

## Why Chess Writers Should Require Money For Their Writing, or, A Letter to Chess Journalists

By Ed Yetman, III

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Post [#822/2023](#)

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*Edward VII, by Grace of God, King of Great Britain, Emperor of India, and Defender of the Faith—all of that on a one—third farthing coin, c. 1905.*

I have written elsewhere as to why you, gentle reader, should part with your money for this chess column. I now want to reach other chess writers to urge them to charge for their writing.

To begin with, Americans--and chess players are an extreme subset of Americans--do not value free things. Economists call it "the problem of the commons": if it belongs to no one, then no one values or takes care of it. A trip through a public park should reveal the truth--it is written in the graffiti and the litter on the ground. Pay nothing, get nothing--*nada por nada*. If you want your writing to be valued, attach a price to it.

Chess-players are way too stingy, and that is hurting the chess world. Yes, Magnus Carlsen is a millionaire, or as Nelson Rockefeller could say, "one of our poorer friends." In today's economy, a million dollars is chump change-- just a big version of finding a five-dollar bill in the parking lot. Nice to have, but not what it used to be.

I've had this conversation countless times as a director or organizer. Some player will come up and ask why the prize fund is so low. Well, I say, I have X number of players at Y entry fee, and X times Y yields Z dollars; after we deduct expenses, that's the prize fund. And they are never happy. Yet they will play in drafty, ill-lit halls, with crappy plastic pieces at lickety-split time controls--and if you ask them to fork over \$5 more for a bigger prize fund for a better playing site, they balk; they imagine you are trying to profiteer off them.

The thing for chess writers to do is to play their part and charge a fee. Not a huge fee, but something. Once chess players realize that if you pay nothing, you get nothing, but if you pay something, you get something, that might spill over into the rest of the chess world and for once we will see some sustained growth. It's worth a try.

There is another benefit: charging a fee or adding a price keeps out the riffraff. I've sold chess books at tournaments for forty years, and if you don't charge money, only the beggars will gather around, and you will sell nothing. If you want quality customers, charge them.

A more elevated reason is reality. If you charge nothing, then in the back of your mind you are thinking, "well, I'm not really very good at this, so I'll just give it away." If you think that little of your writing, well, maybe you are right. Maybe you are bad at writing. If you are,

then *give it up and go do something else with your life*. The world is full of wonderful things you can do, like sleeping late or watching birds or, best of all, reading my column--*after* you pay for it. If you don't think you are good at writing, don't do it.

But if you are good at it, then charge for it.

Many chess writers are modest about their writing because they don't have a title. I used to think this way. Twenty-odd years ago I earned--yes, earned, as this was before computers--a rating of 2296 in the International Correspondence Chess Federation. A master's rating, but not the International Correspondence Chess Master (ICCM) title. I kept the master's rating for about five years, when I played in an all-master tournament where computers were allowed. No one told me computers were allowed. I drew one ICCM and beat another master, and the rest put me to the silicon sword. Farewell, master rating. Oh well.

But gradually I discovered that non-masters are impressed by my once-and-never-again master rating. So, I started putting "ICCF Master" on my publications. My sales went up. I still didn't value my rating, so I delved deeper.

It turns out that people value my writing regardless of my rating or title. I received a great compliment from one of my readers, who told me "your posts are easily digestible." Just what I was aiming for! The master's rating only opened up more minds to reading my writing. That's all.

Having sold books for decades, I learned that most chess books are written by masters for masters, and most readers find them tedious and unrewarding. Ken Smith's Chess Digest pamphlets sold readily and steadily, precisely because they are "easily digestible." You can go on ebay and see they *still* sell. Don't short your writing, like I did for years.

This brings me to the whole grandmasters-know-it-all thing. If they know it all, why do new books keep appearing on the same old subject, and often repeating the same old material? Because the knowledge difference between a grandmaster and a master is, in fact, fairly small--the things that make the difference between them are things like appetite, will to win, killer instinct, visualization, physical stamina, capacity for work, leisure time, inborn talent--these things you can't get from a book. What is needed is writing by non-masters for non-masters. The Five-Rounder may fantasize about becoming a grandmaster, but he knows he'll never make master. But he would like to play a bit better. There's a market out there for writing for those people, so write for them and charge them a reasonable fee.

What is a reasonable fee? I've sold a lot of monographs, simple stapled pamphlets, for between five and ten dollars. And yes, *in descriptive notation at that*. The average chess book-buyer who is a Five-Rounder has learned from bitter experience that \$30 books by grandmasters don't do him any good, so he's long since stopped buying them. But a \$5 or \$10 pamphlet? If it speaks to him, he'll buy it. And the notation doesn't matter, I've noticed. Once last word of advice: don't gouge him, because he's on the lookout for that. Oh, another thing: the easy way to price something is to add \$5 to your production cost. That makes it easy, and it also prompts you to not over-invest in production values, like glossy paper or pictures of glamorous women. Chess players don't much care about those things. I don't know why.

What speaks to him? Something that will help him win. He's not interested in the latest wrinkles in some theory about a high-octane opening. He'll never get there. I speak from experience. I can't say how many hours I've wasted--at least five or six--trying to memorize lines that went out 25 moves. Those things never happen to Five-Rounders. What they need is some sound grounding in a slightly unusual opening line that they can reason their way through from opening to ending. The opening theory doesn't have to be brand-new, it can be decades old, as it will come as a surprise to his opponent. And if a Five-Rounder gets a bad position against another Five-Rounder, it won't matter--the player who understands the position better will play better and thus win. And you can help them with that understanding.

Avoid crackpot ideas at all costs. Don't advocate playing the Grob or the Paris Gambit, for example. You may be thinking, "But after Paul Keres, what can I write about in the Ruy Lopez? And won't the Grob be a surprise?" Yes, the Grob is a surprise--and a pleasant one. In the Ruy, there's plenty left to say, and there are plenty of lines left little-explored by the greats. Look at the openings played by the Big Boys. They are playing for some pretty esoteric advantages. That means nothing to Five-Rounders. There was a grandmaster I used to play from time to time, and we were discussing this very topic. I told him it would be easier for me to beat a grandmaster than to draw one.

"Why?" he asked in puzzlement.

"Because the errors a grandmaster would make that would allow me to draw will just go right by me. But the mistakes that would make them lose, I think I'd notice them." Same applies to your Five-Rounders. Give them a way to win and they'll buy it.

They don't much care about anything else. Why should they? It's just a game. We won't save the world with chess. The best we can do is pass the time in a pleasurable and rewarding pastime, doing no harm to ourselves or others, but maybe making a little beauty along the way.

Or, in our case, a little extra cash. Maybe a bit more than a farthing.