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Ctrl F:

A scholar's tips for delving into the world of creative writing

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ABSTRACT: In this experimental nonfiction essay, the author recounts her (many) experiences with having her creative work rejected by mainstream outlets. Detailing the blessing and the curse that is the *Ctrl Find* command, she pokes fun at the creative writing process, and links her difficulties as a writer to her work as a middle school Language Arts teacher. She concludes with a final story about rejection (which happened to arrive as she was writing this very piece). Subtle implications about the difficulty of the writing process may or may not have been made for those who assess student writing.

Keywords: creative writing, literature, rejection, scholarship



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I habitually promise myself that the first ten minutes of my waking hours will exist email, text, and app free. I'll concede: It is the rare day that I keep that promise, and particularly as I await rejection notifications from prestigious outlets. I should probably stop leaving the phone next to my bed at night.¹

And even still, blurry-eyed and half-dreaming, I wipe away the vestiges of sleep as I lay in bed and study the email I received overnight. This one came from *Glimmer Train*, a coveted creative writing journal that actually pays its authors:

Last Fiction Open until December. Deadline: 6/30. Bulletin 101 follows. Winners and finalists have been notified, the Top 25 list is posted, and here are the Honorable Mentions.

The editors to whom I submitted my short story have graciously completed two-thirds of the work for me. Unlike the ways by which the world of academic scholarship functions, I was not notified any which way as to the status of my fiction submission, so that part was easy. I did not have to scroll down or click to learn that my attempt at a short story is not a winner or a finalist this time—or any time, for that matter.

Only the list of “Honorable Mentions” remains. I rush to my computer and click, over-flowing coffee in one hand, heart in the other. Perhaps the *Honorable Mentions* (quite the status to behold, even if miles away from “The Winners”) have also been notified, but this is not made

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I will use the gender-neutral pronoun

clear in *Glimmer Train*'s newsletter. Nor does it matter.

Is 6 a.m. too early for a White Russian? Yes?

What about wine? That counts as fruit, right?

Who knew that it would be “easier” to publish scholarship than to publish the product of your own imagination?

The Blessing and Curse of “Ctrl F”

I grew up in a time when, if a word or phrase jumped out in a book, magazine, newspaper, or some other “hard copy” (as if there were some opposite version of this in 1980? Some *non*-hold-in-your-hands version of whatever it is you happen to be reading?), you'd better highlight it, fold over the page, underline it, star it, put a sticky-note on it, accidentally smear peanut-butter on it, or otherwise flag it for safekeeping. On the other hand, if you failed to flag whatever it was that captured your interest, and if you desired to return to that word or phrase at a later date, you'd *better* carve out some time. Just a short while ago, Ctrl F—for “find”—was not an option for those of us who wished to revisit, reconsider, or re-experience whatever word, phrase, or idea that was worth saving at the time.

In some ways, I'll bet we were all hoping for some version of “Ctrl F” to come to our rescue, in any given situation; we merely lacked the pre-cell-phone, pre-computer language to articulate that desire:

“they” in an effort to recognize the fluid nature of identity and to not make assumptions about the ways that individuals identify or refer to themselves.

“But Mo-oommmmm, I was right across the street at *An-dreeews!*” If I missed curfew, I’m sure some cosmic version of *Ctrl F for Parents* would have saved my mom a lot of aggravation (and me from a series of month-long groundings). Maybe *Ctrl F for Families* would have brought my lost dog home a bit sooner, from where he found his way, shivering, on a neighbor’s porch on Fillmore Avenue.

“*Where. Were. You.*” Perhaps some version of *Ctrl F for Marrieds* would have saved my parents’ relationship. (Or maybe it would have destroyed their marriage a bit more quickly if *Ctrl F* allowed her to know, truly, what he had been up to).

“*Where for art thou Romeo?*” Maybe, just maybe, if there were some fourteenth- or fifteenth-century version of *Ctrl F for Star-Crossed Lovers*, Romeo’s impending suicide would not have been quite so...impending.

“Why do I do this for a living?” *Ctrl F for Teachers and Professors* on that frequent search for dignity lost.

“Why was my writing rejected *this time?*” *Ctrl F for Writers* in search of validation.

“Why was *I* rejected *this time?*” *Ctrl F for Writers Who Take Rejection Far Too Personally.*

“Why? Where? When?” *Ctrl F for Life*, and for anyone in the middle of an existential crisis (namely, graduate students).

And so on.

Fast-forward three decades, and the invention of *Ctrl F* kept the tears at bay (usually) during my

dissertation-writing year, a fraught year where I, at the very least, could rely on this gift from the technology gods to find a statement, a citation, a word, or a phrase with relative ease. The treasure troves unearthed by *Ctrl F* would determine, on a particularly rough day, whether a single page of my dissertation would come to fruition. (I, at times, could not move forward without “that” quote that I absolutely *needed* in order to make whatever argument I was hoping to make; an argument that would allow me to move on with my damned life, at least for that day.)

On such days, *Ctrl F*, accompanied by a strong White Russian, was the only thing guaranteed to bring me peace, happiness, and some sense of accomplishment. *Ctrl F* was that “thing” that made me wonder how researchers of generations

“With *Ctrl F*, one is granted the gift of efficiency and the inconvenience of a task left incomplete at the same time.”

past ever managed to finish their dissertations and theses. On particularly cranky days I believed that, if not for *Ctrl F*, I might not have finished my dissertation, at least not

satisfactorily.

On the other hand, and as most of us have experienced, *Ctrl F* does not always do its job as a lifeline. Perhaps an electronically formatted document does not recognize the words on the page. When *Ctrl F* comes up short, and if the computer’s speaker volume is turned all the way up, the result is sometimes deafening, releasing that single, abrasive chime; a ding signifying that *Ctrl F* was not able to accomplish what you hoped it would; the chime that mocks, “Do not bother with this search anymore—the word you need is not here.” With *Ctrl F*, one is granted the gift of efficiency and the inconvenience of a task left incomplete at the same time.

To be sure, I am grateful for the advent of Ctrl F. In graduate school, Ctrl F was my savior. My partner might even say that my beloved keyboard shortcut delivered me from evil during that godless “Dissertation Year™.” But now that I’ve gotten that pesky PhD out of the way and am on to more creative, enjoyable, and life-sustaining pursuits, Ctrl F has come to symbolize rejection; a life constantly in “Ctrl F” mode, except that the *F* now sticks to the keyboard, completely dysfunctional, like that time when I was 10 and ate an apple while playing Nintendo. I maneuvered the controllers with sticky, juicy, slimy fingers, and with a blind determination only a child would know: *It’s time to defeat the killer turtles and dragons.*

All of the water-soaked Q-Tips and cotton balls in the world would not get those controllers to work quite right after that. And frankly, my metaphorical Ctrl F remains similarly mal/functional; it’s as sticky as those controllers tasked with getting Mario to the next level. Except, now *I’m* Mario and perpetually stuck in some sort of netherworld, battling dragons (i.e., editors) with fireballs (i.e., mediocre writing submissions), only to shoot too high. Mario, jumping a little too high and a little too fast, falls between the cracks in the surface and into the fiery depths of a pixelated hell; a black hole of a writer’s world where “credibility” and “validation” are for others. For those toothy, smiling, *winning* thumbnails that make their way into my email at 6am on a Monday morning (of all mornings). For those authors with (I presume) similar stories to tell, except, they’ve managed to crack the code and defeat the dragons. *Their* Fs, somehow, some way, have become unstuck. Though, they’d probably argue, “No. *My* F is just less stuck than it was *before.*”

I continue to study the email I received from *Glimmer Train.*

I click on the “Honorable Mentions” link, a list containing somewhere around forty names of authors whose work did not place, was not quite “good enough” for that “Winner” designation, but was at least good enough for the honor of a mention. However, I could not bring myself to tap “Ctrl F” this time; I could not bring myself to enter my last name in a search box that would only chime and ding angrily at my efforts. So I scan the page. The results are clear, maybe even predictable, and my Italian-sounding last name is nowhere to be found.

Not even an “Honorable Mention.”

Maybe I’m not “literary” enough; perhaps too sophomoric for those who assess “literary fiction.” Too unsophisticated, at least when compared to those Winners whose characters entwine their delicate (or strong), expertly manicured fingers betwixt their perfect golden tresses as they meander, pensively, along the cobblestone path of some Parisian enclave or another. Those Winners whose literary inventions (with the most *fabulous* of tresses, be reminded) calmly—yet torturously, yet *calmly*—wait to be noticed by a mysterious other (or others, depending on how erotic of a tale we’re dealing with), and then wined, dined, and perhaps sexed (all in this order, mind you, but the story must always begin with someone’s golden tresses, whether belonging to a he or a she – perfect, *flaxen* tresses are nonnegotiable, and don’t you *dare* use that elementary word “hair,” what on God’s green Earth is *wrong* with you?).

All of this wining, dining, and sexing occurs (or will soon occur) at the masculine (or feminine) hands of *another* character with equally impressive tresses (the tresses do not have to be flaxen, this time, so perhaps choose something more exotic and literary, thank you) and who

cannot, should not, *dare* not be described using anything less than fifty-three adjectives, the likes of which most readers (except editors, for some reason) have not seen in print since the 15th century. In other words, the more obscure those adjectives, the better. Think SAT and GRE prep, and Shakespeare's earliest works if you really want to be literary. Ideally, you will use Shakespearean models—not yet unearthed—as exemplars of the type of literariness to which you should aspire, so get crackin' on those discoveries. And no, you cannot borrow my chisel because I need it to unearth my own exemplars of literary greatness, so find your own damned chisel, you incorrigible fool.

Moreover, you increase your chances of an editor's nod of some sort if you situate your fiction in some kind of nonfictional, historical event. Those characters with the tresses and the nice fingernails? (By the way, can't you come up with a more literary word for fingernails, stop being so damned sophomoric for Christ's sake? What about, for example, *rigid cellular matter that tends to form and re-form, emulating the shape of a crescent moon, at the fleshy tips of one's fingers*? Or! Better yet, *She seductively tickled his back with her smooth crescent-moons and fleshy tips*. Yes. That's it. The literary types understand the need for such metaphors, even if you want to stab your eyes out of your skull as you construct them. For worthy readers and writers, the literary essence of it all simply rolls right off the eyeballs... *Eyeballs*?! Here we go again with your puerile, under-developed vocabulary.)

Anyway, getting back to the tresses and the fingernails: *Situate* your fiction *historically* (even

if the editors of those coveted journals are not asking for historical fiction, per se) and ideally around an event (or person) that most of us do not remember or have not heard of (no worries, your use of obscure adjectives will increase your historical-knowledge-credibility, and this I promise you). Make sure those flaxen-and-exotic-tressed-characters are interacting, or sipping wine, or eating cheese, or sexing, or about to sex, or playing with their tresses or whatever, around some well-known national monument (ideally one that was destroyed in a war, and then rebuilt, and then destroyed again), or internment camp, or some really horrible natural disaster that occurred right around the time that we started keeping track of these

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things (think *Pangea*, you damned troglodyte), or some type of prison with guards who wear camouflage and point rifles at your temples twenty-two hours a day (one guard positioned on each side of your character's face), at some point in history that

you haven't given two shits about since you were required to know something about it on that 5th grade history exam. The kinds of historical facts Jimmy Kimmel's people ask you about on camera that you have not given a single thought to since that damned 5th grade history test that you probably failed anyway and now you look like a fool on national television, you friggin' idiot. Situate your plot around *those* kinds of details and you're golden (*golden*, just like those tresses we talked about).

So pull out your 5th grade history book from your mom's attic (she's so damned sentimental, isn't she?) for inspiration and ideas for creating the kinds of plots and narratives—the kinds of

literature (but make sure you pronounce this as “*litch-ret-chuhre*” moving forward; monocle, cat, armchair, and cigarette optional)—that teach secondary school students how to hate their English classes and their English teachers; the kind of *litch-ret-chuhre* that teaches students how to loathe literacy and books and stories in a general sense, until they read something like *Harry Potter* and are reminded that reading can—and should—result in an act of pleasure, as opposed to suicidal ideation, *despite* what they (and you) were taught.

And if *nothing* else, should *nothing* come from this *necessary* research (*all* great fiction requires *research*), at *least* you’ll be that much better prepared when Jimmy Kimmel comes calling again.

I am reminded of the time one of my own middle school English Language Arts students asked me, moons ago, a look of desperate boredom etched across his face, “When can we read something *fun*?” (*Ctrl F for Middle Schoolers* desperate for something enjoyable and relatable to read. Cue, also, *Ctrl F for Teachers* who *know* better than to assign that pretentious crap, that *litch-ret-chuhre*, but do so anyway because mollifying their Subject Area Supervisor is profoundly more important than instilling, in their students, a love of reading.) Bless their hearts. Bless your heart. Bless *my* heart.

One of my earliest graduate school professors, a dear man who I feared immensely, told me, after I painstakingly produced my second paper for a course I wished (at the time) did not exist: “Stop annoying your readers [with too many adjectives, adverbs, and overly complicated sentences].” (*Ctrl F for Professors* tasked with teaching thirty-year-olds how to unlearn the bad writing habits instilled in them by their earliest *litch-ret-chuhre* teachers.)

Maybe I took his advice too seriously. Maybe my sentences are too damned short. Maybe they’re not annoying enough. Maybe I haven’t read enough good *litch-ret-chuhre*.

On those rare occasions when I happen to receive a personalized rejection, I’m told that my writing is “too dark,” and thus “not quite right for us.” I am left wondering how Stephen King dealt with such feedback. I consider revisiting *On Writing* to remind myself of the answer to my own question, but to also remind myself that there is only *one* Stephen King and to not even go there.

I continue studying that damned *Glimmer Train* newsletter, coffee in one hand, heart in the other.

Maybe if I review the list of Honorable Mentions over and over again, my name will miraculously appear. Maybe I’ve missed something; it is, after all, 6 a.m. on a Monday morning (of all mornings). Maybe I’ll tap Ctrl F to double-check. The whole process of receiving a rejection via email is a bit like opening the cupboards, refrigerator, and freezer, over and over again, when you know damned well that you haven’t been food shopping in over a week because you hate food shopping and sometimes, frankly, you’d rather just starve. But you’re still hungry, and thus hoping something simultaneously desirable and edible will magically appear behind one of those doors. (You *know* it won’t, but you keep looking. Stop looking.)

While Ctrl F once functioned as your lifeline, your ticket to something coveted, whether to a quote that led to an analysis that led to an advanced degree, it has now come to symbolize something more sinister. Now, you dare not press your left pinky and pointer fingers against

those little black buttons, at least not simultaneously.

You realize, also, and for the first time since you began your work all those years ago, that there actually *are* things in life more sinister than earning an advanced degree.

And damn, you're still hungry, but this time, for something else. You stare at your email. Maybe you've missed something, and maybe you'll tap Ctrl F to double-check.

You study the three happy-looking thumbnails that invade your Monday morning. You read their success stories. You notice that they all appear somewhat older than you, and for this terrifically misguided reason you hold out hope: *Maybe there's still time for me.*

You begin your previous three sentences (now four) with "You" and realize that you've broken yet another "rule" that "good writers" do not break.

"[G]ood writing is less about talent and more about work," one of those winning, smiling, God-forsaken thumbnails is all too happy to advise. I notice the short sentence and single adjectival phrase. Maybe my "creative" writing just overwhelmingly, seriously, ferociously, fantastically, honestly, wholeheartedly, devastatingly, mind-blowingly, actually, *sucks*.

And to compound matters, you don't even know if you're pronouncing "adjectival" correctly in your head because your three months of living in France that one time five years ago has forever destroyed your ability to pronounce the "i" in most words containing "i" in a way that sounds like "i" and not "e." And you do not consider it at *all* ironic (eeroneeck?) that you receive yet *another* electronic rejection as you compose these very words.

This time, they didn't like your poem; nope, you're "not quite right" for *The New Yorker*, either. And really, is *anyone* without a top literary agent "quite right" for *The New Yorker*? Why on *Earth* do you keep wasting their God-forsaken time when you know damned well you are not even worthy of top-shelf vodka, let alone a topnotch literary agent (monocle, cigarette, cat, and armchair optional)? And you laugh, at 6:30 on a Monday morning. Of all mornings. Because you don't have an agent (or vodka) and you only have two middle fingers when you can use at least two more. And because that rejected poem was

about your

pain.

And they rejected

it.

They dis-

missed your

pain. A-

gain.

You laugh and you try to remember the French word for "rejection." (Google reminds you that it's *rejet*.)

And you have two containers of half-and-half, but you're out of Kahlua and vodka.

If only there were a life function for Control *Hide*—which is about the only thing a teacher/scholar/writer who dares to delve into the creative wants to do the day they receive a rejection. Maybe Edgar Allen Poe left the Ctrl Hide function at that Philadelphian bar. Or that Maryland bar. Or maybe he took it with him. Or maybe he gave it to Reynolds. Those bastards.

Oh well, my students never much liked Poe
anyway. His writing, his *litch*-ret-chuhre, is too
dark and not quite right for them. He had some

pretty great tresses though, didn't he? And
decent fingernails, from what I've heard.