

"I thought the Court of Public Opinion was just a figure of speech."

"Yeah, everybody thinks that until they get the summons."

"So... what are my chances?"

"As your lawyer, I gotta tell ya they suck. You run a feature called the Story of the Month, people are gonna expect a story a month. Simple as that. It's what? - August now - and you've only had one story out this year. And the title was spelled backwards."

"That's not a crime!"

"It is if it displeases the public. And let's face it. They liked your stories, so not getting them really pissed people off."

"But I was giving the stories away for free."

"Even worse - if they'd been paying for 'em, you be saving them money. But since they weren't paying anything, your readers got every right to feel cheated."

"Oy gevalt."

"I'd lay off the Yiddische schtick too. You're not Jewish. Let's not alienate those who are."

"Okay. Okay. So how bad are the charges?"

"Not good. It says here you were also guilty of employing self-referential recursion, from time to time."

"It's a literary device!"

"Yeah, yeah, tell it to the judge."

"Damn it, it wasn't as if I was goofing off. I was still writing plenty of stories. I just figured that the paying work should have priority over the free stuff."

"That would explain this other charge. The one that says you were getting all self-righteous and smarmy about the situation in a writing advice column. That's gonna count against you."

"Isn't there any good news?"

"Well, since you ask. Turns out the judge is a literary gent himself, wrote a few pop novels in his time. So ya gotta expect he'll be pretty easy on you."

"That's great! Who is he?"

"Some fella named Tom Clancy."

author's note: Readers not previously familiar with Michael Swanwick Online may be scratching their heads at the resolution of this story. Five or ten minutes browsing through the back files of Unca Mike's Bad Advice should clear things right up.