

The Disunderstood Author

As a consummate professional, nothing annoys me more than the way authors are misunderstood. Like right now. See, you're probably thinking I don't know that "disunderstood" isn't a word. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Disunderstood most definitely *is* a word – it's *my* word. Look at it this way: when you were a kid, your first paper airplane probably didn't fly, or at the very best, it didn't fly well. But it was still *your* plane, wasn't it? I mean, you made it. That's why you loved and cherished it, adorned it with aviation stickers and showered it with kisses, extolled its virtues and overlooked its deficiencies and . . . oh, heck, let's face it. You tore it into pieces and made spitballs out of it. Which is to paper airplanes what literary critics do to authors, and to their work.

But that doesn't change the fact that authors are terribly, regrettably misunderstood – a combination of disrespected (i.e., dissed) and misunderstood. We are misunderstood by the public, by our editors, literary critics and publishers and, ultimately, even by ourselves. I'll give you an example. Most people think I only write in hope of achieving fortune and fame, to bathe in hedonistic desires, wallow in unashamed opulence and bask in the adoration of the masses. Hmm. Come to think of it, maybe they understand me better than I thought. But in actuality, my goal goes way beyond revolving circular beds, Jacuzzis filled with warm Perrier, and yachts the size of Caribbean islands. No, my books have a message, and if you read deeply, you'll find it.

Actually, if you read just the back cover, you'll find it. The message, located above the barcode, is something along the lines of \$15.95.

And that's another reason we authors are misunderstood. We take ourselves *waaay* too seriously. We want our literary craft to be appreciated, but rarely achieve the recognition we desire. Our resultant inferiority complexes chafe uncomfortably against our inflated artistic egos. When we are asked to do an interview, we can't resist telling the audience how wonderful we are. Wearing wire-rimmed, plate glass spectacles and decked out in navy blue double-breasted blazers over white turtleneck sweaters, pipe-props in hand, we look stuffy and textbook boring. If only we threw off the stupid blazers to show our gaudy Shakespearean pantaloons and parrot's head codpieces, the

audience might like us a bit more. Trust me, they don't want to hear some dull, dry story about how you overcome writer's block by polishing your pipe. I take it back. They probably would like to hear *that* anecdote, but only that one. In general, author interviews bore the public to death. What readers really want to hear is about the time you overdosed on painkillers and laxatives while on an African photo safari, suffering the delirium of a malarial nightmare. Mistaking a pregnant warthog for a camel, you jumped onto its back and galloped naked through an elephant wallow, whooping like a syphilitic gibbon. Torn to pieces by wild beasts, you were captured and reassembled by aliens who sapped you of your precious bodily fluids and purity of essence. You overcame your captors with a mental telepathy bomb, escaped their spaceship in a landing pod and rehydrated at a desert oasis. There, you were captured by cannibals who shrunk your head to the size and consistency of a Hacky Sack. Nonetheless you survived and returned to civilization, where Rick Moranis unshrunk your head and fortuitously enlarged preferred elements of your anatomy.

The audience, in other words, wants you to take them for a ride -- a fun, frenetic ride. The more reality you pack in along the way, the better, but don't forget to lower the safety bar and rocket your audience through a triple loop at seventy miles per hour. And so far, I've only been talking about home improvement manuals and cookbooks. Action/adventure novels are even more demanding.

Okay, so now we've got the audience's attention. But that doesn't mean they un-disunderstand us. And how can they? Much of the time, they don't even know what we authors are trying to convey. For that matter, I'm not sure *we* understand what we're doing. Some say the price of genius is insanity, but I wonder if that relationship is commutative. Are nutters secretly the most sane among us? If insane people know they're barking mad, are they really? Who are more crazy, the demented loons who know they're insane, or the allegedly sane people who deny their blithering idiocy? And how does this translate into book sales?

It doesn't. But nuttiness sells, even if we invent words that make sense to nobody but ourselves. If inventing words was a crime, President George W. Bush should have been impeached. He made up more words while choking on a pretzel than the rest of the literary world did for the eight years of his presidency. As was the case with our first paper airplanes, his comical Bush-

isms drew justifiable scorn. At least *we* learned to fold better paper airplanes. After eight years in office, Bush only got worse. The only thing that ever flew from his mouth straight and true was the sodden pretzel he coughed up.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying Bush never told the truth, I'm just saying pretzels don't lie.

In the end, Bush's "-isms" didn't fly, and neither does "disunderstood." Editors, agents and publishers see a word like that and don't even blink as they discard the author's query letter. These are the same people who believe authors to be immature, attention-seeking, self-centered prima donnas. So you see, authors aren't completely misunderstood after all! Somebody's got our number, even if we haven't ourselves recognized the petulant little children we are. Don't believe me? Tell a first-time author his or her book has the literary merit of fermented night soil. Then prepare yourself for the torrential infantile tantrum that is certain to follow.

All the same, if authors are insufferable egoists, they're angels compared to editors. Editors are simply a bunch of r__€±__, &sq__@\$*, id__#s who have nothing better to do than %*\$&t off and *#__@^ in the ☹α>{&).

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)#*\$^%. And those are their *good* qualities. Unlike us authors, who are the least demanding, lowest maintenance, most sane and mature people on planet Earth, as I said above. Or did I? My whole point is getting a little dazy—I'm dazed and my point is hazy. Perhaps I went overboard on the painkillers and laxatives again. Remind me, which one's the suppository? No matter. Wash them down with degreasing compound and they both taste the same. The only thing that really matters is that I'm still inventing words, and my editor continues to mail my manuscripts to ex-soviet satellite nations to be cut up and used as toilet paper.

But that's okay. If my work fails to make a mark on the world, the world can make a mark on my manuscripts. But now, you'll have to excuse me. One of the safari camels is rooting through the garbage pit outside my tent, and we've got perfect weather for a moon-lit ride. What do you think—should I bother to throw some clothes on, first?

Nah.

I'll tell you about it when I get back, okay?