

Getting the First Book Published

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These notes do not correspond exactly to the presentation I gave at the AJS Annual Meeting in December 2006, but they cover some of what I think are the major issues and reflect my experience in publishing *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860-1920* (NYU Press, 2005), a revision of my 2001 Rutgers University PhD thesis.

I. Picking a Topic for the Dissertation

Getting the first book published starts with picking a topic for your dissertation. Most academics' first books flow out of their dissertations in one form or another. Although obviously you have to pick something that you care about, that you believe in, that you can finish in an acceptable amount of time, and that will maintain your interest and enthusiasm over a protracted period of time, it is a good idea to think of the long term as well. Read conference programs in your field and recent "state of the field" publications to get a sense of where the scholarship is going. Think broadly about the larger implications of your work—you want to write about a topic that other people will care about and believe in and be interested in and enthused by. When tossing around ideas, speak not only to your advisor, professors, and fellow graduate students but also to non-academic friends and family. If their eyes glaze over when you tell them what you are thinking about—and if you can't immediately explain the topic's importance briefly, in ways educated people can relate to—then that might turn into a problem later for getting a manuscript accepted. There is absolutely nothing wrong with viewing a dissertation as a purely academic exercise that will make a contribution to and be appreciated by scholars in the field. However, if your long term goal is to bring your work to a broader audience, even a broader academic audience, you have to think even at the earliest stages about how to reach people who are not on your dissertation committee.

II. Writing Your Dissertation as a Book

Graduate mentors vary widely in their approach to writing a dissertation. The scholarly field will also play a role; in the social sciences, for example, the literature review is *de rigueur* despite the fact that it will never appear in a book in quite that form. Since the goal of a dissertation is to demonstrate your utter mastery over an original field of research, the convention is often that the more evidence the better. However, one of the best ways to get your first book published is to think of it from the inception as a book despite the specific demands of committee members and dissertation norms. Write with as little jargon as possible. Include as much evidence as you want or need to, but somewhere in the back of your head a little voice should remind you that you will inevitably cut out a lot of it at the book stage. Your committee may require very long dissertations, but be aware that your future publisher will probably pressure you to make the book as short as possible—and that your editor will be right when he/she says that no one will miss the 30,000 words you have to cut out even when you think you have turned the manuscript in for the last time (this happened to me!). Write with a clear beginning,

middle, and end and recognize that the introduction and the conclusion are often the most important parts of any book. You may rewrite them completely for the book, but working on them for the dissertation gives you the beginnings of a book proposal. Chapters should follow each other naturally, building on your central argument(s) rather than being self-contained. Provide some narrative threads for the reader to follow.

You have to balance the demands of your committee with your interest in writing the dissertation as a book, but there are certainly ways to do it. Read the first books of some of your favorite junior scholars—there are often clues in the text and notes about how they made the conversion. This is all also important because almost no press will even look at an unrevised dissertation, and editors don't want to hear about your dissertation. They want to hear about your proposed book, and you need to be able to talk to them about it that way. No matter how carefully you think you are writing your dissertation as a book, you will still need to revise it substantially. Be prepared.

III. Making Contacts

You should make presentations at the major conferences in your field. University press editors read conference programs to spot exciting new scholarship and may even contact you to ask if what you are presenting is part of a larger work such as a dissertation. It is their job to keep abreast of scholarly trends and predict what might attract a larger audience. If you are working on a "hot topic," you are automatically going to be more appealing to them as an author. This is what happened to me. I presented a paper at an Organization of American Historians conference and editors from four different presses contacted me afterward to find out what I was working on. The panel was broadly organized around "girl culture," which continues to be a hot topic. It was definitely to my advantage to present my Jewish-focused work at non-Jewish conference venues. Doing this makes you automatically look like someone whose work is situated within a broader framework.

While at the conferences, go to the book exhibits and introduce yourself to the editors who work in your field. If you can get a mentor who is already known to the editors to introduce you in person, that may make more of an impact, but there's nothing wrong with introducing yourself. Familiarize yourself with the press's publications in your area so you can make connections to your own work and present yourself as a potential author of interest to the editors, who appreciate being able to connect a face to a name. Without being obnoxious or obsequious, it is also a good idea to get to know the big names in your field. Hopefully, your dissertation committee members will help with this. Publishers often contact senior scholars in a given field to ask if they think a junior person's work is valuable or appealing, and if they already know who you are and know something about your work, they'll be able to give more valuable feedback.

IV. Promoting Yourself

No one cares about your success as much as you do, and you have to do the heavy lifting to ensure it. Every meeting, even casual, with a publisher or editor should be highly professional. When you correspond with a press, make sure that you proofread everything carefully and send it neat, professional-looking materials. Conventional wisdom is that it is worth buying fancier

paper for your correspondence and resumes and to take the extra time to type envelope labels rather than hand write them. You are selling yourself, not just your work, for better or for worse. Once a press has agreed to publish your book, make it clear that you are interested in promoting your book. If you have an idea for PR materials or for a potential audience, tell your editor and PR person about it. University presses do not have huge budgets but they often do have large catalogs. If you want someone to pay attention to you, you have to make that happen. If you can bring in a grant for subvention money, the press will be happy and you can make suggestions (not demands) about how at least some of that money is used—for a special brochure sent to a few mailing lists, for example. Research potential book awards and discuss them with the press. The PR or marketing person probably knows about them, but a polite reminder in the form of a list of potential awards with submission deadlines and rules never hurt anybody. We are all very fortunate to have a large Jewish book market. Call the programming directors at your local JCC, synagogues, Hillels, etc., and find out whether they might be interested in planning an event. Often they are very enthusiastic about working with local authors. You may not always get paid for these events, but you will almost certainly sell books.