualities; *especially* : a standardized mental picture held in common by members of a group and representing an oversimplified opinion, affective attitude, or uncritical judgment (as of a person, a race, an issue, or an event)

Main Entry: lit·er·a·ture

Pronunciation: <sup>1</sup>lɪd.əˈrɪtʃ(ə)r, <sup>1</sup>lɪtərə-, <sup>1</sup>li.trə-, <sup>1</sup>lɪd.ə(r)ɪtʃ-, -ɪtʃ(ə), -\_tʃə(r), -rə.ɪtʃ(ə)-, -rə.ɪtʃ(ə)-

Function: *noun* Inflected Form(s): -s Usage: *often attributive*

Etymology: Middle English *litterature*, from Latin *litteratura*, *litteratura* writing, grammar, learning, from *litteratus*, *litteratus* literate + *-ura* -ure

1 *archaic* : knowledge of books : literary culture <in many things he was grotesquely ignorant; he was a man of very small *literature* -- W.D.Howells>

2 : the production of literary work especially as an occupation

3 a : writings in prose or verse; *especially* : writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest <*literature* stands related to man as science stands to nature -- J.H.Newman

Main Entry: lit·er·ary

Pronunciation: <sup>1</sup>lɪd.əˈrɪrɪ, <sup>1</sup>lɪtəri-, -ri Function: *adjective*

Etymology: in sense 1, from Latin *littera*, *littera* letter + English *-ary*; in other senses, from French *littéraire*, from Latin *litterarius*, *litterarius* of writing, from *litterae*, *litterae* writing + *-arius* -ary -- more at LETTER

1 *archaic* : <sup>1</sup>LITERAL

2 a : of, relating to, or having the characteristics of humane learning <the educational system should provide a *literary* as well as a rational education -- G.K.Chalmers> <*literary* institution> b : of, relating to, or having the characteristics of literature <described his types in the grand *literary* manner, with great subtlety and penetration -- William Stephenson> <a *literary* magazine may deal with ... anything at all, so long as each article is a piece of literature -- R.G.Howarth> c : BOOKISH d : of or relating to books <*literary* agent> <*literary* manuscripts>  
3 a : having a firsthand knowledge of literature : WELL-READ <he is *literary*, given to quoting to himself rather long stretches of remembered lines -- F.J.Hoffman> b : of, relating to, or concerned with men of letters or with writing as a profession <a new star in the *literary* firmament -- *Yankee*> 4 *of a painting or sculpture* : characterized by a primary interest in depicting an event, story, or allegory : ANECDOTAL