

**EXCAVATING THE SLUSH PILE
At McClelland & Stewart**

by

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ABSTRACT

Every book publisher in Canada receives unsolicited submissions from writers hoping to be published but who lack an agent or a connection within the house. These submissions are often referred to as the “slush pile.” About fifteen years ago, before literary agents rose to such importance in Canadian book publishing, the quality of unsolicited submissions was much higher. In an agented environment, when firms rarely acquire from the slush pile, the quality of slush-pile submissions has diminished.

This report analyzes the McClelland & Stewart slush pile. It outlines the ways in which McClelland & Stewart acquires manuscripts, the kinds of submissions the company receives in its slush pile, how it responds to them, and why the company continues to evaluate these proposals. It finds that, with very rare exceptions, the submissions writers send unsolicited to the company are either in genres the company does not publish, are written at a level the company deems unacceptable for publication, or otherwise do not fit the M&S publishing mandate.

However, the report concludes that the company should continue to evaluate unsolicited submissions, as a way to train junior editors, to maintain openness to the writing community, and to give unagented writers a forum in which their work can be assessed.

DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad, who always encouraged reading and education.

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CHAPTER 1: THE ROLE OF THE SLUSH PILE

1.1 Introduction

On a shelf or in a cupboard in every Canadian book publishing house, there lies a stack of envelopes of varying sizes and styles, opened or unopened, containing proposals that writers have submitted. These envelopes contain a range of materials, from one-page query letters to a few sample chapters to full manuscripts or self-published books. The industry slang for this stack is the “slush pile,” a term with derogatory connotations. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the fourth meaning of the word “slush” is “rubbishy discourse or literature,” a meaning first attributed to Mark Twain, who in 1869 wrote in *Innocents Abroad*, “He’ll grind out about four reams of the awfulest slush.”¹ The polite term for these proposals is “unsolicited manuscripts.” And in addition to the envelopes, publishers also receive e-mail submissions.

A slush-pile submission is one that is sent to the publisher’s editorial department, rather than to a specific editor. If a writer sends a general query letter to the slush pile, and the editor requests a sample, that writer’s manuscript ceases to be considered part of the slush pile, because a specific editor has now solicited it. However, the boundaries of what constitutes slush are not always clear. For example, Ellen Seligman, the fiction publisher and senior vice-

¹ “Slush,” *Oxford English Dictionary* online, <http://dictionary.oed.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/cgi/entry/00228184?>, November 16, 2004.

president of McClelland & Stewart, receives many unsolicited submissions that are addressed to her personally; writers may find her name in the acknowledgments of a book, or because Seligman holds a high profile in the industry, they may read about her in industry news and then send her a manuscript. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Getting Published* tells authors to do just that: "The best way to get your query letter read is to address it to an actual editor. . . . Look on the acknowledgments page of other books from that publisher; authors often thank their editors."² Editors may also meet authors at publishing events or in other contexts and later receive submissions from them; one could argue that those submissions are not slush, because networking is one way in which editors discover new authors. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus only on submissions that are sent directly to the general editorial department; each editor receives his own unsolicited submissions every month through e-mail or mail, and it would be too difficult to track them all company-wide.

Every house receives varying numbers of slush-pile submissions. McClelland & Stewart estimates that it receives 1,500 unsolicited manuscripts a year, or between twenty-five and thirty every week.³ The company rarely finds anything suitable for its publishing program in the slush pile – many submissions do not fall into the categories the company publishes, for example, and the company has no illusions about the quality of most of the submissions. Susan

² Sheree Bykofsky and Jennifer Basye Sander, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Getting Published*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alpha Books, 2003), 139.

³ E-mail from *The Writer's Market* to McClelland & Stewart, "Update Your 2006 Writer's Market Listing," November 12, 2004.

Renouf, vice-president and associate publisher of non-fiction at McClelland & Stewart, says in her twenty-five years in book publishing, she has only attempted to acquire two manuscripts from the slush pile. She acquired one for Key Porter, *Angel Falls* by Tim Wynveen, and it went on to win the 1998 Commonwealth Writers Prize in the Best First Book category; she made an offer on the other, which the author then used as leverage to gain an agent, who in turn shopped the manuscript around and sold it to another house. "When you think that I've been in the business for almost twenty-five years and I've found two things. . . . I was proud to have found them, but is it worth the slog and the hours?"⁴

As a result, assessing manuscripts in the slush pile is not a great priority within the publishing house. As *Wikipedia*, the open-source encyclopedia, says, "Sifting through the slush pile is the privilege of young, first-jobbing assistants to the Editors. If they find something interesting there and can persuade a Commissioning Editor to consider it, they may get some credit for themselves, especially if it is subsequently published and sells respectably."⁵

Most publishing companies try to respond to unsolicited submissions within six months, both out of respect for the writers, who anxiously await a response (and would probably find even six months interminable), and to ensure the pile does not grow beyond control. Doug Gibson, former publisher of M&S and now publisher of the Douglas Gibson Books imprint within the company, says, "in an editorial department, the first thing to go is the slush pile because our

⁴ Susan Renouf. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

⁵ "Slush Pile," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slush_pile, November 16, 2004.

first responsibility is to the authors with whom we have a contract to publish a book, and then and only then, do you turn your attention to manuscripts that come in from out of the blue and to whom you have no legal obligations.”⁶

1.2 Why publishers read unsolicited submissions

Despite the large amount of labour associated with reading and assessing this high volume of unsolicited manuscripts, and the industry wisdom that books are rarely acquired from the slush pile, most publishing companies do still continue to accept and evaluate them. The reasons for this contradiction vary.

First, there is a prevailing romantic notion among publishers and editors that they may discover the next “real deal.” They hope that a talented, undiscovered writer might submit her manuscript, and they do not want to preempt the discovery of a potential rising star. “You never know when that perfect gem will come through, that is not agented and you’d otherwise never get,” says Renouf.⁷ Doug Gibson says:

The people who work in publishing are thrilled by the idea that some person out there, working away in a bedroom somewhere, is producing a book that’s going to become world famous, and that they, the lowly manuscript reader, slush-pile reader, junior editor, might indeed be the first professional publishing person to see this manuscript and to recognize the diamond in the rough. . . . And when it happens, it’s a wonderful, exciting moment.⁸

The second reason M&S evaluates unsolicited submissions is out of courtesy to the writing community on which its business relies. It wants to display

⁶ Doug Gibson. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

⁷ Susan Renouf. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

⁸ Doug Gibson. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

the “courteous quality of not being too snobby for people who are coming out of nowhere.”⁹ The company recognizes that talented writers may exist who are unconnected with literary agents or creative writing schools, and have no other way of placing their manuscripts in front of an editor.

Third, publishers accept unsolicited submissions as a tradition from the days when fewer writers had agents. “In Jack McClelland’s generation, there were a couple of agents in the States and a couple in Canada, so the Gabrielle Roys and the Margaret Laurences of the world came unsolicited. It was more important to go through the slush pile because you never knew who was going to be there,” says Renouf.¹⁰ Margaret Atwood submitted her early manuscripts to the M&S slush pile; in 1971, she wrote to Jack McClelland, “The MS of mine you lost for two years was that of *The Edible Woman*. . . . I sent it in fall ’65, got an initial letter back, then silence. . . . It turns out the lady in charge had got pregnant and left the company, or something, and my MS was in a drawer somewhere.”¹¹ Publishers used to hire people specifically to read through the slush pile, as recently as the 1980s at M&S. “Then it became clearer and clearer that the ratio of publishable to non-publishable manuscripts was getting smaller, and the slush pile was getting bigger and bigger. . . . As editorial budgets shrank, it became less sensible,” says Gibson.¹²

⁹ Susan Renouf. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Margaret Atwood. Letter to Jack McClelland, October 25, 1971, in *Imagining Canadian Literature: the selected letters of Jack McClelland*, ed. Sam Solecki (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1998), 155-57.

¹² Doug Gibson. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

The fourth reason publishers continue to assess unsolicited manuscripts is that the work trains junior editors and creates opportunity for them to develop reading skills that will help them to acquire as they gain seniority within a company.

Fifth, editors occasionally do discover manuscripts or ideas in the slush pile that are worth publishing. Poetry manuscripts are rarely agented, so companies often rely on unagented material for poetry books. Smaller publishers may also rely more heavily on unsolicited submissions, because they cannot afford the higher advances that come with agented manuscripts. And most publishers can tell a story about acquiring something from the slush pile. For example, in 1993, a man named George Blackburn sent a full manuscript called *Thank God, the Guns!* to the general editorial department of McClelland & Stewart.¹³ Alex Schultz, who was a junior editor at the time, remembers:

I was the first person who read it, and you could tell from page one, it was gripping. I didn't have experience in war memoirs or military history at that point, so I didn't know how unique it was, but the author was doing this second-person present-tense thing – "you are crawling along on your belly at the bottom of a ditch, and a hundred yards up the road you find a tank." It's hard to sustain that successfully, but he did . . . and the detail was just amazing.

The company acquired it, and the book was retitled *The Guns of Normandy*. Since then, it has become a bestseller, with net sales of almost fourteen thousand copies. It has been reprinted several times, was re-released with a new cover in 2003, and has won a few literary awards. The M&S rights department has sold English and French rights to the book. The *London Free*

¹³ Alex Schultz. Memorandum to Doug Gibson re: George Blackburn, *Thank God, the Guns!*, November 15, 1993.

Press said it was “easily the best book yet produced on the Canadian campaign in Normandy,” and it received numerous other positive reviews. So by all accounts, the book was a success.

The author had never written a book before, but he had written a musical and had been a journalist before the Second World War. He did not have an agent. After the publisher read Schultz’s reader’s report and part of the manuscript, the company acquired the book the same way it acquired others: by negotiating a contract with the author and then beginning the normal editorial process. “[An unsolicited manuscript] is not a second-class citizen. Once it’s signed and it has a champion within the house, it’s as if it came in any other way,” says Susan Renouf.¹⁴

Many of the explanations of why publishers continue to evaluate unsolicited submissions are immeasurable, such as the romance of publishing, the tradition, and the desire to create goodwill, but publishers also have economic reasons for tackling their slush pile. Gibson suggests that M&S would be well-advised to read the slush pile because doing so helps to create a benevolent image of M&S among these writers, who are also potential M&S readers and book buyers. A final economic advantage to reading and acquiring from the slush pile is that the writers are likely to accept lower advances, because unpublished, unagented authors have less bargaining power.

These explanations help us understand why publishers continue to evaluate unsolicited manuscripts, even when their quality has been deteriorating.

¹⁴ Susan Renouf. Interview with author, December 9, 2004

Despite the fact that there is increasingly less and less of interest in the slush pile, Canadian publishers appear likely to continue to evaluate these submissions.

CHAPTER 2: SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

2.1 An introduction to submission guidelines

Publishing companies write submission guidelines to tell aspiring authors how proposals should be submitted and what kinds of books the company publishes. Some simply indicate that the company does not accept unsolicited manuscripts, and others give details on what the company prefers in a proposal, which indicates a willingness to entertain unsolicited submissions.

Writers find these guidelines in a variety of places: publishers' websites, direct contact with the publisher (one branch of the M&S phone tree is a recorded message outlining its submission guidelines), in writing workshops, and in the numerous books that inform writers of the best ways to get published, such as *The Canadian Writer's Market*, a McClelland & Stewart book now in its sixteenth edition that contains listings for book publishers and other publications.¹⁵

2.2 McClelland & Stewart's guidelines

McClelland & Stewart's guidelines vary depending on the source you pull them from, because not all books are updated regularly. For the most part, they explicitly discourage novice writers from submitting their work. *The Canadian Writer's Market's* listing for McClelland & Stewart says, "We are 'The Canadian Publishers' and take our role to publish the best in Canadian fiction, non-fiction,

¹⁵ McClelland & Stewart, "The Canadian Writer's Market, 16th edition," *Online catalogue*, <http://www.mcclelland.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=0771085273>, December 2, 2004.

and poetry very seriously. With a stable of authors ranging from Margaret Atwood through to Roy MacGregor on to Leonard Cohen and then to Alice Munro and Rohinton Mistry, this house is not an easy point of entry for the beginning author.”¹⁶ It goes on to say that the company does not accept unsolicited manuscripts; writers must submit an outline for non-fiction manuscripts, and a query for fiction or poetry manuscripts.

In the past, the company’s online guidelines were equally discouraging. Until recently, McClelland & Stewart’s online guidelines were divided into four areas: Books for Children, which simply pointed writers towards Tundra Books (its children’s imprint), Books of Poetry, Fiction, and Non-Fiction Books.

The poetry guidelines said, “McClelland & Stewart publishes only four books of poetry each year. Since this list includes established poets such as Margaret Atwood, Dionne Brand and Lorna Crozier, there is little opportunity left for new authors. Aspiring poets would be better served by a smaller publisher that specializes in publishing new writers.”¹⁷

The fiction guidelines were similarly discouraging to new writers, again listing some of the better-known authors the company publishes and saying:

. . . we receive thousands of inquires about publishing novels or short stories. The following guidelines will help *rule out* M&S as a potential publisher of your manuscript:

- is it a novel aimed at children or young adults?
- Is it a work of science fiction?
- Is it a Harlequin-type romance?

¹⁶ Sandra Tooze. “Book Publishers,” *Canadian Writer’s Market*, 16th ed., (McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2004), 279.

¹⁷ McClelland & Stewart, “New Authors guidelines,” archived www.mcclelland.com Web page.

- Is it shorter than 60 000 words in length or more than 150 000 words?¹⁸

The guidelines continued by saying that if the manuscript hadn't been ruled out by these questions, writers could submit "two or three pages telling us about the manuscript and about your writing or publishing experience."

The online non-fiction guidelines requested that authors submit a two- to three-page outline of the book idea and the writer's experience. The company's non-fiction listings in print publications did not accurately reflect the books it published, and this may help to explain why it received so many submissions that were clearly not in keeping with its list. For example, the current edition of *The Canadian Writer's Market* says that M&S "publishes a wide selection of fiction and non-fiction books on biography, history, natural history, politics, art, religion, and sports,"¹⁹ yet the company publishes very few books on art or religion; if those two categories are included, the listing should probably also include health, since M&S publishes as many health books as it does these two categories.

The Writer's Market, the American equivalent to *The Canadian Writer's Market*, updates its listings annually by e-mailing publishers their current listing and asking for changes. The current M&S listing is more encouraging of novice writers; it says the company "receives 1,500 queries/year. 10% of books from first-time authors; 30% from unagented writers." The 10 per cent figure may be accurate, although the first-time authors tend to be people who already have built names for themselves in other fields such as journalism or politics, or who have

¹⁸ McClelland & Stewart, "New Authors guidelines," archived www.mcclelland.com Web page.

¹⁹ Sandra Tooze. "Book Publishers," *Canadian Writer's Market*, 16th ed., (McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2004), 280.

been published in literary journals, rather than people who have never written *anything* (which many writers submitting to the slush pile haven't). But by including these details in the listing, M&S gives writers the false idea that it publishes a high percentage of novice writers, which encourages unsolicited submissions from people the house is unlikely to publish. Furthermore, the same listing goes on to say that it publishes non-fiction books in the following areas:

Biography, coffee table book, how-to, humor, illustrated book, reference, self-help. Subjects include agriculture/horticulture, animals, art/architecture, business/economics, child guidance/parenting, cooking/foods/nutrition, education, gardening, gay/lesbian, government/politics, health/medicine, history, hobbies, language/literature, military/war, money/finance, music/dance, nature/environment, philosophy, photography, psychology, recreation, religion, science, sociology, sports, translation, travel, women's issues/studies, Canadiana.²⁰

The company may have published the odd book in some of these areas, but this lengthy list of subjects does not accurately reflect its publishing program, and including an extensive list encourages writers in all areas to submit their proposals. "We're a general publisher, so in the minds of the people writing the proposals, in theory we're supposed to be looking at everything," says Alex Schultz, senior editor at M&S.²¹ A more targeted description would help decrease the number of unsolicited submissions the company receives, and in fact, the company recently updated this listing to remove the categories it does not publish.

²⁰ E-mail from *The Writer's Market* to McClelland & Stewart, "Update Your 2006 Writer's Market Listing," November 12, 2004.

²¹ Alex Schultz. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

On October 15, 2004, M&S removed its submission guidelines from its website and replaced them with the following temporary statement: "We are currently not accepting unsolicited manuscripts. Please visit this page again for updated information on our submission guidelines."²² The change was made because the previous guidelines were perceived as having a highbrow tone, particularly when the house does try to discover new authors, and its poetry program does rely on unsolicited submissions. It was also intended to decrease the number of incoming proposals.

[At Key Porter], when we started to put in the *Writer's Markets* . . . that we didn't accept unsolicited manuscripts, the manuscripts went from two to three hundred a week to thirty-five to fifty. . . . It really is about just trying to slow the tide. If you say you're fully open for business, you'll just drown in manuscripts.²³

The company intends to post new guidelines once it has reconsidered the tone, but this was not a priority in the rush of the fall 2004 season.

Despite the change, writers continue to mail in unsolicited manuscripts, at an average of forty per week (including e-mails). And even though it claims not to accept unsolicited manuscripts, McClelland & Stewart continues to evaluate those manuscripts that do come in and attempts to respond to them within three months. It is too soon to determine the effect of the revised guidelines on the number of proposals M&S receives. And direct comparisons between the number of submissions M&S currently receives and the number it received prior to the change are difficult to make because the submissions are inconsistently logged

²² McClelland & Stewart, "Resources For . . . ", http://www.mcclelland.com/resources/index.html#new_authors, December 2, 2004

²³ Susan Renouf. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

in the slush-pile spreadsheet (see Figure 4); sometimes evaluators enter into the “Date Sent to M&S” column the date the submission was received, and sometimes they enter the date on the author’s cover letter (if there is one). If there isn’t a date on the letter, this column might just contain a question mark.

McClelland & Stewart is currently redefining its non-fiction publishing program to focus on the following categories: history (not necessarily Canadian), biography and memoir, current affairs, and narrative non-fiction.²⁴ When it does post new submission guidelines on its website, they should reflect these new categories, to discourage poorly matched manuscripts from finding their way onto editors’ desks, whether solicited or unsolicited. However, many books and workshops exist advising would-be authors of how to get published, and M&S has little control over how its guidelines are presented by external sources.

2.3 Submission guidelines of other publishers

The submission guidelines of ten trade book publishers give evidence of both the similarities and differences among them and in comparison with M&S’s guidelines. The guidelines were taken from the websites of the following publishers: House of Anansi, Harbour Publishing, Key Porter Books, Douglas & McIntyre, Arsenal Pulp Press, The Dundurn Group, Harper Collins Canada, Random House Canada, Goose Lane Editions, Raincoast Books, and Orca Books. The companies were chosen to reflect the varying sizes and ownership models of Canadian publishers: some foreign branch plants, some domestic-owned, and a range of sizes. The guidelines range widely from those that say

²⁴ Susan Renouf. Interview with author, November 1, 2004.

they do not accept unsolicited submissions, such as Key Porter²⁵ and Harper Collins Canada²⁶ to those that detail how writers should submit, such as Raincoast²⁷ or Goose Lane Editions,²⁸ which even lists contact information for the company's editorial director in case writers have questions. Unsolicited manuscripts can be distinguished from proposals; for example, Raincoast refuses full manuscripts, but it outlines in detail how writers can submit queries.

Those companies that do claim to refuse unsolicited submissions tend to be larger; none of the small presses said they would decline unsolicited submissions. The reason may be that acquiring from the slush pile is a cost-effective way for publishers to find new authors, and small publishers are less likely to afford the higher advances that are required to attract established authors. Small publishers may also receive fewer unsolicited submissions than the large ones do, and therefore have less need to discourage submissions.

Commonalities do exist among those publishers that accept unsolicited submissions. Most of these publishers request that writers develop a proposal outlining the author's experience and the subject of the book, rather than submit full manuscripts. The Dundurn Group is a notable exception; it wants a full manuscript, or at least three sample chapters.²⁹ Some publishers, such as

²⁵ Key Porter Books, "How do I submit my manuscript to Key Porter Books?", <http://www.keyporter.com/faq.cfm#3>, December 2, 2004.

²⁶ Harper Collins Canada, "How do I submit proposals/how do I get published," <http://www.harpercollins.ca/root/about.asp#proposals>, December 2, 2004

²⁷ Raincoast Books, "Submission guidelines," <http://www.raincoast.com/publishing/submissions.html>, December 2, 2004

²⁸ Goose Lane Editions, "Goose Lane Guidelines," <http://www.gooselane.com/gle/submit.htm#lines>, December 11, 2004

²⁹ The Dundurn Group, "Submission Guidelines," <http://www.dundurn.com/submissions.html>, December 2, 2004.

Douglas & McIntyre and House of Anansi, also request that writers send a sample chapter or a brief selection of anywhere from ten to sixty pages for their editors to evaluate. Most publishers say they will not accept e-mail queries. M&S also claims it will not accept e-mail queries, yet the editorial assistant does respond to these e-mails. Many of the publishers emphasize that they are looking for Canadian writers, with Arsenal Pulp Press stating, "we are not currently considering manuscripts by non-Canadian writers."³⁰

Most publishers also clearly indicate in which subject areas they publish, and many suggest that writers review their catalogues to gain a better understanding of the sort of books the company publishes. Several also outline which categories they will NOT accept, such as self-help, romance, or personal memoirs.

All publishers accepting submissions tell writers to send a self-addressed, stamped envelope if they want their materials returned. One publisher says, "Although we will make our best effort to return materials where a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) is included, we do not guarantee it. Manuscripts can and do get lost. All submissions are made at the senders [sic] own risk, even where the press has indicated interest."³¹

Publishers also vary in the time it takes them to respond, but most claim to take about three months. The fastest response time listed was by Douglas &

³⁰ Arsenal Pulp Press, "Submissions," <http://www.arsenalpulp.com/submit.php>, December 2, 2004

³¹ Harbour Publishing, "Guidelines for Writers," <http://www.harbourpublishing.com/submissions.html>, December 2, 2004

McIntyre, which tells writers to "please allow 2 to 5 weeks for response."³²

Arsenal Pulp Press says, "We will try to respond within three months of receiving your material. It may be quicker, but we can't promise anything."³³ Harbour Publishing says an editor will normally write within three to six months.

Harbour Publishing's guidelines are unusually detailed and suggest that the company is very receptive to unsolicited submissions; they even include a section called "Acceptance Procedure" that says:

If the press is interested in publishing your work, you may be asked to submit an author questionnaire listing previous publications, vital statistics, etc. We may also make suggestions as to how your manuscript can be changed to make it more publishable.³⁴

The guidelines then detail the company's contract terms, telling authors it acquires world rights to the author's work.

Most of the guidelines are very similar, and the biggest difference is that larger companies tend to be less likely to accept unsolicited submissions than the smaller ones. McClelland & Stewart's guidelines are not much different from those of other publishers, except its subject areas are less clearly defined. Susan Renouf recently changed the M&S listing in *The Writer's Market* to remove references to health and lifestyle publishing, which the company does not do. The company might be wise to add a sentence to its guidelines describing what it will *not* accept for publication.

³² Douglas & McIntyre, "Douglas & McIntyre and Greystone Books Submission Guidelines," pdf file downloaded from <http://www.douglas-mcintyre.com/contact.asp#submissions>, December 2, 2004.

³³ Arsenal Pulp Press, "Submissions," <http://www.arsenalpulp.com/submit.php>, December 2, 2004

³⁴ Harbour Publishing, "Submissions Policy," <http://www.harbourpublishing.com/submissions.html>, December 2, 2004.

CHAPTER 3: OTHER WAYS TO ACQUIRE MANUSCRIPTS

Manuscripts come to trade publishers in three main ways: via literary agents, directly from authors to particular editors, or through the initiative of the editorial board (which at McClelland & Stewart consists of the non-fiction editorial department, the sales and marketing managers, the rights manager, and the publisher). More details on these acquisition methods follow.

Regardless of how they enter the house, all proposals being seriously considered for publication are brought forward in one of the company's bi-weekly editorial meetings. There, the editor pitches the book idea to the rest of the board, which then discusses the merits of the proposal. If the board approves the idea, the sales manager develops sales estimates, and the editor and publisher discuss appropriate advance levels; negotiations with the author or agent then begin. The only exception to this would be if a proposal requiring quick turnaround arrived during the interim between editorial meetings; in those cases, the marketing and sales managers, the editor, and the publisher would evaluate the proposal to determine whether to make an offer.

3.1 Literary agents

Literary agents are an integral part of the publishing system. Agents benefit publishers by screening manuscripts for good writing and by scouting for new authors. But agents usually represent published authors, who earn higher

advances than undiscovered authors. Susan Renouf says, "The trick is to be fast and to be clever, and to approach these authors and their agents before anyone else has noticed,"³⁵ while the authors are still affordable, but also have a writing career ahead of them that they can bring to the company. These are the potential advantages of discovering an author in the slush pile: lower advances and a longer writing career.

Furthermore, as Doug Gibson says, "The trouble is that the rise of the literary agent has meant that, increasingly, Canadian publishers only are granted Canadian rights to famous authors' books. From all of these international sales they make zero – not a nickel."³⁶ In other words, agents negotiate so that the originating publisher only holds Canadian rights, leaving them free to sell the foreign and translation rights to foreign publishers. First-time, unagented authors are more likely to give the publisher world rights to their book, which means the publisher can pursue additional revenue through rights sales.

The advantage to authors of using agents is that they navigate the process of submitting manuscripts and give the manuscript second-party endorsement. Agents have relationships with editors inside various publishing houses, and the better the agent, the more connected she is, so those manuscripts are more likely to be evaluated seriously by an editor than one coming in through the slush pile. The editors at McClelland & Stewart receive proposals regularly from the Beverly Slopen Literary Agency, the Bukowski Agency, the Cooke Agency, Westwood Creative Artists Ltd., Anne McDermid and

³⁵ Susan Renouf. Interview with author, November 1, 2004.

³⁶ Doug Gibson, "Ottawa speech," 2003.

Associates Ltd., and Transatlantic Literary Agency; and they receive further proposals from other agents across Canada and from abroad.

The other reason authors choose to work with an agent is that, if the book is acquired, the agent handles contract negotiations.

But many of the best-connected agents will not accept unpublished authors, unless the author shows exceptional promise, so the new author finds himself in the classic quandary of being unable to earn writing credits without being published and being unable to get published without writing credits. Most agency websites do not specifically say they do not accept unpublished authors; however, the established agencies, such as those that McClelland & Stewart deals with, mostly represent known authors, and their submission guidelines are very similar to those of most publishing companies. For example, the website of Anne McDermid & Associates Ltd. tells authors to submit as follows:

Send initial query by post to the address given below. Initial query should contain a description of the book, a sample chapter, some information about yourself (a full c.v. is preferred), a full submission history of the project, and representative reviews if you are previously published. . . . No reading fees are charged. We try to reply within six to eight weeks.³⁷

Agents receive a commission, usually 15 per cent, of their client's advance and royalties, so are unlikely to accept a new author's work unless it has high sales potential, or the author has future books in him. As *The Canadian Writer's Market* says, "Acquiring a literary agent can sometimes be more challenging than finding a publisher. . . . Typically, agencies work overtime to represent the clients

³⁷ Anne McDermid & Associates Ltd., "Submission Guidelines," <http://www.mcdermidagency.com/submissions.htm>, November 18, 2004.

they already have and are often reluctant to invest their time and money in an unproven entity.”³⁸

On the other hand, agents are responsible for a higher percentage of published books than they were even a decade ago, which implies that the number of agencies is growing. Perhaps this will make it easier for talented writers to find openings with agents. For example, Humber College now has an agent working directly with the students in its creative writing program; however, according to the school’s website, “Margaret Hart is an agent with the Transatlantic Literary Agency, the second largest literary agency in Canada. . . . Representation by the agency is open only to students registered in the program whose work is recommended by an author.”³⁹

And some people calling themselves agents have questionable connections. For example, Johanna M. Bates Literary Consultants claims to offer agent representation, but it sends submissions regularly to the McClelland & Stewart slush pile; while authors may believe their manuscripts are being handled by an agent and reviewed by editors within the company, in fact, their submissions are treated no differently from other unsolicited submissions. The same company charges prospective authors an evaluation fee of \$125 for the first one hundred pages of a manuscript, and then \$2 for every additional page. In exchange for this fee, the writer receives:

³⁸ Sandra Tooze, “Literary Agents,” *The Canadian Writer’s Market*, 16th ed. (McClelland & Stewart, 2004), 306-8.

³⁹ Humber School of Creative & Performing Arts, “Contact Us,” <http://www.humber.ca/creativeandperformingarts/writing/summerworkshop/contact.htm#>, December 11, 2004

- A written discussion of the strengths and weaknesses in dialogue, narrative flow, logic gaps, setting and characterization;
- Suggestions for developing the manuscript;
- A complete commentary on grammar, syntax and the overall language used in the manuscript;
- An assessment of the manuscript's publishing potential.⁴⁰

One can debate whether or not these editorial comments actually improve the manuscript enough to make it worth publishing.

3.2 Direct from authors

The second way McClelland & Stewart acquires manuscripts is by accepting book proposals from its existing stable of authors. The company has many returning authors, in part because its boilerplate contract contains a clause that gives M&S the option of buying the author's next manuscript, and also because the authors build working relationships within the house that they want to continue. The advantage for M&S of building house authors is that previously published authors have a reputation upon which to build, and publicity and sales for new titles enhances the backlist sales of their previous titles.

For this reason, M&S management wants to attract younger authors that it sees as investments; with their writing careers ahead of them, the authors are more likely to build long-term relationships with the company. According to Susan Renouf, "One of the things you don't want to do in non-fiction, that you often get

⁴⁰ Johanna M. Bates Literary Consultants, Inc. <http://www.batesliterary.com/srvc/so-manu.html>, November 16, 2004.

caught into, is reinventing the wheel with every list, because it's more often subject-driven than author-driven. If you structure your list this way, you end up scrambling every year to reinvent the wheel: new writers, new subjects, new everything."⁴¹ By attracting writers with many future books left in them, Renouf hopes that the authors will be able to approach the company with new ideas.

Furthermore, authors recommend other writers to the house. As Renouf explains:

You have your authors already in-house who come to you and say, "someone in my writing class is really fabulous," or, "I have this friend who has a manuscript." There's lots of word of mouth, not quite unsolicited, but sort of semi-unsolicited, so you're not always glued to being in the agents' world.⁴²

3.3 Editorial board ideas

The third way manuscripts are normally acquired by a trade publisher is through the initiative of the editorial board. In-house editors develop book ideas and then think of authors to match those ideas. Ideas often emerge from brainstorming sessions at editorial board meetings, and then the editors try to think of authors who might find the book idea appealing.

The challenge with originating book ideas in-house is that the process requires in-house time and resources, which a lean publishing house does not always have. Furthermore, the editors must find an author who can not only develop the concept in a way that the house sees as marketable and saleable, but also must be enthusiastic enough about the project to make it her own.

⁴¹ Susan Renouf. Interview with author, November 1, 2004.

⁴² Susan Renouf. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

This is not an effective way for authors to seek publication, since they must first be known to the editorial board in order to be considered, which means they either have some personal connection, such as a current house author, for their proposals to be reviewed, or they are previously published authors, or are otherwise big-name personalities, such as politicians, who the house perceives might have a following.

With the challenges for new authors to find literary agents or to get their proposals directly in front of editors, it is hardly surprising that so many of them end up submitting their manuscripts to slush piles across the country.

CHAPTER 4: EVALUATING UNSOLICITED SUBMISSIONS

When evaluating unsolicited submissions, editors look for the same qualities that they would from an agented or direct-from-author submission. Whereas agents normally send a letter plus a sample of the manuscript (for fiction) or a letter plus outline and sample (for non-fiction), unsolicited submissions come in many different forms, often just as a query letter. Editors do not have checklists of criteria they look for when evaluating manuscripts, and part of the process involves instinctively determining when an author shows potential. However, there are a few key criteria that affect editors' assessments of manuscripts or query letters: suitability for the house's list, quality of the work, timing, and sales potential.

Publishing houses have specific editorial profiles. McClelland & Stewart is well known for publishing established Canadian fiction authors such as Margaret Atwood, Jane Urquhart, and Rohinton Mistry. But according to Ellen Seligman, senior vice-president and publisher of fiction, the fiction list is carefully chosen each season to encompass work from newer Canadian authors (such as in the company's annual Journey Prize collection), established Canadian authors, celebrity Canadian authors, and international authors.⁴³ The fiction list is literary, with some crime fiction by authors such as Maureen Jennings and Peter

⁴³Ellen Seligman. Comments made at the McClelland & Stewart Spring 2005 internal launch, September 15, 2004.

Robinson. The non-fiction list is now geared towards history, biography and memoir, current affairs, and narrative non-fiction. McClelland & Stewart's non-fiction authors include commentators such as Mel Hurtig and Gwynne Dyer, and a range of newspaper columnists and professional writers, as well as figures in politics, arts, and other fields.

Having a clear sense of what the company publishes makes it easier to evaluate incoming manuscripts. When a submission arrives in the slush pile outlining new-age approaches to health and spirituality, for example, the evaluating editor quickly recognizes that it is not a McClelland & Stewart book. Often, the editor can read the query letter and recognize that the book simply is not a subject that McClelland & Stewart would publish. For example, one author submitted a query letter to publish his plays, whose audience would be "Scholars, Intellectuals, Academics, language-rich college students who have studied serious literature."⁴⁴ McClelland & Stewart does not usually publish drama, and it also does not publish to an academic audience, so it is unlikely to publish this book.

However, as Susan Renouf says, "If the South Beach Diet fell into our laps, we'd probably cheerfully break all the rules."⁴⁵ In other words, the company publishes particular categories and tries to demonstrate its expertise in publishing those categories, but if a well-written book with strong sales potential arrived that was outside of its usual subject areas, such as a finance or health book, M&S might consider publishing it.

⁴⁴ Author #4. For more details on this numbering system, please see *Chapter 6*.

⁴⁵ Susan Renouf. Interview with author, November 1, 2004.

The key factor in evaluating any manuscript, and the one that every acquisition rests upon, is the quality of the writing. As senior editor Alex Schultz says, "It has to be a great idea, and the writing has to be really, really good, and you can tell that pretty quickly."⁴⁶ This is true for slush-pile submissions; because the authors are unproven and the volume of submissions is so high, the editor must be quickly convinced of a writer's talent for the proposal to merit a closer reading. Either the manuscript must be very strong, or the writer must demonstrate a capacity for fresh, insightful writing. The manuscript might need heavy editing, but the editor must see potential in the draft. As Cynthia Good, former publisher of Penguin Canada, says, you look for "excellence in its genre,"⁴⁷ rather than evaluating based on your personal taste.

When writers submit query letters to the slush pile, the editor does not possess a draft in which to search for strong writing, although many letters arrive that are poorly written, and one can make a decision based on that alone. If the letter is competently written, the editor looks for the author's previous writing experience. About 10 per cent of authors write in their query letters that they have never written anything before, some continuing that they think they should start at the top by writing to McClelland & Stewart. Another 40 per cent do not mention any writing experience. Unless the proposal shows exceptional merit in other areas, these are quickly declined. The remaining 50 per cent indicate some sort of writing experience, ranging from newsletter writing to having published books. For example, 7 per cent of authors have been published in newspapers.

⁴⁶ Alex Schultz. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

⁴⁷ Cynthia Good. "Building a List," talk given to the Master of Publishing class at Simon Fraser University, September 17, 2003.

The proposals that do receive more attention come from writers who have been published in literary journals such as *The Fiddlehead*, *Grain*, or *Geist*; writers who have won awards in story or essay competitions; writers who have been published in one genre, such as children's books, and now are trying new genres, such as novels; and writers who were published many years ago and are returning to the craft after an absence. In these cases, the proposal receives a careful read, because their writing skills have been validated by external sources. And if the editor cannot decide whether or not the manuscript is worth publishing, she may request further material from the author.

Another factor that editors consider when evaluating unsolicited submissions is timing, both external and internal. This factor is more relevant for non-fiction proposals than for fiction, because fiction does not usually date quickly. However, timing does affect fiction publishing in the sense that a house might not want to publish an author's second book too soon after the first, to give media, booksellers, and readers time to regain interest in that author. For non-fiction, the editor must consider whether the topics covered in the book would still hold a reader's attention. For example, in 2004, M&S received an unsolicited proposal for Steve Fonyo's story. In 1985, Fonyo set out to complete Terry Fox's run for cancer across Canada; twenty years later, a younger generation does not recognize Steve Fonyo's name, and an older generation no longer finds the story compelling. This idea is no longer timely and would no longer generate significant interest among readers or booksellers. The editor must also consider the timing of publishing a book against what other publishers are producing. For example,

M&S occasionally learns that another company is publishing a book on the same topic as a manuscript it is considering. In those cases, it will want to publish the book first, or have an entirely new angle, or not publish it at all.

For internal timing, editors must consider how long it takes to produce a book, because what is timely now may not be timely when the book is actually published two years later, after being written, edited, typeset, and marketed. Furthermore, the editor must consider how the book would fit with the rest of the list. For example, McClelland & Stewart is unlikely to publish two books about travelling to Japan in the same season.

The final factor that editors consider while evaluating submissions is the book's overall sales potential. The previous three factors – suitability for the list, quality of writing, and timing – all affect whether or not a book will sell well. But a book may meet these criteria and still not be accepted for publication, if it appeals only to a small audience, and therefore holds weak sales potential. McClelland & Stewart is unlikely to publish such a book, unless it meets some of the following criteria: it has exceptional literary value; the company feels the author has future, bigger books in him; or the book adds something to the list and helps position M&S as a publisher of a new genre for which it was previously unrecognized but wanted to move into.

Most submissions to the M&S slush pile lack one or all four of the requirements for acquisition.

CHAPTER 5: DECLINING SUBMISSIONS

McClelland & Stewart's online submission guidelines used to start, "*I'm sorry, I loved your manuscript but I just could not get it past the editorial board . . .*"

Writers know rejection in many forms: supportive notes, form letters, careless comments, apologetic phone calls.⁴⁸ The editor responsible for the slush pile spends a lot of time declining writers' work. (Just as "slush pile" is a derogatory term for unsolicited manuscripts, "to reject" a manuscript is the less-polite term for "to decline" a manuscript.)

McClelland & Stewart uses a few form letters to respond to unsolicited submissions. Because the editorial team is so busy working on books for its upcoming lists, it cannot devote much time to responding to unsolicited proposals. Even some agented manuscripts receive form-letter responses. The editor rarely includes comments or constructive criticism for authors because that would require too much time. If a writer does show potential, but his or her proposal is clearly inappropriate for McClelland & Stewart, the editor might direct the writer towards resources such as *The Canadian Writer's Market* or *The Literary Marketplace*, or suggest a more suitable publisher.

The two letters the company uses the most are shown in the following figures. McClelland & Stewart also uses a form letter to respond to short-story collections, which tells the writer that "short stories collections, with rare

⁴⁸ McClelland & Stewart, "New Authors guidelines," archived www.mcclelland.com Web page.

exceptions, are difficult to make work economically, which is why McClelland & Stewart publishes relatively few collections, roughly one collection every 1-2 years," and then suggests the writer consult the current edition of *The Canadian Writer's Market* to find a more suitable publisher.

These form letters are designed to shorten the length of time the editor takes to respond to submissions, and to be polite and not discouraging to the writers. At the same time, the letters do not encourage authors to resubmit their manuscripts to the company. From the author's perspective, the letters may be cold and unhelpful, because they do not help writers improve their work; however, the company does not have the resources to respond personally to each submission. Authors might also prefer that M&S send an acknowledgement when it first receives the submission, but that extra step would require additional time that the company cannot spare.

Figure 1: Rejection letter for novels

Dear Mr./Ms. Last Name:

Thank you for your patience while waiting for us to respond to the sample from your novel, *Title*.

While we read your sample with interest, we have some reservations about our ability to publish the novel successfully. It doesn't seem quite right for our list.

We wish you every success in placing your manuscript elsewhere, and thank you for thinking of McClelland & Stewart.

Sincerely,

Trena White
Editorial Assistant

Figure 2: Rejection letter for non-fiction proposals

Dear Mr./Ms. Last Name:

A member of our editorial team has read and considered your proposal for *Title*. Unfortunately, we do not think that we can publish it successfully and must decline the opportunity to pursue it further.

We wish you the best of luck in finding a suitable publisher, and thank you for thinking of McClelland & Stewart.

Best wishes,

Trena White
Editorial Assistant

When the editorial assistant does see value in reading more of the manuscript, she sends the following form letter, with slight variations depending on whether it is a fiction, non-fiction, or poetry proposal.

Figure 3: Request for a sample

Dear Mr./Ms. Last Name:

Thank you for your letter inquiring about our interest in considering your novel, *Title*.

We'd be pleased to consider a sample, perhaps the first hundred pages or so. We should let you know that due to a backlog of submissions, it may be some time before we are able to respond, but we will do so as soon as we are able.

Thank you in advance for your patience, and thank you for giving McClelland & Stewart the opportunity to consider your novel.

Sincerely,

Trena White
Editorial Assistant

CHAPTER 6: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE M&S SLUSH PILE

Every month, McClelland & Stewart receives about twenty-five to thirty-five unsolicited submissions, plus about twenty e-mail queries and submissions. In the two-week period from November 30 to December 12 alone, M&S received twenty-four paper submissions. This does not include those sent to Tundra, its children's imprint. They usually come addressed simply to "McClelland & Stewart" or "Editorial Department" or "Acquisitions Editor." In those rare occasions when a submission is addressed directly to one of the editors (about 3 per cent of submissions), it is usually sent to one of the previous interns who were responsible for reading slush-pile submissions.

As the current editorial assistant at M&S, I am responsible for handling the slush pile. The slush submissions are sorted daily in the mailroom and deposited in my mail slot. I receive the unsolicited fiction, poetry, and non-fiction submissions. The slush pile is usually a low priority simply because I must work on the company's current and upcoming list first. I usually try to devote a couple of hours at the end of the week to assessing submissions, but when that is impossible due to workload, I grab a stack to work through whenever there is down time. A difficulty is that whenever the company runs into a busy period, the slush pile is neglected, and then a backlog of proposals develops. And with

dozens of new submissions coming in every week, the stack is unlikely ever to be reduced to zero.

McClelland & Stewart tries to respond to unsolicited submissions within three months, but when there is a backlog, the response time can be slightly longer. Doug Gibson says M&S used to “do household blitzes, where we’d take over the editorial meeting and task people to take care of them [the submissions] there and then.” Susan Renouf says some companies routinely divide the pile up and everyone on the editorial team reads a batch. The advantage of this process is that the slush pile is tackled before it grows too large. And as senior editor Alex Schultz says, “It gets to you after a while, because the quality is overwhelmingly bad, and it’s slightly depressing to know that there’s so many people putting so much energy into completely unpublishable work.”⁴⁹ However, the value of taking up senior editors’ time with evaluating unpublishable work is questionable.

When submissions arrive at M&S, I place them in a pile on a shelf, placing the newer submissions underneath the older ones, so they will be read in the order in which they arrived. The quantity of submissions is too large to stack in one pile, so there are up to six piles, ordered from oldest to newest so they are dealt with in sequential order.

McClelland & Stewart maintains an Excel file on which I log the status of unsolicited manuscripts (see Figure 4; note that all names in the figure are fictitious). Once a submission has been read and evaluated, I complete a new row in the spreadsheet to indicate the status of the manuscript. The submission

⁴⁹ Alex Schultz. Interview with author, December 9, 2004

log helps the company to track down proposals when it receives phone calls from authors wondering whether their manuscripts have been evaluated yet, or if they were lost in the mail. In late September, M&S received several e-mails and phone calls from would-be authors who had submitted to the M&S slush pile a few months earlier and heard no response (probably due to staffing changes); each time, I dug through the pile to see if the company had indeed received the submission. After doing this a couple of times, I began to log the date, the author's name, and the title in the "Date sent to M&S" column, before placing their submission in the pile, in case writers call or e-mail in the future. Now I can quickly tell whether I did receive the submission and whether it has been evaluated yet.

A closer look at the spreadsheet reveals a few points about the slush-pile system at McClelland & Stewart. First, it notes whether or not the author has included a SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope). While every author receives a typed response on M&S letterhead, if an author does not include a SASE, the company does not return his manuscript or proposal. It stays on file for two months, in case the author does send the appropriate postage to return the proposal, after which time it is recycled. Writers who send e-mail queries or proposals to the general editorial e-mail address receive an e-mail response in return. These authors usually receive a faster response than authors sending hard-copy proposals because the process of responding is much faster; the e-mails do not have to be logged, because there is already an electronic record of them that can be searched, the Sent Items of the editorial mailbox. People also

expect faster responses when they send e-mails than when they send regular mail.

The spreadsheet also creates a sense of accountability, because the reader enters her initials, so the company knows who was responsible for making the decision, particularly since a second editor does not review the decisions. On the other hand, the reader is not required to spend much time justifying her response, as is evident from the "Status/Notes" column, which indicates reasons such as "Not in keeping," suggesting that the submission did not fit the M&S profile (such as a romance novel or cookbook), or simply, "Declined," which usually means the writing was weak or the book was otherwise unpublishable. Occasionally, the reader will give further details, such as an explanation of why she requested further material from the writer: "previously published a book with Orca."

The last thing that the spreadsheet reveals is the assumption within the company that these submissions will not be acquired. Note the heading of the second-last column, "Date Declined," which reveals the prevailing reality of slush-pile submissions and their usual fate.

When evaluating a submission, I do not necessarily read the entire manuscript; often reading the cover letter is sufficient, or five to ten pages of the sample itself. After logging my decision, I then choose one of the template rejection letters and insert the writer's name, address, and book title. I print two copies of the letter, one to mail to the author, and one to keep on file for six months in the company's records, in case the author calls inquiring about the

status of his submission. Given that the submissions are logged in the spreadsheet, this may be an unnecessary step.

If the proposal is insufficient to evaluate the manuscript, I may request further samples using another letter template. And if the sample is quite good, or I want a second opinion, I pass it along to a more senior editor to evaluate. I have done this only once during my six months with the company, when a bestselling author at another publishing house sent an e-mail query to our general editorial mailbox; he wrote financial books and the senior editor felt they were not in keeping with the M&S list, so we declined the opportunity to publish his work.

Figure 4: McClelland & Stewart master slush-pile spreadsheet⁵⁰

Master Slush Pile Reference									
<i>Last Name</i>	<i>First Name</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Date Sent to M&S</i>	<i>Material Included</i>	<i>SASE Encl.?</i>	<i>Status/ Notes</i>	<i>Date Declined</i>	<i>Initials</i>
Cairns	Richard	<i>Walking the Line</i>	poetry	4/9/04	ms	Y	Declined	8/5/04	SC
Campbell	Andrea	<i>End of Fascism</i>		6/14/04			Requested sample; previously pub'd with Orca	10/22/04	AK
Carpenter	Elizabeth	<i>Cornelia's Hope</i>	non-fic/bio	2/17/04	query	n	boring	5/23/04	SC
James	Kristy	<i>Dark Days Ahead</i>	NF	5/7/04	Faxed proposal	Fax	Rejected as per EK	11/2/04	DC
MacDonald	Kevin	<i>Living the Dream</i>	NF	3/10/03	manuscript	N	Declined. Not written for a general audience	7/3/03	AK
Read	Sean	<i>Untitled Novel about psychiatric illness</i>		3/8/04	letter	N	Not in keeping	5/27/04	AK
White	Trevor	<i>A Month of Sundays</i>		5/21/04	Letter & MS	N	Not in keeping; discarded ms on 12/15/2004	9/30/04	AK

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⁵⁰ The names and titles in this table are fictitious.

CHAPTER 7: AN ANALYSIS OF THE M&S SLUSH PILE

This chapter looks closely at typical unsolicited submissions that McClelland & Stewart receives. To conduct my research for this section, I evaluated one hundred submissions that came unsolicited to the company, and the following results are based on my own assessment and evaluations. Another assistant may have read the submissions differently, because the process of evaluating a submission is subjective and decisions are based partly on experience.

7.1 Methodology

To determine what kinds of proposals are sent to the McClelland & Stewart slush pile, I pulled fifteen e-mails sent to the general editorial e-mail address, as well as eighty-five paper submissions from the slush pile. I assessed them using the same criteria I would for any other slush-pile submission: quality of the writing, soundness of the idea, suitability for the M&S list, timing, and sales potential. I chose a sample of one hundred because that is roughly the number M&S receives over two to three months. The proposals were not selected for any particular attributes; I simply counted off eighty-five from the top of two slush-pile stacks, and pulled fifteen consecutive e-mails from the editorial inbox. Most of the proposals were sent during September and October 2004.

When evaluating the submissions, I logged the author's name, the title of the work, the genre, a brief synopsis, the date on the author's submission, how

long it took to evaluate, the status of the proposal once I had assessed it (whether or not it was declined, passed to another editor, or dealt with some other way) the author's address and experience, whether or not the book had been self-published, who the proposal was sent to, whether a SASE was included, and additional comments on why I made the decisions I did (such as, "we don't publish self-help books").

I have quoted from some of the submissions, but to maintain the anonymity of the authors, I have numbered each one and will refer to them simply as "Author one," "Author two," and so on, according to the row they occupy in my Excel log. All titles and other identifying characteristics have been removed from the quotes and the footnotes. To capture the true flavour of the submissions, all grammatical errors have been retained. Readers of this report can assume that all errors of punctuation or otherwise in the quotes were in the original source document.

To contrast the unsolicited submissions with the kinds of books that McClelland & Stewart does publish, I compare these one hundred submissions with the thirty-four new books on the M&S fall 2004 list. I have omitted any new-format reprint books, including those in M&S's New Canadian Library and Emblem editions. As previously mentioned, the non-fiction department is currently being refined at M&S to focus on history, biography and memoir, current affairs, and narrative non-fiction; the types of books it publishes now may be different from what it publishes over the next couple of years.

7.2 Author location

Table 1 and Table 2 show the locations of authors submitting to the slush pile, in comparison with the location of authors publishing new books with M&S in fall 2004. Note that "location" does not necessarily mean "citizenship." Writers rarely indicate their citizenship, but it can be inferred from their mailing address.

Table 1: Location in Canada of authors submitting unsolicited manuscripts and of authors published by M&S in fall 2004

Canadian province	Unsolicited submissions	% of Canadian unsolicited submissions	M&S fall 2004 list	% of Canadian authors
Ontario	31	38%	23	62%
B.C.	22	27%	7	19%
Alberta	8	10%	0	0
Quebec	8	10%	1	3%
Nova Scotia	5	6%	3	8%
Saskatchewan	3	4%	2	5%
New Brunswick	2	2%	0	0
Manitoba	1	1%	0	0
Newfoundland & Labrador	1	1%	1	3%
PEI & Territories	0	0	0	0
Total Canada	82	100%⁵¹	37	100%

⁵¹ The percentages in this table and those following have been rounded to the nearest per cent; as a result, the columns do not always total exactly 100%, but they do represent 100% of the submissions.

Table 2: Location by country of non-Canadian authors submitting unsolicited manuscripts and of authors published by M&S in fall 2004

Non-Canadian locations	Unsolicited submissions	% of non-Canadian unsolicited submissions	M&S Fall 2004 list	% of non-Canadian authors
United States	12	71%	1	20%
United Kingdom	2	12%	4	80%
Australia	1	6%	0	0
Czech Republic	1	6%	0	0
France	0	0	1	20%
Greece	1	6%	0	0
Total non-Canadian	17	100%	5	100%
Location unknown	2	-	0	-

Of the one hundred unsolicited submissions, 81 per cent came from Canadian authors, 17 per cent from foreign authors (including 12 per cent Americans), and 2 per cent came from unknown locations. The two unknown locations were e-mail queries in which the authors did not list contact information. Of the thirty-one submissions originating in Ontario, fifteen came from within the Greater Toronto Area in which McClelland & Stewart is based, which includes the regions of the City of Toronto, Halton, Peel, York, and Durham.⁵²

In comparing the unsolicited submissions to the authors M&S publishes, only 14 per cent of the authors on the M&S fall 2004 list live overseas: three in the United Kingdom, one in France, and one in the United States; the remaining 86 per cent are Canadian residents. The total number of authors listed is forty-two, but only thirty-four new books were published. The explanation is that one of the authors lives half-time in both B.C. and Ontario, and therefore was counted in

⁵² Greater Toronto Marketing Alliance, "The Greater Toronto Area," <http://www.greater.toronto.on.ca/atagance/mapprofile.html>, December 11, 2004.

both. Furthermore, one of the books consisted of half illustrations and half writing, so both the author and illustrator were counted. Two of the books were anthologies of a dozen or more pieces of writing; in these cases, the editors were listed as the contributors. Lastly, two of the books were co-authored, and both authors' locations are represented in Table 2. Four of the five foreign-authored books were all originated by M&S (three of these authors are Canadians living abroad); the fifth, *The Red Queen* by Margaret Drabble, was co-published in the U.K. and the U.S.

7.3 Submissions by category and genre

This section outlines the category of books that writers submitted: fiction, non-fiction, or other. Each of these major categories is sub-divided into genre. For example, fiction submissions are divided into a number of categories such as mystery, fantasy, or short stories. The tables contrast the unsolicited submissions with what M&S published in its fall 2004 list.

Table 3 shows the category of submissions, in comparison with the books published by M&S in fall 2004.

Table 3: Category of unsolicited submissions compared with titles published in fall 2004

Category of submission	Unsolicited submissions	% of total unsolicited submissions	M&S fall 2004 list	% of total fall books
Fiction	48	47%	11	32%
Non-fiction	35	34%	23	68%
Other	19	19%	0	0

Of the one hundred unsolicited proposals, 47 per cent were fiction, 34 per cent were non-fiction, and 19 per cent were other. The “other” category includes seven poetry submissions, one drama submission, and an additional eleven in genres such as puzzle books and joke books. This total equals greater than one hundred because two authors submitted queries for more than one type of book. Note that several of the books could have been placed in more than one category, such as an autobiography of a man’s experience with cancer, which could have been classified as either health or autobiography.

In contrast, M&S published only eleven new fiction books (32 per cent of the list), including one juvenile fiction book, *The Screech Owls’ Reunion*. It published twenty-three new non-fiction books (68 per cent of the list). So while the majority of unsolicited submissions were fiction, the majority of the company’s new books are non-fiction. This may be because M&S fiction has historically been a stronger brand than its non-fiction, and people associate M&S more with fiction.

Table 4 breaks the fiction submissions down by genre, and compares them with what McClelland & Stewart actually published in fall 2004.

Table 4: Fiction submissions and titles published in fall 2004 by genre

Fiction genre	Unsolicited submissions	% of unsolicited fiction submissions	M&S fall 2004 list	% of M&S fall fiction
General	18	38%	5	45%
Short stories	8	17%	3	27%
Historical	7	15%	0	0
Fantasy/sci-fi	7	15%	0	0
Mystery	7	15%	2	18%
Romance	1	2%	0	0
Other	0	0	1	9%
Total fiction	48	100%	11	100%

Of the unsolicited submissions, 38 per cent were general fiction, meaning they could not be considered genre fiction; 17 per cent were short stories; 15 per cent historical fiction, fantasy/science fiction, or mystery; and 2 per cent romance novels. Those numbers are close to what M&S actually published: 45 per cent of its novels were general, literary fiction; 27 per cent were short stories, 18 per cent were mystery; and 9 per cent could be considered "other." The latter was a short Christmas gift book written by Alistair MacLeod and illustrated by Peter Rankin.

The key difference between the unsolicited submissions and those that were published are in the quality of the writing and profile of the authors. For example, two of the short stories books the company published were by Alice Munro and Jack Hodgins – celebrated fiction writers. The other was a compilation of stories by Journey Prize winners.

Table 5 breaks the non-fiction submissions down by subject, and compares them with what McClelland & Stewart actually published in fall 2004.

Table 5: Non-fiction submissions and titles published in fall 2004 by subject

Non-fiction subject	Unsolicited submissions	% of unsolicited non-fiction submissions	M&S fall 2004 list	% of M&S fall non-fiction
Autobiography/biography	15	42%	6	26%
Health	5	14%	0	0
History	4	11%	2	9%
Other	3	9%	1	9%
Self-help/how-to	2	6%	0	0
Business	2	6%	0	0
Nature/wildlife	1	3%	4	17%
Sports	1	3%	4	17%
Politics	1	3%	3	13%
Religion	1	3%	1	9%
Social Science	0	0	2	9%
Total non-fiction	35	100%	23	100%

Autobiography/biography was the largest category of non-fiction proposals submitted, and it was also the category in which M&S published the most non-fiction books in fall 2004. Of the unsolicited non-fiction submissions M&S received in the sample, 43 per cent were for autobiography/biography, while only 26 per cent of the published fall books were. M&S published memoirs in fall 2004 by writers such as Sheila Copps and Peter C. Newman; the memoirs submitted to the slush pile were usually personal diaries or memoirs by individuals who were not public figures, and therefore, of less interest to general readers.

The next largest category for non-fiction submissions was health, which accounted for 14 per cent of the unsolicited submissions. The company did not publish any health or self-help books. The other categories that M&S did not publish but did receive unsolicited submissions for were self-help/how-to and business.

In the "Other" category for non-fiction, M&S published a musical guidebook called *The Essential Classical Collection*, by CBC host and producer Rick Phillips. The "other" unsolicited submissions included a book of anecdotes and thoughts by the author on how he has come to learn everything he knows.

Table 6 illustrates a breakdown of the remaining (i.e. other than fiction or non-fiction) unsolicited submissions M&S received, in contrast to the titles it published in fall 2004.

Table 6: Other unsolicited submissions and M&S fall 2004 titles by category

Other category	Unsolicited submissions	% unsolicited other submissions	M&S fall 2004 list	% M&S fall other
Poetry	6	55%	0	0
Humour/joke books	5	45%	0	0
Undefined	3	27%	0	0
Coffee-table book	1	9%	0	0
Drama	1	9%	0	0
Games	1	9%	0	0
Graphic novel	1	9%	0	0
Total other	11	100%	0	0%

McClelland & Stewart did not publish any of the other categories that writers had submitted. It is worth noting that McClelland & Stewart only publishes about four books of poetry a year, and always in the spring; had the spring 2005 list been used as a point of comparison, this table would have included five poetry books.

The row for "Undefined" submissions includes one book that was explained as a "non-fiction novel," and two submissions that were incomprehensible.

7.4 Author publishing background

Table 7 details the publishing background of the authors sending unsolicited proposals, as well as the experience of M&S authors.

Table 7: Significant publishing experience of authors of unsolicited submissions and authors of M&S fall 2004 books

Experience	Authors of unsolicited submissions	% authors of unsolicited submissions	Authors on M&S fall 2004 list	% authors on M&S fall 2004 list
Specific experience unknown	40	40%	3	7%
Self-published a book	14	14%	0	0
One or more book published (not self-published)	12	12%	31	74%
No publishing experience	10	10%	0	0
Published newspaper articles	7	7%	8	19%
Published one or more non-fiction articles in magazines	5	5%	0	0
Published one or more stories/poems in magazines	4	4%	0	0
Published academic work	3	3%	0	0
Published one or more stories/poems in literary journals	2	2%	0	0
Corporate writing experience	1	1%	0	0
Publishing a kids' book	1	1%	0	0
Published a play	1	1%	0	0
Total	100	100%	42	100%

The published work by the authors of the unsolicited submissions ranged from none to one writer who said he was formerly the travel editor for a large

daily newspaper and had published five non-fiction books in the 1970s. Where an author indicated that she had published in a variety of places, such as publishing several short stories online and a poem in a magazine, I categorized her in the area in which she had the most experience.

The number of unsolicited writers who have published books appears high; however, this includes writers who have published books in genres that M&S does not publish, such as joke books or romance. All but one of these authors were submitting proposals for formats in which they appear never to have been published. For example, one writer had published six magic books and was now submitting a proposal for a book of short stories.

The three M&S authors whose experiences are listed as unknown were all writing their first book. Their experience is indicated as unknown simply because details of their publishing history are unavailable. These authors include: Rick Phillips, the host and producer of CBC's *Sound Advice*; Anne Coleman, a former instructor at the University College of the Cariboo; and Robert McGill, Ph.D candidate and former Rhodes Scholar. All three of these authors would presumably have some publishing experience.

Whereas 50 per cent of unsolicited submissions come from writers who either have no publishing experience, or do not indicate any publishing experience, all of the M&S writers do, with 74 per cent having published one or more book. Many of these authors are also award winners. 19 per cent of the M&S authors showed significant newspaper writing experience. For example, Ed Willes, author of *The Rebel League: The Short and Unruly Life of the World*

Hockey Association, had never published a book, but he had been the hockey writer for the *Winnipeg Sun*, had freelanced for the *New York Times*, and is a sports columnist now at the *Vancouver Province*. So the M&S writers have significantly more experience, and more book-related experience, than writers submitting to the slush pile.

7.5 What the proposals consisted of

This section outlines what the writers submitted as their proposal. One writer sent just a three-line e-mail query, others submitted full manuscripts, and the majority submitted something in-between.

7.5.1 The paper proposals

Of the eighty-five authors submitting paper proposals, forty-three sent just a query letter, ranging from one to five pages, which may have included a synopsis of the book, background on the author, plus some target audience definition. Six authors sent proposals of up to twenty pages. The longer proposals followed the same form as the queries, but went into deeper detail on the plot description and author background.

Thirty-one writers sent samples of their writing. The samples ranged in length from five to two hundred pages. Three of these authors sent their samples on a disk rather than as a printout. This is a mistake, because evaluating editors are unlikely to open the files on an unsolicited disk unless the covering letter is exceptional. With the slush pile, every extra step the editor must take to read the

work reduces the author's chance of being seriously considered by the editor.

Five authors sent full manuscripts; none of these was read in full.

Most of the proposals come as standard, stapled pieces of paper.

Occasionally a writer will attempt a gimmick to attract the editor's attention. For example, one submission came in an envelope saying, "Wouldn't YOU like to discover the next BIG SELLER?"⁵³ One writer submitted a colour photo of herself, and a few of the self-published writers sent colour copies of their book covers. One writer submitted a handwritten cover letter, and one proposal consisted of three lined notebooks filled with handwritten stories or memoirs, each wrapped in a hair elastic.

7.5.2 The electronic proposals

The McClelland & Stewart editorial e-mail address is posted on the Contact Us page on its website, with a note saying, "Please do not send manuscript submissions by e-mail. See our submission guidelines for details on contacting us about your manuscript."⁵⁴ But e-mail queries and proposals do still come in, at a rate of about fifteen to twenty each month (and further e-mails are sent to individual editors).

The e-mail proposals ranged from two lines to extended letters. One writer pasted a sample story in the body of his e-mail, and one attached a sample as a Word file. Two of the e-mails were sent to several other publishers at the same

⁵³ Author #79. As previously mentioned, all authors were assigned a number to preserve their anonymity.

⁵⁴ McClelland & Stewart, "Contact Us," <http://www.mcclelland.com/aboutus/contact.html>, December 12, 2004.

time. One was marked high priority with the subject line, "An Offer!" and another used a twenty-eight-word subject line.

7.6 Third-party submissions

Of the one hundred proposals submitted to the slush pile, one was sent by Johanna Bates Literary Consultants on behalf of a client, three were sent by other third-party representatives (none of them literary agents), and the remaining ninety-six were sent directly by the authors. One can only speculate why those three chose to use third-party people to submit their work (assuming the third parties actually do exist) – perhaps they believed it gave their proposals more legitimacy, or perhaps the third parties wished to send it on behalf of a reluctant author.

All but three of the submissions were sent just to "McClelland & Stewart," or some variation of that, such as "Acquisitions Editor," "Travel Editor," or "Publisher." One was addressed to the "Steward of the Slush Pile." Three of the submissions were addressed to former M&S interns or editorial assistants; in all three cases, the authors had previously been declined by that editor, and had chosen to resubmit to her directly.

7.7 Resubmissions

In fact, 6 per cent of the authors submitting to the slush pile had previously been declined by M&S. One author had twice been declined for the same book, and two had previously been declined for a different book. Five of these authors

waited a year before resubmitting, and one resubmitted the same year she was originally declined.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell whether or not a manuscript is a resubmission because some authors alter their names or the names of the manuscript. For example, a Stephanie Master might become Stephen McMaster, and if one searches the master spreadsheet by name, one might not realize this is a resubmission of a previously declined work.

7.8 Self-publication

Of the one hundred proposals submitted, eleven of the books had been self-published, and the authors were now looking for a professional trade publisher to take on their self-published work. At least two authors referred to Cerlox binding as self-publishing, but several of the others mentioned specific companies they had self-published with, such as Trafford Publishing. None of these authors included sales figures for their self-published work. An additional three authors had previously self-published books, but were pitching new books to M&S.

One of these authors submitted a letter simply saying, "I enclose a photocopy of the jacket of my recently published novel. . . . Its content is self-explanatory. If you decide to consider my novel for possible publication in Canada please contact my publisher . . . for the necessary information concerning its acquisition."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Author sixteen

7.9 Time to evaluate

The unsolicited submissions required from one minute to fourteen to evaluate.

The average time required to assess the submissions was three minutes and forty-eight seconds. Often the more material the author sent, the longer it took to evaluate; even if the letter appears to indicate that the proposal is inappropriate for McClelland & Stewart, there is a tendency to read a bit further to make sure.

In addition to evaluating the submissions, it takes about one minute to respond to an e-mail submission, and about four minutes to respond to and log a written submission. As a result, the total time spent evaluating and responding to these one hundred submissions was just under twelve hours. Since they reflect what M&S receives in about two months, the editorial assistant must spend about an hour and a half a week reading unsolicited submissions to manage the pile.

7.10 SASEs (Self-Addressed, Stamped Envelopes)

Of the eighty-five authors who submitted hard-copy proposals, only forty-seven included a SASE, something that McClelland & Stewart's guidelines tell authors to do. One of these was a stamped postcard for a reply only. Three of the writers who did not send a SASE had sent a full manuscript, so their rejection letters will include a note saying that M&S will hold their materials for two months only, and they can send a SASE during that time.

7.11 Status of the submissions after evaluation

Evaluating submissions is an imperfect science; just as most publishers have a story about an unsolicited submission that they published to great success, many

also have stories about bestselling books that they declined. Susan Juby, the bestselling YA author, is quoted in *Quill & Quire* as saying, "I sent samples out to a lot of agents and received a lot of rejections. Then I sent samples out to a bunch of local publishers and received more rejections."⁵⁶ Perhaps the publishers and agents who declined the manuscript felt the book did not fit their list, or the market for the book was too small, but it was successful for her publishers, Thistle-down and Harper Collins.

Of the one hundred unsolicited submissions I evaluated, all were declined but one – a non-fiction proposal from a Canadian daily newspaper editor, for which a sample and more detailed outline was requested. The reasons the remaining ninety-nine were declined are numerous: the proposals were incomprehensible or unprofessional, the book was for a genre M&S does not publish, and so on. This section will clarify why they were declined and give more insight into what writers include in their proposals.

Table 8 indicates why the unsolicited submissions were declined. Each of these reasons is detailed below, with quotes from submissions to explain the reasoning behind the rejections.

⁵⁶ Robert J. Wiersema, "Tales of teenage misfits," *Quill & Quire*, February 2005, 16-17.

Table 8: Reasons why the authors' submissions were declined

Reason why author was declined	Number of submissions
Genre or subject not in keeping with the M&S list	29
Writing not strong enough	28
Author has no experience or credits to suggest the proposal warrants further consideration	18
Book has weak sales potential	12
The idea is weak	7
Author's proposal was incoherent	5
Total	99

Many of the submissions could fit under two or more of these explanations for rejection; however, they were logged according to the prime reason they were declined, or the reason I stopped reading and formed a judgment of the proposal.

7.11.1 Genre or subject not in keeping with the M&S list

The top reason submissions were declined (29 per cent) was that they were written on a subject or in a genre that M&S would not publish. As suggested earlier by Susan Renouf, there are always exceptions to this rule, but the writing or sales potential would have to be exceptional for a topic to be published that was not in keeping with the M&S list. These proposals ranged from a book about management styles to empower health-care workers to a book described as a "paranormal girl-power novel."⁵⁷ Another proposal for a science-fiction novel says, "The novel begins on a spaceship where an alien Captain – representing a powerful planetary group . . . chides the humans for having allowed the Earth to be an ecological, an economic and a social disaster."⁵⁸ M&S is unlikely to publish

⁵⁷ Author fifty

⁵⁸ Author sixty-nine

such a book, unless it was literary, but that was not how it was presented in the proposal.

7.11.2 Writing not strong enough

The second highest reason (28 per cent) submissions were declined was that the writing simply was not strong enough to be published by McClelland & Stewart. The writing may be cliché, such as one submission that describes the lead character as “a hard drinking Irish womanizer who happens to be better looking than a man has a right to.”⁵⁹ As Doug Gibson says, “every verb has an adverb attached – ‘he jumped briskly onto his horse.’”⁶⁰ Weak writing fails to compel the editor to continue reading; it does not build suspense or engage the reader, and does not demonstrate that the writer has writing talent beyond that of the average person.

7.11.3 Author has no experience or credits to suggest the proposal warrants further consideration

Of the declined submissions, 18 per cent were declined because the writer did not have appropriate writing experience. One should not assume that M&S only publishes writers who have previously published books, although most of those in the fall 2004 list did come from experienced book authors. Rather, none of the submissions that were declined for inexperience included samples, so the decision of whether or not to decline them was based on whether the letter or outline indicated above-average writing ability or potential. The submissions were

⁵⁹ Author 101

⁶⁰ Doug Gibson. Interview with author, December 9, 2004.

read for previous writing experience to suggest the writer could have written a good manuscript. In other words, the editor reads these looking to be convinced that the author has talent and an idea that makes requesting a sample worthwhile, and thus evaluating another submission from that author.

One e-mail submission said simply: "Would you be interested in seeing an outline of a new book of humor? If so, please reply. Thank you."⁶¹ M&S does not usually publish humour; however, this query was also so brief that the editor has no reason to pursue it, especially when knowing that twenty-five to thirty submissions arrive every week.

The same goes for writers who indicate their passion for the craft, but claim no actual experience. For example, author sixty-two says, "I wanted more than anything to write a novel; but not just any novel: a famous novel, and one that would be enjoyed by all people, regardless of gender, age, or any other demographical partition. This lifelong desire is the reason why I am writing to your company today." This writer had no writing experience. Similarly, author four admitted to having no experience but said he was "twenty-years-old and eager to begin what I hope would be a fulfilling career as a writer of serious literature."

A less extreme example is the writer who had previously published four essays, two poems, and a short story but did not indicate where those were published, and was now submitting a proposal for a full-length novel. In that case, the idea was also not in keeping with the M&S list; however, the author did

⁶¹ Author fifty-two

not clarify his experience sufficiently to make a read of the manuscript appear worthwhile.

7.11.4 Book has weak sales potential

12 per cent of the proposals were declined because they were perceived as having weak sales potential. Their market may be seen as small for a number of reasons: either they are of a very minor incident in history that few people might be interested in, or they are overly personal stories about individuals who are not public figures, or they are too regional to be of interest to McClelland & Stewart, or the idea otherwise is not seen as having mass appeal.

Some of the proposals in this category were for inflammatory books in which the writer airs his grievances against society, the legal system, the medical system, or family. For example one proposal came with the sell-line on its title page, "One mothers trip through a nightmare of fraud, forgeries, lies and deception was the easy part."⁶² Another wrote about his "intensely personal journey into an ocean of understanding."⁶³ One author wrote a strong proposal and demonstrated competent writing, but his idea was for a history of the mayors of a Canadian city – a topic that does not have broad enough appeal for M&S to publish, but may be appropriate for a regional publisher.

Some authors include second-person endorsements in their proposals, presumably in an attempt to demonstrate that a market exists for their book. For example, author thirty-four writes, "Some lawyers and detectives on the case

⁶² Author thirty-four

⁶³ Author ninety-one

have said what a great book it would make. . . . I have been asked by all that have help and/or watched this mockery of justice unfold to write a self-help book.” Unless the endorsements quote specific people whose opinion holds some clout, they are dismissed. Some authors attempt to give their own books validity: “I really think it’s a great book.”⁶⁴

7.11.5 The idea is weak

7 per cent of the submissions were declined because the idea behind the book was seen as weak. For example, one writer wanted to publish three books about “how his life could have turned out if it hadn’t been so disappointing.”⁶⁵ That, combined with weak writing and a perceived small market, meant the book was declined. Another author summarized her plot as follows:

[It’s about a teenage girl who is involved in an inappropriate relationship with her stepfather, who just happens to be a pedophile it culminates in her becoming pregnant and having the baby all on her own, being left with no option to abandon the baby on the doorstep of a neighbor. The life of her mother, who neglected and rejected her, does not end up any better. She developed an eating disorder, first binge eating and then bulimia, she has two children out of wedlock, with one being disabled, and with no job skills is forced into a life of prostitution to feed her family.”⁶⁶

The book encompasses about six or seven hard-knock-life stories that would be difficult for even experienced authors to write about successfully in one book.

⁶⁴ Author fifty-four

⁶⁵ Author forty-three

⁶⁶ Author fifty-six

7.11.6 Author's proposal was incoherent

5 per cent of the submissions were declined because the letter or proposal was incoherent. For example, one author sent a page of quotes about his book (without listing sources), and then wrote that his title “depicts warmth, tranquillity, and peace of mind. Yet, there's also a sultry, mystique or aura behind the collaboration of this ‘Fiery’ prose. Similar to the attributes we all express daily. . . . Also, adding a similarity to one’s own conscious speaking a loud for blessings in a pivotal approach.”⁶⁷ If the author does not write a coherent outline, the editor will disregard the proposal. Another wrote in obfuscating language, “The text with which I submit this preamble thwarted my efforts and fathered itself as an unprincipled lace of poetry forced to prose. Inherent in its form and syntax, is a literary creation that exceeded the highest principles of its author’s expectations.”⁶⁸ One submission included three rolled-up, handwritten notebooks with photographs of the writer’s paintings of Jesus, who he claimed to have seen in several visions.

7.11.7 Authors who want financial or distribution help

A final note on the unsolicited submissions: some writers hope McClelland & Stewart can work with them in some other way than as a publisher. This was not listed as a reason why submissions were declined, because I still assess the books themselves in these instances, in case it is something we might publish. Most frequently, they want financing or distribution assistance, which M&S does not provide. Author six wrote, “Presently I do not have the time or money to do

⁶⁷ Author twenty-one

⁶⁸ Author forty-five

the work necessary for the writing. . . . However, I am certain I could get a first draft of the novel completed in two years with a publisher's support." It is an unfortunate fact for new authors that publishers do not review outlines of novels. With very rare exceptions, they review complete manuscripts only, unlike with non-fiction. Author fifty-five says, "This is my first writing and I need you to help me with printing and commercializing and I would very much appreciate your help." Another author wrote to say that he had self-published a book and then gave information on how M&S could buy it: "[This book] can be ordered directly from the Trafford Publishers website or through Chapters/Indigo. Single order prices vary Prices for bulk orders vary but are significantly less expensive."⁶⁹ In these cases, I evaluate the book itself and then inform the writer that we do not act as a distributor/financier, and direct him to the website of the Association of Canadian Publishers, which lists information to help new authors find a distributor, among other things.

⁶⁹ Author thirty-five

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

The majority of manuscripts or proposals that come into McClelland & Stewart as unsolicited submissions are unpublishable. Few would find a home in any Canadian publishing house, and those that do show promise are rarely a good fit with the M&S list. Out of one hundred submissions examined for this report, only one was worth investigating, and it may yield an unpublishable manuscript too.

Furthermore, with an increasing number of manuscripts coming in through agents compared with a decade or two ago, and the best authors being picked up by agents, the manuscripts that do end up in the slush pile tend to be of poorer quality than they were in the pre-agent days.

Yet every week, the company spends an hour and a half to two hours assessing these submissions. Is the effort worth it? In terms of economic benefit, the answer is clearly no. Even if the company found one bestseller every three years, the number of hours expended in finding that book would be close to two hundred.

The strongest reason large publishers – who can compete in an agented publishing environment – appear to continue assessing unsolicited submissions is that they always have. The slush pile is a publishing tradition, but that is not a strong business argument for continuing to assess unsolicited manuscripts when their quality and relevance to the company are weak. Furthermore, because the

task is handled by junior editors who do not acquire books of their own, the assessment of slush-pile submissions is given “why-not” status – why not read them, maybe it will even give the editorial assistant the chance to learn about assessing manuscripts, and with luck, acquire a book.

But there are other reasons for continuing to evaluate unsolicited submissions: the company very occasionally receives query letters for books that it would not receive otherwise. For example, a European writer with a captivating story, who did not have an agent in North America but had previously published three books, sent a query to the editorial department’s general e-mail; her book is now the lead title of an M&S senior editor for next fall. While that type of acquisition is rare through the slush pile, the company does not want to close itself off from potential authors, because talented writers may exist who do not have agents or other connections to M&S, and therefore, no way of seeking publication. In fairness to those authors, the company might choose to continue evaluating the submissions.

Perhaps it is worth reading through the submissions, on the off chance that a good book will emerge from them. However, if that is what M&S management chooses to do, it should try to lessen the number of incoming proposals as much as possible, given that most of them are inappropriate. This might also free up the assistant’s time to investigate more closely those few submissions that might be worth publishing. The flow of proposals can be stemmed through revised submission guidelines that say that the company does not accept unsolicited manuscripts or proposals – the manuscripts will come

anyway. If that statement stays on the company's website long enough, and becomes official company policy, the message should eventually filter down to writers' handbooks and other sources of guidelines.

If the company feels that is too strong a measure to continue, it could improve its guidelines by clearly stating the subject areas M&S publishes. The guidelines should also state which subjects M&S does not publish, such as personal memoirs, which was the largest group of unsolicited submissions the company received in the sample of one hundred; while M&S does publish this category, it is unlikely to publish the personal memoirs of someone who is not a public figure. The challenge for M&S is to appear open to new writers and new topics, while avoiding a flood of unsolicited submissions.

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