

# don't write *that* book!

## Episode 29:

### Reasons Manuscripts are Rejected by Publishers

**Mike Michalowicz** ([00:01](#)):

Welcome back to the Don't Write That Book podcast where you can learn how to write your bestseller and own your authorship. Follow along with us as we give you an insider's view of the book industry. Now, here are your hosts, myself, **Mike Michalowicz** and **AJ Harper**.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([00:16](#)):

This is the episode you're gonna hear about the wall of No. <Laugh> Before we do that, let me introduce my friend. We are gonna be talking about why your manuscript or book proposal gets rejected. What's the elements around that? Why does that happen? What to do about it if it does happen? My name's **Mike Michalowicz**. I'm joined in studio with **AJ Harper**. Good morning to you.

**AJ Harper** ([00:37](#)):

Good morning.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([00:38](#)):

Thanks for being here. So nice and early. You beat me to the office today.

**AJ Harper** ([00:41](#)):

I usually do, but the last time I was late.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([00:44](#)):

And you got front spot parking, yet again.

**AJ Harper** ([00:47](#)):

Rockstar parking is what I call it.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([00:48](#)):

Rockstar. You got a special talent and you don't even circle. You get it first time each time.

**AJ Harper** ([00:54](#)):

Bloop. Right in. Bloop and bloop.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([00:55](#)):

AJ is my partner. She co-writes every book that has come out under my name,.

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**AJ Harper** ([01:03](#)):

Except for the, *My Money Bunnies*.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([01:05](#)):

Except for my, *My Bunnies*. Thanks.

**AJ Harper** ([01:06](#)):

Which is the...

**Mike Michalowicz** ([01:06](#)):

Which is the children's book, thanks for pointing that out. And our most recent work was *All In*, I did a keynote on it, AJ two or three days ago, California. And I'll tell you, it was the best received presentation I've ever done. (Really? Awesome.) Yeah. Not in

**AJ Harper** ([01:23](#)):

Why do you think?

**Mike Michalowicz** ([01:24](#)):

Two things. I think it's so unexpected, the content. So my opening comment, it's not necessarily in the book, but I talk about the story of me doing the big announcement in front of the crew of a vision we have for that is in the book. Well, this part, this part I'm about to tell you. So I do that and I say, most leaders set corporate visions. Mm. Great. Leaders set collective visions. We don't have that line in the book. (We Don't!) We don't. I know. And it's only, there's a tip here. Maybe we should have an episode about this. The more you speak about it, you find what resonates with your audience. And I actually heard gasp. I never had someone hear gasp like, that's it. Someone's like, that's it. We're setting a corporate vision, not a collective vision. And then there's a lot of these unexpected, unexpected transposed perspectives on, on what great leadership is. And so I think that's why it's received so well. I wanna acknowledge you force, it's a positive comment, the simplification of a book, so that it's so digestible. I think *All In* is our best work ever. So thank you for that.

**AJ Harper** ([02:30](#)):

I know you, you love to say that, you say that about every book, but I think this, this is really true,

**Mike Michalowicz** ([02:35](#)):

And I think it's really true. Every,

**AJ Harper** ([02:36](#)):

It's true every time, every time. We, we try to get better every time. And that's why I would introduce you as an author, you know, as a ghost writer. Back in the day. I was, that was my job when I met you. I met a lot of <inaudible>

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**Mike Michalowicz** ([02:49](#)):

<Laugh>. Yeah, I know

**AJ Harper** ([02:51](#)):

You did. I worked for a bunch. Yeah. Yeah. I don't think most of the authors. Some, some did. And incidentally, I'm still friends with them today, a lot, bunch of them. But most of the authors that I worked for as a ghost didn't really wanna get better as a writer. They were abdicating all of that. So, to your credit, I don't think you're the same writer you were certainly not when I met you. Or even five years ago. So, to your credit, even though we work together, you are always trying to get better.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([03:27](#)):

Thank you. Thank you. You have a Wall of No, I, I actually don't know what it is.

**AJ Harper** ([03:33](#)):

I don't have a wall of No, it's my wall of no story.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([03:36](#)):

Oh. What is the Wall of No story.

**AJ Harper** ([03:37](#)):

So, years and years ago, I was a playwright in residence at a children's theater in Menominee, Wisconsin. And I'm grateful for that experience because that's how I met my wife. Incidentally, she and I have our first date anniversary in April and be 28 years.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([03:56](#)):

My gosh. Congratulations.

**AJ Harper** ([03:57](#)):

I know. It's a long time. <Laugh>.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([03:59](#)):

It's a long time.

**AJ Harper** ([04:00](#)):

How did we get so old?

**Mike Michalowicz** ([04:02](#)):

I know... How did we get so young? <Laugh>. Just gotta say that.

**AJ Harper** ([04:05](#)):

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So, while I was living in this little town and serving as a playwright in residence, I was 22 years old at the time. 21, 22. I met this guy. I don't honestly don't even remember his name. It's possible he might not be living anymore. I don't know, because again, 28 years ago, okay. He was a journalist and a, he wrote short stories and he had in his basement, plastered, wallpapered his entire basement with rejection letters, <laugh>. And it was initially just one wall. So he called it the Wall of No. And then he kept going. And he told this to me. He said, it's, I have this Wall of No. I said, why would you put that up on the, I mean, I had rejections at that point, too. It's just part of anything you do creatively. He said, because I, it's a reminder that I tried. You know? It's a reminder that I tried because you can't have that wall of No. If you didn't make something, number one and two have the guts to submit it. So, I love, I always remember that dude from 28 years ago, I can't remember his name.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([05:24](#)):

It, it builds that muscle to keep going after it. I was chairing off air. I was just listening to a podcast, Tim Ferriss, and he interviewed a guy, I think, I can't remember the guy's name. I think he wrote a book called Woolly, or Woolies, I don't recall. Sold 5 million copies so far. It was his fifth or sixth book. And he, he argued, and I think this is gonna be part of it, is there's many rejection points. There's rejection at the submission where you submit your proposal or there's rejection of your manuscript. There's published books. You publish a book and then no one reads it. That's a massive rejection. And he said he was building this muscle and just kept on going, and kept on improving, reading other people's books and just be making his own version, his best version of himself from all he was consuming and all he was doing. And then this book hit, and he goes, it just lifted everything.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([06:17](#)):

You got better through the practice. You get better through rejection. It, it's like anything else. If you wanna build muscle, you have to exercise. It's that resistance. One last little story I read or heard on a podcast. It was, I think it was Dr. Huberman, Andrew Huberman. This concept of our brain and how we build neural pathways around resilience. And what's interesting, he said, whatever that thing is that you're afraid to do, you don't have to do that. Do something else that you're afraid to do that's perhaps a smaller bite. And see your way through it, because you actually build resilience and it'll strengthen you to face anything. So one technique, he said, if you don't like or hate cold showers, not a fan, do that. I've been doing that for well over a year, every single day, including this morning and every single time, like, I hate this part, bink hit it. And it's just, it's a shock to the system. And you, within 10, 20 seconds, you adjust. And it's like, okay, it's not as bad as I expected, but there's a shock. And yeah. I think it's makes me more resilient in every other aspect of my life, because I just face something. I know it's gonna be a pain. But on the other side of it, it's actually pretty good. So, so why, what's the common or the most, number one rated reason why people struggle or fail

**Mike Michalowicz** ([07:35](#)):

As authors?

**AJ Harper** ([07:36](#)):

They quit.

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**Mike Michalowicz** ([07:37](#)):

Why do they quit?

**AJ Harper** ([07:39](#)):

So many different reasons. They use all, all sorts of things like getting rejections as evidence that the inner critic troll who tells them, "Who are you to do this? Who's ever gonna read this?" is correct. So they take evidence from the world around them to bolster the inner critic troll. And then they say, all right, I guess I wasn't meant to do this.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([08:08](#)):

That effing confirmation bias we talked about last episode.

**AJ Harper** ([08:11](#)):

I don't, it's, it's, I think it's con-- Maybe it is, maybe it is. I'm not, I'm not a psychologist. I'm not a research psychologist. I don't know. I think it's deeper. Okay. I think we're just really don't believe in ourselves. That's it. And so the problem is misinformation, disinformation, rejection, when... Discomfort, like you just spoke, spoke about you're dis-- cold for a little bit. And we aren't willing to feel any of those things.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([08:46](#)):

Yeah.

**AJ Harper** ([08:47](#)):

So it's a myriad reasons, but we'll take any evidence. We'll take it so fast. It's just a sub-- boggling. It's just, oh, see, okay. Nevermind. We're very quick to accept the negative evidence. Very quick.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([09:03](#)):

I think if we don't believe in ourselves at the core, even positive evidence we reject.

**AJ Harper** ([09:08](#)):

Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([09:09](#)):

Oh, that, that's, that's just one person. Or that, that was a typo. You know?

**AJ Harper** ([09:14](#)):

Oh yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([09:14](#)):

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Someone says, somebody gives a five star. They, they meant to gimme a one star. They accidentally did that.

**AJ Harper** ([09:18](#)):

Well, yeah. Or whatever, whatever it is. Or that person, it's a fluke or Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>, whatever. If you have a success. When I was a play young playwright, it was normal for me to be rejected all year long. I also had some acceptance. But I used to go to the little post office in Colfax, Wisconsin. You had to mail in your submissions then.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([09:43](#)):

So old school.

**AJ Harper** ([09:44](#)):

Yeah. And so imagine these big manila envelopes with a whole play in it because you had to write the whole play plus whatever other supportive materials. I'm broke, you know, so I <laugh> I have to wait till I have money to do these things. I have just an, imagine me walking with just an tall arm load of, once I finally have some cash for postage, to the post office of scripts. And the thankfully postmaster was always nice to me when I came in, oh, I sure hope this works out for you. <Laugh>. And I would al, I had this thing I did where every time I sent them off, handed them across the counter. Or if I was just doing one and putting it in the, you know, the little, what is that called? Post office box? (Oh, Yeah, yeah, yeah.) The little bin. I would always say, "Godspeed." Just say it. Just go. But the thing is, I didn't actually expect a yes. You know, expectation. That's the root of all unhappiness. <Laugh>.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([10:53](#)):

It is! <Laugh>. That's true.

**AJ Harper** ([10:54](#)):

That's true. So if I did get something, I would be delighted. But I knew that I had to actually send it, send it, send it, keep it going, keep it going, keep it going. So I had the different expectation. I knew that part of my job was to create things and submit them and create things and submit them. Not to put too much stock in any one of those things working out. But it's a volume thing, honestly. You have to keep, you have to keep it going. And of course, I was improving. I was also working on my craft.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([11:32](#)):

Okay. So a couple of qualifying questions. Was the same script being sent out to multiple recipients?

**AJ Harper** ([11:39](#)):

At the same time? Yeah, depending on what they wanted. I had multiple scripts. So depended on if it was a one act play competition or a full length or.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([11:46](#)):

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Okay. So the second question is, are they soliciting you or are there some public solicitation? Like, Hey, we're accepting scripts. How do you know who to send it to?

**AJ Harper** ([11:53](#)):

Well, there, there's a Playwright's Market. (Okay.) Just like there's a Writer's Market.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([11:57](#)):

And what if, could it happen that two people were accept the script at the same time? Or you, you get approved by two folks. Yeah. At the same. So what do you then you choose?

**AJ Harper** ([12:07](#)):

Oh, it's not like publishing. Playwriting's not like publishing. Okay. So it can be in a certain respect because a, a theater might want the first pub production, but a play can be produced all over anytime. Multiple times.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([12:21](#)):

Clear. Okay.

**AJ Harper** ([12:21](#)):

That's different than,

**Mike Michalowicz** ([12:23](#)):

Okay. Yeah. I got it. So for authors, there's reasons they get rejected that they don't understand. A publisher will say,

**AJ Harper** ([12:30](#)):

Well, that's outta your control.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([12:32](#)):

That's what, that's what I mean.

**AJ Harper** ([12:32](#)):

And I think people sometimes think it has something to do with them.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([12:36](#)):

Right.

**AJ Harper** ([12:36](#)):

Totally. So you have to understand the many factors that go into not choosing an author's work that may have nothing to do with you or your work.

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**Mike Michalowicz** ([12:45](#)):

So lay them on me. What are some of the reasons?

**AJ Harper** ([12:47](#)):

So the big one is front list. So front list is books that are about to come out in the, you know, coming year. But also books that have recently come out, say the last year. So if a publisher has a book that's very similar to yours, they're, they don't want to produce another book that's in competition with that book.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([13:09](#)):

Okay.

**AJ Harper** ([13:10](#)):

So you can't always know what that is. You, there are some things you can do. You can go to track pretty closely if you're trying to go for a specific publisher, which I hope you're not putting all your eggs in one basket, but you can go to Publisher's Marketplace, get a subscription track, the deals that come across as a very time consuming process. Most people aren't gonna do this, so you may not know that they have a book on deck that's similar to yours and topic. And so they might have to reject it. That's one. That's a, and it's a, happens all the time.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([13:45](#)):

What about a hybrid publisher? Do they have a similar criteria?

**AJ Harper** ([13:47](#)):

Same. Well, okay. Let's be clear. If they're a top tier hybrid, meaning that they are operating like a traditional publisher, but with an investment from you, then yes, it does matter to them because they care as much about positioning your book and supporting your book as a traditional publisher. But if it's a hybrid that's just operating like a factory where they're not really concerned if they have multiple books, you know, for them it's about the money.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([14:15](#)):

It's about, it's about the money they earn. Yeah. Yeah. From you making an investment. In the top tier hybrid publishing model, they also, and maybe, maybe this is true for other hybrids, receive a percentage of royalties.

**AJ Harper** ([14:27](#)):

Yeah. So it is true for other hybrids as well.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([14:29](#)):

Okay. So they do want the book to sell. That's a, that's icing on the cake perhaps.



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**AJ Harper** ([14:33](#)):

Right. But my experience with other hybrids that are operating more like a factory is that they know most of their money is coming from the investment.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([14:42](#)):

Gotcha. The last thing about front list is, I wanna make sure I understand this properly. The front list is a book that the publisher is actively or has recently invested in through editorial work, but also some form of sales and marketing distribution. Right. That's where the big cost is to them. And then when it goes to the back list, it's mostly, it sounds like it's pushed the button to print it, but there's no active effort going on from the publisher typically. Is that?

**AJ Harper** ([15:09](#)):

Typically, unless they are known for being a publisher that invests heavily in backlist. Okay. So you would know that by researching them.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([15:20](#)):

And if a, a publisher invests heavily in backlist, I research and I find out, wow, there they keep pushing this book. Would that potentially be a blockade if I'm writing on a similar topic? Because they're actively promoting a backlist with that topic?

**AJ Harper** ([15:32](#)):

No, not so much. As, as you know, so much happens for authors when they're front list. That's when you're gonna get the most media attention. That's when you're gonna get trade reviews. That's when you're gonna, it's just, it's just when all the stuff happens. That's when the sales team is really focused on you. They're not focused on you on when your backlist unless something weird happens. Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([15:52](#)):

Right. Okay. That makes sense. What's another reason that you get rejected by a publisher?

**AJ Harper** ([15:55](#)):

So the publisher's goals and mission. Okay. So let's, for goals, for example, a publisher might say, okay, we're going to, we are going to publish 20 titles this season, but then the next year they might be down to 10. So that's not, you know, the, your chances of shrunk. So you don't know what their publishing goals are, and necessarily they don't. It's not that they're gonna post them necessarily.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([16:23](#)):

Noah what my editor said? Now, I'm probably bastardizing his numbers, but I think he receives around a hundred submissions a week.

**AJ Harper** ([16:31](#)):

<Laugh>. Yeah.

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**Mike Michalowicz** ([16:32](#)):

And so when it comes to this, they have to have a vetting process. You can't read a hundred a week. And so it sounds like the first vetting process is, well, how many, how many am I gonna publish this year? And I think Noah published 10 himself. Like he, he's responsible for 10 books a year.

**AJ Harper** ([16:49](#)):

Well, so at Portfolio, which is the imprint that your books are published with at Penguin Random House, they have a set number of titles they're gonna publish each season within

**Mike Michalowicz** ([16:58](#)):

The imprint. And then the, each editor within that imprint is assigned a certain number of books.

**AJ Harper** ([17:03](#)):

Within that total. Yeah. But they're fighting for those slots.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([17:07](#)):

Yeah. So I, I think, I don't remember the numbers. I think it's 80 a year that Portfolio does the imprint. And I think no, is 10 books 10 or maybe 12.

**AJ Harper** ([17:15](#)):

But they were doing more when they were two years ago. Yeah. So that's what I mean by goals. Yeah. Okay. Number two is mission. So for example, Portfolio has a certain focus of business. Primarily. They had to publish some other books, but you are not going to submit a cookbook to them. Right. You're not gonna submit a YA fantasy book to them. It doesn't go there. Or when I had, when I, you know, the little publishing company that I co-founded and subsequently sold, we were on a very specific mission to publish fiction books with LGBTQ main characters in, and this is the key part, two things where they had happy endings, meaning they didn't die or end up in a dumpster somewhere. (Oh, Interesting.) Right? And their gender or sexual orientation was not the central source of conflict. Meaning a lot of books with LGBTQ characters, it's about being accepted by their families. (Yeah.) Or bashing or prejudice or coming onto their families. And those books are important and they exist and they should exist. But we just wanted like, here's a story about pirates and they happen to have <laugh>, you know, like. We just wanted it to not be the central issue. Yeah. They'd be that it wasn't, you know, part of them as a character. So that was a, a mission clearly stated.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([18:45](#)):

And by having that clear mission as the publisher, does that serve you in that you can more efficiently edit the books? Produce books?

**AJ Harper** ([18:54](#)):

Well, it does, but it, it's a, I was the acquisitions editor for that house. If I, if a book came across that didn't have LGBTQ main characters, or in which there was some sort of tragic ending, I could

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immediately reject it. (Yeah.) Do you see what I'm saying? Yeah. This is why these are the things that are out of your control, but it's within your control to at least go look. Because publishers will state what they're, they might not tell you how many books they're going to publish. They probably won't. But they will tell you their mission, their objectives. So you make sure it aligns with the book. That's a big one.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([19:32](#)):

Okay. That's, okay. I get it. You got more for me.

**AJ Harper** ([19:35](#)):

Yeah. Publishers take on trends and I say publishers take, so internally in the publishing world, people will make just sort of their take on what's happening. Vampire books, oh, they're out. Right? Oh, we're not doing, we're memoirs out. We're in hybrid memoir. We don't want just a straight memoir anymore. Whatever. They just decide. (Yeah.) Right. So it's usually back with some data, their own anecdotal experience. But they have an opinion. You can't control that. They may have decided, oh, I don't want any more of these books. Right now that trend's over. You don't know what that is. So, you know, you can't really fault yourself if you get rejected and you won't know.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([20:24](#)):

Yeah. It's interesting. I think the trend in the business, prescriptive nonfiction space is AI. Now it's this, at least with my editorial team, I think at, at Penguin. Because I was last talked to Noah and we were talking about, it's like, yeah, we're really interested in this. How's it going to influence business and so forth.

**AJ Harper** ([20:42](#)):

Interesting. Yeah. But that won't be the case a year or two from now. No, that's, it won't be, they'll say, "We're, that's over. That's done." But again, that's an editor's take on it. Right. And you don't have control over that. Right.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([20:53](#)):

Yeah. I just wanna share with our audience. I found an AI app that is really intriguing. It's called pi, PI Do ai pi.ai. I invite you to go to it. It's a conversational AI so you literally can activate it. I did in my car. I was driving back from the airport for 45 minutes, just had a conversation. You think you're talking with a human being. It was really fascinating. And we just talked about books the whole way. Interesting.

**AJ Harper** ([21:17](#)):

You and the robot?

**Mike Michalowicz** ([21:18](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. And it's interesting because it's, it sounds like a person that pauses. There's some stutters. He says, they'll say some superlatives that are not typical of an AI.

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**AJ Harper** ([21:29](#)):

Huh. I wonder if that would help keep me awake on long drives.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([21:32](#)):

Try it out. It's bizarre. <Laugh> It's bizarre, but interesting. Okay. What else? Okay, rejection.

**AJ Harper** ([21:40](#)):

So this is stuff that's out of your control. Editor's taste. You don't know. They might read a few pages of your manuscript and say, I don't want, I'm not just 'cause of their own taste. (Yeah.) Or I would add sometime I know as an editor, what is my strong suit? So I might like something, I could see the potential, but I know, Hmm. I can't actually, I can't actually do this. I'm not gonna be the best person to bring this to what it needs to be.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([22:10](#)):

Well, the editor, once they get pitched, they be, have to become your agent or representative effectively, internally. (Yeah. Yeah.) They have to pitch it to the committee. That's usually the publisher or other editors. So Noah tells me, he says he looks at the first page and he goes, within seconds, do I feel I can back this with all my energy?

**AJ Harper** ([22:30](#)):

A hundred percent. Yeah. We haven't gotten there yet, but I can look at the first paragraph and I know.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([22:35](#)):

Amazing. Okay. What else?

**AJ Harper** ([22:37](#)):

Okay. Then there's the publisher's track record with books like yours. So maybe they took a chance on a book and it didn't go well. They might be biased now because it didn't go well. So again, totally outta your control. I'll

**Mike Michalowicz** ([22:51](#)):

Give you an example. *Profit First*. When, when I pitched *Wasn't Noah* back then, I can't remember who the editor was. It was probably Kaushic.

**AJ Harper** ([22:58](#)):

No, it was before Kaushic is the one that brought it back, back. I can't remember who was.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([23:03](#)):

It was a woman, Carrie or something. Yeah. I, now, I remember her vaguely. I can picture and her response, not her words, but she said the publisher said there's enough accounting books out there

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already. They couldn't see past that. And their accounting books, their finance books weren't doing, well anymore. So they said that another finance book won't do it.

**AJ Harper** ([23:20](#)):

Yeah. It's a perfect example of it was totally out of your control. Yeah. Didn't matter if the book idea was great or not. Yeah. And honestly, listeners, <laugh>, you can't overcome this stuff. You think you can just pitch it harder in a different way. But a lot of people are fixed in this, in their beliefs around this stuff until they see evidence to the contrary from actual sales from somebody else's book, then they wanna jump on it and do a million of those. Okay. Publishers' budget, you don't know what it is. You can't control it. They might not have the money for it. For example, let's say you want to do a, you know your book is gonna be 400 pages. First of all, you know, this, we don't, usually those books are published, but it's rare. It's expensive. You know, or maybe they just don't have the funds to, it's gonna be heavy lifting.

**AJ Harper** ([24:14](#)):

I, I don't know. So the budget's a factor. And then publishing team strength and strengths and weaknesses. It sort of aligns with, does the editor feel like they can really do it? An example would be at this little publishing house I mentioned, I was doing almost all of the substantive editing. If I got a manuscript that, you know, I did a couple literary fiction novels, and it's really, I'm don't feel, I am up for it. So I would have to hire out a different substantive editor, which can be expensive. So I might not choose that book because I maybe can't afford it.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([24:52](#)):

Can you ask a publisher? I'm sure you can ask anything, but will a publisher respond? If you ask, what is your budget for a book like this? How do you invest in it? (No.) So we had a case, and this might be a, a future episode, also one of our authors at Pinned With Purpose that we represent. We got them a publishing deal, traditional publishing deal. So, but a boutique house that we hadn't worked with before.

**AJ Harper** ([25:16](#)):

Yeah. You mentioned this on a previous podcast. Okay. The bad cover, which was a tip off.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([25:21](#)):

Yeah. It was a horrific experience. At the end, we broke that contract and we contractually were obligated to pay back. They had to produce receipts on what their spend was up to that point and reimburse for that. We found a new publisher. It's, it's gonna be, it's already proven to be an extraordinary relationship. The new publisher, the old publisher, the total bill for all the work they did cover, design, editorial work, which supposedly includes substantive, which it didn't copy, line, proof page layouts \$1,500. (Whoa. <Laugh>) And I was like, well, I was like, hold on. That's not a, I think you missed a zero here. I mean.

**AJ Harper** ([26:00](#)):

That's not a traditional publisher then. Yeah. That operates in a traditional way. Not at all.

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**Mike Michalowicz** ([26:04](#)):

No. It, it was a farce and it really upsetting. But thank them for being truthful about what they spend. But that means they were going on Fiverr to get this edited. They were going, you know, somewhere else to get the quote unquote cover design. It was horrific. So they are on our blacklist now to never work with that publisher again. But one of the questions that come about now is what resources are they allocating to it? We do want to know proactively. And I'm just wondering how forward we can be about that.

**AJ Harper** ([26:32](#)):

No, they're not gonna tell you their budget for that stuff. But you can tell the single best way to vet a publisher is to talk to their recently published authors.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([26:42](#)):

Yep. I love

**AJ Harper** ([26:43](#)):

That. It just, it just is.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([26:45](#)):

Yeah. Okay. Any other reasons to get rejected by a publisher?

**AJ Harper** ([26:47](#)):

Well, yeah, there's a bunch more, but I just listed all the ways that are outside of your control. But then there are ways that are in your control.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([26:55](#)):

Well lay those on me.

**AJ Harper** ([26:56](#)):

So this is some, these are some of the reasons. Incidentally, if you go to my YouTube channel, I have a free video up there that says the top five reasons I rejected manuscripts.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:08](#)):

<Laugh>. That's cool. What's your YouTube channel?

**AJ Harper** ([27:10](#)):

**AJ Harper**. Okay. Yeah. Or maybe it's Anjannette. Oh God, I'm embarrassed now.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:14](#)):

Either **AJ Harper** or Angenette Harper?

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**AJ Harper** ([27:16](#)):

It's, no, it's **AJ Harper**.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:17](#)):

Do you remember the title of that one?

**AJ Harper** ([27:19](#)):

Top Five Reasons I Rejected Manuscripts.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:22](#)):

That's the title.

**AJ Harper** ([27:23](#)):

Okay. Yeah. If you go, that includes a ton of red flags for me that I think will correspond to a lot of other editors. And that's free up on YouTube. Bad writing. <Laugh> Number one reason. Bad writing. And I can usually tell that's what Noah's referring to when he says the first page.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:42](#)):

And when he says the first page. Is it the bad writing in sample chapter? Or is it bad writing in the proposal? Self they judge?

**AJ Harper** ([27:49](#)):

Well. It could be both. I'm not sure what he's referring to, but I don't know. We can tell pretty quickly.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:54](#)):

But how do you tell, do you go to the first this chapter samples or...?

**AJ Harper** ([27:58](#)):

Well, okay, so full manuscript. So when I was an acquisitions editor, it was for fiction. So I wasn't full man receiving proposals. \But Now I do of course, help nonfiction authors write those proposals. In my workshop. . So, you know, I can, I can identify where there might be some bad writing there, but when it comes to a manuscript, we can tell on the first page.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([28:19](#)):

Okay.

**AJ Harper** ([28:20](#)):

So you can improve that. You know, that's in fact in that, in that free video, I actually have some tips about what you can do and how, what would be my tip offs for bad, bad writing or weak prose. But then equally important, lack of clarity. Lack of clarity about your fundamentals. Who's your reader? What's

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your core message? What's the promise of this book? If you don't know what that is, we can tell right away that you're, you're a little mushy. There. It, so it's a little muddy.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([28:49](#)):

Should in a proposal, should people specify that clearly that this is the promise I'm making this book. (Yeah.) Okay. Make it that clear and simple.

**AJ Harper** ([28:58](#)):

It should be in the overview. Yeah. So should the reader, so should the core message, the reader statement, specifically what you understand about the reader, what the reader wants, and their perceived problem.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([29:09](#)):

This next one kind of blows my mind. Why is this a big deal? Tell me what it is. And then why is this a big deal?

**AJ Harper** ([29:13](#)):

Mike is looking at a bulleted list of reasons. <Laugh>. I know,

**Mike Michalowicz** ([29:16](#)):

I know. I'm just looking at this one. I'm like, this one blows my mind

**AJ Harper** ([29:18](#)):

Length. Why? That's so funny. That's spoken like an author <laugh>. Why, why shouldn't you want all my good words? (I'm A genius.) <laugh> Books are expensive. Yeah. Okay. If I, if you first, okay. A couple reasons. It's not just the expensive piece. If you say <laugh>, I have 120,000 word manuscript that tells me <laugh> A, it's gonna be expensive to edit because I have to, I know. I gotta cut that down. B, it's gonna be expensive to print if we can't get it too far down. Meaning lots of pages. But it also tells me you don't really understand the industry. It's a tip off that you're green.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([29:59](#)):

Yes.

**AJ Harper** ([30:00](#)):

It tells me that you really don't get it. Yeah. That this is outside of the scope and that most books in this genre run in this range. So at Portfolio, they're not gonna want 120,000 word. They want half that. So if you're submitting that to them, this is a big red flag. Right. When I had my publishing company and I didn't get a hundred a week, but, because we were tiny, but I, we probably got 75 to a hundred a month. So <laugh> people, we, we explicitly said, we will not accept manuscripts that are over 90,000 words.



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**Mike Michalowicz** ([30:46](#)):

And people ignore that. Or they just don't read that.

**AJ Harper** ([30:48](#)):

They, no, they would, sometimes they don't read it. But other times they would explain to you why they were the exception. Yeah. You're not the exception.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([30:56](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

**AJ Harper** ([30:58](#)):

That's So it's a sign. It's a sign that the person is pretty green and hasn't done their homework and hasn't really respected this process. Which is a sign of other yucky things to come.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([31:09](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. And where are some of the yucky things that do come?

**AJ Harper** ([31:12](#)):

With a green author? (Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>.) They just have unrealistic expectations. They don't understand the process. They don't even really understand the creative process.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([31:23](#)):

Do they therefore try to tell you the publisher, this is how it's done?

**AJ Harper** ([31:27](#)):

That's more of the arrogant person. (Okay.) Like really, really green. Green and arrogant is the worst combo of all

**Mike Michalowicz** ([31:33](#)):

The Grarragant they call it, which is a blend.

**AJ Harper** ([31:35](#)):

I've had people send me queries that said I legit without and not, not ingest, calling their work a masterpiece. A work of genius. I automatically will not look at that man manuscript. Yeah. It automatically will not look at it. Who? No, it's not. It's first of all, it can't be one yet because you haven't been through an editorial process. Secondly, you never say that about yourself.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([32:05](#)):

Correct. Correct. And, and you as a publisher, no matter what you do, if you modify, give critical feedback or anything on a work of genius, it causes instant conflict. I would avoid that person.

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**AJ Harper** ([32:18](#)):

Yeah. And if a, if an author is green, it tells me that they need a lot of handholding. Maybe they don't understand simple things like play, you know, track changes when it comes to editing, I don't want to have to teach them a bunch of stuff. Maybe they don't understand some basic rules of prose. They don't know how to take editorial comments. Maybe they're gonna have a total breakdown when they get editorial comments because they're not professional. Maybe they're gonna have insist on certain things, like you said, covers certain covers. We're gonna have an argument and probably, and I do mean probably they don't know how to market the thing. If they're super green, then they don't really understand how this is gonna work, which means they're not gonna be a good publishing partner with us.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([33:07](#)):

It is true that regardless of how great a book is, it needs a push out of the gate. You need those first people to discover it. And if you've written the best book in the world, only one person discovers it. You gotta pray to God that one person talks about to everybody. But it's unlikely. Someone wrote what it a thousand true fans. I think is this thing. It probably somewhere around that number, if you get a large enough sampling of people that you've delivered something of true greatness to a portion of them will become active advocates. 'cause That's who they naturally are. So you need to get that tipping point that requires extraordinary marketing. And if you, and if you go into this concept of, I've written, I've written a masterpiece here, it's gonna sell itself... Pfft. Good luck.

**AJ Harper** ([33:49](#)):

Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([33:49](#)):

That's my, it's me opining.

**AJ Harper** ([33:50](#)):

Yeah. So there are tip offs, you know, editors over time can they identify their own red flags. They can tell, okay, if I see this, I know this is a problem. Right? So for example one, I'll just give you one example on weak prose. If I see a lot of passive voice, for example, I know, okay, this is a person who hasn't really worked this out yet. Which means there's probably gonna be other issues with the writing even as I go deeper into the manuscript.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([34:21](#)):

So don't use the word "perhaps."

**AJ Harper** ([34:23](#)):

<Laugh>

**Mike Michalowicz** ([34:25](#)):

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Pass.

**AJ Harper** ([34:25](#)):

Perhaps is fine. <Laugh>

**Mike Michalowicz** ([34:27](#)):

What about marketing potential? Do you measure that too? Can you measure that? Do you consider that at the pitch stage?

**AJ Harper** ([34:34](#)):

So again, different for me with fiction, but we know that non-fiction publishers do consider the marketing. I think it's important to show that you understand what it is. That you understand that it's a multi-stage process. That you know how to describe your platform and how to leverage it, that you've given it some thought and consideration and you know, that's a pretty big tip off when a person doesn't seem to have an understanding of that. (Hmm.) So I think you have to demonstrate that books get published though, even with small platforms platform, it's, you know, a good idea can get published, but you have to still be willing to market it.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([35:16](#)):

Okay. Anything else we gotta cover? I think we nailed it.

**AJ Harper** ([35:19](#)):

We did. I just, you know, I think it's important for people to understand that, keep going. It's good to have a Wall of No, because it means that you tried and to not take the things that are out of your control as evidence that you shouldn't move forward and then work on the things that are in your control.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([35:36](#)):

I really do like the idea of having a, a room with a Wall of No, unfortunately no one responds in writing anymore. Maybe you can print out your emails.

**AJ Harper** ([35:43](#)):

You could take all your one stars. In fact, I was just, oh my gosh. Mike!

**Mike Michalowicz** ([35:47](#)):

Wall of ones.

**AJ Harper** ([35:48](#)):

Wall of ones. You have to do that.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([35:50](#)):

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I will, I will. That's I promise you.

**AJ Harper (35:52):**

Listen, I was teaching a class yesterday. I have this program where I help people get ready to write it. So they <laugh> they aren't quite ready to start writing. So I helped them throughout the year just do, just tinkering with things and thinking about it before they're really ready. And we were talking about comps and I went to *Profit First* so that I could show something and I went to the one stars, or No, the three stars. Okay. I just joined them. The three star rule about comps. Yeah. <Laugh>. Oh my god. Laugh. I couldn't stop laughing at some of the three stars on *Profit First*. It was so one of, I think one of them said it was hot garbage <laugh>, 20 20%. Brilliant. 80% hot garbage.

**Mike Michalowicz (36:39):**

Hot garbage. I love that.

**AJ Harper (36:40):**

And I laughed so hard. <Laugh>. Oh. And I think the people I was teaching were wondering why I was laughing, but I think you can't worry. But there's almost, there's 85, almost 8,300 reviews of *Profit First*. It's okay. You know, it's not hot garbage. But that's a fantastic subject line.

**Mike Michalowicz (36:58):**

Yeah, that is good. Yeah. That is good. My favorite critique of it. And I'm gonna build this wall of ones. Now. I got, I wanna show you a picture before we wrap it up. Is someone said stupid formula: X minus Y equals Z, therefore X minus R equals Z. Like whatever. He messed up the formula. He said like, this is what Mike's saying. And he got the formula so wrong <laugh> that he's now arguing against himself. (Against Himself.) He's right. That formula is wrong. He's doing the wrong formula. The carpenter I hired rearranged the word read, but look at that. I dunno if you can see that. It's a bookshelf.

**AJ Harper (37:34):**

Says dear.

**Mike Michalowicz (37:35):**

I know he rearranged Read to dear. Okay. But that's a bookshelf. READ I'm putting my wall Uhhuh. It's a massive bookshelf. It's from floor to ceiling and it's gonna be REA, you know, the first row in it. Ad uhhuh. And I have it in my office and I'm gonna store books in there. So it's actually a bookshelf that says read. Well that wall is this a blank wall that's now gonna be surrounded by my Wall of Ones.

**AJ Harper (37:57):**

Wall of Ones, do it. Yeah. Wall of ones.

**Mike Michalowicz (37:58):**

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Wall of ones. We hope you enjoyed this episode and hopefully you built that resilience to rejection and actually see maybe it's part of your path. I wanna invite you to go to our website. It's [dwtb.podcast.com](http://dwtb.podcast.com). We have free materials there. We invite you to join our email list. Make sure you read AJ's book. *Write a Must-Read*. It is a must read itself. It will be defining for you, I promise. So get that book and also join our email list. You can email us any of your stories or any of your experiences we'd love to share on an episode. You can email AJ or myself at [hello@dwtb.podcast.com](mailto:hello@dwtb.podcast.com). We actually got an email from a reader.

**AJ Harper** ([38:40](#)):

We wanna shout out April. Yeah. It came to me directly and after in response to a newsletter I did. April, who deep cleaned her kitchen listening to this podcast. Thank you so much. We're glad you're enjoying it.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([38:54](#)):

Yeah. That's the ultimate binge.

**AJ Harper** ([38:56](#)):

The ultimate binge, could started out just trying to listen. Ended up deep cleaning the kitchen. Couldn't stop listening.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([39:02](#)):

Right now. She's listening in. Thanks April. She's listening in right now. That toilet's being scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed.

**AJ Harper** ([39:08](#)):

We get you cleaning the garage soon, <laugh>.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([39:12](#)):

So please do send us into your comments, experiences. Hey, maybe we can give you a shout out on our show. Thanks for joining us for this episode. I hope you listen to the past episodes. We do invite you to binge and as the ultimate reminder. Don't write that book. Write this one.