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A Commentary on Academic Publishing: Insider Tips

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Abstract

Patricia Leavy, Ph.D. is a leading qualitative researcher, best-selling author, and the creator and editor for seven book series. On the release of her 20th book, *American Circumstance: Anniversary Edition*, the prolific author offers TQR readers this commentary on academic publishing.

Keywords

Publishing, Writing, Book Contracts, Academic Publishing, Career

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A Commentary on Academic Publishing: Insider Tips

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Patricia Leavy, Ph.D. is a leading qualitative researcher, best-selling author, and the creator and editor for seven book series. On the release of her 20th book, [American Circumstance: Anniversary Edition](#), the prolific author offers TQR readers this commentary on academic publishing. Keywords: Publishing, Writing, Book Contracts, Academic Publishing, Career

People regularly email me seeking publishing advice. I've done interviews over the years in which I have offered advice and those can be searched for online. Time doesn't permit me to offer individual advice to everyone who asks or to write extensively on this topic. However, as I prepared to release my 20th book, which is simultaneously the 20th title released in the *Social Fictions* series I created and edit for Sense Publishers, I wanted to take the time to give back to my community. I created a post on Facebook asking friends what they most want to know. I received over 100 Facebook comments and emails within 24 hours. It would take a book to respond to all of those topics! I have selected a few for these brief remarks.

Finding a Publisher

How do you find the right publisher? I publish with academic presses so that's my focus. (If you are publishing a trade book intended for a commercial audience you will need a literary agent. This can be a long and difficult process and you need to find the right person. There are books printed annually that list literary agents, their areas of specialization and how to contact them. There also books and online blogs available about how to write a killer query letter, without which it is impossible to attract the attention of a literary agent.) Finding the right academic publisher requires research. Visit the book exhibit at conferences you attend. Go to various booths, looking for books in your subject area. You can also look on your own bookshelf to see who published other books in your field. Finally, do online searches. Academic presses typically have submission guidelines on their website. It is important to take great care in writing your book proposal. Without a strong proposal, you won't get any further in the process. My biggest tip based on my experience as both an author and series editor is to include a robust section on the market, including a detailed review of competing titles (title, author/editor, publisher, year of publication, how your proposed title differs). Authors are often so eager to claim their book is so unique and "one-of-a-kind" that they neglect to do this. However, from a publisher's perspective they need to see there is already an existing market for your proposed book and they need to know who the competition is. As you conducted research and sought feedback to write your manuscript, so too you should conduct research and seek feedback on your book proposal. Don't rush. Also, if you're asked about the potential readership for your book avoid responses like, "Anyone interested in X" or "All students, graduates students and researchers interested in X." That's way too vague and ambitious. Publishers need potential audiences they can identify and reach. Finally, follow instructions. Many authors shoot themselves in the foot by failing to do so. If the publisher has asked for the first ten pages, send precisely that. If you can't follow simple instructions, editors won't want to work with you. The requirements in the beginning are not just about your book, they're also about gauging what it would be like to work with you. Follow instructions.

Contracts

I am not an intellectual property lawyer so I don't feel comfortable offering specific advice on book contracts; however, I will point out a few things that have been important to me over the years.

- You should understand everything that is in your contract. No excuses. Don't sign something you don't understand.
- Personally, I have publishers remove clauses that require me to offer them my next book (often called "the right of first refusal"). No matter how excited you are to receive a book contract, the fact is you have no idea what the process with the publisher will be like and whether or not you'll be satisfied with the outcome. Furthermore, they may be well suited to the subject matter you are currently writing about but not suited as well for the topic of your next project. Having worked with more than half a dozen publishers I can say with certainty that my career and earning potential would have stalled more than once had I been obligated to take my next project to a particular publisher.
- Because I publish a lot, and I work with multiple publishers, I'm always concerned with the non-competes in my contracts (which can prevent, to various degrees your ability to publish other works on the same topic). There are always non-competes (and rightfully so) but it's vital to understand the expectations surrounding the non-compete in your contract. If you have concerns about particular forthcoming projects discuss them with your editor before signing your contract so that you're all on the same page.
- If your book requires an index, the contract states whether you or the publisher is responsible for paying for the index.
- Consider whether or not you need a permissions budget. If there are images, graphs, or excerpts from music or books that you want to reprint, there may be fees associated with those. If you do not have a permissions budget in your contract you are responsible for those payments.
- There is a difference between an advance and an outright grant (which is like a signing bonus that is not attached to future earnings). Typically, academic publishers only pay advances and grants for textbooks. If you are writing a bona fide textbook, in addition to royalties, you can negotiate for an advance and grant.
- If you have an attorney review your contract make sure they understand it is for an *academic* book not a trade book, because those contracts usually carry very different terms. An attorney's job is to flag all of the major points in your contract and to offer alternative terms and language. However, that does not mean you need to present all of those issues to the publisher (I rarely do). You need to sift through these comments to determine what is important to you.
- Ask questions. Ask as many questions as you need to (editors are used to this). There may be issues that are important to you that are not covered in a standard book contract that you want to discuss before entering a legal agreement. For example, if you are concerned about the price point of your book you should discuss that prior to signing a contract (you should also do your homework and look at other books on the topic by your publisher and how they have been priced).
- Negotiate. You do not need to sign a first offer. The negotiation process can be long and involve a great deal of back-and-forth until you have established relationships with your publishers, especially for larger projects like textbooks and handbooks. Don't rush the process and sign a contract that you'll be unhappy with later. Always bet on yourself and have faith in your worth.

Dissertations

If you are trying to turn your thesis or dissertation into a book I have a couple suggestions:

- Put it in a drawer for at least a few months. You need to be able to look at it more objectively, with fresh eyes.
- You may be confronted with the common challenge that many publishers do not want to publish dissertations. However, if you understand the reason why you can revise your manuscript and write a proposal accordingly. Nobody wants to read a book that is written like a dissertation. That's the simple truth. All of the endless citations and lengthy block excerpts used in most dissertations need to be eliminated and rewritten, so that your manuscript reads like a book and not a school assignment.

Marketing and Selling

It's important to have realistic expectations. The simple fact is that most academic books don't sell more than a couple hundred copies. Books by new and unknown authors are also less likely to sell significantly. You build a reputation over time. I've come across authors who think their first book is going to be a *New York Times* bestseller and NPR will be calling, arranged by their publisher. While there's no harm in aiming high and dreaming big, it's also important to be realistic. You can ask your publisher questions about their sales expectations, and the first print run for your book (how many copies they plan to print, which is an indicator of their sales expectations). Note that textbooks are the exception to the typical low sales of academic titles. If you're really trying to earn income as an academic author, consider textbook writing in your area.

It's also important to understand that authors are typically in the best position to market their own books. Publishers will not do it all for you. There are three phases in the life of a book that authors can be directly involved with: creation, production and promotion. Oftentimes authors are willing to spend years on the creation of their book, and extensive time during the production period on copyedits, revisions, and haggling over things like cover images. However, once the book comes out authors often think their job is done. If you want a shot of selling your book, you need to actively be involved in promoting it which can be as significant an investment of your time as writing the book was. Those academic books that ultimately do well, usually gain legs in their second and third years, so the process takes some time. Some things that you can do to help include:

- Developing a presence on social media (which you can begin prior to your book's release) and promoting your book regularly
- Speaking about your book at conferences, including the teaching potential of your book (always let your publisher know what conferences you will be speaking at in advance to see if there is an opportunity for them to display or advertise your book, or at a minimum provide you with flyers)
- Sending announcements to your professional network and relevant listservs
- Contact local bookstores and universities about readings (always arrange a book sale and signing as a part of these events)
- Contact local media (news/radio/blogs)-- to do this effectively think about what themes in your book might be of interest to a general readership and be prepared to talk broadly about your book; if your topic can be linked to the anniversary of an event or holiday, seek media exposure around that time each year (tip: media plan anniversary/holiday

stories in advance so don't wait until the last minute); create and send press releases for your book (there are online services with both free and paid options, such as Newswire); be prepared to talk to media at any level (no newspaper is too small-- you can get bigger media opportunities by faithfully pursuing small ones. For example, over many years I was quoted in hundreds of minor newspaper stories, one of which led to an invitation on CNN, which then led to other opportunities); understand that media coverage does not necessarily correlate with increased sales; however, the more you brand yourself as an expert in your area, the more likely your book is to be successful over time

Tenacity

What I've learned more than anything else is that there will be many obstacles along the way. It's inevitable. You are always confronted with challenges. Rejections, rejections, rejections. I choose to look at these as a gift from the universe saving me from the wrong publishing relationship. Experience shows me this is true. I've had my heart broken numerous times only to end up in a better place. Don't get discouraged by the rejections. Keep sending your work out. It doesn't do you any good sitting in a drawer. Once you do have a publisher there are a million other things that can go wrong. Editors you have a relationship with leave your publishing house and you need to start from scratch and build a relationship with a new editor who may not be thrilled they got "stuck" with your book. Tip: there's a high turnover rate in publishing so pick a press because you like the business as a whole, not simply because you have a nice relationship with one editor. Publishers cancel contracts. Creative decisions regarding the formatting and cover art for your book don't meet your expectations. You're dissatisfied with how your book is marketed (I hear this time and again from frustrated colleagues. Again, you need to be actively involved in your own marketing. Publishers do a limited amount). Try to take these things in stride and learn for the next project.

Building a Career

If you want to build a career as an academic author, there are a few things that have helped me. First of all, develop a relationship with your work that isn't dependent on anything external (validation from peers, sales). Having your own relationship with your work will help you weather the storms. It is vital to be able to take in critique prior to publication (good editors and reviewers will red pen your entire MS, and you'll be grateful for it because it will make your work stronger). However, once your work is published make peace with it. How other people feel about it really isn't any of your business. Second, develop good relationships with your publishers (mainly your editor is your go-to person and advocate). Be someone they want to work with and support. To do this, demonstrate that you are a good publishing partner. Show your editor and everyone on your team that you are willing to learn from them, and that you are also willing to go the extra mile, for example by taking an active role in marketing your book. Always operate with integrity and in the spirit of full disclosure, let your publishers know when you are sending simultaneous submissions. Editors have a lot of books and a lot of discretion about which ones to promote more aggressively. Never underestimate the importance of the relationship you build with your editor. In my experience it makes an enormous difference in the success of a book as well as your future opportunities. Third, think creatively about your work. When I wrote my first novel [*Low-Fat Love*](#) nobody wanted to publish it. As a means of problem-solving I developed a book series in which the novel could be placed. In other words, I created something bigger than my own work. This turned out to be vital not just for publishing my book but for allowing me to build a career and earn a living as an author and editor. We often hear that singers who write their own material or actors who

create their own material have the best careers. Authors who can create spaces beyond their own work, such as book series or magazines, are well positioned to build robust careers too. For example, consider best-selling author Lee Gutkind who has not only written extensively about creative nonfiction but has also founded a magazine by that name. Finally, develop a support team, such as a local writing group or regular writing buddy. My weekly writing buddy helps my craft and my soul. It's important to have a safe space to test out ideas and garner empathetic critique.

Author Note

[Patricia Leavy](#), Ph.D. is an independent scholar (formerly Associate Professor of Sociology, Chair of Sociology & Criminology and Founding Director of Gender Studies at Stonehill College). She is widely considered an international leader in the fields of arts-based research and qualitative inquiry. Her twenty published books include [Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice](#) (first and second editions), [The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research](#), [Fiction as Research Practice](#), [Essentials of Transdisciplinary Research](#) and the best-selling novels [Low-Fat Love](#) (first and second editions), [American Circumstance](#) (first and second editions) and [Blue](#). She is series creator and editor for seven book series with Oxford University Press and Sense Publishers, including the ground-breaking [Social Fictions](#) series. Known for her commitment to public scholarship, she is frequently called on by the US national news media and has regular blogs for [The Huffington Post](#), [The Creativity Post](#) and [We Are the Real Deal](#). For her work advancing arts-based research she has received numerous awards including the New England Sociological Association 2010 New England Sociologist of the Year Award, the American Creativity Association 2014 Special Achievement Award, the American Educational Research Association Qualitative SIG 2015 Egon Guba Memorial Keynote Lecture Award, and the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry 2015 Special Career Award. Patricia's new book, a research-informed novel, [American Circumstance](#) is available now. You can learn more about the Social Fictions series here: <https://www.sensepublishers.com/catalogs/bookseries/social-fictions-series/> Please visit www.patricialeavy.com for more information.

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