

“The Prague Affair” (15,700 words) is a novelette which I am currently submitting to various publications and contests, you may read the opening below:

THE PRAGUE AFFAIR

In the end Jeremy Susskind decided to publish online.

It had taken Susskind four years to write the novel *The Return to the Wall* (working titles included: *The Return*, *Back to the Wall*, *Visions of a Return*, *The Man Who Came Back*, and *The Wall*), and when he finally felt that it was in the best shape it would achieve, he was almost irked to find that the book wasn't already printed, bound, and available in bookstores across the country, respectfully shelved between the works of William Styron and Italo Svevo.

Though Susskind was eager to move on to writing a new novel, for which he had a title but no plot, he turned instead to the task of submitting his book to literary agents. He studied all the leading literary agencies, looking for agents who represented authors whose work he admired, and wrote them personalized query letters. In the beginning he sent his queries to one agent at a time, feeling certain that a positive response was imminent and not wishing to spend too much energy on such a time-consuming and unliterary task. After waiting for months and receiving nothing but impersonal rejections, he began submitting to three or four agents at a time.

Over the span of three years and seven months he offered his novel to 38 agents and was rejected by all of them, sometimes with a brief formulaic letter, rarely with a personal note to persevere and keep submitting (to other agents, naturally), and sometimes with an unbroken silence which troubled him far more than any offhand rejection. Did they get the e-mail? Did they read the sample? Are they just taking their time? Is it possible they’re still considering his book?

Susskind began to fear that his work was too literary, too intellectual for most literary agents, who are only interested in authors that will make them a lot of money. Unfortunately, the really big agents, the tastemakers and career builders, the ones who are interested in more than just the bottom line, were not open to unsolicited submissions and Susskind had no connections. He began looking at the small independent presses, the few that still existed, the few that were still searching for unrecognized literary greatness, but his book was rejected by all the ones he approached.

Susskind had received his MFA in creative writing from Pittsburgh University and continued to work there as an adjunct professor in the English Department and so it was assumed that, just like all his unpublished or insignificantly published coworkers, he must be working on something or other. But unlike the rest, Susskind kept his triumphs and failures private. He did not announce “3 AM, wired on coffee, 2,000 words down, how far will I go? #amwriting” on Twitter, he did not bemoan, “Rejected again!” on Facebook, and when he finally decided to publish his book online, he didn’t tell anyone about that either. If the book was a success, he reasoned, he could tell them about it at a

later stage, without it seeming like he was begging them to buy it, and if it was a failure, he could simply withdraw it and pretend that he had never put it up.

After extensive research he decided to publish his novel on Amazon, though he himself did not own a Kindle, or any other e-book reader, and could not even imagine purchasing or reading an e-book. He spent a week designing the cover, and another week wording the product description to make it appealing, but not to give away too much of the story, “a provocative and chilling tale of longing and despair.” He spent a lot of time considering the price for his book – he wanted to attract curious readers by making it inexpensive, but he also fantasized about becoming a bestseller and being able to make some sort of a living from his writing. Eventually he settled on \$2.99, which meant he would get \$2.05 for each copy sold. A tingle of excitement passed through him when he finally clicked the “publish” button, but it was soon replaced with an anxious anticipation, as minutes turned to hours turned to days, and no one bought his book.

One morning, almost a month after the book was published, Susskind entered his Amazon direct publishing account and found that a single purchase had been made. His book had been electronically transmitted to someone’s e-book reader, someone had read the blurb and found it intriguing, someone had been willing to pay \$2.99 to read Susskind’s debut novel. The book’s page on Amazon was still as desolate as ever, with far more than a million titles ahead of it in the bestseller ranking, and with the feeble admission “there are no customer reviews yet” at the bottom, but someone was not deterred by all that, someone wanted to find out for himself (or herself) what Susskind’s book was worth.

Susskind began checking his account three or four times a day, waiting for the deluge of readers, or at least for a review by his single reader, but for several weeks nothing changed. Then, just as suddenly, a second purchase occurred. Two days later, a single review titled “Misleading!” appeared on the book’s page. It gave *The Return to the Wall* one star out of five and read:

Don’t be fooled! This is NOT Donald A.M. Patrick’s *Return to the Walls*, the second volume of *The Saga of Basalt and Steel*. It’s cheaper but not the same. Total ripoff!

Susskind was furious. He wanted to report the review as inappropriate, but it didn’t really violate any of the murky rules of customer reviews. He wanted to comment on the review, that it was irrelevant, that it said nothing of the book itself, that the reviewer was a fool to confuse the two works, but he knew that his comment would appear under his own name, that everyone could see he was the author of the book, and it seemed improper for him to respond this way. As the author, he thought, he should have been above it all.

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Six months after Susskind’s book went online, after he had already given up on it, after he had stopped checking its sales every day, or even once a week, he received an email:

Hello dear Susskind Jeremy,

We are interested in translating your book *The Return to the Wall* to Czech

Please send number,
Luboš Kopecký
Translator
Relikvie Publishing

At first Susskind suspected it was a scam. He looked up the name of the translator and the publishing house online but could not find any reference to either. He searched for “Czech publishing scam”, but nothing came up. He thought that maybe they had made a mistake, like his single reviewer, and believed the book in question was the far more famous and successful volume from *The Saga of Basalt and Steel* epic fantasy series – a mistake which might be more understandable for someone whose native language is not English. Or else, Susskind thought, it might be some sort of vanity publisher, who will charge him a premium for the translation and publication. In the end he decided that no harm would come to him by simply responding, and so he replied:

Hello Mr. Kopecký,

I am honored that you would consider translating my book but I feel it is my duty to inform you, simply to avoid any possible miscommunication or misunderstanding, that my novel is not in any way related to Donald A.M. Patrick’s *The Saga of Basalt and Steel*. In case you truly are interested in publishing my novel, I have attached my contact details below.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Susskind

Immediately after sending the e-mail Susskind regretted it. Why should he have even brought up that other book? Would the translator be offended by the suggestion that he was mistaken? Did it perhaps unintentionally imply that he is unprofessional, or even stupid? At that point it occurred to him, for the first time, that the translator must have been his first and only reader. How else would he know about it? Someone at the publishing house must have read it if they wish to publish it.

The next morning Susskind was woken up by the telephone.

"Hello? Susskind?" a thick voice demanded.

"Yes?"

"This is Luboš."

Susskind looked at his alarm clock, it was not quite five in the morning.

"Who? Oh, the translator, yes, how are you?"

"Cold. I hope I am not waking you."

"No, it's fine."

"Listen, I have read your book, it is very good. We want to publish it, you speak Czech?"

"What? No, I don't speak Czech."

"Good. So you are interested?"

"I'm... look, you're not going to... I mean to say... I hope you're not offended but... you are a real publisher, right?"

"Of course."

Perhaps it was the early hour that made Susskind less tactful than usual.

“I just didn’t find any... any website, or anything about you.” He said.

“We are a new publishing house, we are only interested in publishing books, we have no use for websites and internets.”

“But, I wouldn’t have to pay you, right?”

“Pay us? No, no. The publishers pay. They pay me, they pay you. Is this not how it works in America?”

“Not always.”

“Don’t worry, they will pay, Výtisk and Pascheles, you have heard of them? They are known in Prague, they have enough money.”

“Oh, well, I’m glad to hear it.”

“Good, we will send you contract to sign.”

“Sure, and if you have any questions, you know, when you are translating the book, you can always ask me.”

“Thank you very much Mr. Susskind, I appreciate it.”

Susskind hung up the phone and got out of bed. His happiness was cocooned in anxiety; it was as if he had invited a girl to meet him for coffee and she accepted – there was mutual interest, certainly, but there was still so much that could go wrong. He brushed his teeth and wondered, why did the translator ask him if he could speak Czech? Was he worried that he might want to translate the book himself? Susskind thought back on the conversation; was the translator’s level of English sufficient for the job? Would he understand the significance of each character’s name? Would all his carefully wrought metaphors make sense in Czech?