

QUESTION:

I am interested in your writing process, and want to know how much planning you do before you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard? Have you planned the whole book? How detailed are the plans for each chapter or do you just work with a thesis for each chapter? I am speaking of the process you go through for a trade book. I assume the process for the scholarly book is a bit different, but if so, how so?

RESPONSE:

I get asked this question every now and then, and think that maybe I'll devote a few posts to trying to answer it. I will focus my response to the question specifically of how I go about writing trade books. Writing scholarly monographs is a different kettle of fish, and more people are interested, I think, in the books for general audiences, since these are the ones that get read the most. So how do I go about writing a trade book?

As a preliminary I should say that I am on a two-year cycle for trade books - that is, I have agreed with my publisher, HarperOne, that I will produce one approximately every two years. It normally takes 8-12 months (usually 12) for a book to be produced and published from the time that the very final version leaves the author's hands and into the publisher's. So if I plan on publishing a book in Spring 2016, as I am, then I need to have the thing written, completely and utterly written with no revisions left to make, by Spring 2015. If there is a crunch on my time, and the publisher is willing to speed up the process on their end (putting other books back in the queue) then early Fall might on occasion be an option.

In my case, I am always imagining and thinking about several trade books at once, and have them lined up in my head in the sequence in which I want to write them, so that when I start work on a book seriously it is not the first time I've thought about it. I've been ruminating about it for a long time, usually years. This helps speed things along significantly.

The basic sequence of producing a book involves the following steps:

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1. Doing basic research/reading/and outlining
2. Writing a prospectus for the publisher
3. Reading massively
4. Outlining the book
5. Writing it
6. Revising it

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