

## [Guest Post: Publishing with a Trade Press to Reach a Wider Audience](#)

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By [Erin Thompson](#)

I took a circuitous path to my professorship. Midway through my dissertation, on ancient Greek painted vases, I realized not only was I utterly sick of the subject, but chances were I probably wouldn't get a job as an art historian. I was interested in the looting and smuggling of antiquities, so I went to law school and thought I'd be a lawyer. I defended my dissertation my first semester and have pretty much never looked at it again. After I graduated, I worked as a lawyer for a few years, until I saw the posting for my current position. They wanted someone with a PhD and a JD to teach art crime...bingo! So I went back to the ivory tower and started thinking about what I wanted my first book to be about.

I knew I didn't want to write about my dissertation topic, which had come to seem very narrow. I wanted to write a book that people outside of my sub-field might want to read. Maybe most importantly, I wanted a topic that wouldn't require much travel, since I knew I would be starting a family. (I ended up doing most of the research while pregnant. I would email a list of call numbers to a grad student I hired just to gather books from the library shelves and have them waiting for me once I could no longer bend down. Best money I've ever spent!)

Early on during my research, I gave a paper at a conference. Afterwards [Adrienne Mayor](#) came up to me and asked if the paper was part of a larger book project. I said yes, and Adrienne offered to put me in touch with her agent, whom she has worked with for a number of her books with big audiences among both scholars and the general public, including [The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World](#) and [Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology](#), both from Princeton University Press.

So that's how I ended up with my agent, [Sandra Dijkstra](#). It was an incredible piece of luck. But you can try to make it happen on your own if you figure out if someone who knows and likes your writing has an agent (check the acknowledgements pages of their books), and, if so, ask for an introduction.

I'd been interested in doing public scholarship for a long time. In grad school, I started giving short, funny talks about interesting areas of my field. I'd also gone through an [Op Ed Project](#) training, which I highly recommend, to learn how to pitch and write opinion pieces. By the time I started talking to my agent, I had a couple of published op-eds, including one in the New York Times, about a paragraph-long summary of my still very fuzzy book idea. Fortunately, that was good enough for her to start working with me on how to write a book proposal.

My agent explained how to write a book proposal and was very patient with me, but I wish I had come across the very helpful [Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction and Get It Published](#) by Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato earlier—it has all the steps for writing a

great proposal.

When I was done with the book proposal, my agent sent it to a variety of potential publishers, both academic and trade. You don't need an agent to submit a manuscript to a university press, but one very wonderful thing about working with an agent is that they have the power to set a deadline for a response. Within a few weeks, we knew which presses were interested. My agent started to negotiate with them, and I scheduled an appointment with my provost. I asked whether publishing with a trade press would hurt my tenure case, and the provost said, given the reputation of the presses I was considering, I would be fine. It's true that my college values public outreach. But I did later hear from a colleague at my college that his chair (in a department in the sciences) had told him that publishing a "popular" book would not count at all for tenure.

Still, I don't think the attitude of people at your department or institution toward trade presses in general should be the determining factor in where you choose to publish. What's under consideration isn't books in general, but your book. If you're able to write about your own research in your tenure file, you can detail the original, scholarly research that went into the book, to help your reviewers see it as a work of original research instead of, say, simplifying other people's research for a casual reader.

Ultimately, I published with Yale University Press, but in a special division meant to sell books to a general audience. To me, it was the best of both worlds—although I was surprised how little peer review there was. Once I was done with the manuscript, it went to an anonymous reader, chosen by the press, who didn't have any substantive comments. Yale did do a great job getting review copies out, which led to, e.g., reviews in the Wall Street Journal and to being named one of NPR's Best Books of 2016 (at which point I had to finally donate to my local NPR station, ha). But in retrospect, I think I depended too much on Yale, and I wish I had done more publicity on my own. It's surprising what success you'll have if just start contacting podcasts or speaker series and asking them to have you on!

My book has ended up being used in the ways I hoped. My two favorite things to hear are "it's on my syllabus" and "my mom read it on vacation." I wanted to write it so people would read it because it's about an important issue—changing the way we collect antiquities to stop the destruction of the past—that we all need to work together to fix. Classicists can't do it by ourselves. We need a wide audience for these issues. So I wrote the book with plenty of stories and colorful characters, so people could get into them while also thinking about the more theoretical, broader issues. My book is like a dry scholarly monograph, plumped up and made delicious with the addition of stories.

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