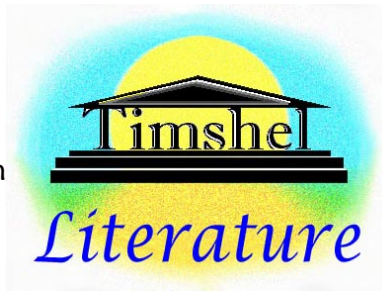


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Castor Oil for the Writer's Soul

by Justin Katz

For my 26th birthday, my brother-in-law and his wife gave me *Chicken Soup for the Writer's Soul*, with the inscription, "We figured a good writer could always use some soul for the heart." Of course, they were right. Four years after I began making serious attempts to publish, I have accumulated 128 rejections, with very few acceptances (none of which paid). This despite continual assurances from friends, family, teachers, other writers, and even some editors that I should, could, and — more importantly — would find publication. Given these statistics, it is understandable that I often need more to keep me plodding along than my wife's admonition to concentrate on the fact that I love writing.

Elated by the prospect of 385 pages of day-to-day encouragement, I wasn't looking for a way into the business, or even anything amounting to specific advice, just little bits of solace from people who've been in my shoes, which speaks, I believe, to the intention behind the book's publication. Unfortunately, most of the time that I spent reading the various stories left me feeling that, whatever the encouragement I might really need, it could not possibly be that offered by *Chicken Soup*. As is often the case with emotional or spiritual lessons, however, when I put the book down, I realized that the extent to which it didn't fit my vision of my needs, it accomplished exactly what I needed.

Sure, there are many uplifting and inspiring essays in *Chicken Soup for the Writer's Soul*, but it seems as if the majority fall into at least one of three categories. First are the instant-success stories, whether through a lucky break right away or immediately upon the decision to give writing a serious attempt. One of the book's authors/compiler, Bud Gardner, wrote what is perhaps the most depressing of these essays about how his career as a writer began. I am just shy of incredulous that Mr. Gardner believed that his story, in which the aspiring writer's big letdown was that his 15th submission turned out to be his first rejection, would be uplifting. "Face your fears," he seems to be telling the reader, "and begin writing." Personally, even my first 15 rejections hardly touched upon the fear I've since discovered.

A second category encompasses those writers who found success through personal tragedy. The more literary of these stories are told by people who were trying to become professional writers and failing until something happened that dramatically changed their lives and forced them to reconsider their positions and their writing... while simultaneously giving them compelling subjects with which to kick off their lives as born-again writers. I do not begrudge these writers their success, but theirs is not a route that a young writer could choose to follow as a procedure. Moreover, this story line is the less likely version to be trumpeted by popular magazines or Oprah, on whose show a "Finding Your Spirit" segment was devoted to a failed actor turned bicycle messenger turned published memoirist. This more popular brand of the success story is, of course, so widely publicized by virtue of the idea that it can literally happen to anybody, writers or otherwise. To the extent that this is true, I suppose these stories are indeed "uplifting" and "inspiring," though less so to people who have worked to hone their craft as writers and still are failing.

The third category of supposedly uplifting writer stories is often marketed as one of the other two to capitalize on the inspiration factor because their real lesson, success through luck or connections unrelated to writing, is by now mundane. In a section that is one of the most encouraging in the book, *Chicken Soup's* editors offer a litany of failure-to-success snippets, one of which relates that Dr. Seuss was rejected by 27 publishers before he sold his first children's book. When it is considered that, as far as I'm able to confirm, it was a chance meeting with an old associate that led to the final publication of *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, Dr. Seuss' blend of luck and networking seems too unmanageable to take as a tangible hope.

I've gotten the sense that part of the problem is that the publishing world has changed considerably since most of the essayists in *Chicken Soup* got their start, but I think that writers' strange opinion about what is uplifting to other writers has deeper implications. Successful writers are likely to concentrate on telling hopefuls about how they finally made it. Oh, they'll say that they felt God supporting them or that they always fell back on a love of writing for its own sake, but these synopses, while indubitably true, are distillations of the day-to-day mantras and interior dialogues that sustained them through years of rejection, and that is what I wanted to read — the daily justifications. Perhaps the average person has no desire to hear about years of struggle, but for a struggling writer, an inspiring figure would be an author who stuck to his or her guns, fought, and succeeded.

Perhaps I sound bitter, and perhaps I am a little, but my question goes further than that. In a book meant to uplift writers, where's the story of what I hope to be? I can't be alone in wanting to be a writer who writes on impulse, out of necessity — the mad raving wordsmith — and succeeds... enough. Enough to keep on writing and not starve. Alternately, when I picked up *Chicken Soup*, I would have liked to read an essay by a writer who was just beginning to get

his stride. Or a writer whose essay tore apart every reason for ever putting pen to paper while simultaneously confirming to herself, and to readers who are writers, the validity of those very reasons.

The inspiration that I eventually managed to derive from most of the vignettes in *Chicken Soup for the Writer's Soul* is like many other seemingly spurious justifications for continuing to write. If there are no publicized stories like mine, I guess I've got one more reason to succeed: to be that writer. I make this essay my pledge to do so (in the same spirit as telling everybody I knew when I quit smoking so that I'd be too embarrassed to fail).

So that's my motivation, at least for today and probably a few days hence. I honestly do believe, like some of *Chicken Soup's* contributors, that it would be a sin to squander abilities with which I've been gifted, and, like others, I do love writing of itself. But for the time being, the face that I'm putting on these constants is a desire to succeed and then write the essay that I would have liked to have read before I did.

Canfield, Jack, Mark Victor Hansen, and Bud Gardner, *Chicken Soup for the Writer's Soul*
(Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 2000)