

Dealing with Disappointment by Lori Weber

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The writing life is a lot like the little girl in that old rhyme, the one with a curl in the middle of her forehead; *when it is good, it is very very good, and when it is bad, it is horrid*. Every writer I know has experienced the highs and lows that come with publishing, and I am no exception.

The day I received word that my first book was going to be published, in 2003, I was at a major tennis tournament in Montreal. As I sat in the nose bleed section watching the stars play, I felt I was the ball, sailing high and fast above the ground, zipping my way (at long last) to literary stardom. Okay, I was not that delusional, but I knew the deal meant the beginning of a new life, that of a published author. The days of rejection were over. I had never felt so high.

Now, six books later, with numbers 7 & 8 already contracted, I know that the highs are real, but so are the lows.

There is the low that hits when one of our beloved books (on which we have toiled for so long and invested so much) gets a bad review, or even a good review with one bad comment in it. It is even worse when the book's *only* bad review appears in one's hometown newspaper. When this happens, one has to find a way of holding one's head high at writing related events or at work, knowing that that bad review was probably read by all present. (Notice I have switched to the less personal third person: it helps with the distancing process necessary to deal with disappointment.) It is even even worse when this review appears, cruelly and coincidentally, on the same day as one's launch party. (This has not happened to me but has happened to two writer friends). In this instance, one must read from the book with gusto and pretend that nobody is judging whether the bad review has merit.

Disappointment can also be experienced when sales reports come in and numbers are lower than expected. In this day and age, when writers are implored from every corner to become their own publicists, these low numbers also lead to a sense of guilt for not having done more. This precipitates a double whammy of disappointment – in the numbers and in one's self. Worse than low sales is the news that a publishing company is closing shop and refusing to pay royalties or to revert publication rights. (This has happened to me and many other writers at Lobster Press.) Our books then exist in limbo and, in spite of the fact that teachers and booksellers want them, eventually die out. It is like the death of a loved one and the grieving is profound.

Awards – egads! Being nominated is so elating, not winning so deflating. One's confidence takes a direct hit and every bit of energy is needed just to remind one's self that being nominated was an honour. (And this is exactly what everyone else will say to you for the next six months.) Watching neophytes hit the jackpot and win awards with their first books takes strength as well. We are happy for our fellow authors, but prickles inside. The prickles, however, must never poke through (like cacti), so we work at being smooth and gracious, sometimes under the hardest of circumstances.

My writing friends and I have all dealt with these and other disappointments. Because we are writers, we are sensitive. Because we are sensitive, it doesn't take much to shake our belief in our creative

abilities. When we commiserate, we tend to fall back on the idea that we are, after all, writing because we love to write. So what if our books are not winning big awards, or reaching the sales numbers of *Twilight*. Aren't we doing it for ourselves, because we cannot do otherwise?

The truth, for me at least, is yes and no. To live without writing would be torture. It would mean taking away the thing that gives me definition and fills many hours with both pain and pleasure. But does that mean I have to pretend that I don't want to sell lots of books and, dare I jinx myself further, win some recognition for my efforts?

In my latest bout of disappointment, I have buoyed myself up with these notions. You can decide if they make me a terrible person.

- I think about people I know who have been trying to publish their first books since forever and how much further ahead I am in my writing career
- I think of all the adults I have worked with, both as a workshop leader and mentor, who are working on beloved manuscripts and would love to be dealing with my "let-downs"
- I reread my fan mail and remind myself that my books have touched many young and tender souls
- I have a hot bath and cup of tea, not necessarily at the same time
- I think of all the natural disasters and wars wreaking havoc around the world and how my problems are petty in comparison
- I repeat, mantra-like, that I am a published author, placing a zing on the "published", something not many people in the world can say

But, if all else fails, I pull one of my books off the shelf and read. And this becomes the real test. Do I still love the book, even if it didn't catapult me to literary stardom? Do I still marvel at the clever image or turn of phrase? Do I still care about my characters like they are family, with all their quirks and faults? Does my book stand my own test of time and make me feel proud? Do I remember how exciting it was to open the box from the publisher and nestle it in my hands when it first arrived? When I answer yes to all these questions, the cloud begins to lift.

That is always a good time to fire up the old laptop...

Lori Weber is the author of seven young adult novels, including *Picture Me* (James Lorimer 2013) and *Yellow Mini* (Fitzhenry and Whiteside 2011). Her first picture book, *My Granny Loves Hockey* (Simply Read Books), came out in spring 2014. She teaches English in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec.