

Short Story: *"Shed that Guilt! Double Your Productivity Overnight!"* by Michael Swanwick and Eileen Gunn

The figure of the sin eater is fairly common in myth and lore. But how about a guilt eater? But wait! There's more!

Dear Sirs:

Ordinarily, I would not respond to an email such as yours. I am by nature a skeptic and, as a former advertising writer, consider myself well able to resist the transparent come-on of a carelessly written appeal to my baser nature. Today, however...

Today I found myself wracked with guilt at how much time I spend goofing around. Sunday is the end of my work-week and, as usual, all the chickens came home to roost: I absolutely had to get a story finished and sent off. And I did. I didn't do much of anything else: just worry and plot and write, all day long. I didn't even call in a pizza. Fortunately, I keep on hand an adequate supply of snickerdoodles, a nutritionally perfect source of carbs, fats, and cinnamon that will keep anxiety at bay for up to twenty-four hours.

But now, sitting here at midnight amid crumpled manuscript pages and snickerdoodle crumbs, I feel there must be a better way.

And your email, which promises I could be lounging about on Sundays, taking the day off, doing the crossword puzzle, and idly staring at things without thinking of them, certainly caught my eye.

Can you really reduce my guilt to nothing, as your email claims? Is your service worth its unnamed but undoubtedly exorbitant cost?

Warily,

Eileen Gunn

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Dear Ms. Gunn:

Every word in our ad is true! For very reasonable rates, our organization will take on your guilt for a **day**, a **weekend**, or even a **month-long vacation**! You may be especially interested in our Sunday subscription, a perennial bestseller among writers.

Here's how it works: Go to our Rates page, and click on the service that best suits your needs and pocketbook. Prepay, using credit card, debit card, or PayPal. It's as simple as that!

Let's say you choose **Guilt-Free Friday Nights.** (This option is particularly popular among church-goers! Garrison Keillor says, "It's like being a Republican for an evening!") Every Friday at precisely 5:30 p.m. local time, all your **failures, inadequacies**, and **moral weaknesses** become our responsibility. Do anything you like! Go out dancing and drinking. Stiff the waitress. Bring home an inappropriate sex partner. Stiff the waitress, bring her home, and have inappropriate sex with her. It's all okay! You can even, if you like, **Not Write!!!** All the guilt you would normally feel is, through our proprietary process, painlessly transferred to a member of our **degraded, subhuman staff.**

For the first time since you don't know when, you'll go to sleep -- as I have for many years -- with a smirk on your face. So don't delay. Act now! You'll be glad you did.

Sincerely,

Michael Swanwick

Chief Creative Officer

Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

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Dear Mr. Swanwick:

But if I didn't feel guilty, how would I write?

I have it set up that I feel guilty every day until about midnight, when it becomes the next day's problem.

I'd change that, but I'm afraid that if I didn't wake up feeling guilty every day, I'd forget to feel guilty on Mondays.

Worriedly,

Eileen Gunn

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Dear Ms. Gunn:

Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia offers a program for that! Sundays you can be guilt free, but the other six days of the week, we can hone and sharpen your guilt until it is a *keen-edged weapon of productivity!*

Just *imagine*: You're sitting at your desk and you should be writing. Instead, you log onto the Internet. Ordinarily, you'd waste countless hours on ego-searches, Sudoku, and Paris Hilton trivia. But -- what's this? It's an email from the *child you never knew you'd had,* but which it turns out you abandoned in its infancy, telling you how badly her life turned out because of your neglect. You log off and reach for the phone to tell your best friend about this frightful development and -- not incidentally -- waste half the morning in idle chitchat and gossip. But before your hand reaches the receiver, the phone rings! It's the *Humane Society*, telling you that your childhood pet, *Fluffy*, lost all these years, has died of a painful disease you could have cured with an inexpensive treatment, had it not been for the fact that you neglected to put your name and address on its collar.

Stunned, you put down the phone. You stare out the window -- your last, best chance to avoid actual work. And then (this is our piece de resistance!)_ one of our trained professionals calls you up and in *your mother's voice* says, "I saw what you did last night, and I'm very disappointed."

You start to work. You don't raise your head from the paper until twelve hours have passed and the first fifty pages of your blockbuster fantasy dekalogy have been completed. At this rate, the first volume will be finished in a *month!*

All for a perfectly understandable fee.

Sincerely,

Michael Swanwick

Chief Creative Officer

Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

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Dear Mr. Swanwick:

This sounds like my ordinary workday. I do not see how your service could add to my productivity.

The lost kids, the dead pet ... this is my life in a nutshell. And my mother's disapproval? I obsess about it, of course, like everyone else, but it does not drive me to work on the fantasy dekalogy one single minute.

How did you know about the dekalogy? It has such a lovely synopsis: elves, mirrors, electric trains, trees that extend into the stratosphere and rain gold on those below, and Dick Cheney's evil twin. _NYT_ bestseller? Fowler and Lethem can eat their hearts out. But I do not work on it.

Does your service offer anything else?

Curiously,

Eileen Gunn

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Dear Ms. Gunn:

We are in receipt of your heartbreaking missive, in which you ask, "_Does your service offer anything else_?"

The answer to which is, of course, ***You Bet Your Sweet Patootie!*** Hold onto your hat, because ***Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia*** is prepared to ***DOUBLE YOUR PRODUCTIVITY OVERNIGHT!!!***

Sound incredible? It is! But true. And there's more! We are prepared to do this at absolutely no cost to you!

Here's how it works: You provide the idea and parameters for that story you want to write but for whatever reason can't. Our downtrodden and overworked staff will labor into the wee hours of the night to produce ten pages of crisply polished prose, all of which is guaranteed to be of ***final draft quality!*** You will then, driven by a combination of ***guilt, admiration***, and ***ambition***, produce an equal number of pages of (it goes without saying) superior literary value. And so it will go, turn on turn, until in less time than you ever imagined possible the story is complete.

And what do we demand in exchange for this ***incredible service***? Only the pleasure of being of service, and three-quarters of the take when the story is sold! Yes ... we _are_ taking more than our fair share. But consider this: It is more than our fair share of a book which otherwise ***would not exist***. Everybody wins!

So don't delay -- ***ACT TODAY!***

Sincerely,

Michael Swanwick

Chief Creative Officer

Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

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Dear Mr. Swanwick

I can tell you've worked hard devising this service, and that you believe in it. But could I see some hard evidence of its efficacy? Testimonials, maybe?

Skeptically,

Eileen Gunn

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Dear Ms. Gunn:

You certainly are a **tough nut to crack**. Not that we think you are a nut. Absolutely not! Yet crack you we shall.

You asked for testimonials? Testimonials you shall have!

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A **Former Schoolteacher** in Maine says:

I was trapped in a dead-end job, living in a trailer, and writing at night. My total production was something like five words a week -- and I wasn't working on haikus but novels! Then GEP taught me to **produce, produce, produce!* Now it's a sorry month that doesn't see a new novel from me. I write so much that I have to use pseudonyms to keep from flooding the market. So now I am a happy man. The pay is pretty damn good too, but so what? All I ever wanted was to be a **human fountain of words**, and, as the old joke goes, Now I Are One!

-- S. K.

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A **British YA Author** gushes:

As a single mother, I spent seven years working on a short story about a woman sitting in a cheap cafe trying to write. It was depressing and going nowhere. Heck, I was depressing and going nowhere. Then GEP showed me how to open the **sluice-gates of my soul!* Now I'm a billionaire, world-famous, and married to the kind of man my ex-husband only wishes he could be. Thanks, GEP!

-- J. K. R.

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A **Noted Dead British Fantasist** writes:

When I was alive, I was the slowest writer imaginable. It took me an entire lifetime -- and it was not a short one! -- to pen a single children's book, a trilogy, and a handful of short works and fragments. After my demise, I decided that **enough was enough,** and linked my fortunes to GEP's star. Now I've written so many books I can't keep track of them! If only I'd discovered GEP earlier, I could have wrapped up my career and retired to Miami at age thirty!

-- J. R. R. T.

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And there are *many, many more* such unsolicited testimonials on file! Shouldn't yours be among them?

Sincerely,

Michael Swanwick

Chief Creative Officer

Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

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Dear Mr. Swanwick:

It all sounds very good, but I just don't understand how you can do it. How on earth can your staff turn out such remarkable volumes of work, when it's all I can do to finish a single page? Can you possibly clear up my confusion?

Uncertainly,

Eileen Gunn

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Dear Ms. Gunn:

Clear up your confusion we shall! As you know by now, we here at *Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia* are strong believers in the motivational power of guilt. Not just your standard guilt, mind you, but *crushing, soul-destroying guilt*. The kind of guilt that through our secret proprietary process we remove from *thousands of clients* every day.

What do we do with this guilt once we've piped it into our holding vats? Do we release it into the environment? Certainly not! Rather, we inject it directly into the bloodstreams of our *suffering staff writers*. Who, feeling responsible for every vile and petty thing that happens in the world, lose themselves in *compulsive and desperate scribbling.*

It is their misery that has raised many a despairing ink-stained wretch out of the *Slough of Writerly Despond* and into the *Glorious Light of Fiscal Solvency.* Let us do the same for you!

Sincerely,

Michael Swanwick

Chief Creative Officer

Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

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Dear Mr. Swanwick:

I am beginning to have my doubts about the entire enterprise. Am I supposed to benefit from the misery of others? I was not brought up to be like that.

Perhaps we should simply drop the matter.

Firmly,

Eileen Gunn

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Dear Ms. Gunn:

I must confess that everybody here at *Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia*, from myself down to the most wretched staff writer, finds your reluctance to sign up with the firm that turned a humorless and unproductive nobody into *Terry Pratchett* absolutely baffling. Let me speak to you like a Dutch uncle. You must seize control of your own destiny!

Ask yourself this: What is it that you really want? Fame? Money? Literary immortality? To be a _New York Times_ bestseller? Invitations to *gala Hollywood parties?* The love of millions of readers? To write so many books that by carefully stacking one of each, you can build the walls of a *new addition* to your house? All these things are attainable! Simply tell us your goals and *Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia* will make them real for you.

But we can't do it alone. We need your active cooperation.

What will it take to get you to *sign up today?*

 Our operators are standing by!

Sincerely,

Michael Swanwick

Chief Creative Officer

Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

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Dear Mr. Swanwick:

I don't believe your organization can help me after all. Seeing your list of goals made me realize that I don't want any of them. Not the fame, not the money, and certainly not the gala Hollywood parties. All I really want is to be able to write. It may not make sense to you, but if only I could write prolifically and be left alone, that would be enough for me. I wouldn't even have to be happy.

But I don't suppose that you, or anyone else for that matter, can provide a service that will do that.

Realistically,

Eileen Gunn

* * * *

Dear Ms. Gunn:

You underestimate us here at *Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia!* We are expertly qualified to analyze your situation and devise a satisfactory means of resolving all your emotional and psychological problems in a manner that will satisfy you. Now that we completely understand your situation, it is the simplest of

matters to devise a custom situation, based on a close reading of your letters and our long association with *litterateurs of all stripes*, which has given us enormous insight into the *writerly mentality*,

Thus it is that we are happy to offer you a low-paying position as a member of our *miserable and downtrodden writing staff.*

Sincerely,

Michael Swanwick

Chief Creative Officer

Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

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Dear Mr. Swanwick:

Do your employee benefits include snickerdoodles?

Hopefully,

Eileen Gunn