

Writing about the dark times

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*In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.
Bertold Brecht¹*

I'd like to write in these dark times, but I find myself anxious and easily distracted. I'm intrigued that book sales are up, as I'm also reading less. I used to think of myself as a voracious reader, but, filling in a weekly pandemic reading diary for the *Scottish Books Trust*, I realise that I now can't go more than a dozen pages or so without turning to the mobile or the tablet.

I suspect that many of my friends feel much the same. But I don't think we should worry about this, recalling Daniel Pennac's *Reader's Bill Of Rights*²:

1. *The right not to read*
2. *The right to skip pages*
3. *The right to not finish*
4. *The right to reread*
5. *The right to read anything*
6. *The right to escapism*
7. *The right to read anywhere*
8. *The right to browse*
9. *The right to read out loud*
10. *The right to not defend your taste*

I subscribe strongly to all of these, and, right now, the first three seem particularly germane. Still, as a writer, I'd like people to finish my work, to not skip pages, and, above all, to want to read what I've written.

Gosh, isn't that ego-full. It's not supposed to be like that, is it. We're supposed to write because we're writers, and that's what writers do. Except we'd all really like to be authors as well, and to be an author we need to be published and to have readers.

Getting published is hard, really hard. Every rejection is a dart to the heart. My baby, my baby. And it doesn't get any better. So, why are my offspring rejected, when they're obviously so much better than 95% of published work?

Maybe I don't have the right connections? Maybe if I went on a course, or paid for a critique, I might find an opening? Maybe the gatekeepers just don't get it? Maybe it isn't fashionable? Maybe the synopsis isn't synoptic enough. Maybe the chapter summary is too summery. Maybe the back page precis isn't precise enough? Maybe the choice of comparable books is unconvincing? Maybe the marketing survey is implausible? Maybe there's something wrong with the covering letter or the website or the writer biography or the portrait photograph?

¹ Motto, *Brecht Poems Part Two: 1929-38*, Eyre Methuen, 1976, p320.

² D. Pennac, *Better Than Life*, Stenhouse/Pembroke, 1999, pp175-207 .

But what if it's the quality of my writing. Maybe I'm not as good as I think I am. Maybe 95% of published writers really are better than me.

Maybe my story's pretty dull. Maybe my style's really flat. Maybe there's too much tell and not enough show. Maybe there's too much dialogue or description or interior monologue. Maybe too much happens too quickly, or not enough happens too slowly. Maybe there aren't enough characters and they're all tiresome. Maybe there are too many characters and they aren't distinct enough. Maybe it shouldn't be first person or present tense. Maybe I use too many adjectives and similes and clichés and repetitions. Maybe it starts badly. Maybe it ends badly. Maybe if I could crack the first three paragraphs, or the first 10,000 words, then the publishers would go for it.

Maybe if I just knew the rules?

Either way, perhaps we over think it. After all, so many people are writing, and so few are published. Maybe that's the way it goes? But why should it go that way?

Remember Pennac's *Reader's Bill Of Rights*. When we read other people's work, we need to think about why we're keen to finish it, and why we're not skipping pages, and why we picked it up in the first place. When we read our own work, we need to think about why someone might not want to finish it, or might skip pages, or might not even browse it. I think we need to read like writers and write like readers. Even in these dark times. Especially in these dark times.