

14. Once more unto the post-box (I)

Submitting your work for publication can be a fraught and traumatic process, but it's one that you have to go through, again and again, if your work is not to gather dust. If you never send your work out then the one thing that can be guaranteed is that it will never be published. But who do you send it to?

It all depends on what sort of work you write. Few mainstream publishers accept poetry and short stories from untried writers, but there remains a huge network of small presses that exists purely to promote such work [see **Once more unto the post-box (II)**]. On the other hand, few small presses publish novels or autobiographies, so your options here are much more limited.

The first thing to note is that you will stand a far better chance of placing your work with a publisher if you can avail yourself of the services of a literary agent. You will find lists of such agents in *The Writers' Handbook* [Ed: Barry Turner, Pan Books] or *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* [A&C Black], both published annually, but you need to be aware that agents are as hard to attract as publishers. Like publishers, they exist to make money – a percentage of the author's literary income – and so are unlikely to take on a writer whose work they aren't fairly sure they can sell.

For budding novelists who don't have an agent, the only advice is to do some research. It should be obvious, but you won't sell a romance to a house that only publishes science fiction, or a piece of literary fiction to one that publishes only westerns. Research your market carefully, and at least you will end up on the right slush pile. The slush pile refers to all the unsolicited manuscripts that a publisher receives. They sit gathering dust until someone – usually a new employee – is given the job of glancing through them and, usually, returning them whence they came. (Occasionally you can be lucky – the winner of the 2003 Man Booker Prize, DCB Pierre's *Vernon God Little* came from such a pile.) You will stand a better chance if the publisher has actually asked to see your work – if you have sent in advance a specimen chapter or two plus a synopsis, rather than a whole book – but this is very unlikely to happen unless you have an agent to speak for you. Back to square one.

As for autobiographies, the sad truth is that you are unlikely to place them unless you are famous, or are a previously silent witness to some epoch-making event. If the story has strong local interest, then your regional library or local history society may be interested – many of them have a publishing arm for work of local interest – but you may just have to accept that it's only going to be of interest to your friends, family and descendants. As a last resort, you could always try turning it into a novel.