

## The Calm Before the Calm

**I**N THESE weeks before my new novel is to be published, when the slog of revision is behind me and there is the wary relief of knowing that, despite horrendous odds, a book has been born and allowed to survive, I can't help but remember what a friend told me his editor calls this blissful period of anticipation: the calm before the calm.

After all, that's the usual sequence of events following the publication of a book, even one you hope will make a great splash. There it is, up on Amazon, knocking about with the gazillion other books whose presence has been reduced to JPGs the size of postage stamps. Perhaps you can find it in a bookstore (should bookstores still exist at the time of this printing) or on a shelf at a library. But even just lurking in the margins of a computer screen, hoping to land on someone's Nook, there is proof that your book exists. So you wait to hear that it has been reviewed, discussed, even just mentioned. Any scrap of evidence that the book is being read.

Has anyone read it? Has anyone *heard* of it?

Hello?

Instead of a splash, there is the calm.

The day my first novel officially debuted, I gave a reading at my local bookstore, held a big party, and went to bed so elated I couldn't sleep. Early the next morning I went straight to the computer to see if there were any e-mails about *My Book*. And indeed, there was a beautiful review—in the *Washington Post*, no less. So I had something to brag about to my parents. But as the week went on, no more reviews came in.

The silence was not unfamiliar. After all, most writers spend the majority of their time waiting for praise, feedback, even basic acknowledgment, that does not come. Stories submitted to literary journals, queries sent to agents... Ask any writer, no matter how successful, and you'll hear about the agent who never replied, the friend who still hasn't read the manuscript, the relative who has yet to open the book. These putative readers have their own reasons—conscious or not—for their abstinence. But for writers, the pain is universal; having sought approval, we feel only rejection. A renowned author once told me with

### SILENCE AND THE CREATIVE WRITER



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great emotion that she had been waiting for weeks to hear from her editor about her new manuscript, that she was going out of her mind wondering what that might mean. It was a reminder that even for those writers blessed with immense success, ones whose work has reached multitudes and touched readers on faraway continents, silence—that dark absence of affirmation—is a shared affliction.

My favorite depiction of this occupational hazard appears in Bernard Malamud's novel *A New Life* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961). The protagonist, a college English professor named Sy Levin, writes a scholarly paper he decides to show to a colleague—who quickly suggests he send it out for publication. But doubt prevents Levin from mailing it. Instead, he seeks the approval of a second colleague, on whose desk he leaves the essay, along with this self-consciously brief note: "Would appreciate any comment. No hurry."

Any writer who has ever asked a

friend to read a draft of a work-in-progress knows the falseness of those words, the seemingly blasé "No hurry," when of course all we ever want is immediate, affirmative feedback. Let "any comment" be confirmation of our talent, our calling, our assured success—and as soon as possible, thank you very much.

Malamud's Levin waits for days, a week, longer, with no word from his colleague. The silence taints his ability to continue writing: "He had come up with a new idea but did not want to work on it until he knew how good the first paper was." He reminds himself how busy the man must be and of the many responsibilities that might distract him from reading the essay. Imagine Levin's pain when, as they cross paths on campus, the colleague doesn't even mention having received it.

The two see each other "at least once daily"—with no acknowledgment of the essay. When Levin can no longer restrain himself, he peeks into

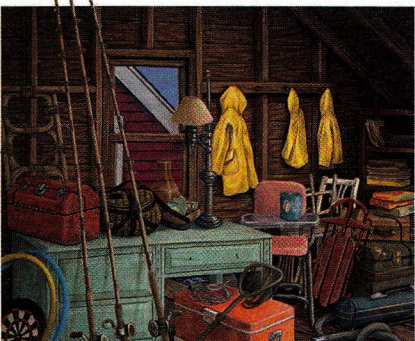
his colleague's office, where he finds his paper still on the desk. It looks "somewhat worn"—sticky with food residue—and Levin thumbs through it, looking for comments. Nothing.

His anxious waiting begins to resemble the stages of grief. Bewildered, disbelieving, he wonders if he might have somehow offended his colleague—or if perhaps he didn't make it clear that he expected a response. Or does his colleague have some horrible illness, could that be what's wrong? Next, Levin becomes angry, thinks his colleague rude for not saying to his face that he hasn't time to read it (though Levin is sure he has read it) or even just that the paper is bad. (Or is it, Levin wonders in a new twist of reasoning, that his colleague is jealous of his writing?) Fully within the Rage stage, Levin lets his fury taint his feelings about everything around him, and thinks up punishments his colleague might suffer, ultimately envisioning his death.

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- April 30th | Family Matters
- May 31st | Short Story Award for New Writers
- June 30th | Fiction Open
- July 31st | Very Short Fiction Award

We look forward to reading your stories!

Susan S. Linder

It is through this death fantasy that Levin arrives, finally, at acceptance. Picturing the dead man at his wake, “having entered his last long silence,” Levin understands that his colleague

had acted on his rights as a free man, the right not to say, for whatever reason, under no matter what provocation, what he didn’t feel like saying. He did not care to say anything about Levin’s paper, probably to save someone pain—himself, both, either.

I love those lines, for their grace and honesty. At the most basic level, they are a reminder that most people, when asked to read a work and report back on it, feel some sense of burden. But Malamud, knowing well the fragility of a writer’s psyche, takes this notion to the next comic level.

Levin rereads his paper and, like every self-flagellating writer, decides it is awful. So awful that he is filled with remorse for having inflicted it on his colleague. In apology, Levin buys

a potted plant, which he leaves as an offering on the same desk where he left the essay. “I must be humble, he told himself. Humility is its own virtue, sweet, if true. I must be generous, kind, good.”

It is the sincerity as much as the comedy of this sequence of internal events that moves me. Levin’s emotional progress mirrors that of so many writers, with the doubts we harbor—that that first positive response (whether from a friend, colleague, or the *Washington Post*) was a fluke, or simply wrong, so that we need to hear it again, from someone else. If no response arrives, we no longer know what to think about our work. Or, like Levin, we reconsider it until we question its worth.

In the case of my debut novel, I was extremely fortunate and the book ended up receiving more notice than I could have hoped for. But the interim waiting made me acutely aware of how distracting and destructive the want

of feedback can be. Of course writers need a reading public; we *all* need those pats on the back in order to survive and keep on trying. But just as humility (as Levin reminds us) is in a way a true writer’s essence, an indispensable element of the writer’s job is learning to live with the silence of being ignored—and not just because the silence is independent of our talent, of a book’s merit, of the love and effort that went into creating it. No, we must learn to live with the silence because *silence is where we go to write*.

Silence is where you were when you first lifted your pen and listened for the words in your head. Silence is where you are sovereign, where you write what you are drawn to write, not what you are told to write. It is where the muscle-work of creation takes place. And, in this age of nonstop tweets and text messages and headlines flashing across screens, silence—that space free of anyone else’s words—is more elusive and precious than ever. ∞

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