

PUBLISHING THE FIRST BOOK: A CONVERSATION WITH ERIC ZINNER

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Courtesy of New York University Press.

One of the first projects facing new Ph.D.s in Jewish Studies is finding a publisher for a book emerging from dissertation research. Hoping to demystify the process for young scholars, AJS Perspectives turned to Eric Zinner, editorial director of New York University Press. Beginning his career at Routledge, Zinner has been at NYU Press for over eight years. His special interest is in literature, culture, media, American history, and American studies, including many Jewish studies projects, and just about “anything smart.” In conversation with Sara R. Horowitz, Zinner offers helpful advice to new and seasoned authors.

SRH: *What is the difference between a dissertation and a publishable book manuscript?*

EZ: Certain core components of a dissertation don’t belong in a book, for example, an exhaustive review of secondary literature. But there are also more subtle issues that distinguish most dissertations from a more polished book. Someone writing a dissertation is in the process of developing a facility and an expertise in a particular topic. More than that, the dissertation writer is discovering his or her own voice. When you read a dissertation that has not yet been revised for publication, it is usually easy to see what was written early on, and what was written as the dissertation neared completion—this, despite the fact that often the chapters were not written in the order in which they appear. In revising a dissertation, most scholars find they need to jettison their earliest work.

Would you suggest that young scholars work on at least some preliminary revisions before submitting their dissertation to publishers, or that they submit the dissertation as is, and await some guidelines for revision?

Generally speaking, it is a mistake to submit a manuscript prematurely. With the exception of a few hot shots, no one is well served by sending out a raw dissertation. There is almost always a significant time gap between the writing of a dissertation and the publication of a book.

What advice can you give to someone looking to revise a dissertation?

In a dissertation, I look first for the core of a future book. For example, a historical exploration of a narrow period might raise an intriguing issue that should be explored more broadly; revision gives scholars an opportunity to amplify their dissertation around such themes. Turn to your mentors to aid in opening up your dissertation. Obviously the quality of the writing is also paramount. For scholarly books, writing is not the final determinative factor—outside readers evaluate scholarship—but felicitous prose helps a lot.

I would strongly advise new scholars to have an awareness of the academic publishing market before sending off the manuscript. Of late, more dissertations emerge ready to be published as books. In part, this is because their advisors are more publishing savvy. They recognize the immense pressures on new scholars to publish early. There is, of course, some

danger in writing a dissertation with an eye to book publication. Pure scholarly needs should not be abandoned for market considerations. Most frequently, however, dissertations are not so much book-ready, as centered on topics that lend themselves nicely to book manuscripts. But there is still substantial work to be done in order to shape the dissertation into a publishable book. And the whole question of voice needs to be revisited and reworked.

Should scholars wait until they have completed the revisions before submitting anything?

No, I don’t think so. I would suggest writing a proposal letter—a letter of inquiry that sets out what you hope the project will be when finalized. Write an engaging letter that shows clear thinking. When you write a letter of inquiry, it is important to explain why you’ve selected that particular press. Keep in mind that an acquisitions editor looks at hundreds of manuscripts. Some of those manuscripts are a good fit with the press, and some are not. Scholars submitting a proposal to the press should be clear that they know what the press has published in their area. They might name specific book titles that made them turn to this press. If you are submitting a sample chapter, select it wisely. Your writing should be able to draw in readers, to engage a broader audience. It might be useful to consult books on getting published. One good choice is *Getting it Published* (2001) by William Germano, a long-time editor.

How can an author know which presses are most appropriate?

It is not difficult to find out which editors are interested in what kinds of projects. Just look at your own bookshelf. Your book will fit in with the books that you’ve bought for your own interests. Use the web to see where the people doing good work in your field have published. The Association of American University Presses, our umbrella organization, publishes a

guidebook to member presses, including who's who and areas of interest of presses and editors (aaupnet.org). Another good resource is the *Literary Marketplace* (LMP), which lists and details all domestic publishers (www.literartmarketplace.com).

Is it acceptable to write to several publishers at once, or should one submit to one press at a time, and wait for a response before writing to another press?

Each press has its own standards regarding multiple submissions. I think it is fine to write to several publishers at once, especially given the pressure on untenured scholars to publish early. The key is transparency. Let the presses know what you are doing by indicating it in your letter of inquiry. I am not prejudiced against a scholar who lets me know that he or she has submitted a proposal to two or three presses. But I become less interested if I get the sense that the proposal has gone out to the universe, because this tells me that the writer doesn't have strong ideas about where to go with it.

Would it be useful to use the services of an agent to get a first book published?

Editors of academic presses deal with agents, but we are primarily in direct contact with authors. It is certainly not necessary to go through an agent, and it is rare for a first book to come through an agent.

Are personal referrals important?

They can be useful. Keep in mind the sheer volume of material editors receive. We look for shortcuts that will help us identify the manuscripts we want to publish. If a published author of the press referred you, say so. If a manuscript has been recommended by someone we know, we take note of it differently than when something arrives from someone we've never heard of. Be creative—if you have stellar comments from important dissertation committee members, use them.

What about e-mail submissions?

I prefer hard copy submissions to e-

mail, especially if unsolicited. Use university letterhead; where an author is writing from enters into an editor's first impression. Of course, a really good project will get noticed no matter where its author is based. Once initial contact has been made, further correspondence is often through e-mail.

What else can young scholars do to get a press interested in publishing their book project?

Don't be shy. Many scholars are not good self-promoters. But to get your book published—and this does not apply only to a first book—you have to promote your work. People need to be aggressive to position their work. Quote from favorable comments made by people who have read your manuscript. In the case of published authors, it is a good idea to quote from reviews of previous books.

What about personal contact with acquisition editors?

Very useful. The primary way to do that is to use academic conferences to meet editors. That's why we go. It's a big part of the business that goes on at learned society meetings. Set up meetings with editors in advance of the conference. Learned societies help their members by letting them know in advance which presses will have a presence. Write to editors whose presses interest you. It is better to have an appointment than to show up at a press's booth and hope to catch an editor. I will have those impromptu conversations at conventions, but they are not the most useful.

Once a press has agreed to consider a book project, what should a scholar expect to happen?

The general timetable would be something like this: within four weeks of submitting a proposal, expect some kind of response. If a full or partial manuscript is sent to readers for review, we aim to receive their reports within two months. It is at this stage, however, where timing can break down, because some readers take more time. This is

why multiple submissions make sense, so a proposal is not held up for too long at one press. When a press only accepts solo submissions, an author has the right to expect a speedy response.

What happens next depends on the readers' reports. They may raise fundamental scholarly or audience issues that indicate that the project is not for the press. They may be generally supportive but with suggestions for further development. The author will be asked to respond to the reports. He or she can accept the suggestions or refute them. If the readers' reports applaud the core of the project, the editor would take the proposal to the editorial committee together with the author's response. Or, if the reports raise too many issues, but ones that the editor believes the author can address, the author might be asked to revise and resubmit the project.

When a manuscript is accepted, what should the author expect during the editing process?

The acquiring editor will review the project first, sometimes weighing in heavily, sometimes with only a few spare comments. Copyeditors will do true line editing, addressing structural issues, grammar, word choices, proofing, check for consistency of notation, see that there are no floating references, etc. The quality of writing and overall readability will be improved. If the book is intended for a general audience, the involvement of the acquiring editor will tend to be more extensive.

In the happy event that a scholar is offered a book contract, is there much room for negotiating the terms?

Publishers have a fairly set idea of the terms of the contract, but there is certainly no harm in trying to negotiate. If more than one press is interested, the author can be in a good bargaining position.

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