Twitter may have earned its reputation as a cesspool for trolls and virtual shouting matches, but light does spring forth from the darkness on occasion. A few months ago, a hashtag began making the rounds in the writing community on Twitter: #ShareYourRejections. The response was shocking. Did you know that the great Roxane Gay was rejected from Bread Loaf so many times that she stopped applying just three years ago? Poet Saeed Jones is another recipient of multiple Bread Loaf rejections, and he's got a Pushcart Prize to his name. Acclaimed author Jason Reynolds has had 40-plus picture books rejected, novelist Jami Attenberg's own *publisher* rejected a manuscript that went on to become a *New York Times* best-seller, and prolific YA/MG author Shannon Hale received so many rejections for her first novel that she printed them, laminated them into one terrifyingly long chain, and brings it to show students on school visits.

As for me, I once had a boss who believed I was the worst editor ever to wield a pen. It seemed I could do nothing right; I was unbearable, insufferable, a disgrace to the profession, his appointed cross to bear. And when your own worth is rejected daily by your supposed mentor, well, eventually, you start to reject it yourself.

Here's the thing about rejections: Each one contains a kernel of truth. But sometimes that truth reflects on the rejecter, not the work. And knowing the difference – recognizing the "it's not right for *me* right now" versus "it's not right for *publication* right now" – is one of the trickiest tight ropes a writer must walk.

Like the other writers above, my story found its happy ending. But the road to a happy ending is a long one, a journey that requires both feet on the path. To all the writers who haven't yet found the end of their rainbow, take heart: You're on a hero's quest, and no protagonist ever waltzed into Oz, Mordor, or the Temple of Doom and immediately skipped out victorious. The one thing all the writers above (and Dorothy, and Frodo, and Indy) all have in common is that they didn't let these obstacles deter them. Even when the going got tough. Even after countless denials. They believed in their work, their potential, their dream, and above all, themselves.

You must do the same.

Keep writing,

Nicki Porter
SENIOR EDITOR

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* "Don't let anyone discourage you from writing. If you become a professional writer, there are plenty of editors, reviewers, critics, and book buyers to do that." —Jane Yolen

To read or not to read?

Dealing with online comments about your work.

By Candy Schulman

When I discuss style in the writing workshops I teach, I quote Voltaire: "Every style that is not boring is a good one." I teach my students to compel the reader – and especially an editor's attention – with a strong voice, dramatic tension, skillful scene-setting, and a sense of urgency.

Recently, I was accused of not meeting Voltaire's standard. A reader left a comment in response to my essay "The Trial Retirement: Are You Really Ready to Stop Working?" in the online publication *Next Tribe.* Granted a summer teaching sabbatical, I was exploring whether I was ready to retire.

The comment that stung said simply: "Incredibly boring."

The biggest insult you can call a writer. Or is it?

The truth is, I've been called much worse. Personal attacks have left me feeling angry, even shaken. Gone are the days when a reader had to go to the post office to mail a message to you. Early in my writing career, I received a letter from a *Family Circle* reader vehemently objecting to the fact that I'd called Paul McCartney "middle-aged." Rather than feeling offended, I had to smile.

Today, online comments to our articles are immediate and often strident, insulting, and painful. "Boring" sounds tame when I've been accused of being a bad mother, mentally unfit, and elitist. I know I should ignore or brush off comments, realizing that the person might not have even read or internalized what I've written. Yet my writer's curiosity often overrules the rational part of my brain that advises me to stay away. Repeatedly, I've felt hurt inside, as if I'm back in middle school and the class bully is humiliating me in front of everyone.

In my essay for the *Washington Post* about how my daughter became my temporary caretaker after my intense dental surgery, I was stunned at the way readers reacted:

This is way over the top. She's a 22-year-old adult. You are treating her like a 10-year-old.

Your flair for overwrought self-indulgent drama is laughable, so this must be a joke.

Why the self-consciousness about bruising? Would you refuse to go out in public with a cast on a fracture? I hope you never really get sick.

AlexanderPavlov/Shutterstock

I was merely trying to reflect on how role reversal with your child can be comforting as well as a disconcerting reminder of our mortality. My goal was to illuminate deep emotions that readers also experienced. As an essayist, I always hope my readers could learn something or feel consoled by my reflections.

Who were these anonymous cyberspace critics? And what gave them the right to attack me? Commonly known as internet trolls, they discounted my painstaking work as a writer. The barbs that hit hardest were the ones that went beyond my writing style and questioned my role and competence as a mother. In the *Washington Post,* when I wrote about student stress in "Burnout on the High School Treadmill," more than 200 comments rolled in.

This piece seems to typify the elitist bubble so many pundits live in and mistake for the real world.

Why are you writing about how awful your daughter's life is rather than fixing it? Give her her life back.

This author sounds like a sociopath. I feel sorry for her daughter.

This is such a "crock of crap."

This article is another in a long line of whining self-loathing amongst the so-called "East Coast elite."

Woman, the problem is YOU, not the system.

A colleague remarked that the harshest comments flung at writers are when we write about children or dogs. I don't have a dog, but I once wrote about my daughter's hamster and our family's grief when he broke his back from a fall, and we made the difficult decision to put him to sleep at the vet.

Just flush him down the toilet, advised one reader.

Writing op-eds about politics elicits the fiercest responses online. When I criticized Melania Trump's alleged plagiarism, a reader wrote: "It demonstrates just how clueless and out of touch most college professors are. Apparently, in Ms. Schulman's 'real world,' the standards are very different for Democrats."

So what is an out-of-touch, clueless college professor like me to do? Stop reading comments completely?

"To write well, express yourself like the common people, but think like a wise man." —Aristotle

"It's easy to say don't read them, and while it's the best defense, it's so hard to do," says Lisa Romeo, author of the memoir *Starting With Goodbye*. "I hold off reading for as long as I can stand it but then weaken. Then I make sure I DO NOTHING in response – except maybe grouse in a safe place where other writers understand."

"Sometimes I laugh if they're funny or if it's obvious they didn't read the piece," says essayist Robin Eileen Bernstein. "I never respond," she adds, an adage to which many writers adhere.

"Try not to take it personally," urges Kristina Wright, a parenting and lifestyle writer in Richmond, Virginia. "It says more about the commenter than it does about your writing. Also, other commenters often take care of the rude ones, which can be very validating."

Some writers do spar, even curse at their attackers. "If they have good points, be snarky back, but keep your skirt clean from the mud," says L.A. writer Katharine Coldiron. "If they don't have good points but you must reply, spam with pictures of unicorns. They'll comment nastily on them, and it'll show that they'll comment nastily on anything."

Other writers rely on their spouses to navigate through the comments, protecting their loved ones by not sharing anything bizarre or cruel. Friends also step in, posting supportive comments to balance the good vs. bad responses.

Dueling comments might not please you but may make your editor happy. Online debate can catapult a publication into wider attention. As Oscar Wilde quipped, long before Twitter, "The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about."

I am consoled, even relieved, on rare occasions when *all* commenters refrain from attacking my work. In my essay *My Motherless Mother* in the *New York Times*, I wrote about forgiving my complicated mother, who'd grown up in an orphanage; in spite of our struggles and the nurturing I'd never received from her as a child, I was able to care for her in old age, when she suffered from Lewy body dementia.

Every one of the 219 comments expressed admiration, empathy, and kindness toward me and my late mother. I read them all. Several times. I even thanked some of them for their supportive comments.

We all welcome praise. But it's a much wiser strategy to seek approval elsewhere, in a workshop or a peer writing group. In the writing classes I teach, I emphasize that critiques must be shared in a supportive way. It's all about balance: first respond to a writer's work with insight into the strengths of a piece and second with constructive suggestions on how to improve the work.

In the online comment world, however, there aren't any ethical rules. Chaos and anarchy can reign. Internet trolls aren't trained literary critics. It's as if their ids have been uncapped and they feel free to say whatever they want without repercussions. I have learned to keep this in mind, trying my best not to take negative comments personally. Instead, I remind myself how much I believed in my work when I finished my essay and proudly sent it off for publication. And then I start to work on a new piece, determined to write in a style that is anything but boring. If online strangers respond with vitriol, that's a risk I must take in my craft. In writing, as in life, I may sometimes get booed, but what a glorious feeling it is to remain true to my words.

—Candy Schulman is an award-winning writer whose essays have appeared in the New York Times, The Washington Post, Salon, Parents, The Chicago Tribune, *and others including anthologies. She is a creative writing professor at* The New School in Greenwich Village.

John Martins

WRITERS ON WRITING

Lauret Savoy

Lauret Savoy's book *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape* won the ASLE Creative Writing Award and American Book Award, was a finalist for the Phillis Wheatley Book Award and PEN American Open Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Orion Book Award and the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. Savoy's writing and editing often draw on her work as a geologist. She is co-editor of *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World* and *Bedrock: Writers on the Wonders of Geology* and is a co-author of *Living with the Changing California Coast*. In addition to being an author and geologist, she is also a professor and photographer and currently serves as David B. Truman Professor of Environmental Studies and Geology at Mount Holyoke, a Seven Sisters College located in South Hadley, Massachusetts.

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT WRITING?

There isn't a single most important thing that I've learned but a few, all linked together. And I hope that I'll learn much more in time. My writing began in my struggle to answer – or at least come to terms with – questions that long haunted me, questions like these: If each of our lives is an instant, like a camera shutter opening then closing, what can we make of our place in the world for that instant? And then, over time and space, what do generations of instants mean?

I learned that the past I come from is broken and pitted by gaps left by silences stretched across generations. By losses of language and voice. By human displacements. By immeasurable dimensions of lives compressed and deflated under the weight of ignorance and stereotype. By dismembering narratives of who "we the people" are to each other in this land.

AND HOW HAS THAT HELPED YOU AS A WRITER?

What comes first to mind is *responsibility*, the ability to respond, the capacity to attend, to stand behind one's acts. It is a key word for me. I have a responsibility to *re*-member, to piece together the fragments left as a way of pushing back forgetting, forgetfulness. By confronting emptiness and erasure, I believe the writer can un-forget. Hélène Cixous's words come to mind. Reflecting on the works of Clarice Lispector, Cixous described writing as "touching the mystery, delicately, with the tips of the words, trying not to crush it, in order to un-lie." Yes.

—Gabriel Packard is the author of The Painted Ocean: A Novel, *published by Corsair, an imprint of Little, Brown.*

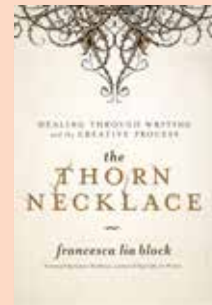
BOOKISH

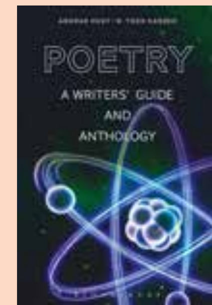
Next Line, Please
By David Lehman

Every Tuesday, *Best American Poetry* series editor David Lehman challenges poets – both renowned and unknown – to write a poem following a certain set of restrictions as part of "Next Line, Please," his interactive poetry column on *The American Scholar* website. Lehman's column attracted a significant following, and now we have *Next Line, Please: Prompts to Inspire Poets and Writers*, a compilation of "Next Line, Please" prompts from 2014-2016. The resulting book of poetry prompts aims to provide "a masterclass in writing in form and collaborative composition."

The Thorn Necklace: Healing Through Writing and the Creative Process
By Francesca Lia Block

"I've written to transform pain, to save my mind from its incessant loopings, to save my life," writes award-winning fiction author and memoirist Francesca Lia Block in *The Thorn Necklace: Healing Through Writing and the Creative Process*. Block's teaching strategy relies on the "Twelve Questions" every writer must ask themselves, a process that the author developed over her three decades as a writer and teacher. In *The Thorn Necklace*, Block blends examples from her own life with analyses of famous works of literature to help writers deliver a successful story.





Poetry: A Writers' Guide and Anthology
Edited by Amorak Huey and W. Todd Kaneko

Billed as "a complete introduction to the art and craft of writing poetry," *Poetry: A Writers' Guide and Anthology* provides both instruction and inspiration for new poets. Section I, "An Introduction to Poetry," offers in-depth answers to questions such as "Why Do We Write Poems?" and "What Does It Mean to Be a Poet?" Section II, "The Elements of Poetry," covers craft, including diction, form, syntax, and voice. Section III, "Practicalities," offers a how-to guide for poetry workshops. Finally, the book concludes with an anthology of works by leading contemporary poets.

The Geek's Guide to the Writing Life
By Stephanie Vanderslice

"Literally or metaphorically, I've never sat at the cool kids' table in the cafeteria – whether in high school or the literary world – in my life," writes Stephanie Vanderslice, director of the University of Central Arkansas' Arkansas Writer's MFA workshop, in *The Geek's Guide to the Writing Life*. With refreshing and disarming honesty, Vanderslice encourages writers while delivering cut-to-the-chase advice. The book contains short, incessantly readable chapters that cover topics like craft, platform building, options for pursuing a writing education, and both traditional and non-traditional book publishing.