

## P u b l i c a t i o n

All right, let's talk about publication. Let's talk about the myth of publication.

Say you've finished your book, or a draft of the book, or a whole lot of stories, and you send them off to your agent, if you have one, or to a friend's agent, or to an agent you've found listed in the Yellow Pages or in the *Literary Market Place*. Say you actually already *have* an editor somewhere, or an editor who once wrote you an admiring rejection letter, so you send your book or stories to him or her and to a couple of friends. As I've mentioned, I'm one of those people who feels beside herself the day after I've stuck the manuscript in the mail. It can't have even arrived and already I'm feeling bitter and resentful about what cold, lazy, sadistic slime I'm surrounded by. There are other writers, and you may be one of them, who just push back their sleeves and get to work on the next

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piece. I could never be close to a person like this, but I know they exist. Anyway, if you are like me, you wait and wait and check your mail ten times each day, and feel devastated and rejected every hour that there is no response. Finally, if you are lucky, a week later you get a note from your agent's assistant that the manuscript has in fact arrived, and maybe one of the friends has called to say that he or she has read part of it, and that it is just terrific and not to worry, but you go ahead and have a small breakdown anyhow, waiting for your agent and editor to call and tell you that it's brilliant. Every time the phone rings, you sing, "Let it please be him, oh, dear God, it *must* be him." But it's not him, and then you die and go on a massive eating binge and think about what phonies most of your friends are. And then you calm down. You go for a walk. You're a little better. Then you try to read something, but you end up reading your own manuscript and reeling with shame at how bad it is. But just when you start to go into actual spasm, your friend calls back and says he's just read another chapter and really, on the souls of his grandchildren, he swears it's the best thing you've ever written; he loves it and he loves you.

So you are Okay again, for a good ten minutes or so.

After another week, you call your agent because you can't stand pretending to be cool anymore, but your agent hasn't read your manuscript yet because he is swamped with infinitely more important matters. He tells you with the faintest hint of irritation that the very second he finishes it or hears from

production and postage costs that they will have to go ahead and actually publish the damn thing.

The first time you read through your galley is heaven. The second time through, all you see are the typos no one caught. It looks like the typesetter typed it with frostbitten feet, drunk. And the typos are important ones. They make you look ignorant; they make you look like an ignorant racist. By the third or fourth time through, you can see that there is not one fresh or insightful or even salvageable line in the whole thing. By the fifth reading, you are no longer sure that publishing this would be in your best interests.

Not long after, you get your early reviews, in *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*, and sometimes they sound like your mother wrote them. Other times they suggest that you are a show-offy vacuous loser, and they hope you die so that they won't have to read your work anymore. I have gotten prepub reviews that said I was a treadmill on the underpants of life. Perhaps this is not exactly what they said, but by reading between the lines, I could see that this is what they were implying. You survive that. Possibly you're still drinking, so you have a pitcher of martinis just to take the edge off, or you've quit drinking, so you eat your body weight in pastries and Mexican food. Somehow you get the time to pass, and then your pub date arrives.

There is something mythic about the date of publication, and you actually come to believe that on this one particular morning you will wake up to a phone ringing off the hook and your publisher will be so excited that they will have hired

the Blue Angels precision flying team to buzz your squalid little hovel, which you will be moving out of as soon as sales of the book really take off. Or at least they will remember to send flowers.

I remember one year my friend Carpenter and I had books out on the same day. We talked about it all summer. We each pretended to have modest expectations. I had modest expectations for his book; he had modest expectations for mine. The week before, we talked almost every morning about how excited we were and what a long time we had waited, and how it was just like being a little kid waiting for Christmas Eve. Finally the big day arrived and I woke up happy, embarrassed in advance by all the praise and attention that would be forthcoming. I made coffee and practiced digging my toe in the dirt, and called Pammy and a few friends to let them congratulate me. Then I waited for the phone to ring. The phone did not know its part. It sat there silent as death with a head cold. By noon the noise of it not ringing began to wear badly on my nerves. Luckily, though, by noon it was time for the first beer of the day. I sat by the phone like a loyal dog, waiting for it to ring. Finally, finally it rang at four. I picked up the phone and heard Carpenter laughing hysterically, like some serial killer, and then I became hysterical, and eventually we both had to be sedated.

He sent me flowers, and before I knew he had done so, I sent him flowers, too. The ones he sent me were so beautiful, roses and irises mostly.

That is often pretty much what it is like, except for the

part about the roses and irises. I tell you, if what you have in mind is fame and fortune, publication is going to drive you crazy. If you are lucky, you will get a few reviews, some good, some bad, some indifferent. Don't even get me started on the places where one is neglected. There will be a few book-signing parties and maybe some readings, at one of which your publisher will spring for a twenty-pound wheel of runny Brie, and the only person who will show has lived on the street since he was twelve and even he will leave, because he hates Brie. You and the people who work at the bookstore will make lots of hilarious jokes about this. You will read to the five of them, and they will respond with great enthusiasm. Maybe there will be a couple of interviews and then probably somewhere along the line, just when you thought things were settling down, your first really devastating review, the review that says your book is dog doo. It is especially festive when this review is in the local press so that all your relatives can read it, too. You can just picture several hundred thousand people perusing the review over their morning coffee, reading it out loud to one another and chucking about how clever the reviewer is. So you rant and you cry, and then your writer friends call and commiserate. And they really do feel sick for you, and angry, and they know you feel like a wounded animal, a raging bull, and they say the right things, that they love you and they love your book, and that it has happened to them, a year ago or whenever. Because if you are a writer, it is going to happen to you. This is the truth. It has happened to me,

and if you get published, it is almost certainly going to happen to you.

But the fact of publication is the acknowledgment from the community that you did your writing right. You acquire a rank that you never lose. Now you're a published writer, and you are in that rare position of getting to make a living, such as it is, doing what you love best. That knowledge does bring you a quiet joy.

But eventually you have to sit down like every other writer and face the blank page.

The beginnings of a second or third book are full of spirit and confidence because you have been published, and false starts and terror because now you have to prove yourself again. People may find out that you were a flash in the pan, that it was all beginner's luck. What I know now is that you have to wear out all that dread by writing long and hard and not stopping too often to admire yourself and your publishedness in the mirror. Sometime later you'll find yourself at work on, maybe really into, another book, and once again you figure out that the real payoff is the writing itself, that a day when you have gotten your work done is a good day, that total dedication is the point.

"When is she going to talk about *joy*?" the people in the back row whine. Haven't I? I certainly meant to mention that good hours at the desk are as wonderful as any I can imagine. But joy for me is Sam and my church and my buddies and family, and more often it is felt outdoors than at my desk.

There is a part of me that resists saying that I love being a published writer, that it has been a dream come true, first of all because it is so much more complicated than that. And second, I don't want unpublished writers to throw up their hands and say, "See? Okay? I rest my case: publishing is the great reward."

But the truth is that there can be a great deal of satisfaction in being a writer, in being a person who gets some work done most days, and who has been published and acknowledged. I carry this around in my pocket, touch it a number of times a day to make sure it is still there. Even though so much of my writing time is stressful and disheartening, I carry a secret sense of accomplishment around with me, like a radium pack implanted near my heart that now leaches a quiet sense of relief through my system. But you pay through the nose for this.

No one has expressed it better than a great novelist I heard once on a talk show who said something like "You want to know the price I pay for being a writer? Okay, I'll tell you. I travel by plane a great deal. And I'm usually seated next to some huge businessman who works on files or his laptop computer for a while, and then notices me and asks me what I do. And I say I'm a writer. Then there's always a terrible silence. Then he says eagerly, 'Have you written anything I might have heard of?'"

"And *that's* the price I pay for being a writer."

My own version of this is that the other day, Sam and I were at the mall. I had a big event coming up onstage at the

Herbst Theater, because I had just had a book published that was getting a lot of attention. I had decided to buy a new dress for the evening. So the two of us were just innocently walking around the store when the owner came up to me. She said, "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

I said, "Well, I have a special occasion coming up, and I need a new dress."

She said, "Is it for a dinner party?"

I said, "No, actually, I'm doing something onstage."

She said, "Are you a singer?" and I felt the jungle drums start to beat, warning me to keep my mouth shut, warning me to send my ego to its room. But I had gotten used to the attention. I cleared my throat and toed the carpet and said, "No, I'm a writer."

She said, "Oh, wow! I read absolutely *everything*. Tell me your name."

I knew I was in trouble. I knew I was going to get nailed, but my ego had become Nelson Rockefeller, and it felt like mingling. My wiser self knew I was already too far in to stop now. I said, "No, no, you won't have heard of me, and it'll make me feel terrible."

She stood firm. "Honest," she said, "I read *everything*." Part of me believed I had become so famous that when I told her my name, she'd react as if Paul McCartney had just dropped into her store. The wiser part of me knew I was a goner for sure. I started to pray at that point, only I was praying to her: please, please don't make me tell you my name. I smiled demurely, like we'd had our fun and I'd better go get Sam,

who was hiding under a rack of dresses making rude noises.

"Beth, Beth," the shop owner called out suddenly. "Come here!" A young woman stepped out from the back room with an expectant look on her face. "Beth," the owner said, "don't I read everything? Tell her!" Beth said yes, yes, this is true, she reads *everything*. Then the owner looked at me kindly, and said, "Now come on, what's your name?"

I sighed, smiled, and finally said, "Anne Lamott." She stared at me with great concern. The room was very quiet, except for Sam under the dress rack. Then she pursed her lips and slowly shook her head. "No," she said. "I guess not."

It took me about a week and a great deal of cheap chocolate to get over that. But then I remembered that whenever the world throws rose petals at you, which thrill and seduce the ego, beware. The cosmic banana peel is suddenly going to appear underfoot to make sure you don't take it all too seriously, that you don't fill up on junk food.

All that I know about the relationship between publication and mental health was summed up in one line of the movie *Cool Runnings*, which is about the first Jamaican bobsled team. The coach is a four-hundred-pound man who had won a gold in Olympic bobsledding twenty years before but has been a complete loser ever since. The men on his team are desperate to win an Olympic medal, just as half the people in my classes are desperate to get published. But the coach says, "If you're not enough before the gold medal, you won't be enough with it." You may want to tape this to the wall near your desk.

The banana peel has appeared almost every time I've scored

a triumph, or what the world would regard as a triumph. It's God as coyote prankster. Just last week, for instance, I was participating in this illustrious literary event in San Francisco for a national charity. I had waited for years to be included in this event, each year watching six other writers be selected. I had tried to be a good sport about it, God knows I had. I understood that the organizers needed to invite big-time, nationally known writers so as to draw the biggest possible crowd; this made perfect sense. But year after year I felt dejected each time I was not included. Finally this year I was asked, and my joy was boundless. Now, I'm not stupid: I knew it was a nice big plate of cocaine for my ego. I knew it was another golden calf. But still my baby heart soared like an eagle.

However. There was this one tiny little problem. I was the last author to be asked and to commit, so I wasn't on the initial press release that went out three months ago. The publicity chairwoman sent out a second release after I came on board. But when the first big prominent mention was made in the paper a few weeks ago, my name wasn't included. I was miffed, since it was the most important column in the paper, but I am old and tough and can handle this sort of disappointment. Next there was a paragraph about the event in the book section, and once again I was not included. This time the publicity chairwoman called, upset and so full of apologies that she managed to mollify me. Then there was a big mention in the society pages, and guess what? It felt like seventh grade all over again. The publicity chairwoman called

again and was so upset that I thought she might actually drink a big glass of Drano right there on the phone. I felt suddenly so teary and premenstrual and left out that I couldn't even talk about it. Hours later, I remembered that if I wasn't enough before being asked to participate in this prestigious event, then participating wasn't going to make me enough. Being enough was going to have to be an inside job.

Also, about an hour after I had slogged through to this conclusion, my mouth dropped open. I had somehow forgotten that it was a charity event! I had come to see it as a sort of showcase. For me.

Funny how that happens. I finally smiled, remembering something I heard Ram Dass say on the radio once, about somebodyism—how most of us are raised to be somebodies and what a no-win game that is to buy into, because while you may turn out to be much more somebody than somebody else, a lot of other people are going to be a lot more somebody than you. And you are going to drive yourself crazy.

One more thing about publication: when this book of mine came out, the one that did pretty well, the one that necessitated the buying of a new dress, I found myself stoned on all the attention, and then lost and derailed, needing a new fix every couple of days and otherwise going into withdrawal. My insides became completely uninhabitable, as if I'd wandered into a penny arcade with lots of bells ringing and lights flashing and lots of junk food, and I'd been there too long. I wanted peace, peace and quiet, but at the same time I didn't want to leave.

I was like one of the bad boys in "Pinocchio" who flock to the island of pleasure and grow donkey ears. I knew my soul was sick and that I needed spiritual advice, and I knew also that this advice shouldn't be terribly sophisticated. So I went to see the pastor of my son's preschool.

The pastor is about fifteen. We talked for a while. It turns out he just looks young. I said that I was all over the place, up and down, scattered, high, withdrawing, lost, and in the midst of it all trying to find some elusive sense of serenity. "The world can't give that serenity," he said. "The world can't give us peace. We can only find it in our hearts."

"I hate that," I said.

"I know. But the good news is that by the same token, the world can't take it away."