

INTRODUCTION #4: REJECTION, RESOLVE, & RESPECT

by

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The following story includes a satanic cult, illicit use of a baseball chalker, king-sized bat creatures, several topical references which have dated badly, and a couple of small-town heroes who are just this side of clueless. If you were reading small press magazines in the late eighties and early nineties, you probably encountered more than a few tales like this—goofy adventure yarns with fantastic sensibilities that could only see print in publications designed on a home computer.

Call 'em dot-matrix pulp. Done right they were just this side of a guilty pleasure, and I admit that I loved 'em. Like the best of the old-time pulp stories, dot-matrix pulp tales cranked hard, got where they were going, and didn't apologize for being purely entertaining.

Joe Lansdale wrote more than a few. I'm thinking of stories like "The Junkyard" and "The Valley of the Swastika." Fact is, I can almost see Joe cringing at the mention of the latter. Doesn't matter. Let him cringe all he wants. "Valley" is by far the best "lost Nazis in the Appalachians" story I have ever read. I love the damn thing—inbred cavemen, clay-and-straw airplane, and all.

When I sat down to write "Black Leather Kites," I tried to put myself in a Lansdale frame of mind. After all, Joe was one of my favorite writers back then (still is), and sooner or later I was bound to try a little imitation. You'd have to look pretty hard to find a beginner who hasn't done that, intentionally or unintentionally. But it's tough to pull off, kind of like trying to wear another guy's clothes when you're not even close to the same size. Hell, those clothes might

look great on him. But on you....

Well, you'll see what I mean when you read this one. If you're in the right mood, you just might get a kick out of it. Anyway, go ahead and give "Black Leather Kites" a test drive, then come back and check in with me when you're done. I've got another story to tell you that'll keep until then.

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All right. Time for "Black Leather Kites," Part Two, with a little writerly advice about rejection, resolve, and respect.

So I'm finishing up my tale of runaway lawnmowers and werebats and wondering where I should submit it. The phone rings. It's Rich Chizmar, editor of a little magazine you may have heard of called Cemetery Dance, calling up to talk shop. In the course of our conversation Rich mentions that he's heard about a new dark suspense anthology that Joe Lansdale's editing. "Sounds right up your alley," Rich says. "Maybe you should send Lansdale a query and see if he'll take a look at a story."

By this time I'm eager to break out of small magazines into the professional short story market, so Rich's suggestion sounds like a plan to me. I don't know Joe Lansdale from Adam, so I query away—keeping my letter short, mentioning my credits, asking Joe if he'd be willing to look at a story. Joe replies that he is indeed editing a dark suspense anthology (actually, he's co-editing it with his wife, Karen), and they're open to submissions.

I figure, hot damn, do I have a story for the Lansdales—it's definitely suspenseful. As for "dark"—well, hell, it's got werebats. Gotta be that fits the bill. In short order I finish up "Black Leather Kites." Then I type a cover letter, enclose a SASE, and hand off my manuscript to the good folks at the USPS.

I wait. A couple weeks later, here comes my manuscript, rebounding with a note from hisownself:

Norman:

Thanks for “Black Leather Kites.” Not bad at all, but not what I’m looking for. I’m doing a suspense, not a horror anthology, though I might buy something with horror if it struck me just right. It should go somewhere, however, and I wish you luck with it and your writing career.

Best,
Joe Lansdale

Whoops. A cordial, kind letter, but certainly not what I was hoping for. Still, looking over Joe’s reject, I see that I made the most basic of mistakes with my submission—I didn’t understand what the editor was looking for when I sent in my story. I heard “dark suspense,” and it meant one thing to me. Obviously, it meant something else to Joe.

Now, “dark suspense” was a new term at the time, and it was being defined a number of ways. Take a broad view, and maybe there was room for werebats.¹ Take a narrower view, you’re looking more along the lines of dark crime or noir. Either way, in this particular case Joe’s was the only definition that mattered. Why? Easy answer—he was the editor.

And I was left sitting there with a rejection letter in my hands. Now, I could have sat there kicking myself all afternoon. I could have beaten myself up over blowing a chance to crack a top-drawer anthology. Worst case scenario, I could have moped around, cried woe is me, and not written another word for a week or a month.

I didn’t do any of those things. Instead, I went for a walk and tried to sort things out. I

¹ I’m talking an extremely broad view and an extremely small werebat (maybe one that flutters around in the margins or something). The way I see it now, I was off the mark with my submission any way you slice it.

got some air and some sunshine and some distance from my mailbox, but not from Joe's letter. It was still there in my head. I couldn't help wishing that I'd asked him exactly what kind of story he was looking for when I first sent my query instead of making an assumption, but I hadn't done that and I couldn't turn back the clock and do it now, so the knowledge didn't do me any good when I'd already submitted and been rejected.

Or maybe it did. I thought about Joe's letter, what it said and what it didn't say. He hadn't praised my story to high heaven, but he hadn't slammed it, either. "Not bad at all," was what he said. And while he hadn't invited me to send another story, he hadn't told me that he was closed to submissions, either.

Now this wasn't exactly a glowing ray of sunshine, but it did give me a little hope, and I grabbed it. Right then and there I decided to try Joe again, with another story—the right kind of story this time. Something suspenseful and dark... but not at all supernatural.

Only holdup to that little plan was that I didn't have any stories like that lying around. No problem. I'd write one. I'd do it fast, because I didn't know if Joe had a deadline or not. After all, this was an anthology I really wanted to crack, edited by a writer I really admired. That kindled what you might call your basic fire-in-the-belly, which is something every writer needs when he's trying to set the bar a little higher than it used to be.

I started thinking about a story. By the time I finished my walk, I had an opening scene and the skeleton of a plot. By the time I went to sleep that night, I had completed a rough draft of a 3,800 word story called "Dead Celebs." Next morning I got up and started polishing my manuscript. By the time the clock hit five that afternoon, that sucker was in the hands of the United States Postal Service and on its way to Nacogdoches, Texas.

Two weeks went by. This time I didn't get a rejection letter. Another two weeks passed,

and I started thinking, “Well, maybe Joe’s holding it for another look.” Two weeks after that I was torn between feeling like I might have a pretty good chance of making the final cut and hoping that my manuscript hadn’t gotten lost in the mail.

Two weeks later I opened my mailbox and yanked out an acceptance letter from Joe... which I never would have received if I’d sat around staring at my rejection slip for “Black Leather Kites,” feeling sorry for myself, and not writing a damn word.

Now, he didn’t set out to do it, but that was the first lesson Joe Lansdale taught me about writing.

It’s one you need to learn, too.

Simple fact of life—your stories will be rejected. When that happens, don’t feel sorry for yourself. Don’t give up. Toss that rejection in the waste basket. Pin it to your wall and use it for inspiration. File it in your filing cabinet and forget about it. But whatever you do, get back in there. Sit down at your desk. Turn on your computer. Get to work.

Or as someone I know says when offering up one-size-fits-all writing advice: “Put ass to chair in from of typewriter....”

* * *

I’ll leave you with a few words about writers further up the food chain. If you’re lucky starting out, you’ll meet up with more experienced writers who’ll answer your questions and give you advice. Of course, there’s no set way to “make this happen,” and it’s not a good idea to try too hard to do that. But if it does happen (at a writer’s convention, or in an internet chatroom, or through an editorial relationship or a review of your work), take advantage of it. Listen. Learn. Because there’s no book or website that can teach you as much as a professional writer who’s already been down the road you want to travel.

As a green newcomer, I was lucky enough to have a few experienced pros in my corner. There were the gentlemen I have come to think of as The Two Ed's—Messrs. Bryant and Gorman. As mentioned earlier, Ed Bryant noticed my work early on, reviewed it enthusiastically in Locus, and was generous with both his time and his praise. The same goes for Ed Gorman, a fine writer who took an interest in my fiction, bought stories when I really needed the sales, and (like the other Ed) answered my questions without once making me feel like a wet-behind-the-ears beginner.

I got to know Joe Lansdale a little later. After accepting “Dead Celebs” for Dark at Heart, I met Joe and Karen at the World Fantasy Convention in Phoenix. We had a couple of short chats at the con and met up again a year or so later at the Little Bookshop of Horrors in Colorado—first at a reading and then at a barbeque at Doug and Tomi Lewis' house. That's when we really started to get to know each other.

Joe never sugar-coated things much when offering advice, especially when it came to relating mistakes he made when he was starting out or the innumerable ways a writer can be screwed by editors, publishers, or agents (easy to do the latter once you learn the ropes, tougher to develop the self-critical eye that allows you to do the former). Joe learned from his mistakes, and when he offered them up as warnings, I learned from them, too. Certainly, the knowledge I gained from Joe spared me making some mistakes of my own.

Joe's a good man and a good friend, and I'm always happy to pick up the phone and find him on the other end. If I've got good news, he's one of the first to hear about it. Over the years I've been lucky enough to use him as a sounding board, and I think he'd say the same of me.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that we share similar backgrounds and a similar view of the world, human nature, and the business of writing. Maybe that's why many readers who enjoy

Joe's work also enjoy mine. Stylistically, we're really pretty different, but that doesn't mean we haven't got a lot in common when you cut through the meat of the writing and get down to the bones of the stories. We do.

To tell you the truth, most relationships you'll develop as a writer turn out to be pretty disposable. You'll work with someone on a project—say an editor or a publisher—and for a while you'll have close contact, but in the end they move on to other things and so do you. Sometimes business itself can get in the way of these friendships, especially if business goes bad. Unfortunately, that's just the nature of the beast. Even under the best conditions, writers and editors/publishers are naturally on the opposite sides of the fence and will often butt heads.

Relationships between writers can be just as tricky. No matter where you live on the food chain, lots of things can ruin a friendship. You can start your list with jealousy and envy (“You sold a story to that anthology and I didn't!”), toss in pride and hurt pride (“Your lousy story won an award and my brilliant masterpiece wasn't even nominated!”), and go on from there. In other words, the same old human emotions that sour everyday relationships are apt to sour relationships between writers.

But please remember this: it doesn't have to be that way—not in life, and not in writing. Sure, it might take some work, but most worthwhile things do. Because when you come right down to it, no matter how hard you work on your writing or how much you invest in it, the end result is a stack of paper that'll end up between the covers of a book or jammed in a desk drawer somewhere.

Your friends are worth a little more than that.

For me, that's the good news.

I hope it'll be the same for you.