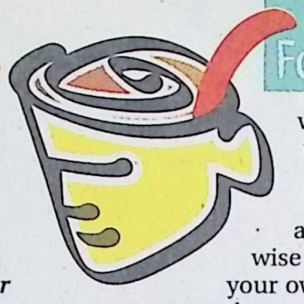


This is the seventh in a series of articles written by Farah Ghuznavi as Writer in Residence at the Commonwealth Writers website, based in the UK. Commonwealth Writers is the cultural initiative from the Commonwealth Foundation, and Farah is their first Bangladeshi Writer in Residence.

The Road(s) to Publication

Part II

FARAH GHUZNAVI

Revision is your friend: I just *know* I'm not going to make myself popular with this one! But the truth is, there is no way of making your words sing unless you are willing to revisit and revise what you have written more than once. I have met many aspiring writers who send out an insufficiently polished draft, without realising that by doing so they are in fact sabotaging their chances of being published. Your story needs to be the best version possible in order to stand out against all the competition it will face for the attention of editors and publishers.

My short story 'Getting There' has been published three times so far: in the US, the UK and India. In the most recent version of the story, which appears in the *Lifelines* anthology published by Zubaan Books, two scenes have been significantly rewritten, reflecting what I have learned since I first wrote the story four years ago. And while I'm not suggesting that anyone should be a raving perfectionist (in my case, let's face it, with the stress on the 'raving'), the truth is that 'Getting There' has been through a total of around twenty revisions since its first incarnation, about five of them substantive. So be prepared to revise your work, polish the working draft, take a break, and repeat the entire cycle as necessary. For each painstaking round of revision – and to be quite honest, I much prefer the process of doing multiple revisions to the anxiety of vomiting up the first draft – you will significantly improve your chances of selection.

Try to give something back: Writers talk (and hear) a great deal about the need to network effectively, and it is undoubtedly useful and interesting to communicate with your peers. But there is another aspect of such communication that is severely underrated – that of making a contribution to the community(ies) that you are part of. This is of course very much an individual decision, but personally, I believe it's a good policy to dedicate some amount of time to helping others out.

This may seem counterintuitive in a world where we are already struggling to protect our writing time, and it is certainly true that an author will receive many requests: for help, for feedback, for advice. You certainly can't respond to all of them. And you shouldn't – otherwise you will never be able to get on with your own work. But whenever possible, it is worth providing a little help to a fellow scribe. Among other things, it builds goodwill; except, of course, in the case of folks who consider themselves entitled to everyone else's attention and help. Watch out for those. The hard truth is that there is no reason why anyone should be interested in reading your work – unless it is outstandingly brilliant – if you have never been willing to read anyone else's. After all, no one *owes* you anything; least of all, the publishing industry.

Keep on keeping on: In the end, the likelihood of having your work published comes down, at least partly, to persistence. Seeking out opportunities for submission requires time. Scouring the Internet for literary magazines that are a good fit with your writing is hard work. There are certainly more opportunities out there than most of us are aware of. The *Commonwealth Writers* website occasionally provides information on this, and I have also provided links to a handful of other websites at the end of the article. A good way of maximising your chances of finding submission opportunities is by collaborating with others to exchange information, although some people are reluctant to do so. In most cases though, your work will have to win out against significant competition in order to be chosen, regardless of whether or not you choose to share news of publishing opportunities with your immediate network. So it is rarely a zero-sum game.

It's also worth keeping an eye out for trends in the industry that open up new options for publication. For example, an interesting development for writers in South Asia is that there currently seems to be a greater receptivity in India for writing from other parts of the region. Perhaps at some stage in the near future, we will see a committed pan-South Asian readership; if not, just yet, a pan-South Asian publishing industry.

Avoid negativity: One of the hardest things in this business is to stave off the bitterness that can set in after multiple rejections. One of my short stories, 'Tangled Threads', went through a year-long process in a competition in the US, where it