

In a lacerating essay for *The New York Times* last December, writer Timothy Egan publicly asks fading political star Joe the Plumber whether he wants Egan to fix his toilet.

Egan is irked that Joe had a book published last month, based on his 15 minutes of farcical fame. In a manner of speaking, Egan seems to want to flush Joe's book down the toilet. (Let's see if Joe can fix *that*.)

Egan further goes after Sarah Palin, who, as of this writing, is negotiating with publishers for her own book. Her advance — as a non-writer, not to mention a world-class mangler of the Queen's English — will probably be between \$5 million and \$10 million, which, after taxes and a couple of shopping trips, could amount to literally hundreds of dollars left over.

To paraphrase wealthy Texas whackadoodle and former presidential candidate Ross Perot, that giant sucking sound coming out of New York's publisher's row is millions of dollars in advances going to people who wouldn't know the difference between an invective and a detective.

Speaking of detectives and literature, you may like Milan Jacovich, the fictional creation of Cleveland's mystery novelist, Les Roberts, and I may like Milan Kundera, the real name of the Franco-Czech author. We can have our preferences, but at least they both represent writing as a skill, an art and, for many of us, an occupation.

"I don't want you writing books," Egan admonishes Joe the Unlicensed Plumber. Surely Egan knows that the chance of Joe actually writing that book is nearly zero. Likely it'll be ghostwritten, or "As told to." (Bet on the ghost:

Underpaid, desperate ghostwriters write most celebrity books.)

Meanwhile, on the other side of publisher's row, amateur, anonymous writers are getting published in the great newspapers of America, and most especially on those papers' websites. They're taking up more space, in some cases, than the actual editorial writers of those newspapers.

I first wrote about the raw, unfiltered sewage that seeps through newspaper websites and newsprint a year ago in these pages, in a column called "Anonymously Yours." I received positive feedback from newspaper reporters I've long respected. They, too, were disgusted and saw the spray paint on the wall.

At least one of those reporters has now been let go from one of America's largest daily papers. Writers with one-off screen names are gradually replacing trained, serious journalists. It's as if *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was shot on video and with amateur actors. And did I tell you what the amateur writers' fees are? (Hint: It's in the definition of "amateur.") You got it: They write for free.

Journalists aren't being replaced by bloggers, who can serve important purposes by raising issues, trading stories and opinions, engaging in discussions and breaking stories. Sometimes, they're funny and entertaining. Bloggers aren't the problem, because bloggers often link to old media and at least keep people reading.

Old media lost its way by forgetting what it does well. The job of the mainstream press has been and should remain keeping politicians honest, reporting the news, shaping public

opinion and entertaining, among other things. There's room for periodicals you can hold in your hand and spill coffee on without a trip to the computer repair shop. I for one still like the feel of *The Plain Dealer* in the morning, even if it is on a diet.

When the written word is so debased that serious novelists and nonfiction writers are losing deals because publishers panic and feed their readers literary junk food, or newspapers try to stay hip and happening by allowing graffiti to be spray-painted on their newsprint, or published on their websites, whose fault is it?

Not that anyone's going to do this, but there might be a way out of this freefall. Publishers can publish and promote more good books with literary value, written by qualified and talented writers, and fewer nonliterary tell-alls from brothers of famous singers with one name. Newspapers can celebrate good writing and reporting, and stop burying it in recycled trash from Internet gossip websites.

New media is real, powerful and can't be blamed for the decline of newspapers. If old media — specifically newspapers and books — wants to keep what little it has left, it needs to raise its standards, not lower them, and stop mixing its message.

There's a place for anonymous and amateur writers, a place for legitimate bloggers, and a place for trained journalists and authors. But mixing them up is proving to be a toxic stew for newspapers, and it has stunk up the book world. With apologies to Shakespeare, "The fault lies not in the bloggers, dear publishers, but in yourselves." ■

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