

Life After Writing, by Ray Zimmerman

The check was not in the mailbox. No worries. The bills were not due for another week and my work from home job always paid in a timely manner. Instead of rushing to my bank with a deposit, I faced an ominous letter from the Writers' Office of Standards, Code Enforcement Division, an organization which would occupy my time for the next week. I well remember the contents of that letter. It said:

Dear Writer:

Your Writer's Permit has been suspended. The Standards Committee has found your writing to be outside the accepted norms for content or style. You are challenged to document appropriate writing to restore your permit. On the assigned day, please bring your copy of the Writer's Permit and appropriate writing samples, preferably published, to the Office of Standards, Code Enforcement Division, for examination by a representative Standards Officer. The line may look long, but it moves quickly.

The Standards Officer will examine your works for appropriate content and style. Character development and plot will count heavily for works of fiction. Nonfiction works should exhibit believability. Poetic works should contain both metaphor and extended metaphor as well as appropriate rhythm. Extraneous words weigh heavily against writers in all genres.

Should you receive a negative evaluation and wish to appeal the Standards Officer's decision, please be advised that the appeal is a three-day process. Rooms in the Appeals Center have Spartan accommodations consisting of a bed, writing desk and appropriate chair. Friends and relatives are welcome to bring food to assist you with dietary restrictions which the available food may not accommodate. Visitors are encouraged to make their stay brief so you can focus on the business of completing your appeal.

Be sure to bring a blank journal and pens. Typewriters, tablets, laptops, and other devices are strictly prohibited. All appeals must be written by hand. At the end of three days, you will read your memoir, book of poems, or work of fiction aloud to a panel of three widely published authors who will judge it based on your delivery and the merits of the work. The Appeals Center will provide reasonable amounts of water and throat lozenges to allow you to complete this task.

Should you continue to write after your visit to the office of Office of Standards and/or Appeals Center, please remember to conform to the standards of the writing community. Small groups of writers have at times attempted to create a movement with new writing standards and achieved brief success, but only the established standards have withstood the test of time.

Good Luck

Siegfried von Machsnichst

Comptroller General

On the appointed day, I carried a small briefcase which held a folio of published poems, a short story collection, and a novel in progress, as well as the pens and journal for a possible stay at the Appeals Center. I had prepared a satchel of clothing which a friend would deliver if needed. It would certainly be searched for pre-written material.

I arrived at the Office of Standards early, but a line of 23 people already awaited the Standards Officer's arrival. A short woman in a business suit entered the room.

I expected her to immediately begin examining works by the writer at the head of the line, but no, she took a place in line and gave me a sardonic smile. "Better get in line, more of us will arrive any minute now. First time through the process?"

I had not thought anyone would go through this daunting process more than once. As I took my place, 25th in line, I noticed a window at the front of the room, closed with a wooden shutter and protected with iron bars.

The window had a counter large enough to hold a manuscript. It was flanked by two similar windows. A clock above the window indicated five minutes until opening time.

"Why the iron bars?" I wondered aloud.

The woman in front of me snorted, "They keep rejected writers from grabbing the standards officer while making threats or shouting about being the nation's greatest up and coming author.

Sometimes they belittle the Standards Officer, the Standards Committee, or the Office of Standards. Sometimes they get out of hand. I saw one hauled off to an asylum. Too bad, his writing was actually OK."

Every eye focused on the window as it opened with a loud screech. A rotund man wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a light blue shirt, and a blue pinstriped blazer surveyed the line from behind the bars and blinked.

Presumably, the blazer had matching pants, but from our perspective, he could have been wearing Bermuda shorts. His large handlebar mustache was incongruous on his otherwise cleanshaven face and head. "First writer!" he proclaimed.

Each writer in turn placed their writing samples on the counter. The portly Standards Officer briefly examined one or two samples and stamped the Writer's Permits "Approved" or "Rejected." He pointed to his right for those who were accepted, left for those rejected.

All went smoothly until the seventh writer in line, a thin nervous man, received the rejection gesture. "No, no, no," he shouted. "I won't appeal. I can't give this place another three days of my life." He exited through a previously unseen door.

With a chuckle, the woman in front of me said, "Frequent flier. He'll be back. He has three days to change his mind, you know."

According to the clock above the window, an hour had passed. The line behind me stretched to the entrance. A guard, now stationed there, briefly opened the door and assured the writer's outside that they would be admitted as space allowed.

After completing his review of the twelfth writer's work, the Standards Officer proclaimed, "Break time. Reviews will resume in 15 minutes." The windowed screeched shut.

"Easy for him to say," said someone further up the line. "He actually gets a break."

Ascertaining that I would hold her place in line, the woman in front of me strolled to the ladies room. Others noticed this and availed themselves of the facilities. In some cases, arguments ensued when they returned to their places in line.

Precisely fifteen minutes later, the shutter screeched open. "Thirteenth writer," proclaimed the now familiar Standards Officer.

The window to his right likewise screeched open and a woman in a silk blouse and navy blazer proclaimed, "hold your places in line." Fourteenth writer, please."

Ten minutes later, the remaining window opened. A man with an angular, carrot shaped head and red hair looked out. He wore a matching black tie and black shirt. "Seventeenth writer," he proclaimed.

Half an hour later he called out "Twenty-fifth writer."

I stepped forward and placed my writing samples on the counter.

He fanned through the portfolio of poems and set it down. He did the same with the short stories, "Published collection. Exceptionally good."

Then he picked up the manuscript, "Novel in progress. Excellent. I'll look at this."

He fanned through the pages, quickly read two, and proclaimed, "Sophomoric! Work rejected."

He stamped the rejected seal in red ink on my permit.

"Are you appealing?" he queried.

"Some people think so," I nearly replied. I thought better of it and simply said "Yes."

He stamped the purple seal of appeal on my permit and pointed to his, left, my right.

As I entered the hallway and walked toward the appeals center, a raspy, yet melodious voice singing the strains of "Downtown Train" issued from the overhead speakers. An auspicious omen, I thought.