

## How to Increase your Chances of Getting Published

by James Weseen

On March 19, 2009 close to 50 writers and aspiring writers attended a panel discussion on this topic at Saskatoon's Frances Morrison Library.

The event was organized and MC'd by John Barton, Saskatoon Public Library's 2008-2009 Writer in Residence. In addition to Barton, an award-winning poet who also serves as editor of the Victoria, BC literary magazine *The Malahat Review*, the panel included *Grain* magazine editor and Griffin Prize-winning poet Sylvia Legris, and Coteau Books co-founder and board member Geoffrey Ursell, also an award-winning writer of drama, poetry, and fiction.

Needless to say, in addition to their current roles as arbiters of which works will make it into print in their respective literary fiefdoms, all three panellists have as writers experienced both the disappointment of rejection and the satisfaction of acceptance of their own works for publication. This was clear to the audience, who listened carefully to the presentations and asked many questions afterward.

Each of the three panellists summarized the mission and mandate of their respective publications or presses, which can be found in varying detail at the following Web locations:

Coteau Books: <http://www.coteaubooks.com/infopages/aboutcoteau.html>

*Grain*: <http://www.grainmagazine.ca/about.htm>

*The Malahat Review*: <http://www.malahatreview.ca/history.html>

All three share a willingness to consider all submissions they receive, provided the submission guidelines are followed, as outlined on the following Web pages:

Coteau Books: <http://www.coteaubooks.com/infopages/mssubmission.html>

*Grain*: <http://www.grainmagazine.ca/submissions.htm>

*The Malahat Review*: [http://www.malahatreview.ca/submission\\_guidelines.html](http://www.malahatreview.ca/submission_guidelines.html)

The downside is, each receives far more submissions, many of excellent quality, than they can possibly publish. Coteau, for example, does editorial reports on about 10% of the approximately 2,000 queries and sample chapters (nonfiction) and manuscripts (fiction, poetry) it receives each year in all genres, and publishes about 10% of those – 15 to 18 titles per year. *Grain* receives approximately 2,000 submissions each year, mostly short fiction and poetry, and accepts about 5% for publication. *The Malahat Review* receives about 3,200 submissions annually, approximately two-thirds fiction and one-third poetry, and publishes about 3.5% of these – about 100 authors per year.

While both *Grain* and *Malahat* are mandated by their granting agencies to publish 80% Canadian content, neither adopts a particular regional focus, neither considers an author's

previous publishing history (but see their comments below about the cover letter), and neither favours a particular genre. In fact, as well as fiction and poetry, both magazines will publish creative non-fiction, though they currently receive very few such submissions, and both will also consider other special forms such as book reviews (*Malahat*) and interviews (*Grain*).

A major limitation for the two magazines is length. “Pages are real estate,” says Barton. “We have to really love something to give it a lot of pages.” A short story in *Malahat* would normally be between 2,400 and 8,000 words, but the journal has published occasional novellas (normally found through their biennial contest) of up to 20,000 words.

“The longer a piece is, the better it has to be,” Legris agrees. *Grain* has a limit of 5,000 words per submission.

Because Coteau publishes books, length restrictions are not so rigorous. Nevertheless, there are other limitations. For example, Ursell notes that just any collection of poems or short fiction, even if already individually published elsewhere, will not necessarily come together to make a book— at the very least, selection and revision with an editor’s assistance will be needed. A poetry manuscript should contain from 80 to 120 pages, or more.

What do editors look for in a submission? In addition to the basics such as no typos or spelling errors, each has some personal preferences.

“I want to be surprised,” says Legris. “There’s lots of competently written work, but it doesn’t distinguish itself. We want something that seems like it couldn’t have been written by anyone else.”

Barton agrees. “I look for surprise, for work that convinces, work that engages. Work that communicates a sensibility that captures a reader’s attention.” Barton admits there is a significant subjective element: “We spend a lot of time putting these journals together, so we want to publish work we really love.”

Ursell adds a further criterion as a book publisher, where there’s a longer timeline for bringing a work into print. “We get far more publishable manuscripts than can fit,” he says. “Sometimes it comes down to, what’s the best fit for *this year*?”

Such comments would seem to imply a fair element of chance at work. Despite this, there are ways for any writer to increase the likelihood of being published. One, of course, is by submitting to more publishers or publications. But do your research first. Some small presses cater more to new writers. For example, Ursell notes that Saskatoon’s Thistledown Press has a specific series, *New Leaf*, for first books.

In any case, he says, “If you get turned down by one, try another.”

For shorter works, literary magazines are a good place to start. “Literary magazines open the door for beginning writers,” says Legris. “The audience may be small, and mostly other writers, but we’re very approachable. Ask, stop in, phone....”

Both Legris and Barton cautioned against submitting to any publisher who charges a “reading fee”. They were quick, however, to distinguish between this practice and literary competitions (which both *Malahat* and *Grain* sponsor annually), where all entrants receive at least a subscription for their entry fee.

All had suggestions for finding potential Canadian literary publishers, in addition to surveying the shelves of libraries and bookstores. Some sources are:

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Magazines Canada: <http://magazinescanada.ca/consumer/>

NewPages.com: <http://www.newpages.com/>

Literary Press Group of Canada: <http://www.lpg.ca/>

The Writers’ Union of Canada: [http://www.writersunion.ca/gp\\_findapublisher.asp](http://www.writersunion.ca/gp_findapublisher.asp)

Nevertheless, all three panellists discouraged writers from submitting the same work to more than one publisher or journal the same time.

“We can’t control you,” says Barton, “but I’d discourage it. If you do, tell us in the cover letter.” In any case, he adds, since editors spend a lot of time evaluating submissions it’s only fair that you let them know immediately if your work has been accepted for publication elsewhere.

Ursell was firmer: “Coteau does not want to see simultaneous submissions.”

When submitting a work, writers should take particular care with their cover letter. All three panellists agree the cover letter should be a single page, and contain all your essential contact information including email address, plus the title and the type of work you are submitting. Your biographic details should be brief, and focus on your publication experience and awards if any. If you have not been published, mention where and with whom you have studied, or equivalent writing-related activity. Do *not* include testimonials, reviews, or a CV.

Two panellists were a bit equivocal, however, when questioned as to why previous writing experience should be included in a cover letter if, as they had said earlier, it made no difference to the likelihood of acceptance.

Only Ursell did not qualify his opinion, saying a cover letter is “...just a way of saying hello.”

Barton was noncommittal, saying, “The cover letter gives us a heads-up as to a writer’s commitment to his or her craft.”

Legris faced the contradiction head on. “We might tend to look at it differently,” she admitted. “We base our response to some extent on the writer’s experience.”

The hard part after any submission is the waiting. How long should you wait before asking for a progress report? Before giving up? Legris and Barton agree that at least three months should elapse before even a brief query, and you should take into account any scheduled “down times” in the publication’s yearly calendar. If you haven’t heard after nine months to a year, it’s probably safe to assume your work has not been accepted—but it’s better to query just the same.

Ursell suggests waiting a minimum of 4 to 6 months before an initial query—but, he says, “The longer we keep it, the more likely it is that we’re seriously considering publishing it.”

What happens if your submission is good, but not quite ready for publication?

“We’ve worked with writers to develop their manuscripts,” says Ursell, “not accepting them at first, but giving advice about how to improve them. And then published those writers.”

“Poetry has to be pretty much ready to go,” says Legris, “but fiction can get some editorial interaction once a work has been accepted.”

Barton goes further, suggesting even a second try may be possible. “I’ve been editing literary magazines for twenty years,” he says. “As a rule I never make comments on a submission I’m returning if I don’t want to see it again.” Barton notes that any comments he makes will be concrete, not vaguely judgemental.

In any case, given the odds of rejection as compared to acceptance, Legris counsels writers not to expend too much emotion on a rejected submission. “Don’t take it personally,” she says. “Treat it as a business. There are lots of reasons for rejection.”

Barton agrees, saying of his own rejections as a writer, “You discover so much has to do with taste.”

And to end where we began, having honed your craft to its finest edge and revised your piece until you’re sick of the sight of it, how do you know your work is ready for submission?

“Just think of it as a test,” says Barton, suggesting the worst that can happen is that you’ll get it back.

Legris is more philosophical. She says, “When you can let go of it.”