

Writers' Woes

By Bob Evancho

So you have this great idea for a book. Swell! Have at it. All you need is to write the manuscript, find a publisher, and ... voilà! In the words of poet Sidney Lanier, "Publish yourselves to the sky ..."

But before you do, listen to some writers in the BSU community. Because if they share one common message about writing a book, it's this: Writing is hard, but getting your work published is even harder.

Take it from English professor Kent Anderson, one of BSU's more successful writers: "I tell my students don't try to be writers, it's too hard. You have no idea how difficult it is and how disappointing it can be. Writing is the most difficult thing I know. Every time you sit down to write, you know you're going to fail. Because you know whatever you do is going to be imperfect; it can always be a little bit better."

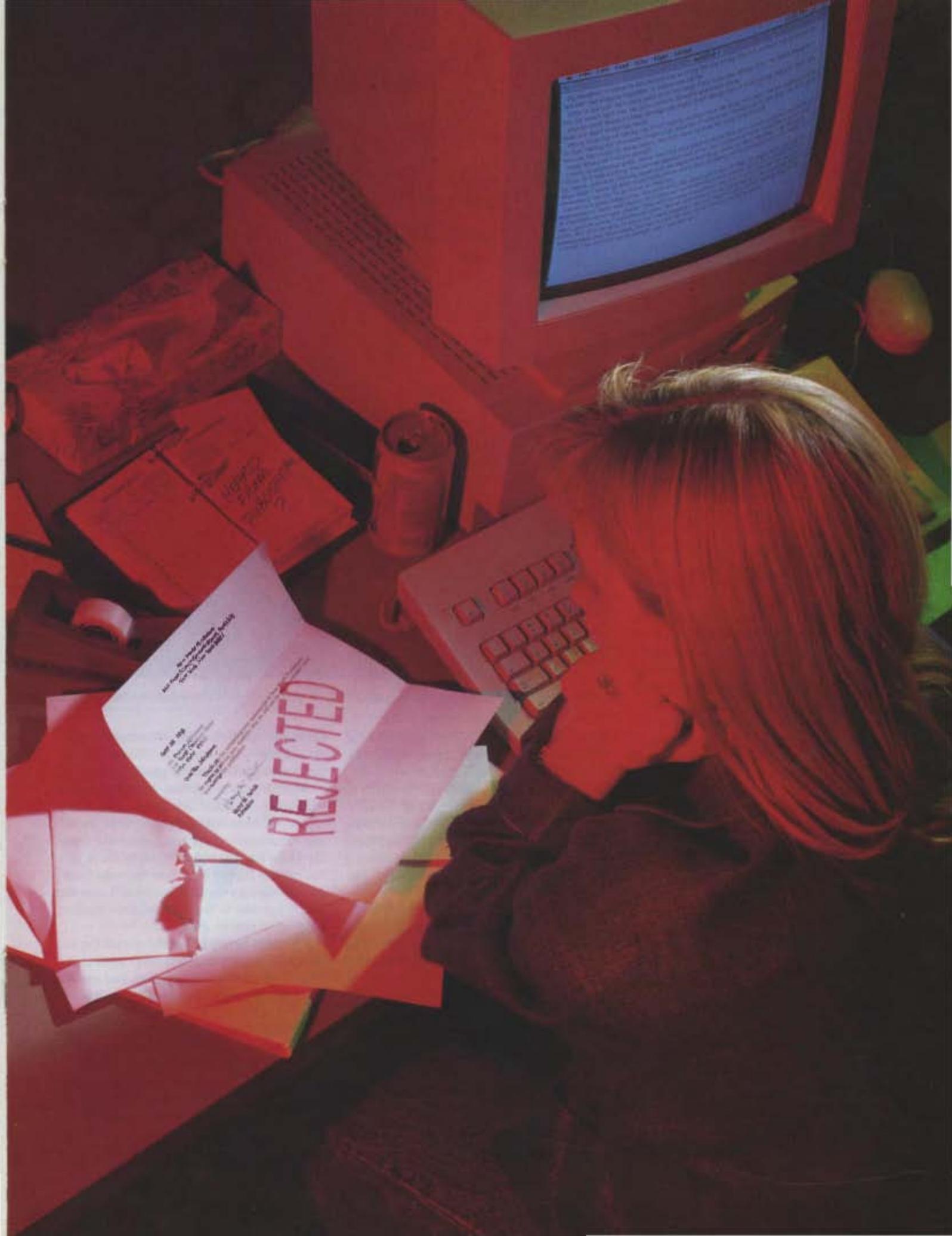
But let's say you've ignored Anderson's warning and you've completed this dynamite book — a tour de force that's bound for the best-seller list. Great! The hard part is over. Right?

Wrong. More than likely, your ordeal is just beginning, warns Anderson. The author of *Sympathy for the Devil*, a novel based on his experiences as a member of the U.S. Special Forces during the Vietnam War, Anderson says "hustling your stuff" is part and parcel to the publishing process.

But isn't that what agents are hired to do?

"Agents really don't do that much," Anderson replies. "They know the editors and the [publishing] houses in New York, and they can make multiple submissions. But they don't really hustle your stuff; you've got to hustle it. It's a mistake to think, 'OK, I wrote the book, now it's [the agent's] job to sell it.' That's not a good attitude because they're not going to do that kind of work for you. ... I remember saying, 'Hey, I'll never be a salesman. I'm going to be some kind of pure artist.' There's no such thing. You've got to sell the stuff."

Writing is hard,
but getting your
work published
is often harder



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In essence, it was Anderson's persistence that made *Sympathy for the Devil* a \$70,000 success. "If I hadn't done all that [promotional] work, it would have vanished without a trace," he says of his 1987 novel. In addition to asking well-known authors to write blurbs for the jacket of his book, Anderson wrote to book-review editors at major newspapers around the country, asking them to consider a review of *Sympathy*. "I'd ask them to please take my book out of the pile [of other submissions] and give it 15 minutes," he says. "If I hadn't done that, it wouldn't have gotten reviewed by the *Washington Post*."

While Anderson paints a rather bleak picture of the book business, there are writers like BSU education professor Norma Sadler, who approach the process with less need for entreatment. Sadler, whose writing "crosses a variety of genres," also preaches perseverance when it comes to getting published.

"But I can't assume that the product is always more important than the process of writing, unless, of course, people are writing for survival in the marketplace. Then, yes, those writers are extremely concerned about their product. But for those of us who are searching for understanding for ourselves as well as seeking to entertain, we have to say some of those monetary priorities at times will be further down the line in importance."

Still, Sadler's approach does not make her immune from the vagaries of the publishing business. "Writing is a difficult process that takes a tremendous amount of self-discipline," she says. And like Anderson, Sadler is quick to state that writing the manuscript is only half the battle. "One of the biggest difficulties a writer faces as he or she finishes a book is getting it out to a publisher, getting a good cover letter written, finding the appropriate market, and if it comes back [from a prospective publisher], determining the amount of work that needs to be done to revise it."

The bulk of Sadler's writing is for children and teenagers. She has written a book titled



Boise State English professor and novelist Kent Anderson says, "The most important qualities of a

Mirabelle's Country Club for Cats, several short stories and original scripts for children's plays. Her latest efforts include two books for young adults, but she is still in search of a publisher for both. And finding the right match is not easy. "When you get a manuscript back from a publisher with suggested revisions, part of my difficulty is determining whether or not the book is right for that publisher," she says.

So if you want to dispense with the hassles of dealing with a publisher, you can always self-publish like Boise free-lance writer Steve Stuebner. Right? After all, he saw a need for a guidebook to mountain-bike riding in

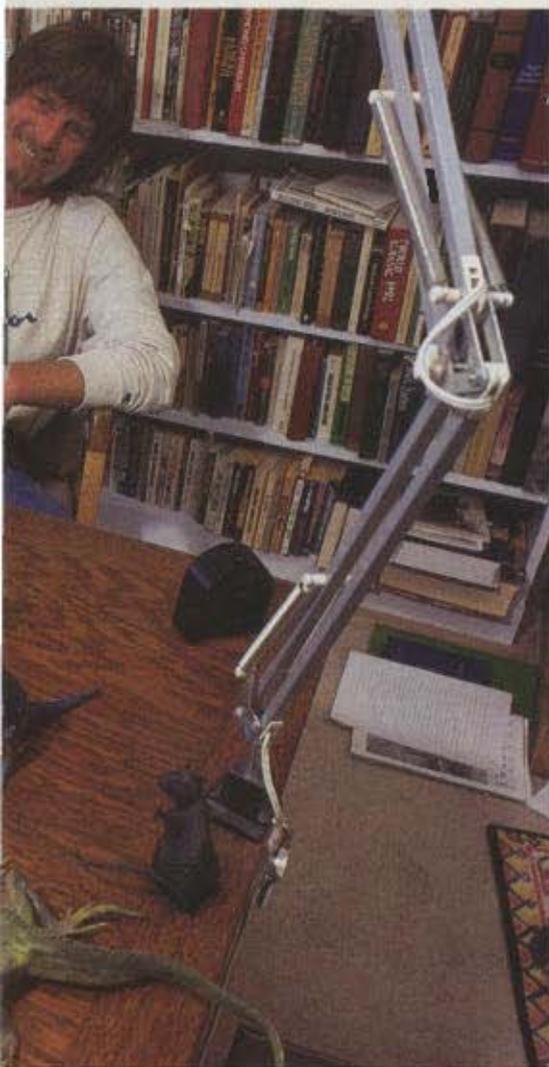
southwest Idaho, he wrote the darn thing — two, in fact — and he made a profit. Sounds pretty straightforward. Right?

Well, not quite. Stuebner's response goes something like this: Sure, go ahead, but only if you can write well, if you know your subject extensively, if you have adequate desktop skills and the requisite software, if you are certain there's a market for your product, if you make sound business decisions, and if you are willing to take the financial gamble. ... maybe then.

A former environmental reporter for the *Idaho Statesman*, Stuebner says even those who have the talent, expertise and equipment are still taking a big risk. "I don't think you can make any assumptions [about self-publishing]," he says. So why were his two books, written in 1992 and '94, successful? "It was a unique combination of being a professional writer, an avid and experienced recreationist, and having some desktop skills, which allowed me to do most of the work myself," he responds.

And while Stuebner, who has taught journalism for BSU's communication depart-

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CHUCK KALINA PHOTO

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ment, works on his third publication, a guidebook to rafting, kayaking and canoeing Idaho's Payette River, he supplements his income by free-lancing for a number of outdoor magazines and serving as the capitol correspondent for the Idaho Falls *Post Register*.

The free-lance writers who harbor "starry-eyed notions that they can sit around" and write a book had better keep their day jobs, Stuebner advises. "In a situation like mine, I've got to come up with revenue because I'm going to have expenses with the books," he adds. "The free-lancing I do for magazines and newspapers creates the revenue I need until the [book] projects reach fruition."

A writer like Stuebner may possess the wherewithal to do his own publishing, but Kellie Branson doesn't have those kinds of talents or resources. Yet she managed to get her self-help book published in 1992.

Branson, program manager of the BSU College of Technology's Outreach programs, doesn't consider herself a gifted writer. "What I *did* have," she says, "was a lot of

information that could serve as a resource for people."

Written with Meridian counselor Dale Babcock, Branson's book *I Don't Know Who You Are Anymore* describes her family's struggle with her ex-husband's depression. Like Stuebner, she had information to share. Like Anderson, she struggled to find a publisher. And like Sadler, money was not her primary objective.

"What I wanted to do is stir emotions and teach the reader something," says Branson, whose book was published by Legendary Publishing of Boise. "I thought writing about my [family's] experience would be helpful to others. When you go with a small publisher, you often do it because you think what you have to tell is important. The book did not pad my checkbook; there was no lucrative-ness there."

Branson is now about halfway through the manuscript of a second self-help book about balancing the responsibilities of the home and workplace. And again, she may struggle to find a publisher. "It's very intense out there," she says of the competition to get books published. "What you have to do with publishers is tell them why what you have written is different from the others."

For different reasons — and with different objectives in mind — Branson, Stuebner, Sadler and Anderson have enjoyed varying degrees of success in getting their books published. But for every writer who has reached that goal, there are hundreds who have not.

Still want to write that book? Anderson, whose sequel to *Sympathy for the Devil* is currently with an agent in New York City, suggests you rethink your plans. If you decide to forge ahead, you had better don your emotional armor.

"The rejection is endless," he says. "You get your stuff rejected for reasons that just seem loony. The most important quality of a writer is endurance and perseverance. If you're going to write and you want to get published, you've got to be tough." □

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