

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY
Part I: Meet Your Internal Critic

by Jenna Kernan

I remember the day I got “THE CALL.” The joyful elation lasted about 10 minutes. Then I started thinking that any second this editor will spot me as an imposter. When my contract arrived I fell into further panic – 16 pages of gibberish told me I was way over my head. Sending out my ARC for review also struck terror into my soul. Holding my first book in my hand filled me with a mix of elation and horror, as it sunk in that anyone could slip into a store and buy my book. Generally, that’s what a writer is hoping for. I’d waited years for this moment and none of my fantasies included having a panic attack in a bookstore while my husband beamed with pride.

What was going on here?

At this point, I began looking around to discover if I was alone in this sea of anxiety and discovered I was not alone. After reading several books I began to understand some of the bizarre, counter-productive behavior displayed by writers (including me). What I know now, but didn’t then is that fear and writing go hand in hand and the results can be paralyzing or empowering.

Just a disclaimer at this point. I am not a psychiatrist, nor do I play one on TV. I’m just a writer – which means I am an expert at being a neurotic mess.

So, just what we are afraid of?

Let’s begin with the fears that dog Unpublished Writers. As I was unpublished for many more years than I have been published, this is a subject with which I am quite familiar.

Unpublished writers face:

Long odds

Form rejection letters that offer nothing constructive

Nasty comments from contest judges

Fears that they will never succeed...and...

Dealing with people whose first question when they learn you are a writer is: **“So...are you published?”**

M.J. Rose says that **“The only reason writers survive rejection is because they love writing so much that they can’t bear the idea of giving it up.”**

And sometimes that perseverance pays off because, despite the odds and despite good sense, you send out your imperfect creation and, sometimes, someone offers to buy it—with real money, and you become a published author. At this point, you would think that all those worries vanish. Well...some do, but mostly they are replaced by other worries.

First time published authors are afraid they will be one hit wonders. You slipped one dog by the editor. Sooner or later you’ll be ‘found out’ as a fraud, recognizing what you feared all along, that it was beginner’s luck, not talent that got you this far and you’ll go from debut author to one-hit-wonder.

You have a new editor. How do you write to please a person you don’t even know? A sense of vulnerability pervades.

Writer and teacher, Janet Finch says, **“There is no such thing as a permanent state of grace...anxiety is at least eighty percent of writing, and ...if you cannot tolerate a fair amount of anxiety in your life, then you can’t be a writer.”**

Published Writers worry about -

meeting deadlines,

getting proposals rejected

getting proposals accepted (because then you have to actually write the book)

that editors won’t like your rewrites,

the cover will be lousy
that the book will not make money and the publisher will regret their decision,
that the reviewers will hate it
that readers won't buy it and...
the sell-through will be terrible and you'll be worse off than if you never published.

Publishers who would never think of checking your criminal record, will absolutely check your sell-through record before offering you another contract. Will there be another contract?

For new authors, the pressure to repeat successes and provide the editor with another complete manuscript coincides with the need to make corrections, check galleys, cover art questions, starting a website, beginning an advertising campaign, promotion efforts, facebook page, twitter, podcasting, book trailers, head shot, writing a dedication and mass mailings. All of this and many of us still have family responsibilities and full-time job.

This is why the second book is always harder to write than your first.

Natalie Goldberg observed that, **“We have an idea that success is a happy occasion. Success can also be lonely, isolating and disappointing.”**

Wally Lamb said, **“In some ways, I found success just as intimidating as rejection.”**

Ambrose Pierce called success, **“The one unpardonable sin against one's fellows.”** Did you know that authors often lose friends once published? What if you publish and you are a big success and everyone you love hates you?

Once your book appears complete strangers will read and judge your words AND they will send you emails to point out your errors and they'll review your book on AMAZON. Sooner or later, you'll get a bad review. Kathryn Harrison combats critics by intentionally being involved in her new work when a book is published. **“That's my only defense, really. To separate myself**

and distance myself from the thing that's arriving in the marketplace, and be completely in love with, and involved with, something new."

Be mindful that your finished book will never be the book you intended to write, but rather a betrayal of your hopes.

John Steinbeck put it this way, **"The book is done...The writer wants to cry out –'Bring it back, Let me rewrite it or better – Let me burn it. Don't let it out in the unfriendly cold in that condition."** After finishing East of Eden, he wrote, **"I have never lost the weight of clumsiness, of ignorance, of aching inability."** Dear me, if that's what Steinbeck felt, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Cervantes wrote Don Quixote. He also wrote, **"I have not been able to contravene the laws of nature which would have it that like begets like."**

Your book will never match your expectations – that's normal. Expect it and get on your way.

Unpublished authors dream of publishing as a wonderful land of fulfillment when in reality it more closely resembles that familiar nightmare where you discover you are walking through the halls of your Junior High School but are terrified that any second someone will notice that you have forgotten to put on your pants. It's happened. Your book is your naked self and you long to strut your stuff and hide, simultaneously.

You worry if you have exposed too much of yourself. Have you betrayed family secrets that might embarrass loved ones? I have more bad news. Someone very close to you will say something thoughtless that hurts you deeply, as in my case when I was told that I write, 'soft porn'.

And what if you get rejected now? In the past, rejections were hurtful. But they were also private. Now your triumphs and bombs are public.

Tell me if this inner conversation sounds familiar? “I’ll never finish. I’ll never get it right. This manuscript is not what I imagined. I’ll revise it again. My critique group thinks it’s great. But it’s lousy. What’s missing? Maybe I’ll buy another ‘how to’ book or attend another conference or workshop. I got to get back to critique sessions. Who am I kidding? I’ll never sell this turkey.”

We’ve all had similar internal dialogs. When you offer yourself the least shred of hope, that nasty little voice in your head crushes it. We allow that voice to say things to us that we would never tolerate from an outsider. I know what some of you are thinking. “What little voice? I don’t have a little voice?” **That’s it** – speaking right now, drowning me out.

That voice is your **Internal Critic**. It can serve as an important first alert system or as I like to call it THE VOICE OF DOOM.

Fiction is not all made up, if it were, it would not be so scary to write– this material comes from revealing deeply personal, emotional issues. That is why writing non-fiction is so much less threatening. It allows writers to avoid introspection and self-revelations that fiction writers must face everyday.

Meanwhile back at the keyboard, your Ego and Internal Critic are at war in your brain. Anne Lamott likes these voices to a radio station that plays 24/7 in your ear. One side is your **Ego** shouting how special and talented you are, filling you with grand and brilliant ideas and great expectations! The other ear plays the voice of your **Internal Critic** reciting edicts of doom, failure and self-loathing. Confidence and insecurity shout out like carnival barkers. Before you can quiet these voices you first must recognize that they do exist.

As soon as a writer decides to get serious and admit that they are not just fooling around, that this is not a hobby or a whim - the stakes mount.

You are vested. It matters.

It is one thing to fail at something you don’t care about. But what if you have made a serious commitment of time and money, try your very best and you still fail? In his book, DO IT! Peter

McWilliams writes, “Our minds go off on one distraction or another—*anything* rather than having to face the possibility of our own elemental inadequacy.”

That is a huge hit to the ego. There is no guarantee for any of us – Now that is SCARY.

A little over a hundred years ago a man named Sidney Smith said: “**A great deal of talent is lost to the world for want of a little courage.**” What was true then is true now. Faced with the death of a dream, many choose to drop out of the race before they have their fears confirmed. In effect, our fear of failure has led us directly to that which we most feared.

Your Internal Critic has protected you from any more rejection – permanently.

“Discouragement promotes inaction, and inaction guarantees failure—a life of not living our dreams,” writes Peter McWilliams.

But, your Internal Critic does serve a purpose and I don’t think it wise to ignore it completely, just turn it down a bit while writing. When you are editing, turn it way up, because, your Internal Critic serves you as your protector.

Like the emperor in the story, we all fear the little boy in the crowd who shouts, “Look the emperor has no clothes” or in our case, “Look that writer has no talent.”

Our Internal Critic is a self-serving entity, which protect us from walking down the street naked and exposing embarrassing secrets in our writing and finally from having to experience failure.

By preventing the writer from taking the very risks necessary to become published and stay published our sneaky Internal Critic keeps us from failure. Unfortunately, it also prevents success. Everything has a price.

The ironic part is that it doesn’t stop you cold – oh, no, that would be too obvious. Instead it impedes you, like a blister, by slowing our progress and preventing us from entering and

submitting work– so the Ego is allowed to preserve the fantasy of being a writer without all that nasty risk.

Our Internal Critic fears prevents us to show a side of ourselves that is unflattering or may not be how we wish to be represented. After all we are not idiots to go about babbling all our innermost secrets to complete strangers – are we? Well – yes we are. That might actually be the definition of a fiction writer.

Writers expose an inner life does not flatter us, but rather strips us naked revealing the very emotions that others struggle to conceal.

Your Internal Critic also **protects** the secrets of your family, friends and loved ones. Only a fiend would break such a sacred trust. Right? Well, maybe and maybe not. But betraying secrets has consequences and now you have guilt in addition to fear of failure.

Understand - your Internal Critic only springs to action when you are afraid. And understand that fiction writers are afraid all of the time.

Poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay recognized the dangers of publishing when she wrote: **“A person who publishes a book willfully appears before the populace with his pants down.”**

Even as we struggle to get published, we know that if we do, everyone will see our work, including that certain someone whose opinion really matters. Perhaps we even fear it enough to take steps to be certain that our work actually never sees daylight. That person, whose opinion carries such weight, is your **Censor in Chief**.

Thoughts of this censor can so stunt us, that not only do we not submit our work, but we repress ideas, subtly changing our word to meet what we see as the expectations of others.

This censor can rob our writing and sap the emotion as surely as a tapeworm. Again, preserving our ego prevents us from taking risks and exposing strong emotions. It also keeps our writing

from being very interesting.

The rigid barrier between what is expected and what one feels can make us mute. It can also dull the poignancy of your words. The voice of your **Censor in Chief** is the main obstacle between you and your first draft.

I attended a workshop with agent, Donald Maass. He told us that the number one problem with the submissions he reads is that they are predictable and boring. He thinks we are not very creative. I disagree. I think we are so damn creative, that we have created a method to prevent our creativity from exposing our personal secrets. Predictable work might be a result of allowing the Censor and Chief to suck all the life from their words to make them risk free and safe. Unfortunately safe writing is also boring writing.

Writer, Eudora Welty said, **“I believe if I stopped to wonder what so-and-so would think, or what it would feel like to be read by a stranger, I would be paralyzed.”**

How many people sit down with you to write? What critics judge your every word?

So now you know why those voices keep chiming in. They are there to protect you from experiencing failure, from hurting those you love or causing embarrassment to your **Ego**. To accomplish this, the Internal Critic and **Censor in Chief** can throw all kinds of roadblocks in a writer's path.

Tricks of the EGO

The most universal tactic of the ego is **Avoidance**. There is nothing more common than the non-writing writer. Avoidance is the ultimate triumph of fear.

The first and most common form of avoidance tactic is **Procrastination**. You really want to write but you never find the time. Distractions draw you away again and again. Bonnie Freidman compares them to flies, buzzing around you. It is hard not to roll your manuscript into

a tube and start swatting. Ding – You’ve Got Mail! Family responsibilities, work, vacations, a kitchen remodel, congratulations! You’re a grandma and so on.

Other activities may impinge, but NOT to the point that they eat **all** the time you need for writing. If they are taking all 24 hours in the day, then take a good look, because your Ego is steering the ship.

The Second type of avoidance, one of my favorites, is searching for the **Perfect Gear**. You need a specific French linen paper journal in order to lure the muse, or a special pen, your office needs weeding out or, better still, redecorating. So you end up with a clean office, new curtains, new pen and the same blank page.

The third avoidance tactics can take the form of **Polishing to Death**. Slow or low output means you are writing, but speed that insure you never have to worry about finishing or submitting a story. Last year you finished your first three chapters and entered contests. Based on those suggestions you have returned to page one and revamped the opening, now you are nearly done with your draft, but you have to keep going back and re-reading what you have already written. Sound familiar? By never finishing you never have to face rejection.

Don’t get me wrong – every writer needs to do revisions, lots of them. But this type of polishing goes beyond that.

A variation on this is to show your writing only for ‘safe’ people, like your critique partner, your sister and your dog. This is a form of self-publishing without the expense or unpredictable audience.

Fourth type of avoidance is the **Non-writing Writing**. This is all those extra jobs like spending hours on research, outlines, editing existing writing instead of forging on, creating one more draft, checking your email, blog entry, updating your website, designing a business card, correspondence, updating a database, designing bookmarks, playing solitaire, writing another article for your chapter’s newsletter. None of these activities advance your story.

Fifth is **Making Excuses** is my final example of avoidance. If you have a good excuse, you are not really responsible for avoiding writing. One of the most common is losing your work. The computer crashed, the disk dissolved. It's the modern version of 'the dog ate my homework.' Frustrating, yes. A reason not to write - no. Either we have the time to write or we have an airtight reason why it is not even remotely possible. I encourage you to fill out the blank below and see what creative output your Ego is capable of.

I could be a terrific writer except _____



Your Ego

Wrote this

Sixth type of avoidance is **Writer's Block** is the ultimate form of avoidance. It might be a red flag that your story is heading in the wrong direction. It also might be the subconscious trying to stop the writer from making an utter fool of herself or from revealing dark secrets or traveling to dangerous places.

The final Ego response does not involve avoidance. It is **Getting Mad**. We seek opinions of contest judges, editors, critique partners and sometimes when we get it, we get really angry. That's normal. **Anger is a mask hiding fear**. Even constructive comments challenge our ego.

Rejections hurt, but in the long run, your response to rejection might be your best weapon, if you choose **persistence** and **perseverance**. What you do with rejections determines a lot. Failure makes some quit and perhaps that is best. Listen, not everyone has the stomach for the kind of risk, exposure and rejection writing involves. But for those who do not quit, rejection can light a fire in the belly. Here the Ego can help, for a change, by stepping in to defend and giving the writer an 'I'll show you' attitude that makes the writer work harder to prove judges, editors and other detractors that you do have what it takes. Turn your hurt into a bubbling little caldron of "I'll show you."

Don't dismiss your detractors as too stupid to see your genius, but instead let these comments prompt you to improve your writing, through fury, if necessary. Focus your resentment into a

laser beam of motivation. By not focusing it, you allow Ego to steer you into relatively safe activities such as procrastination, excuses, undertaking just one more edit, finding the perfect gear and engaging in non-writing writing. And if you let that happen, you never have to face rejection and failure. You do not have to walk naked through the streets. And you won't have to give up your dream, exactly, it will just take longer than expected.

Isn't that Ego tricky? But fear is crucial in good writing.

Fear is Important.

Fear energizes. Why else would people pay to ride roller coasters, see scary movies and buy our books! Fear can be transformed into excitement and arousal in your work. Don't write despite the fear – write because of it.

“Readers sense when a writer feels in jeopardy and pay close attention.” Ralph Keyes says that **“daring is always more riveting than skill.”**

This means being prepared to take risks and record your *first thoughts*. The ones that come straight from your subconscious, before that Censor in Chief gets a hold of them and weakens them into something safe, non-controversial, inoffensive and boring.

You can't avoid being stripped naked in front of your reader if you are going to provide the raw emotion and deeply moving situations they crave. Ralph Keyes says that **“Embarrassment is like a dowsing rod pointing its quivering tip right at deep wells of rich material.”** The best ideas are personal, candid and deeply felt, which means they are scary!

I'm telling you right now, that fear can help guide your work to the dangerous ground that produces intensely emotional prose, but how do you write through it?

You've seen how tricky your Ego can be. So you need to be trickier. In Part II we'll look at ways to trick your Ego into silence by making it unaware you are taking risks in your writing.

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