

A BURDEN to his family, to his friends and certainly to himself, the unpublished writer is a walking wound. A literary leper in the community of letters, he is a desperate, dangerous fellow. No wonder editors avoid him. There is no stratagem too vile, no degradation too low for him: He will use his friends, suck the blood of lovers, write grovelling letters to people he has never met.

The unpublished writer is the darling of rejection. But he is also the plaything of hope. With the handwringing prayers of a heathen sacrificing to a capricious god, he mails his newest manuscript and dreads its sure return. In rain or snow he shivers in front of bookstores, pushing his nose against the glass like a famished dog drooling outside a butcher's window.

The unpublished writer consoles himself with the prospect of posthumous publication. He knows that Hittite scribes waited 3,000 years before their cuneiforms were finally dug up in the boondocks of Anatolia. By this he is chastened, yet mightily encouraged. Nonetheless, sometimes he cannot help gaping at the bestseller list with the horror of a jealous lover. He has always had a simple faith in publishers. Yet his faith is somewhat shaken by the knowledge that in recent years the ranks of the published have included confessed murderers, thieves, prostitutes, political scoundrels and other forms of convicted felons-not to speak of the usual assortment of incompetents and presidential relatives.

The unpublished writer is a tortured, sensitive man. Sad to say, he is not always well. There is one little statistic that has begun to trouble him to the point of obsession: Every book of publishable quality has at most a 50 percent chance of actually achieving publication. The unpublished writer wonders how many innocent and deserving books over the last 3,000 years have been stoned to death or fried in the electric chair. He fears there must be millions. He knows, for example, that the Old Testament is just the tiniest fragment of the literature produced in ancient Israel and that the rest was lost forever because the families of scribes (with the peremptory whim of publishers) decided they just didn't want any more prophets on their spring lists.

In a world whose reality is hype and image, the unpublished writer is as insubstantial as a ghost. He has less name recognition than a popular bathroom tissue. He could set fire to himself in public and still he would remain unnoticed. Even when he stands in plain view, frantically waving his manuscript, editors and agents look right through him. He has less credibility in their eyes than a murderer caught in flagrante delicto-who at least is innocent until proven guilty.

But he does not give up. He sends back thank you notes for rejection slips. He mails birthday cards to editors. Nonetheless, his phone calls are never returned. Even assistant editors fresh out of college patronize him: The opus he has slaved on for years is now just one more stack of papers to be gnawed and spat out by youngsters still cutting their first teeth. In his moment of despair, he wonders whether he should do what other people do-become a dentist, a car salesman or a mortician. But if he has truly learned his craft, he is capable of nothing else. With all other forms of publication denied him, maybe he should try graffiti? He knows that writing on the wall has been respectable since Belshazzar's feast. He loves the graffiti artist like a brother and wishes he could buy him all the spray paint in the world.

What happens to unpublished writers after they die? Are they perhaps a literate species of the undead who haunt bookstores at night and stalk their living brethren? The unpublished writer fears this might be so. Frequently in his nightmares he has seen them like this-howling mutely, reaching out for him with zombie hands. Every time this happens, he awakens and assures himself that it was just a dream. This he tells himself over and over again. He often talks to himself: That is his profession.