

Essay

No Thanks, Mr. Nabokov

By DAVID OSHINSKY

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In the summer of 1950, Alfred A. Knopf Inc. turned down the English-language rights to a Dutch manuscript after receiving a particularly harsh reader's report. The work was "very dull," the reader insisted, "a dreary record of typical family bickering, petty annoyances and adolescent emotions." Sales would be small because the main characters were neither familiar to Americans nor especially appealing. "Even if the work had come to light five years ago, when the subject was timely," the reader wrote, "I don't see that there would have been a chance for it."

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[Text: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records, 1873-1996 \(From the Harry Ransom Center Web Site\)](#)

Knopf wasn't alone. "The Diary of a Young Girl," by [Anne Frank](#), would be rejected by 15 others before Doubleday published it in 1952. More than 30 million copies are currently in print, making it one of the best-selling books in history.

The Anne Frank reader's report is part of the massive [Knopf archive housed in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center](#) at the [University of Texas](#). The document is one of thousands tucked away in the publisher's rejection files, a place where whopping editorial blunders are mercifully entombed. Nothing embarrasses a publisher more than the public knowledge that a literary classic or a mega best seller has somehow slipped away. One of them turned down Pearl Buck's novel "The Good Earth" on the grounds that Americans were "not interested in anything on China." Another passed on George Orwell's "Animal Farm," explaining it was "impossible to sell animal stories in the U.S.A." (It's not only publishers: Tony Hillerman was dumped by an agent who urged him to "get rid of all that Indian stuff.")

For almost a century, Knopf has been the gold standard in the book trade, publishing the works of 17 [Nobel Prize](#)-winning authors as well as 47 [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning volumes of fiction, nonfiction, biography and history. Recently, however, scholars trolling through the Knopf archive have been struck by the number of reader's reports that badly missed the mark, especially where new talent was concerned. The rejection files, which run from the 1940s through the 1970s, include dismissive verdicts on the likes of Jorge Luis Borges ("utterly untranslatable"), Isaac Bashevis Singer ("It's Poland and the rich Jews again"), Anaïs Nin ("There is no commercial advantage in acquiring her, and, in my opinion, no artistic"), Sylvia Plath ("There certainly isn't enough genuine talent for us to take notice") and [Jack Kerouac](#) ("His frenetic and scrambling prose perfectly express the feverish travels of the Beat Generation. But is that enough? I don't think so"). In a two-year stretch beginning in 1955, Knopf turned down manuscripts by Jean-Paul Sartre, Mordecai Richler, and the historians A. J. P. Taylor and Barbara Tuchman, not to mention [Vladimir Nabokov](#)'s "Lolita" (too racy) and James Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room" ("hopelessly bad").

As a historian, I was most interested in the files of my professional colleagues. I went through them, I must admit, anticipating a pile of windy pronouncements and delicious mistakes. Reader's reports can be wildly subjective, reflecting the quirks and biases of the reviewer, and the history rejection files are hardly immune. In the 1940s and '50s, Knopf sent a fair number of American history manuscripts to a notorious curmudgeon whose scathing critiques could peel bark from a tree. In one reader's report, we see him demolish a well-known historian, calling her research "shockingly inadequate" and her writing "fairly drab." In another, he works over a promising scholar, describing the prose as "a bit better than Ph.D. English" and claiming that "the mountain of his research has produced a mouse of a thesis." The carnage complete, the reader adds a cautiously protective postscript: "Of course my name must not be mentioned." Professor X "and I are acquaintances and I like him very much as a person." (Both manuscripts would be published elsewhere to glowing reviews.)

Actually, darts like these turned up less frequently than I expected. Even in the rejection files, where negativity reigned, the great bulk of the reader's reports seemed fair-minded and persuasive. Put simply, a rejected manuscript usually appeared to deserve its fate.

The final arbiters were Alfred A. Knopf, his wife Blanche Knopf (who took over as company president in 1957) and their editor in chief, Harold Strauss. After a manuscript was judged to be wrong for the list — a process that included input from numerous people — a rejection letter would follow, often written by the publisher himself. Sometimes the problem was financial. Alfred Knopf personally turned down R. R. Palmer's classic, "The Age of the Democratic Revolution," telling the Princeton historian that his book would never earn back the \$7,750 in "total production costs" the project would require — a big mistake, it turned out. He rejected a biography of Sir Robert Walpole by the distinguished British historian J. H. Plumb, claiming that the manuscript, while "a good piece of history," would be lucky to sell 750 copies in the United States. And he declined a manuscript by William Appleman Williams, the father of New Left diplomatic history, writing to him that "fundamentally your book would be an editorial in hard covers, and it is difficult almost to the point of impossible to persuade readers to pay money for the privilege of reading" such works.

Going through these letters, one is struck by the more upbeat tone employed with younger scholars. Though the Knopfs and Strauss had little use for a revised doctoral dissertation — that, they believed, was the reason God created university presses — they understood that cultivating fresh talent was a process in which doors must remain open, and that the next manuscript might well be the charm. A typical rejection letter to a newly minted historian would conclude with Alfred Knopf’s prediction that “one of these days we will have something from you that we can publish with gusto.”

What most disturbed the Knopfs and Strauss were auspicious projects by accomplished scholars that failed to measure up. Upon receiving a long-anticipated manuscript in 1952 from John Hope Franklin, whose earlier book, “From Slavery to Freedom,” had sold well for Knopf, Strauss responded: “I am terribly sorry to have to tell you that, while we recognize the scholarly merits of the manuscript, we are deeply disappointed in its trade possibilities. We feel that you have completely missed your chance to write a colorful and dramatic book.” In 1958, Alfred Knopf sent this pointed note to T. Harry Williams, a professor of Southern history, who also had published a successful book with the company a few years before: “Dear Harry — I am terribly sorry because I would love to have a really good manuscript from you, but ‘Americans at War’ isn’t it.”

(Williams wasn’t amused. “Enclosed is a check for \$1,” he replied, “which is sufficient for return postage first class. I would appreciate getting the manuscript back immediately.”)

Such was Knopf’s reputation, however, that authors kept lining up for more. Indeed, in the years between 1940 and 1980, it would have been possible to staff a distinguished history department using scholars who published important books at Knopf after having at least one of their previous works rejected there — a roster that includes Williams, whose “Huey Long” won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1970; Tuchman, whose biggest sellers for Knopf included “A Distant Mirror” and “The March of Folly”; Kenneth Stampp, whose 1956 book “The Peculiar Institution” revolutionized the study of American slavery; and Michael Kammen, whose “People of Paradox” was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1973.

Today, as publishers eschew the finished manuscript and spit out contracts based on a sketchy outline or even less, the scripting of rejection letters has become something of a lost art. It’s hard to imagine a current publisher dictating the sort of response that Alfred Knopf sent to a prominent [Columbia University](#) historian in the 1950s. “This time there’s no point in trying to be kind,” it said. “Your manuscript is utterly hopeless as a candidate for our list. I never thought the subject worth a damn to begin with and I don’t think it’s worth a damn now. Lay off, MacDuff.”

Now, that’s a rejection letter.

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