

Segue

Writing  Writing

TALES OF A CHICAGO FREELANCER

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A couple of years ago, I wrote a feature on former Chicago Bear Chris Zorich. The idea was occasioned not by any particular news event, as much as by the fact that I had learned he was working for a law firm downtown, and I thought an update on a popular Chicago athlete—a “where are they now?” profile—would have reader appeal.

I was teaching English at College of DuPage in Illinois, and in my spare time, writing freelance stories for newspapers and magazines on sports, education, and the outdoors, among other topics. Freelancing can be a very satisfying art, but it can often be a very frustrating business.

With the Zorich piece, for example, I thought that a story about the ex-nose tackle in football-crazy Chicago ought to have been an easy sell. So I interviewed Zorich in his Loop office and wrote a 3,100 word essay with extensive quotes from him about his new career, his transition from celebrated athlete to attorney, about his goals as a lawyer, and his motivation for social justice. An editor at one of the Chicago area daily newspapers read it and said they planned to use it.

Four or five days passed, and the same editor emailed to say he was sorry that they would, in fact, not be using it because he had not been aware that one of their own staffers was already working on a Christopher Zorich story.

I answered his email by exclaiming my surprise that someone else would suddenly and out of the blue decide to write such a feature. Ignoring my implication that they stole my story idea, he responded that it was unfortunate that the communication between him and the rest of the staff of his paper “wasn’t as good as it should be.”

A week or two later, a Zorich feature by their own reporter appeared in the paper, discussing, what else—Zorich’s law career, his transition from athlete to attorney, his goals as a lawyer, and his motivation for social justice. The only thing missing was Zorich’s prediction for the Bears this year.

I chalked it up as a hard lesson about emailing a manuscript, unprotected, to an unfamiliar market outlet, and that one should make an inquiry before sending the goods. In fact, before going through the time and trouble of piecing together a feature, a freelancer should probably first get a commitment of publication and payment.

My 3,100 essay was not a total loss. I changed it into to a commentary piece that extolled the popular and clean-cut Zorich as an antidote to the then current rash of stories in the news about professional athletes going to jail, and the new version was published in a regional weekly newspaper.

Another of my stories slipped through my fingers, although not so directly appropriated like the Zorich piece. Instead, columnist Bob Greene politely asked if he could use it for one of his columns. This was a little like Shaquille O'Neil politely asking an elf if he could butt ahead of him in line.

I had written a satirical piece about professional athletes that suggested they all be conscripted into the military to make them more mature, and to pay a price for their stardom and celebrity. I sent it off to the *Chicago Tribune* and was surprised and pleased to receive an inquiry from nationally syndicated columnist Bob Greene, asking if he could write about it. He said it was a wonderful piece, but he would understand if I wanted to take my chances and try to sell it freelance.

What would anyone do? Bob Greene was big; the prospect of exposure to some 10 million readers across the country was very real. And as no *Tribune* editor had yet responded to my submission, I figured that my chances for going it alone, especially since Greene wanted it, might be limited. Go, Greene! I thought. What was the loss of a few hundred dollars I might get for selling it, compared to the potential benefits getting my writing splashed across fifty states.

What I didn't count on was that Greene's column failed to acknowledge that I had written anything at all. Instead, I was portrayed as a fifty year old suburban man who essentially phoned in a unique idea. And though most of his column was comprised of the words and sentences I had written, they were paraphrased or framed as if they were responses elicited in a phone conversation.

The liberties he took with my essay turn out to be a lesson for freelancers to guard their stories as well as their intellectual property as if they were their children.

Though I received no pay for my "ghostwriting" for Greene, I was mollified by a different kind of "capital" from doing a favor for a media star. Of course, that capital dwindled like dot.com stock at the end of the last stock market crash, after Greene was forced to resign over allegations of sexual misconduct with a woman who had been the subject of one of his stories past.

I liked and admired Bob Greene's talent, and I disliked the shabby way the *Tribune* cast him off. It's quite possible he did not realize the importance of the misrepresentation to me, and I certainly forgive him the error in view of the mountain of other troubles he has had to endure.

Lack of credibility is another handicap freelancers must learn to contend with. In fact, the first real thrill in my freelance career was immediately followed by the first big letdown because of such a credibility concern. I received a letter from senior editor C. Michael Curtis of the hallowed *Atlantic Monthly*, a letter whose first line expressed interest in and praise for "Castle in Ruins," an 8,000 word essay I wrote in the 90's on the troubles plaguing the Chicago Public Schools. In the second line, Curtis wrote, "Of course, we cannot print it," since the hard facts and details that gave

the essay its power, he explained, would give the *Atlantic* lawyers fits. He apologized again and recommended I develop and expand the essay into a book.

Most of *Atlantic's* monthly articles are written by staff writers or journeymen, whose veracity had been historically borne out after years of reliable performance. I, however, was a freelancer. They didn't know me from Adam (or Jayson Blair) and did not want to bank on my credibility.

But my disappointment didn't last long. A couple of weeks after the Curtis letter, I played on my office answering machine a message from the managing editor of the *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, Jack Wade. He, too, thought the piece was worthy and wanted to publish it.

Again, I was excited. I looked up both the circulation and the freelance pay rates for the publication—both of which would have been the highest for any of my writing thus far. I ripped through the paper the following Sunday, tossing off the news and sports and travel sections to get to the magazine. When my essay was not there, I called Wade who patiently explained that they prepare each Sunday edition about two months ahead of time.

Relieved, I went about my business, being sure to tell every friend and relative whenever the opportunity arose, to watch for "Castle in Ruins" in the *Tribune Magazine*.

Several weeks later, I listened to another message from Wade: the Trib' lawyers, he said, put the kibosh on the "Castle."

Immediately I called Wade to ask why and got nearly the same rationale as from the *Atlantic* about liability for damaging information. When I protested that every line and word was factual and verifiable, he said it didn't matter since the lawyers had spoken.

I counted to ten. I took a deep breath.

Since "Castle" was obviously too hot a potato for the high circulation market, I went to the education field and got a quick acceptance from *Contemporary Education*, an academic journal published by Indiana University. Editor David Gelman said he loved it and would publish it if I could pare it down, which I did over the weekend.

Then came Monday and another telephone call from David Gelman:

"My publisher is against running your story," he said frantically. "It seems the University (Indiana State University) does not want to upset or offend its 'friends' in the Chicago public school system."

I listened to his message on the same answering machine that still had Jack Wade's bad news on it, like a surreal refrain in a bad dream. But Gelman wasn't finished:

"I'm going forward with plans to print it anyway," he said. "I told her (his supervisor) so, and she said she would fire me first; but this is blatant censorship."

I was floored by Gelman: by his courage and willingness to risk everything for the essay and for the First Amendment, essentially.

In the meantime, Gelman sent me a thick envelope with copies of all the correspondence between him and the publisher, so that I would have evidence for a censorship complaint, if the publisher persisted.

I then considered a compromise whereby Gelman might keep his job and my story would still get published. I called Gelman and offered that we delete or change all names of persons and places, essentially avoiding any liability.

His publisher reluctantly agreed to the compromise, and the piece was finally printed. Minimized, diluted, but still recognizable to the principals involved, it engendered considerable reaction, but mostly in the education field. So the story that was almost featured in the *Atlantic*, and then almost in the *Tribune Magazine*, in 1994 made it to the finals as a prizewinning finalist in the National Ed-Press competition.

I suppose there are several themes to be derived from the “Castle in Ruins” saga, chief among which is that censorship is still alive in this century. But the practical lesson for the freelancer is that, again, there has to be a home out there somewhere for your manuscript if it’s a solid story, no matter how politically dangerous or incorrect it may be.

The issue of trust between publishers and freelancers is among the stickiest, especially as I look back at the aftermath of my story on actor/comedian Bernie Mac. I had written a feature about Mac, whose name had been Bernard McCullough when he was a student of mine back in 1972. As might be expected, the irrepressible Mac was the class clown as a teenager, and my piece described his unforgettable personality and antics in my freshman English class.

The article was printed on the front page of the Tempo section of the *Chicago Tribune* in February of 2002. The next day it was picked up by the LA Times. Two days later I received a call from a producer of the TV show *Inside Edition* wanting me to appear with Mac in a reunion show (I politely declined). The following week, staff writer Nancy Franklin cited the piece in *The New Yorker*. And about a month later, CNN called and asked me to do an interview for a profile of Mac in their *People in the News* program.

I bring these things up not to show off, but to show that while the essay was received very well nation-wide, Bernie Mac himself disputed the story to the L.A. press, in fact, proclaiming that I was never his teacher!

Nervous about his denial, the *Tribune* started to question me. I stood behind the story and offered an explanation that Mac was either upset with the story since it seemed to contradict the old fashioned family and school values that he touts in his stand-up comedy routine, or that he simply forgot who his high school teacher was 25 years ago. It also occurred to me that Mac didn’t want his less than stellar high school record publicized. Regardless of his motives, the *Tribune* insisted on corroboration which I supplied by putting them in contact with another of Mac’s former teachers. Later on, Mac acknowledged the facts of my story through his publicist.

Granted, the *Tribune* hadn’t been sure about me since I was a freelancer, yet they only asked for verification after Mac’s denial. Although this wasn’t a problem for me, and everything was eventually corroborated, it struck me as a potentially careless *modus operandi* on the newspaper’s part. A similar *m.o.*, in fact, proved embarrassing to the *New York Times* in the Jayson Blair debacle.

Another harsh truth that every freelancer should count on and learn to live with is invisibility.

For example, many consumer and literary magazines that receive more manuscripts than they can handle, hire student apprentices or “interns” to screen submissions, so that a freelancer can’t be sure anyone in the editorial department has even seen the work for which the writer received a rejection slip.

My own daughter, at age 21, interned at a large Chicago literary agency where she was giving the thumbs up or thumbs down to hundreds of aspiring authors and poets for an entire

summer. Janet is a competent English major with good instincts and human compassion. But I personally would not want to take a chance and have to depend on the sense of literature, business, and responsibility of another 21 year old intern, if I'm proposing a contract for my life's work.

Freelancers may also be invisible to publications simply because they are not on the "premises," and clear communication is, therefore, lacking or altogether absent.

Once, for example, a story I wrote about fishing in Lake Winter, Wisconsin, appeared in two outdoor magazines. I had originally sent the manuscript to *Outdoor Notebook* from which I received no reply for over a month. When my follow-up postcard inquiry received no response, I sent the article to *Midwest Outdoors*, who in less than a week sent me a note saying they would print it and pay me a modest fee.

About three weeks later, I was panicked to see my same story in both magazines. But neither complained or even contacted me about the duplicity, which I attributed either to the very slim chance that they didn't notice it, or to the more likely possibility that they couldn't complain since neither publication specified rights or copyright claims in mastheads or contracts.



Nonpayment, censorship, questionable credibility, theft of ideas, capricious rejections, invisibility—why the hell would anyone want to be a freelance writer?

The answer is in the term itself, etymologically related to the knights of old who would sell their unique services and loyalty to any nobleman who paid the right price.

Writing about whatever piques my interest or inspires passion, and, more importantly, writing only when I want to write, are the chief reasons for being a freelance writer. I've been offered regular gigs working for newspapers and magazines. But a daily grind, a deadline, and compulsory assignments don't add up to why I love writing and publishing. So I kept my day job, and 5 or 6 times a year, I affix to my knight's "lance," the banner of one publication or another. And knowing that thousands and sometimes even millions of strangers are reading and being moved or influenced by something I created, is worth all the slights, the obstacles, and borderline legal assaults with which freelancers must intermittently and patiently contend.

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