

My Shelf of Shame

It's not a long shelf by metric measure, but it is extensive in infamy. It contains books that should never have been printed. Such a shelf could only exist in modern times. Before the advent of electronic ease, a text would only be published if it had passed some sort of editorial scrutiny. For sure, some texts intercepted by the Catholic Inquisition were rudely ripped from the inky hands of the printer before they could pollute stout minds with heresy. But even these texts found publishers elsewhere... provided... Provided they were literate, provided they had merit, provided the printer and publisher deemed them valuable enough to give some return for their investment. For sure, mistakes were made; there's the so-called Wicked Bible, published in 1631 by Robert Barker and Martin Lucas, where the reader is commanded: 'Thou shalt commit adultery.' One of publishing history's greatest oh-shit moments. In his comment upon it at the time, the Archbishop of Canterbury could have been presaging the modern era:

I knew the time when great care was had about printing, the Bibles especially, good compositors and the best correctors were gotten being grave and learned men, the paper and the letter rare, and faire every way of the best, but now the paper is nought, the composers boys, and the correctors unlearned.

This is my Shelf of Shame in a nutshell: the paper is nought, the correctors unlearned. The shelf stands as a uniquely modern testimony to the fact that the middleman—the controller of quality and worth—can be dispensed with. Thanks to modern amateur writing competition, I could spend the whole of November executing some species of syntactical dysentery, then upload my copious egestion to the Web, and presto! I've published a book! Of course it's a book: look, it's got an ISBN. But if I do this, it will be one small crumbling brick in the collapsing edifice of the printed word. It will be one more reason why

self-publishing has acquired such a shocking reputation. Why *literacy*, for God's sake, is in a downward spiral.

I am not saying I would do this; I am not saying I would excrete words in competition, upload raw text and pretend it's a book, or that others with equal access to our technology would do this. All I am saying is that it is done, and the reputation of the written word is dragged through the mire by the perpetrators. My shelf is not long by metric measure because it contains only books that I have either been given for review, or have exchanged for some of my own. If I am to review a book, I will review it in its entirety. If there are misspellings and errors on every page, I will say so. If there are non-sequiturs, mistakes of chronology and fact, or diverse gaping plot holes, I will say so. I will be especially truthful if the author has printed the work using the default settings on the word-processor, so each page looks like a bureaucratic report using Times New Roman on glaring white paper with generous space, underlines and bold, vast tabs, and asterisks between sections. Yes, I will say so. And I will make the hard distinction between the typo and the spelling mistake. If 'bird' is spelled 'brid,' that is a typo; a pure typographic error. If 'there' is used instead of 'their,' that is a spelling mistake. A 'canon' is not a weapon; it is an office of the church. That is a spelling mistake. There exist numerous excellent books spanning a century and more, which address spelling, correct writing, accurate punctuation and elegance in prose. My Shelf of Shame contains evidence that some people may write, but they choose not to *read*.

Only when I have combed through the text identifying ghastly lapses of common typography and formatting, will I concern myself with the meat and potatoes of the work, looking for originality, merit in the storyline, depth in the characters, the usual things one reviews in a work of literature... trying, while doing so, not to stub my toes on the errors that act as roadblocks to my progress. That's my problem: I have an over-acute sense of the correctness of prose, and an inability to pass over errors without distraction.

So, the Shelf of Shame is short because not many ask me to review their works. I believe it to be irresponsible—unethical at best, if not immoral—to publish praise of a work of literature without reference to its shortcomings. I wish the same could be said for many of those who contribute to the debased and worthless star ratings on the Web.

I always have been a stickler for quality control, and in that aspect, I am like any trade publisher. How the text sits on the page, the way the eye is beguiled, the comfort with which you sit down to read, are all prerequisites, even before beginning to absorb the words. Publishers develop house styles for highly refined aesthetic reasons. Just look, for example, at the vast range of fonts available in even the most basic of word processors. These varied graphic expressions of the alphabet were all designed to send a message to the eyes and to the brain before even the meaning of the words can get there. Browse the shelves of any bookstore, open many books, and marvel at the range of ways the words on the page can be presented to you.

All this to say that control of quality is as important as it ever was, and that as self-publishers we have no reason *not* to aspire to good quality. We have no excuse for shoddy work. So, what, practically, is to be done? Well, whoever you are, whatever your skill and experience as a writer, please do these seven things:

1. Have your text peer reviewed. No, not by your friends. Cast the net wider; find people who don't know you or your work. They will give you an honest clinical assessment. Pay attention to what they report, especially if you see a consensus among their views.
2. Have your text edited. No, not by a friend. Pay a professional editor whose credentials are sound. Seek second opinions; seek reviews of your choice of editor.
3. Have your text professionally proofread. Spell- and grammar-checkers are the bane of the English language; rely upon them at your peril. The compliers of many software spelling and grammar

checkers are illiterate. Have every single word, every single diacritical, every single feature of format checked.

4. Go to the library or bookstore, open up some books in your chosen genre, and check the kind of format and presentation that trade publishers use. Examine fonts, spacing, indents, margins and paper quality, and find a style that suits you. A great exercise is to set up one page in several formats, print them, and keep them by you to look at and evaluate for some time.
5. The cover is critical. If you have graphics arts skills, you can best create an appropriate cover because you know the inside story intimately. If not, employ a professional book cover artist to design the whole thing. Excellent graphics are essential, but their integration with the title text, the rear cover blurb, and the barcodes, logos and other back cover furniture, contributes to a well-balanced overall appearance.
6. I know it's tempting, but don't send your files to a conventional printer and order a print-run of hundreds. Upload your text and cover to a suitable online resource and order *one single copy*.
7. Go through your single printed work with the same care and attention you have invested in stages 1 to 5.

You owe it to yourself to do these seven things. You have spent so much effort getting your thoughts out onto the page that they deserve this treatment. Try to think of the great reams of writing you have produced as a stage on the way, not as a *fait accompli*. Do these things as a way of giving credit to yourself and value to your work; the value it deserves.

If you don't do these seven things, you are playing your small part in the dumbing-down of the printed word. If you treat your work like garbage, so will the rest of the world. Please... I don't want to see any more of our books anywhere near somebody's Shelf of Shame.

It's in your hands.