

The Manuscript Bag

Raymond Abbott

My communication with senior editor Richard Michaels began when I wrote him what I considered a rather ordinary letter telling him about one of my novels, a contemporary novel about the Sioux Indians of South Dakota. I got to the point, not wishing to waste his time or mine if he wasn't interested. I wrote,

I have completed a contemporary novel about the Sioux Indians of South Dakota entitled *Revenge at Cut Meat Village*. Would you care to read the manuscript? I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for your reply. . . .

I also told him a little about myself, my background, my credentials for writing about Indians, while giving him my writing credits as well. I had by this time published a few short stories in small quarterly journals, and one story accepted for publication with a national magazine with a good reputation. The reply came the following week. "Yes, Mr. Abbott, do send us your manuscript. I am very much interested in seeing fiction about Indians."

Shortly thereafter my novel was off to New York first class mail along with additional, more complete biographical information and other information requested. I noted the date, July 30, 1974 for my card file.

When five months somehow slipped by with no response to my submission, I wrote Mr. Michaels a short note. The date was Jan. 11, 1975. "Did you receive my manuscript, *Revenge at Cut Meat Village*? The mails being what they are . . . I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for your reply."

A few days later I had my answer, a handwritten note scrawled across the bottom of my letter. "Sorry not to have acknowledged receipt of your manuscript and being so long with it. Will be in touch with you shortly about it. Best for 1975. Sincerely, Richard Michaels."

Encouraging, I thought, studying the scrawl with unusual scrutiny. Probably read by Michaels himself, for he could just as well have said, *No thanks, and the manuscript is on the way to you under separate cover*. But he didn't say that, so he must be at least mildly interested. I was obviously hopeful.

February came and went, and so did March and April, with no report from my friend Mr. Michaels. On May 2nd, I wrote as follows:

Gosh, it has now been how long that you have had my novel *Revenge at Cut Meat Village*? Eight months, I believe. What are you doing with it?

If the story is something you want or think you might want, how about a line or two of encouragement?

I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for your answer. Thank you.

When May 15th rolled around and there was no reply, and I was thinking how I gave the SOB another self-addressed envelope, I wrote still another letter. "I tried calling your office, but your secretary said you are in France. Paris, I think she said. I don't suppose you took my manuscript to read on the plane? What's happening, anyway?"

There was no answer to this letter. I wrote again on June 19.

I don't know how much longer I can be kept waiting about my submission . . . I am reasonable, but there is a point where something has to happen . . .

It seems to me it is unfair to ask an unknown writer to wait nearly a full year for a report on a short novel, a novel I remind you that you asked me to send.

Two letters before this one I stopped including self-addressed stamped envelopes.

Still no reply, but a few days later I had Mr. Michaels on the phone.

"Oh, Mr. Abbott, he said, as if we'd talked before and were good friends. I'm very sorry for the long wait. I have a note in bold letters on my desk to answer Abbott this week. I am interested in your novel, but things are not great in publishing these days, especially for fiction from lesser-known writers. May I keep the manuscript for another week and we will make a decision, I promise you? If this were the '60s again, I would have accepted the book months before."

"Okay," I said, that flicker of hope returning in a rush. "All I want to know is that you're seriously considering the novel. Knowing you're interested makes the waiting easier."

I figured, *Be patient Abbott, for this guy is a senior editor, a man important enough in the publishing world to accept a book on his own without checking with anyone.*

So I waited three, maybe four, no five weeks it was, and no letter or call or anything. On September 15th, I wrote him an angry but reasonable letter.

I thought of calling you again, but my damn phone bill already has too many New York calls.

It has been you know more than six weeks since our telephone conversation, and while I understand your problems, twelve months is about as long as I am willing to wait. You can't say that I have been unreasonable, can you?

Make a decision of some kind. There is little to be gained in keeping this thing going on much longer.

After several more phone calls, more delays, more vague expressions of interest, but none in writing, I found it was Christmas and no decision had come, for or against, one way or the other.

Fourteen months was long enough. *I am writing my last letter*, I decided, not nasty, not even hostile. But not to be my last, either.

Kindly return my novel *Revenge at Cut Meat Village*. I'm sure I sent sufficient postage with the script for return mailing. So that there is no further mixup, I am enclosing another dollar. Send the manuscript first class mail . . .

Manuscripts often go the less expensive and slower special fourth class book rate.

I was not at all certain I did the right thing by forcing this decision. But when January came and I still did not have my novel or a letter explaining the delay, I was furious. *The son of a bitch*, I muttered. On January 24, I wrote him another note.

Well, Mr. Michaels, it is January 24, one and a half years later, and still no *Revenge at Cut Meat Village*. Did you leave it in Paris? Wouldn't surprise me a bit. What do I need to do to convince you I want the manuscript back?

I went on in this way for a couple of paragraphs and closed out the letter. There could be no mistaking my ugly mood.

I had plans for February, an invitation to visit an island off the coast of Georgia where I planned to work on, yes, another writing project, another novel, but more than that, I would be away from the New England winter.

Mid-February I got a letter from a friend who was opening my mail for me while I was away on this remote island. She wrote, "Your manuscript came back minus the first 42 pages, but I called Mr. Michaels' office for you and his secretary promised to find the rest and send it out immediately."

Typical, I mumbled, as I read this letter. A wild pig darted out of the brush across my path, making me jump. *Well, at least the aggravation is over*. That is worth something, I decided, not really believing it though, and not considering then the annoyance of almost two years of waiting for nothing.

It isn't fair, I sputtered to myself walking alone through the island brush. He doesn't make a decision, returns the manuscript missing 42 pages, and without even so much as the courtesy of a form letter.

Several island donkeys—they were everywhere on the island—were watching me with curiosity as I talked to myself, but they didn't come close. I couldn't blame them really, for several years before, each and every male was altered—cut but not castrated—so that the ten-mile-square island wouldn't become overrun with wild donkeys. Just then one took a big steaming shit in front of me, and it was then and there that I got my splendid idea, my *Revenge*.

I was quite good friends with a man from New York, who was also on this island to write. Seymour Krim was his name. When I told him of my idea, he laughed.

"You wouldn't do that, would you?" He liked the plan. *Wouldn't I?* I laughed, feeling well for the first time that day.

I waited until I returned to Massachusetts where I found my missing 42 pages of manuscript with a cover letter apologizing for the final mixup and all the other so-called misunderstandings. I prepared my gift with unusual care and packed it carefully. My manuscript bag I had filled with fresh steaming cow shit, disguised as yet another novel, and off it went first class as had the first, but this time with no cover letter and no return postage. Not even a return address.

I had no sooner dropped the package in the mail that I quite forgot about Mr. Michaels and his promises and all the rest until a letter came for me with the Park Avenue address I knew belonged to Richard Michaels.

Oh, he must have been angry, I chuckled. Absolutely furious, I decided, as I pictured him opening the bag, marked personal, and packed in such a way that the contents could well have spilled all over him or at least on his desk or the floor. Fresh cow shit everywhere. How I would have loved to have seen it!

But this letter was very strange, considering the circumstances. Maybe he hadn't received my package—but, somehow, I knew he had. I read the letter over several times.

Just a note to let you know I have on two occasions mentioned your manuscript to two of my publishing colleagues and they may be in touch with you about it. Both of the publishers are quite astute as far as fiction goes, though both are pretty hard-nosed and aware of the general problems involving new fiction today. Anyway, I hope that they are going to be of help to you. All best, Richard Michaels.

Which submission is he talking about? I wondered as I dropped the letter into my wastebasket.



photograph by Becky Clever