

## Slush pile blues

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### **A cautionary tale for frustrated modern scribblers**

People still give the “rabbit look” – that wordless upward wrinkle of the nose – when you confess to the solitary act of self-publication. They suspect that the authorial ego outweighs the talent, that the scribbler is not a “real” author like Dan Brown. However, since most of us have a snowball’s chance in the high-margin hell of present-day publishing, I urge young scribblers to consider taking the solo plunge. But read this case history first, before you add any more rejected pages to that mountain of never-published words they call the slush pile.

Everyman has a novel in him, alas. In 1972 my solid Rhodesian system gave a convulsive heave and began to excrete a Swiftian satirical fantasy. Before dawn and after midnight, I kept my pastel-green Hermes 3000 clattering. By the time I stopped to think, I had 117 000 words: *After the Eclipse*. My Afro-cacotopia rejoiced in large-scale violence, racism, sex and perversion. I assumed that publishers would be gagging for my page-turning piss-take of an enclave that was clearly headed for a permanent eclipse.

But soon, with everything turning guava shaped in the last outpost of imperialism, there seemed no point in taking the mickey out of yesterday’s news. The tattered wad of brownish foolscap emigrated to Joburg with its creator, who armed himself with a sheaf of pseudonyms and began living by his wits. A new draft with broader appeal started going out to the world in 1982 and dived onto the slush pile. Then, after years of blues, I took the primrose path of DIY publishing.

Primitive technology was available, and *Eclipse* appeared in DOS Edlin on a disc. My brand was Discobolus, after the classical discus thrower statue. The logo was the discobolus himself, poised to hurl a 360k floppy. My second edition was in Windows Wordpad on a stiffy, inside a VHS videocassette box with a garish cover. Attempting to hawk these in a Rosebank bookshop, I learned how it feels to be ignored. If you’re ever on the run from the cops, you can hide in plain sight – in a bookshop with a chair, a table and a pile of copies to sign. There was one review: “Not very readable,” said *The Mail & Guardian*. British agent Bob Ellis insisted that I dump the paperless novel, and I signed with him – two months before he went bust.

After every down there’s an up. In 1998 *Eclipse* won the Sanlam Literary Award (unpublished) under the pseudonym Eugene Nkabinde. The citation called it “a compulsive read”. My speech at the ceremony in Grahamstown compared the manuscript to a lone sperm, with an infinitesimal likelihood of finding consummation – until the good people at Sanlam gave it a leg up. I declared that the award was my exit visa from the slush pile, and everyone applauded – with the notable exceptions of agents and publishers on three continents. They assumed the black aristocrats in my inverted fantasy would be taken for an attack on the New South Africa. An agent at the venerable UK agency Curtis Brown said *Eclipse* was “magical, lyrical...” She had it on her desk for seven months, mistook it for hard science fiction, and bombed it. Then a London manuscript broker attacked “*The Big Eight*” with a “submission package” which he cobbled together without bothering to read the book; only two underwhelmed publishers bothered to reply.

In 2001 Kevin Davie’s web portal Woza was glad to run *Eclipse* as a 25-part serial, and emails came whizzing in from enthusiastic readers. When Woza folded, the serial migrated to iafrica.com. Meanwhile, using Adobe software, I typeset the book myself. Favours were called in to get professional help with editing, proofreading, photography and cover design. A PDF disc went off to the printers with an order for the first 100 copies at some R40 each, and sales at a modest launch covered the print costs in a single night.

Big bookshops were acting snooty, so I persuaded a mix of stationers, second hand book stores, independents and filling station convenience shops to take books on consignment, at 30% discount on R131 (not including VAT). A lady friend threw me a profitable “tupperbook party”. Some person or persons unknown paid Eclipse the ultimate compliment by simultaneously shoplifting the only two copies in stock at Chapter One in Norwood.

The media gave Eclipse the rabbit nose. Apart from The Sunday Independent, that is, where Michiel Heyns wrote a rave review (check his blog). In a guerrilla marketing move, I swapped 20 weekly humour columns with iafrica.com, in return for R25 000 worth of front-page ads. These linked to the Eclipse serial and a purchase form. The ads got a million hits, the serial had 1 000 click-throughs – and a solitary order from a lady in Scotland, who cancelled. She couldn't afford postage.

I rarely waste anything and flogged the columns to a conventional publisher. Two Dogs brought the book out: Rogue Male. This combination of evolutionary psychology and scabrous sexual anecdotes got excellent reviews, but with lacklustre merchandising: less than 300 books sold. Some remaindered copies can still be found at R20 – and the rest were pulped in a matter of months – after Random House gobbled up Struik. My whack was less than R1 500. A “real” publisher is no guarantee of riches, and I've proved it.

A one-man band can do better. I make roughly the same from 200 of my own books as I would from royalties on 600. The money's up front – not six months down the line. And “dead tree” books are marketing aids, when you go out to hawk your mutton in the cold, cruel publishing world. I sold a Sci-fi opus to Kwela that way. Eclipse is out of print, but good second-hand copies can be bought online for many times the original price.

Weigh it up and make your decision, earnest young scribblers. If you bring a thoroughly professional product to market, you can be in charge. But remember that the effort chronicled in this case history works out to a gigantic loss – when you debit all the blood, sweat and tears. And attacks of slush pile blues – for which there is only one remedy, a glass of decent red. The truth is that any book brought out by an individual or published on that person's behalf by a print-on-demand company, will sell on average only 150 copies. Even if you work very hard at it and sell 300-odd copies, then you run smack into the concrete marketing wall. You will never break through without serious promotion and distribution muscle – no matter how good the reviews are, not even if you give up your day job. Being a glutton for punishment, I am back on the slush pile with *The Spirit's Tale* – a simplified, scaled-down version of Eclipse. I can get a modest but real return and a lot of satisfaction. And if the worse comes to the worst, I can always park my dreams on Kindle – which is the biggest slush pile in the universe.