My Shelf of Shame

It's not a long shelf by metric measure, but it is extensive in sadness. 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 they were literate, provided they had merit, provided the printer and publisher deemed them valuable enough to give some return for their investment. Setting up a book for printing in the old days was highly labour-intensive; you mage sure to do it right.

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. This is sad, because on my shelf are examples of the most incredible creativity, wonderful imagination, and an enviable ability to spin thoughts and ideas onto the lines of a page. The people who created those books worked wonders with words. They deserved better, but their works will stay on the shelf because when they had them printed, they believed they had come to the end of the process, and not simply at a stage along the way.

My shelf stands as a uniquely modern testimony to the fact that the middleman—the controller of quality and worth—can be dispensed with. Nowadays, a book filled with typographical and formatting errors, spelling and grammatical mistakes, plot holes and contradictions, can be printed easily. Modern technology allows all of us to upload our works and print our books at the tap of a few keys, but this easy facility is a false friend. As indie-publishers, we need restraint; we need to bring back a virtual middleman. We need to reestablish the quality control that has been lost to automation, and just because we can publish whatever we wish, whenever we wish, such discipline is even more essential.

Absent a trade publisher working with us, this discipline needs to be ours; it needs to come from within our group. As indie-publishers we have no reason not to aspire to fine quality. When I open a book, I like to appreciate how the text sits on the page, the way the eye is beguiled, all contributing to the comfort with which I sit down to read. 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 trade books, and marvel at the range of ways in which the words on the page can be presented to you

When I open a book, I don't want to trip over obstacles laid within the lines like tripwires. Spelling mistakes, poor punctuation, and typographical and formatting errors ruin my reading experience. Attention to such minutiae is a prerequisite of enjoyment, even before beginning to absorb the words. And if I encounter those basic errors in an indie publication, I can be sure they are harbingers to a deeper malaise within the text. Inattention to details often means inattention to the bigger picture. I have been burned often enough that if I find my readings legs entangled in orthographic nets and tripwires, I'll abandon the pursuit before encountering the non-sequiturs, disappearing characters, contradictions and many other features that guarantee pride of place on the Shelf of Shame.

All this to say that control of quality is as important as it ever was, and with all the resources at our disposal, we have no excuse for anything that detracts from the importance and creativity of the work. How can we change this? Well, whoever you are, whatever your skill and experience as a writer, please heed 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. Make sure your editor can be a fact-checker for your chosen genre.
3. Have your text professionally proofread. Spelling and grammar checkers are the bane of the English language; rely upon them at your peril. The compilers of many software grammar tools are illiterate. Have every single word, every single diacritical, every single feature of format checked.
4. Make your book look nice. At all costs, avoid the default settings of your word-processor. Go to a library or bookstore, open up some books in your chosen genre, and check the kind of format and presentation that trade publishers use. Bring a small ruler with you. Examine fonts, measure spacing, indents and margins, and check paper quality. 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. Show them to your friends.
5. The cover is critical. If you have graphics arts skills, you are the best person to create an appropriate cover because you know the story inside intimately. If not, employ a professional book cover artist to design the whole thing. An excellent cover graphic is essential, but its 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 take your book to a conventional printer and order a print run. Upload your text and cover to a suitable online resource and order one single copy. Or search out an organization that prints single copies

from electronic files. Major libraries, universities and other institutions are investing in this technology.
7. Go through your single printed work with the same care and attention you have invested in stages 1 to 5.

Now you're ready to publish! 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. Yes, it costs money and time, but try to think of the great reams of creative writing you have produced (and for which I totally envy you) 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 things, you are playing your small part in the descent of the printed word. If you treat your work with little regard, 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, let alone mine. It's in your hands.