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**How Not to Review a Book**

**By Arthur Zulu**

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Dear Mr. Ilesanmi:

Dismayed. Disappointed. That was exactly how I felt after reading your review of Mr. Mike Uzor's book, *How to Buy and Sell Shares in Nigeria*, published in *Financial Standard* of December 20, 2004. I should have said that I was dismayed, but not disappointed. Because that was my first time of reading your "review." For I do not know if you used to write masterpieces. Perhaps, you wrote the said "review" on your "bad" day.

In one of my published books, *How to Write a Best-seller*, I wrote that the author that would write an error free manuscript has not been born. That includes myself.

Great writers like Miguel Cervantes who wrote *Don Quixote* and James Joyce the author of *Ulysses* made mistakes. Bill Clinton's book, *My Life*, is said to be short on editing. And Tom Clancy himself pays an editor \$2.50 per word to proof read his works.

So, writers are susceptible to slips, errors. In that review, however, you not only betrayed a shocking ignorance of the rules of English grammar but also an abysmal incompetence about how to review a book. The review reads part biographical and part lazy student's book summary.

You don't start a book review by devoting five long opening paragraphs in a twenty paragraph work to announce the degrees and honors garnered by the author. That is not the first thing the reader wants to know. In fact, that blaze of glory biography; that "I hail thee" guitar in hand introduction, passes you off as a paid praise singer, not a book reviewer. Not that I detest paying book reviewers to do reviews. But there must be "a method to the madness" according to the bard, William Shakespeare.

If your method is to first give your readers a long list of the author's degrees and awards, I think that you will be at a loss if you were to review literary greats like Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, and many others. Because they had no degrees.

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One could see how you were desperately reaching your hand into your vocabulary bag to qualify the

out of this world author who "bagged his first degree"; was "founding business editor"; reported for "both local and foreign publications"; is "concretely grounded in management consulting"; has "become a renowned financial analyst / investment adviser"; is "a regular commentator on macro-economic policy matters"; and now "managing director / chief executive." Thank heavens! I thought it wouldn't end. Even the Nobel Prize winners didn't get that citation. Ask your brother, Professor Wole Soyinka.

A prose work should be lively, jazzy. But when I finished reading the excellent biography, and went into the "review," I was confronted in every paragraph by the following sins of literature: repetition (the word sub-concept was mentioned seven times); redundancies ( "According to this author on how to become a shareholder, you can either become a shareholder . . ."); ineffective sentences ("On a how to beat inflation, this author didactically illuminates that with inflation rate rising and interest rate falling under heavy government pressure on banks as we have seen over the past few years, if you are earning less than inflation rate on your money, then you run the risk that the real value of your savings is being washed off by rising consumer prices"); disjointed paragraphs ( one long sentence per paragraph as the one above); meaningless words ("didactically illuminates"); quoting a bad sentence ("For many people who are quite interested in share INVESTTING"); circumlocution (" In addition to these 15 basic chapters, there is another section, a textual appendage of sort.")

I was ashamed reading through those sentences. In the name of the muses, what do these mean? "The sub-concepts of what a share is"; "the sub-concepts of what you should know"; "this author nationally x-rays the sub-concepts of the possibility of risk in share-making"; "this financial analyst examines the sub-concepts of the basic nature of unit trusts"; "the concepts of what to consider"; "the sub-concepts of starting to invest"; "the simplicity of conceptual presentation." You actually have a romantic attachment for that word, sub-concept.

Then toward the end of the "review," you played smart by trying to correct a few grammatical errors in the book. Like telling us that presently (American) should have been currently or at present (British). That was good editing—straight from the 6th edition Oxford dictionary (page 919 box).

The point is that it is not necessary for a reviewer to make a list of the badly written words of the author and publish it on the pages of a newspaper or magazine. You can do that if the review is for the eyes of the author only.

Not many writers like it—especially if the reviewer has been paid to do the work. He could simply say in his review that the book needs editing. You know the saying about those who live in glass houses that take delight in throwing stones.

That old saying became poignant to me as I read the next sentence explaining the reason for your correction: "to achieve a high level of GRAMMATICALITY." To tell you the truth, when I read that sentence, I thought that a stray missile had just come from the Middle-East and landed on my desk. I docked. Grammaticality? Where did you get that?

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I don't know what the author of the book must have done after reading the "review." I guess he must have been full of thanks to you for letting his "great" book appear in your newspaper. If so, he got it all wrong. You did him a great disservice.

The book was about buying and selling of shares. Now, let me answer your question: "Do you aspire to make money through buying and selling of shares?" My answer is yes, but not by reading the book that you have just "reviewed." You killed it!

There are some things that good editors and reviewers do. First, they cross check facts with other editors. Second, they read good reviews in respected newspapers and magazines. You can find excellent book reviews in London Review of Books and The Spectator.

Those of us who are in the writing business should have the humility to learn. There is more to editing than sitting in swivel editorial chairs behind huge mahogany desks, looking through tinted glasses like mine, and giving deadlines to less privileged reporters. Writers should know that their writings are read by authorities in the language—and that includes the native speakers. So, there is need for us to strive for perfection—to write living, meaningful prose.

In those good old days, students learnt English by reading newspapers and magazines. "Not anymore," according to Raven the bird. These days, everyone is a writer and an editor. I remember a principal lamenting that an English graduate job applicant couldn't write an application letter. It is as bad as that.

But I am happy that there are a few humble ones. Not long ago, I was discussing editing with the head of the English department of a prestigious university. I was surprised when she admitted to me that she gives her works to a junior lecturer, who she says is good in the language, to edit for her. When I heard that, I thought I was transported to the ideal world of Sir Francis Bacon's New Atlantis. And my respect for her grew from that day on.

If you like truth, your prose was drab, breathless, dead. Just to tell you how bad it is, you never for once mentioned the title of the book in your "review." What I kept seeing were references like: "According to this author, the production of the book"; "Structure-wise this book is segmented into 15 chapters"; "Chapter two of this book"; "Stylistically speaking, this book is a success." I kept asking myself, Which book is he referring to?

I could only find the book's image, not an existing book title that was being referred to. You just wrote dangling modifiers. The GRAMMATICALITY of the "review," therefore, is hopelessly wanting.

Writing is not a crossword puzzle. Or a game of charades. Good prose should be clear— devoid of ambiguities. There should not be sentences like: "The witches said to Macbeth." Because what they told him has two meanings.

There is one thing about truth—it is hurtful. It is not the same as drinking a cup of honey. This letter will

test your humility because truth has been a relative "concept" ever since Pontius Pilate asked Jesus

Christ, "What is truth?" And I will tell you another truth: you could do better.

Enjoy your writing.

Yours sincerely,

Arthur Zulu.

Arthur Zulu is an editor, book reviewer, and author of Chasing Shadows!, How to Write a Best-seller, A Letter to Noah, and many others. For his works and free help for writers, goto:

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Arthur Zulu is an editor, book reviewer, and published author.

### **A Bad Book Review? You Aren't Doomed. Here's Why.**

**By Laura Hickey**

#### **A Bad Book Review? You Aren't Doomed. Here's Why. by Laura Hickey**

When you get a bad book review

You've just been notified a review of your book has been posted. You're all excited and can't wait to see what has been written. You're clicking onto your book's page when...Oh no! They hated your book! This bad review is going to turn away customers from buying your book. Wait! This isn't the end of the world. Here's 3 tips to deal when you get a bad review.

#### 1. You can't please everyone!

Example: One of my favorite authors is a bestseller but the author didn't receive such hot customer reviews.

Another example: I was reading some book reviews and one of the books had one of the worst ratings ever. I clicked the link with curiosity to find over 20 customers had reviewed the book and loved it. In life, you can't please everyone. Will a bad review discourage future customers? On to my next tip.

#### 2. A bad review doesn't have to mean bad profit.

Not all customers look at a bad review as their only guide to buying. In fact, if your review is so awful, they may even buy the book to see if it's really as bad as the reviewer rated it. There's the saying that

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curiosity killed the cat, curiosity in this case could help you. Customers also realize that everyone has different tastes. Maybe the reviewer didn't like your book, but who's to say someone different won't? It may be bad publicity, but none the less it may help you. In fact, sometimes a customer may have read the bad review but only remembers your name and or the book's title.

3. If you're getting more than one bad review.

It's understandable if you're disappointed. It's expected, but do not allow yourself to become discouraged. If you've published an e-book and can easily edit your work, bad reviews can actually help your writing. Now don't go crazy and change everything! But if reviews are constantly pin pointing on one certain area, review your work and see if and how you could improve it. I know reviewing repeatedly can be hurtful but if it can help your e-book, isn't it worth considering? Also, don't start picking apart reviews right away, give yourself time to go over them. Picking apart your reviews the moment you receive them could prove fatal to your self esteem.

Author of Mysterious Chills and Thrills for Kids. Ten Short Stories to Tickle the Imagination. "Spooky" "Awesome" "Unpredictable" Isn't it time you entered the world where shadows lurk and each page turn

could be your doom...<http://www.laurahickey.com>



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