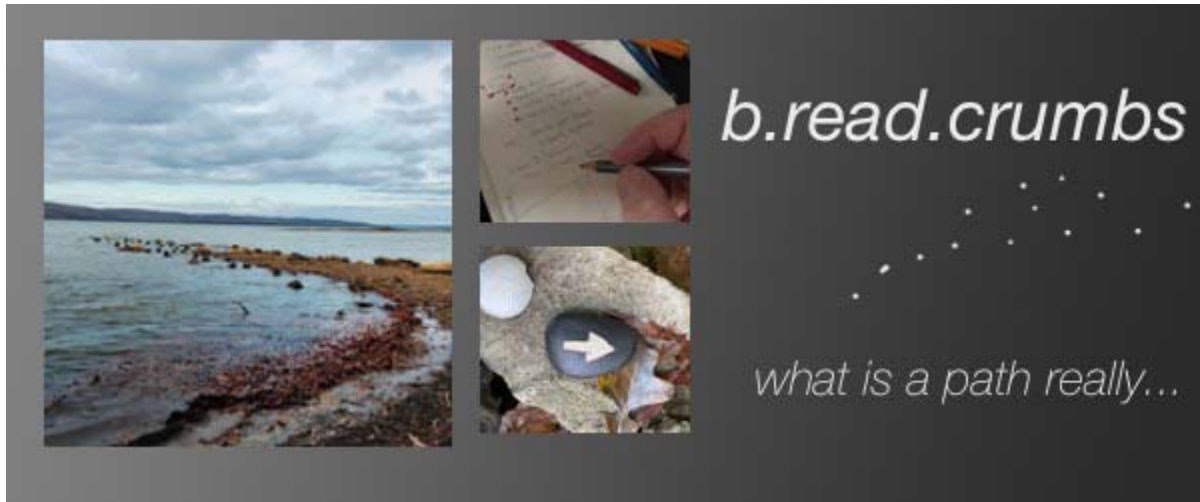


b.read.crumbs, the rejection issue



Here it is, folks--[b.read.crumbs: the rejection issue](#)! Julie, Deborah, and special guest Carmela McCain Simmons talk about how we keep going when we are stupid, ugly, and dumb, and nobody likes our writing

[Carmela](#) || [Deborah](#) || [Julie](#) || [Writers in Conversation](#)

Julie: My dear friend, Carmela McCain Simmons, has been a friend for a long time—we met so long ago, in fact, that our children re-enacted HATS FOR SALE in a Crepe Myrtle at the Houston Zoo when they were in preschool together. She impressed me then as someone thoughtful and funny—a killer combination in my book. On top of that she taught first grade in such a loving way that she was named favorite teacher by most all of the students whose paths she crossed. Now retired from teaching, she had the time to devote to a passion: writing advanced picture books that will help children love science and nature as much as she does. From tougue-twisters to lyrical language, Carmela didn't seem like an obvious choice for a rejection-based discussion—but! but!—she brings her special commonsensical logic to the fore on this topic as she does with all others. Read on to see why she turned out to be a great fit for this issue.

CARMELA McCAIN SIMMONS

The fear of rejection can be petrifying. I hate to admit it on paper, but querying reminds me of dating. I would dress up my writing in my finest prose, triple check to make sure my query is solid, professional, in the requested format, addressed properly, not too chummy, not too distant. Of course, I always run my writing by my wonderful critique partners for their opinions. (BTW- I can't thank you enough, Julie, your critiques are always thoughtful, encouraging, and deep.) After doing all that, I would stare at my screen, hover my mouse over SEND, but decide to wait until: re-rereading, dark chocolate, a nap, X,Y, or Z... After I sent my query, I would fret. Will they like my work? Will they like my voice? Will they like ME?

For years, while other writers were flirting with every agent around, sending out queries by the dozens, I timidly sent out just a few for my PB biography, sure I would be rejected. I also hung out in the Twitter-verse making friends with other writers, and reading what agents and editors tweeted. Twitter pitch contests felt safer than directly querying. I watched which agents liked which pitches, researched them, and occasionally queried one of them. I waited for weeks, wishing, "Pick me! Pick me!" There were quite a few form letter rejections and silences that lasted longer than the "if you have not heard back from me in ___ months, it's a no." (Ouch! Pass the dark chocolate! Pour me some red wine!)

I was thrilled when an agent liked my query. She requested more stories, which I triple-inspected and promptly emailed her. Months passed. Finally, I nudged, but no answer. She ghosted me! WHAT?!? After sobbing to my CPs, scarfing dark chocolate, and downing a few glasses of Apothic Red, the initial sting wore off, and I realized that she had done me a huge favor. I now knew that I did not want just any agent. I got "picky." I wanted the right agent, a hardworking dependable professional who communicated honestly, who rep'ped me because they believed in me and my writing, someone who would work for me, and with me, to get my writing into the hands of young readers. A rejection only meant that I had "dated" the wrong person. Like dating, no agent at all would be better than the wrong one. If I kept at it, I would find "The One."

Signing with my amazing agent, Ana Crespo of East West Literary, was a like a cautious courtship. We had several emails and two Zoom calls before signing. Ana was "being picky" too. She wanted to know if we would work well together. She requested two more stories, then sent me three thorough critiques. She told me to think about them and, if I was interested, to take my time with the R&Rs. She wanted to help me get my work as polished as possible before subbing. Rather than dating, she suggested that our relationship would be more "like raising the same child together." She wanted our work together to be a "joyous journey."

Ana and I are now on a quest for just the right editor and we are racking up rejections together, but we call them passes. (I remind myself I am in good company. All writers get rejected...quick mini dark chocolate... Move on... .) A recent "champagne rejection" from an editor came with an invitation to submit other stories. I confused my husband when I celebrated that email by popping a bottle of bubbly and baking him a batch of Cowboy Cookies, but why not celebrate the small steps along the way? We are all on this joyous journey together.



THINGS I LOVE

Here is a link to [Laura Bush's Cowboy Cookies Recipe](#). (I like to use dark chocolate chips and I only use 1 cup of unsweetened shredded coconut.)

Carmela McCain Simmons is a Peruvian-American who writes to inspire young readers to explore and take care of the natural world. As a child in Florida, she swam with dolphins, trekked through mangroves, rescued lost baby sea turtles, and read constantly. Carmela fell in love with traveling when her family moved to Peru. She hiked up Machu Picchu, rode a donkey

across the desert, and flew over the Andes to the Amazon jungle seated on a giant pumpkin in the hold of a cargo plane. Carmela lives in Texas and still travels whenever she can, just not seated on pumpkins or donkeys anymore.

DEBORAH-ZENHA ADAMS

I started out a poet, then turned my hand to mystery novels, and now I'm dipping into every genre on the writers' buffet. But here's the thing: for ten years, I was executive editor at a small press, and that's where I learned the single most important thing a writer needs to know.

Rejection doesn't mean the submitted work is lacking. I know this is true; I had to pass on a lot of books that were intriguing, well-written, and that we would have published if only we'd had the budget and space to do it.

Knowing this doesn't keep me from curling myself into fetal position and whinging when my own work gets turned down. The day I received three (three!) rejections boom-boom-boom was also the day that I developed a system for dealing with "not a good fit" letters like the grown-up that I pretend to be.

I call it Rewards for Rejections. Simply put, after every 35th rejection, I get a reward. It can be anything from a(nother) pair of nature-themed earrings to a(nother) package of mechanical pencils or even something a little pricier (hello, percale sheets!). Whatever I want.

And yes, I could just buy those things anyway, but I've found that looking forward to the reward—shopping for it, choosing colors or styles or options—is a great way to stay motivated. Cue Tim Curry's Dr. Frank-N-Furter—"Anticip....."

Here's the thing, though: In order to get the rejections, I have to keep submitting, which means I have to get things written, which means I have to take the writing seriously. Plus it has actually caused me to feel disappointment and swear mildly when I'm only two rejections shy of a reward and some journal accepts my work. (True story.)

While we are passing on your submission this time around we have read your submission, and unfortunately we are not able to use it Although we are passing on your submission, we wish you the best of luck placing your work elsewhere. Unfortunately, the piece is not right for us at this time. Although we must decline your submission this time, we appreciate

I invite you to give this system a try. Set your own rules—maybe you'll reward yourself after 20 rejections or 50 rejections, maybe you'll set a maximum dollar amount for the rewards—but you MUST abide by the rules you choose.

Let me know, will you? Because just as I still (sadly) need publishers to validate the quality of my writing, I need you to validate the worth of Rewards for Rejection.

THINGS I LOVE

- Erica Verrillo's [helpful website](#) (and her newsletter!), especially [this piece on rejection](#).
- The websites of [Fairtrade America](#) and [Good On You](#). Both of these help me make sure my shopping dollars are supporting sustainable and ethical companies.
- *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott. These essays get to the heart of what it means to be a writer, show just how painful and rewarding it can be to write, and remind us that we are the most ridiculous and majestic beings in the universe.

Deborah-Zenha Adams is often lost in the woods without a paddle. She is an award-winning author of novels, short fiction, CNF, and poetry; she is also a certified naturalist and a yoga educator, a vegetarian, and a Prius owner. Yes, she's the living stereotype of a liberal tree-hugger. You're invited to visit her website to learn more about her work.

<http://www.deborah-adams.com>

JULIE WRAY HERMAN

After my dad died, I found one of the stories I wrote in second grade in his keepsake box. I poured everything into that story. I was excited to share it with my parents. Mom took her time with it. She hugged me tight after she read it. It felt good. Dad barely glanced at the page I shoved under his nose. (That he was a very quick adult reader, reading full adult novels in an hour, did not occur to my seven-year-old self.) That quick glance, the advice he tossed over his shoulder as he walked away, "Check your spelling," crushed me. I remember telling my teacher I couldn't write, as though my fingers themselves had broken.

It felt like he'd rejected my story. And with true writerly ego, it felt like Dad had rejected me. My story-telling-self needed acceptance. That is still true of me, witness the fact that I cried buckets when I found it in his keepsake box, all these years later, despite the spelling challenges, despite his ability to scan the entire story in one glance. That discovery was a gift—an acceptance that I didn't even know I had gotten. We so rarely get what we class as acceptance to our submissions: Cash money. Publication. Bragging rights. What could we writers accomplish if we created for ourselves a different metric of acceptance?

No answer from a query is a tough sell as an acceptance. For that, the sticker chart of rejection and resultant prizes works. We “earn” something by trying. The phrase Collect Proof of Effort comes to mind there. (No Gain Without Pain is another, harsher way to say the same thing. I don’t particularly like pain myself, so I’ll go with Proof of Effort.) But what is acceptable acceptance? What metric could we use to fill up our acceptance chart with stars?

What if you craft a scene, and your critique group experiences the emotion you intended them to feel, you counted that as an acceptance? What if a personal response came back, be it yay or nay, to a query, and you counted that as acceptance? When a reader contacts you about work that touches them, you collected another gold star of acceptance? When you feel satisfied with a scene you’ve written, that too could be counted an acceptance. Everything short of “we’ll pay you” is not necessarily a rejection. Rejection hurts. Don’t borrow that pain. I carried the pain of what wasn’t actually rejection for my little story around for so many years. Dad kept that story. He kept it not because it was perfect, but because he knew how much effort I put into it.

Collect Proof of Effort. It’s a real thing, ya’ll. Now go do that thing.

THINGS I LOVE

- Two of my writing friends are writing letters to each other and they are magical: Jamie Wood and Erin Baldwin: <https://fromyoutome.substack.com> Go listen in on their conversation.
- I have never gone to law school, nor is that something I would ever consider wanting to do, but this podcast is an interesting take by podcast host Roman Mars on the intersection of history and politics and constitutional law: <https://learnconlaw.com>
- [Medical Bridges](#) is a non-profit in Houston gathering and shipping medical supplies to Ukraine. The majority of their supplies are donated by hospitals and other medical organizations: equipment that is old here is new to other parts of the world. (They serve a lot of regions.) Our friends were part of the group that started it, and I am so impressed with the work they do.
- Reading right now: CRAFT IN THE REAL WORLD by Matthew Salesses. What if the workshop model we’ve all been using is wrong? This book brings forth an argument for something better.

Julie is a perpetual student of writing and life. She is currently getting perilously close to graduating from the MFA program at Vermont College of Fine Arts in Writing for Children and Young Adults. She is a lapsed Master Gardener and a retired Horse Management judge. She is discovering, now that she has decided that growing up is not a dirty word, that making space for what you love it a good thing. She can be reached through her website at <https://juliewherman.com>

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

Deb: I've had a thought (the words nobody wants to hear from me, right?) I have no memory of my first rejection. No idea at all where or when or who. Is it just me? What do you remember about the first time something you wrote was rejected?

Julie: My first professional writing rejection came from a professional writing organization that told me to reapply for membership after I had demonstrated my professionalism...I thought writing a complete draft of a mystery novel and applying for membership in the organization was professional behavior. I had hoped of course, that it would also lead to making connections with fellow writers so I could learn more. Fortunately, I take "no" as a challenge to do better. I am now a member of that organization, and proud to be there. If you're looking, you can almost always find a kernel of helpfulness in a rejection that isn't just a rote, "Nope."

Carmela: Wow, Julie! How tough that must have been because we write to make connections with others. Sometimes parents, and teachers, edit the writer out of the child. I am so glad you kept at it! I sent several stories out to agents and publishing houses that got no responses at all. NADA. Silence... It was a very lonely feeling, an emptiness. It would have helped me to know then what I know now, that many agents and editors are so swamped by submissions that they only respond if they like something. I would have welcomed even a form letter rejection.

Deb: Okay, what about the first time something you wrote was accepted? For me it was in sixth grade. We'd had some free time, I think, and it was early December, so I wrote a poem. My teacher showed it to the principal, who was also the editor of the local newspaper, and he printed it in the paper! I knew nothing about this until he came into our classroom and showed me the published poem. I cried. While I'd written a couple of

“books” before that, it never occurred to me that a regular person could have her writing published. I thought that was only for famous people who lived in big cities.

Julie: Is it bad that I don't remember my reaction to my first accepted piece? I imagine I jumped up and down and then sat down with my head between my legs because I felt faint. I do remember when the news was given to me that I had made the lineup for the then-new mystery line from the Overmountain Press and that my book would come out in April. It was only a few short months away and I had not yet finished the book... That reaction was sheer and utter panic. If I finished the book and they printed it, then everyone would know I couldn't write to save my life. (Which was probably not really true as I had a book offer literally on the table.) I had to excuse myself to go sit behind a closed door in the ladies room to see if I could stop hyperventilating long enough to say, “Thank you.”

Carmela: My first acceptance was a nasty unwelcome surprise. I was angry! My fifth grade teacher had shepherded us through the whole writing process. For weeks we outlined, then drafted, wrote, revised, revised, revised and edited, and even dummied out a picture book. It was a tedious process and after my father typed up the final version, mistakes and all, I, who struggled with drawing, illustrated each page. So much work for a preteen! Imagine my surprise when all the fifth graders were called to the library for an assembly and the librarian called out my name. My teacher was beaming. The librarian announced that she had chosen my story and given it a "real" yellow satin cover with a giant E and my initials on the spine, and then covered it in a plastic library binding. My book was to be kept in the library's permanent collection for checkout by anyone in the school! Much to my proud teacher's dismay, I loudly demanded my book back! No one had told us that there was a contest and that the winner's book would be taken away. My father was called and he agreed that the book was mine and I should have been asked first if I wanted to donate it to the library. I had been published without my permission. So my first publication was a flop. I still have the book, tacky yellow cover and all.

Deb: Carmela, you were absolutely right to hang onto your book! Good for you for being so wise at that tender age.

Julie: It's interesting isn't it that in a newsletter with the theme of rejection, we all three went back to our childhood stories. The need for acceptance shows up early—it's inborn,

isn't it?

Which brings us to you, dear reader. Tell us your stories of acceptance and rejection, how you handle it, your advice to the rest of us based on your experiences of acceptance and rejection. We really want to hear from you. breadcrumbsnewsletter@gmail.com