

On Deadline for *The Times*: A Poet's Brush with Fame and Fortune

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I had just begun sorting poems for mailing to literary journals when the phone rang. My once-a-month "submission days" (aptly named since the process of offering my poetry for publication makes me feel like a supplicant) always infect me with a feeling of negativity, so I paused as the answering machine clicked on, hoping that a friendly voice might persuade me to violate my usual ban on interruptions. I begin most writing sessions by turning the phone off completely, deafening myself to social enticement, but submission days require no focus, just pure blind, resigned busyness: get the stuff in the mail so it's out there, likely to come homing back in a few months, but at least out there.

When the caller identified himself I twirled my chair in pleasure, then with an exaggerated flourish swept from the desk a pile of clippings advertising poetry prizes, fellowships, and calls for manuscripts. Kicking away the nine-by-twelve manila envelopes and paperclipped sets of poems, I gazed out the window like a laborer who has just punched out on the day before vacation. For the next two months, the clipped "Please call" assured me, I would bask in the waters of the intellectual elite, bump up to first class in the jet to writerly recognition, reap good value for my words rather than a pair of book-rated contributors copies. My benefactor? An editor from *The New York Times Book Review* who summoned me periodically to comment on nonfiction. Continuing to look out the window, I arched a brow as if forming an influential literary opinion. For the next two months, watch out: I was on deadline for *The Times*.

"I'm on deadline for *The Times*," I muttered under my breath whenever obligations prevented me from hurrying home to work on my review. "I'm on deadline for *The Times*," I shouted to my golden retriever when she dallied in fetching a tennis ball at the windswept high school courts, nuzzling the pack of baggy-panted students trudging back from their morning joint behind the gym. "I'm on deadline for *The Times*," I longed to explain to these slackers. In reality I never declared myself "on deadline for *The Times*" out loud to anyone. My deadline consisted of two months to write a seven hundred word review, hardly the stuff of stop-the-presses and breathless phoned-in edits.

Although my morsel of literary polemic might not spark debate in the offices of the *New Yorker*, or stand comparison with Susan Sontag's treatises in *The New York Review of Books*, even the most modest voice gains authority when backed by *The Times*. In a bookstore recently I spied the paperback edition of a memoir I had reviewed lukewarmly the year before, my brief notice occupying a sliver of page deep inside the issue. The publisher had excerpted several favorable adjectives, emblazoning them in boldface across the front cover. The sight of my words, even in their decontextualized state, filled me with pride—that is, until I noticed that the *New York Times Book Review* alone received credit for the comment. I longed to sidle over to the only other customer in the store and whisper, "That's me! No, really, that's me!"

Despite such surges of egotism I'm surely among the most obscure writers ever to earn a by-line in this august newspaper. In fact, I owe my commission solely to a friend's generosity. Asked to review a collection of letters on poetry, this frequent *Book Review* contributor recommended me as a more qualified choice. Luckily, the editor sought variety and "freshness" in his reviewers and overlooked my lack

of experience. He called on Tuesday morning; I called back a fashionable half hour later. After pretending to weigh the appropriateness of the book's content to my interests and abilities, I agreed to "give it a try" and hung up, repeating "*The New York Times Book Review*, the goddamn *New York Times Book Review*." Then, like a cartoon where the caller says "I'll be there right away" even as his car screeches up outside, the book appeared the next morning in my mailbox, where I let it sit through the afternoon, *The Times's* logo peeking out for my neighbors to happen to see.

Why all this fuss over a piddling, tucked-away-on-page-twenty-seven, barely-time-to-clear-your-throat seven hundred word review? Let me elaborate. I am a rarely published, utterly unfamous poet. My first published poem saw print two and a half years after its acceptance, and my book manuscript once spent fourteen months in a prestigious New York publisher's possession. Finally, after my letters and phone calls pleading for a response, it arrived home in its soiled, chewed-through return envelope (stamped "Postage Due" since rates had increased during its confinement) with a soiled, chewed-through form rejection letter (I pictured the editor's Great Dane perusing my manuscript on a sundeck in the Hamptons, his incisors engrossed in one of my poems). In contrast, fewer than twenty-four hours elapsed between the initiation of my talks with *The Times* and receipt of the product.

The Times not only offered a spectacular improvement in my working conditions, it also expanded (albeit fleetingly) the audience for my writing. Last year one of my poems gained acceptance in a tiny journal published out of a midwestern university's English department; another poem had appeared in the same magazine the year before. These works, representing my entire two year publishing output, were read by my mother, siblings, a few English students at the sponsoring university, some browsers in the town's bookstores, and maybe a handful of intrepid souls who peruse poetry for pleasure. I report this not in order to whine—no rational poet writes with an eye toward fame or profit—but to explain why a turn before *The Times's* gargantuan readership attracted me the way a week in St. Tropez might tempt a lifelong miner.

The benefits go beyond mere efficiency and exposure. A poet accustomed to patronizing smiles when he mentions his publishing credentials marvels at *The Times's* reputation—this is some serious prestige. Not just writers and readers but non-writers and non-readers hearken to the name. Last year, as I prepared for parent conferences at the high school where I teach, a deep voice called my name across the gymnasium: "Let me shake the hand of a man who has published in *The Times Book Review*." I turned to greet the lawyer father of one of my ninth graders. "I usually just read the mysteries column," he gushed, "but when I saw your name ..." The next day I sat grading essays in a library carrel when a series of shadows darkened my desk. Fellow teachers, a few students, and the principal stopped by to congratulate me on my review, the latter calling me "a credit to our school."

The whole process of reviewing for *The Times* felt so gratifying, so professional, so *unfamiliar*. Hired to write, one writes, sends the manuscript forth and promptly (about two months between delivery and publication) holds the published version. This must be how William Safire feels all the time, the kind of response that John Grisham anticipates with every tap of the keyboard. Does such attentiveness to their words affect their writing? I can't imagine. Except for a few Nobel Laureates and popular icons such as Allen Ginsberg and Maya Angelou, poets never receive such acknowledgment. At best, they hear an occasional "I liked your poem in *University X Review*," and these comments usually come from fellow poets sensitive to the tribe's hunger for affirmation.

Then there's the payment, generous and prompt, especially gratifying to a writer accustomed to compensation in contributor's copies, subscriptions or, most galling of all, copies of the winning book in a manuscript competition one has lost. Days after delivery of the review a check arrives with the familiar Times Roman typeface (on these occasions I pick my morning newspaper off the

stoop with a marvelous sense of “we-ness,” as in “What’s in our newspaper today?”). The fee totals more than I’ve received for all of my published poems together, enough to make me feel for once respectably compensated, and even to allow me to fantasize that I write for a living. But damn the amount; what matters is the efficiency. (Well, before damning the amount I calculated how many reviews per year it would take to support me and badgered my editor at polite intervals in the hope that we might get a regular thing going, but he waited two years to pitch another book, suggesting either that he finds my sensibility too refined for just anything, or has a hundred other equally eager candidates.)

Prior to my first *Times* assignment, my reviews had only appeared in literary journals with tiny circulations. Their obscurity encouraged me to opine freely, assailing mediocrity and overblown reputations, praising or condemning solely according to the dictates of my taste. On one occasion this bluntness backfired: reviewing a collection of prose by an influential critic whose prominently published essays could boost or derail a poet’s career, I suggested that for all of this writer’s erudition and insight, she had terrible literary judgment. I never dreamed that she would come across my words. Then one day her handwritten postcard arrived, asking with pained politeness which poets I would recommend that she read.

Luckily the woman had not taken offense, though her graciousness felt more punishing than any reprimand. The episode taught me that the printed page serves as no shield between a reviewer and his words. This lesson haunted me as I tore open my first review copy from *The Times*. What if I didn’t like the book? Did I dare flex my critical claws before the paper’s national audience? I recalled those letters that appear periodically in the *Book Review*, fired off by huffy experts (or, in awkward cases, by the reviewed authors themselves) eager to root out bias or correct misstatements. My new readership would include people far more learned than I, forcing me to proceed carefully and avoid wrong or stupid comments. Thus far my published writing had felt a bit like a joke muttered in a private club, intended only for a few sympathetic ears. I knew that no faceless public was scrutinizing my work, vigilant for offense or error. Now, fearful of sounding inaccurate or cruel or both, and torn by the dual pulls of honesty and diplomacy, I squirmed.

The book’s topic, religion, about which I know very little, exacerbated my concerns. My editor had assured me that the book needed “a poet’s perspective” in light of its determinedly lyrical style, but my qualifications ended there, so I checked an armful of religious histories out of the local library and spent a week immersed in them. Even the author intimidated me, having attracted a passionate following with two previous bestsellers. Given her recent popularity, I feared that not only would every Christian east of the Mississippi devoutly scrutinize my review, but that her legions of fans would expect it to be favorable. The entire project began to resemble a minefield dotted with unexploded theologians and bookbuyers, each faulty sentence strung like a tripwire promising disaster.

I tried to reassure myself that my diminutive review would hardly precipitate a firestorm, no matter how negative or wrong-headed. Glancing at the front pages of past issues of the *Book Review* with their two thousand word essays by famous writers, I realized that the true shapers of opinion toiled here, in full view of every browser. I wondered whether these titans shared my concern about the size of *The Times*’s audience or just typed out a quick draft or two, grateful for the well-paid hack work and loath to take too much time from their own novels and biographies. Comparing the conspicuousness of their articles to mine, I felt both deflation at the puniness of my assignment and a surge of relief—after all, how many readers would even find my notice tucked away in the bowels of the issue? My answer to this question came when my phone began to ring at midmorning on the Sunday of publication: not only do the most motivated and often best qualified readers track down those buried

reviews, but an astonishing number of people read the *Book Review* from cover to cover.

In the end I didn't much like the book my editor sent me, but coaxed my review into liking it quite well. I simply couldn't savage it, an act which might mean savaging its sales as well as its author's feelings. Who was I to spread such damage with my opinion? This humane view contradicted the one I had held before employment by the *Book Review*, which I used to fling across the room, disgusted by its contributors' relentless approval, particularly of poetry. Now, cautioned by my experience with the critic and by the reality of *The Times's* influence, I strove for a balance of honesty and diplomacy. In fact, I fretted over those seven hundred words like an Oscar winner over his acceptance speech, a President over his State of the Union address, a poet over her poem. I molded each phrase and shaded each opinion, compulsively checking my dictionary to confirm that sentences said exactly what I intended. My obsessiveness arose in part from a desire for accuracy, but also from a need to live with my words. I wanted to tell the truth but tell it upbeat, a feat requiring considerable dexterity.

My first serious challenge occurred during the "however" paragraph, that point where the reviewer switches from praising to finding fault. I felt obligated to mention that the author had struck me as too tolerant of a cowboy's racist comment, an example of her attitude of unquestioning Christian forgiveness that to my mind often weakened the book. But how could I even hint at racism in a national newspaper? I reread the offending passage in the book, trying to find my own grounds for excusing it. Failing this, I doggedly revised my own words in order to muffle their accusatory tone. I imagined the author dashing off a furious, or worse, bewildered denial of my charge in a letter to the editor, and weighed this possibility against my own self-loathing if I ignored her transgression. Finally, I carved out a compromise, replacing "racism" with a milder word and suggesting that the author "seemed" to condone the epithet. Then I quickly launched the next paragraph with a "Nevertheless" transition, reiterating the book's virtues and coasting home on a current of approval.

Such contortions made me long for the bluntness of my old literary magazine reviews, and for poetry, where one simply writes, uninhibited by any scrutiny. Not that I covet obscurity—in fact, I can't conceive of writing solely for myself or posthumous glory, though both of these motivations help spur me to work each day. I even fantasize about my poems reaching a wide readership. No sooner does that prospect arise, however, than it terrifies me, guaranteeing that I will never write well again because my work has always sprung in part from a hunger for recognition. I try to conquer such ambivalence, particularly during composition, by envisioning a modest audience, equal parts real and imaginary, consisting of friends, relatives, colleagues and a cast of living and dead writers whose genius I hope to honor.

No strangers infiltrate this group, except when *The Times* amplifies my literary voice. Gathering the Sunday newspaper off the stoop, I marvel at this sudden exposure, trying to picture all who will read my words: a woman encountered in a bookstore; a former high school English teacher; former students; the author's mother; my mother; a thousand faces I will never see. In a week, of course, my seven hundred words, my most prestigious, lucrative writing ever, will have become old news, the stuff of recycling bins and hamster cages. By the time a publicist shuffles them into a glowing blurb on the paperback's cover, omitting my name to display *The Times's* more prominently, they will no longer belong to me, but to the newspaper that bought them. So much for big time reviewing: a quick buck, a turn in the spotlight, something to brag about.