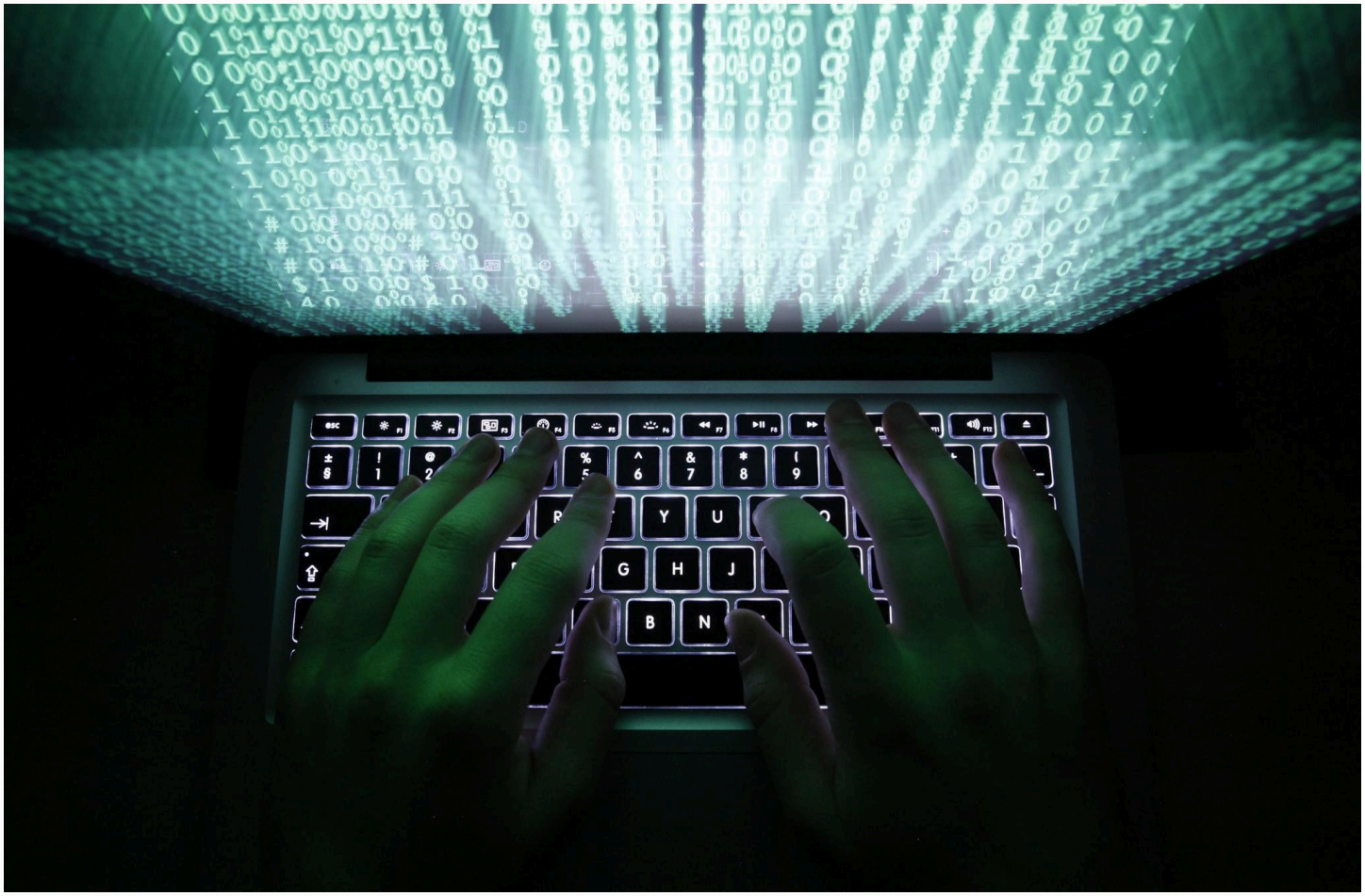
Chicago Tribune

David McGrath: Con men are always looking for a mark, as I found out the hard way



KACPER PEMPEL/REUTERS The old adage, if it looks too good to be true, it probably is, was proven true yet again, columnist David McGrath says. (KACPER PEMPEL/REUTERS)



By **David McGrath** | Special to the Tribune

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I have not been this excited about an email in years. I even marked it with one of those gold stars, which I've never done before.

It was from Graywolf Press, a superstar publisher in Minneapolis known for putting out books by Pulitzer Prize-winning authors like Percival Everett.

My heart started beating faster as I read what turned out to be a personal message from the company's editorial director, Ethan Nosowsky, that said he was contacting me with regard to my book "South Siders," a collection of columns that came out six years ago: "It came to my attention during an editorial review and stood out enough for me to reach out personally, something I do only occasionally."

My head was spinning: Did he want to publish another edition of "South Siders"?Was he keen to take on my next book? Could this mean a contract and one of those eye-popping advances I've read about? $50,000? $5 million?

Hold your horses. I wasn't born yesterday, and I know that when something looks too good to be true, it usually is. So I resisted the urge to run outside and share the news with my wife, who was weeding her plants out front.

Instead, I conducted some flashbang research on the company to determine whether everything was real.

And guess what: It all checked out, including the photo of the editor in the email's signature.

I immediately sent a reply to Nosowsky, disclosing that I had just completed a draft of my newest book and was halfway finished with a novel as well. To my surprise and burgeoning delight, he wrote this back: "Could you send me the manuscript, along with a brief description of the collection and its working title? I can take a look and let you know whether it may be a fit for Graywolf."

Writers know how big that is coming from a publishing house that normally does not accept or read unsolicited submissions or proposals from "unagented" authors. Things were happening fast, and not wanting to interrupt the rhythm, I worked feverishly the rest of the morning to put the draft of my book in a presentable form and emailed the attachment to Graywolf in the early afternoon.

The only thing left to do was wait for his reply. I paced back and forth in our house, eyeing the cracked window in our entryway and the worn furniture in our living room. Suddenly, we might be able to just chuck it all and buy a mansion in California's Sonoma Valley, like Jack London. Better yet, a house in Jamaica overlooking the Caribbean, like Ian Fleming.

Fifteen minutes later, I opened my laptop and my dream of Stephen King-like success went up in smoke. There, in my inbox, was an email from the editor claiming to have already evaluated my book. All 67,000 words.

It had a “strong foundation,” he wrote, but I needed to hire his script doctor to repair the shortcomings and make it acceptable for Graywolf.

Red flags galore: First, a legit publisher does not solicit funds from an author. Second, the generalities in his evaluation (“structure,” “pacing,” “focus”) could apply to any book under the sun. Third, the use of flattery to con a “mark” is as old as the hills, and I’m embarrassed I fell for it. And the kicker, which I only discovered after realizing it was a scam, was that while the photo and email address I had checked were correct for the real editor of Graywolf, a closer look revealed the email address my replies went to included a single, sneaky additional letter in the domain: graywolf.orrg instead of org.

No harm, no foul?

True enough, the con men did not get any of my money. They did, however, get my unpublished book, all 253 pages, and I immediately notified the real editor of Graywolf by deleting the extra r in the address.

He was kind enough to respond, confirming that the messages were fraudulent. He was sorry for any trouble it may have caused but didn’t think I had to worry about my book since they only seemed to want my money. He further explained that they’ve been trying but failing to catch the impostor for the longest time: “What happens is that we request a take-down order from the email

providers, they sometimes honor it, and then the scammers just slightly change the email address. It's maddening."

Graywolf isn't the only one. A recent story in The New York Times (www.nytimes.com/2026/09/25/books/filippo-bernardini-manuscript-thief-publishing-scam.html?searchResultPosition=1>) reported that the unpublished manuscripts of multiple authors have been similarly stolen and used to feed AI data bases, yet another AI abuse making the need for government regulation obvious. Others are stolen and listed on the dark web, where they might conceivably be plagiarized for movie and TV adaptations.

So, is there a ransom demand in my future?

The way I see it, I must race to get my book in print ahead of any potential counterfeit. As for the crook who kidnapped it, please have the decency to cast, say, a mature but debonaire Richard Gere or Pierce Brosnan as myself in the pirated film version.

Meanwhile, I'm off to Walmart to buy some kind of decorative stencil to hide that crack in our window.

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