

On Publishing a Novel: Top Ten Favorite Moments
An Annotated List
Tony Romano

10 **Getting a Call from New York**

Over the years, I have become an expert on rejection. Self-addressed-stamped-envelopes that come back without return addresses are unquestionably rejections; they usually arrive with a form letter that begins with apology and ends with strained encouragement. Envelopes with return addresses but with a single sheet inside, probably the aforementioned form letter, are rejections as well. Sometimes, I'd fold these envelopes without opening them and stuff them in my back pocket, out of embarrassment or to forestall the inevitable, but still hoping for ink from an editor. Manuscripts that never return are passive-aggressive rejections. Unreturned calls to editors who accepted but never published work: rejections. Unreturned calls and letters to agents presumed at one point to be representing me: rejections. Contests that collapse, even after cashing contest fees: rejections.

So when my wife handed me the phone one evening and whispered *New York*, I was incredulous. One of my colleagues enjoys elaborate practical jokes, but this would have been downright cruel, even for him. I had a few manuscripts in agents' hands, one for over a year and a half because she'd expressed interest, but this agent on the phone now, Marly Rusoff, had my manuscript for only a few weeks. We talked for a while, a routine call for her probably, though I could tell that this was a favorite part of her job, surprising writers with good news at home. I paced the living room, breathing shallowly so I wouldn't miss a word, trying my best to sound casual, as if I received these sorts of calls all the time. We had a nice chat, but she said that fiction lately was a tough sell, so when we ended the call, I wasn't sure whether she'd send my work out or not. Eighteen days later, she called to say she'd be surprised if we didn't have an offer from HarperCollins the next day. My heart in my throat, I could barely breathe. Wave after wave of rejection spanning years, and this woman with the gentle voice, my agent apparently, Marly, found a publisher in less than three weeks.

9 **Getting a Call from Mom**

A week before Mom's call, during a visit home, I'd tried to explain to my parents about the novel. We speak to each other in a crude combination of English and Italian, usually fairly clearly, but they didn't quite understand. I figured I'd simply wait until I could put a copy of the book in their hands, as they're tangible people. My mother-in-law, who doesn't speak a word of English but apparently speaks my parents' language, called them to explain why they should be proud, which led to my mom's call.

"Congratulash," she said. "You smart boy." In the same breath, she added, "I call your brother in Californ..." I forget the precise complaint she wanted to lodge against my

brother, but that was the last word on my book, and I was reminded why my ego has always been well-tempered. No buttons popping off this shirt. Thanks, Mom.

8 Anticipating Placing the Novel in My Father's Hands

While my mother finds security in plodding ahead—cleaning, planting, cooking, and cooking some more—my dad takes walks, sits, naps, enjoys TV, and presumably reflects. His reminiscences are often filled with sorrowful regrets. He had only a sixth-grade education. He never drove a car. He lived his first 37 years in a small village 40 kilometers south of Naples and the next 50 years in Chicago. Except for a brief sojourn by bus to Canada with a local church group and weeklong visits to California and Hawaii to visit his other children, he has been nowhere else. I think he wished he'd done more.

He's too humble to take credit for his children's successes, but my hope is that he will weigh this novel of mine with his hands—the same hands that fashioned lapels and hems in a factory for over 30 years—and know in his bones that my persistence in getting a book on a shelf pales when compared to his own. His boyhood home had no electricity, gas, or plumbing. He had to leave home when he was fifteen to begin his six-year unpaid apprenticeship with a tailor in a neighboring town. Not knowing any English, he left his homeland and his family and sent for us eleven months later after he'd secured his job at the factory, where he brought two salami sandwiches each day for over three decades.

The tale told in the novel is not his story, but I hope I've given voice to people like my father, who endured without complaint and struggled to retain some of their old world identities. And I hope that in some small way my father finds satisfaction in knowing that his sacrifices have left a lasting legacy for his family.

7 Waiting at Home

On the day that I found out HarperCollins wanted to publish my novel, I hadn't been able to reach my wife at work, so I left a breathless message. When I arrived home, no one was there, so I paced, waiting for someone to come home already. When she finally arrived, much earlier than usual, my wife—and I'm not sure anymore how literal this memory is, but I think this is how it felt—she dropped her book bag, threw out her arms, and leaped in my arms with a force that pushed me back a bit.

Later, we celebrated by ordering pizza. With two toppings.

6 Revising the Novel

HarperCollins editor Claire Wachtel, who accepted the novel, sent me a four-page, single-spaced letter filled with incisive and insightful questions—all relevant—about character, dialogue, setting, plot, and other related issues, all of which stirred mild panic. I wasn't sure I could return to that fictional world with the same intensity and reverie as when I first worked on the book.

After finishing the first draft of the novel, I had bought a laptop and was using that to write fiction. But I'd written *When the World Was Young* by hand, and typing seemed wrong, a betrayal, twisted as that may seem. Turning to a legal pad, I began to address some of Claire's questions, and before long, the characters felt like old friends to me. I was happy to hear their voices come to life again, to see their names on note cards in my pockets, to imagine new corners onto which they could turn.

5 Seeing the Cover for the First Time

Determined to become a better golfer, I was hitting a bucket of balls at the range. Midway, my cell phone rang. Anytime I see Marly's number on caller ID, I'm pleased. She wanted to know if I was near a computer; she'd just e-mailed a copy of the cover. She cut the call short so I could head home to view it. I sauntered back to the tee area, ready to gather my belongings on the bench, but instead of leaving immediately, I glanced at the half-empty bucket, then back at my wallet, phone, and scattered tees, and decided to finish. My pace was admittedly more brisk than before the call, but I thought, Here I am with two good things to look forward to—swinging freely because nothing could dampen my spirits; and taking in the cover in a matter of minutes. I was a kid eating ice cream, saving the chocolate for last, when I could savor its sweetness.

I rushed home, opened the file, and called back Marly, who may have been more excited than I was. I told her I loved everything about the cover, the washed tint that both aged the photo and made it seem current, the children in holy procession, the open-backed chairs, the old guy with the fat ass, front center. Relieved, I think, that I liked the cover so much, Marly, between laughs, said, "Who knew we'd want an old guy's fat ass on the cover?"

4 Seeing Henry's and Maria's Reactions to the Galley

When people find out about the novel, they seem genuinely sincere in their congratulations (Mom, too, even if it was short-lived). "When's the book coming out?" they ask, and I appreciate their anticipation—because I suspect that a few weeks after the book is published, the book will be old news. And that's okay. But not many people fully comprehend the toll of rejection on a boy. My good friend, Henry, who hosted many a meeting for our writing group on his front porch, was the only friendly face at my first reading (I'm sure there were many friendly people in attendance; I just didn't know any of them). And Maria, his soon-to-be bride, has been one of those supportive readers for which writers crave. Kurt Vonnegut says writers usually have one ear, one audience, to whom they write; for him it is his sister, even though she has long passed. For me, often, it is Maria.

When I brought the galley to our lunch table at the high school where we teach, I pushed the book unceremoniously toward my good friends. I expected a few cheers and a few hugs, but I didn't anticipate the tears welling up in Maria's eyes. All writers need a Henry and Maria in their lives.

3 Finishing the Book, Though I Don't Remember When

I know it was summer, though not the year. I know that the night before I was on Henry's porch with our writing group. As I was leaving, the last one to go, I turned to Henry, and said, "Tomorrow, I'm finishing this." Surprisingly, I slept fairly soundly that night, woke up early, went straight to my notebook, and didn't emerge from my waking dream state until early afternoon. Both exhausted and exhilarated, I marched into the kitchen, turned to my wife, and said, "I'm done...I did it...I wrote a book...a novel...it's not too bad."

2 Realizing That Publication Will Not Change My Daily Routines

If I never write another sentence, my family will still love me. I think. I'm fairly certain. Yes, of course, they will. They will. To them, I'm the guy who hangs around the house too much, reading, cooking, playing music, and writing. If I eliminate this last activity, I doubt they'd notice much. For which I'm grateful. If their love depended on my success as a writer, they'd have all left me years ago.

1 Checking Sales Rank on Amazon

A few weeks after my book appeared on Amazon, it ranked 1, 645, 000, or some such number too large to comprehend. In the following months, two people I knew ordered a copy, rocketing its rank to somewhere in the 1, 598,000 range. I thought about calling my mom.