**From Dissertation to Book - Philip Laughlin**

PHILIP LAUGHLIN: Thank you.

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And I'm happy to say we did not overlap at all in our content. We're safe.

First of all I'd just like to start off by thanking Amy Brand, the former Cognitive Science Editor at MIT Press for inviting me to speak at the Harvard Club today. I'm confident this will be the only time in my life that someone asks me to speak at an Ivy League institution, so I'm particularly grateful that today's proceedings are being videotaped and posted on the web. I'm looking forward to sending URL to my incredulous friends.

In addition to giving me my 15 minutes of internet fame, I'm happy to be here because preparing this talk was an educational experience for me. I have to confess that although I've been in my current position for about 15 months, I had never even seen, let alone read the MIT Press submission guidelines for book proposals until Amy had sent them to me about three days ago. It turns out it's an extremely useful document, definitely more thorough and professional than what I have been giving authors, so I strongly encourage everyone here to refer to it when you begin approaching publishers. I think the advice contained in it is universal enough that you could follow these guidelines for just about any academic publisher, not just MIT Press.

As useful as these proposal guidelines are though, they don't give you a sense of the process that I go through when trying to decide what to publish. It's sort of the difference between reading a recipe and cooking a meal, so I'd like to supplement these guidelines you have with some background information that you might find useful.

The first point that I'd like to emphasize to any aspiring author is one that I'm sure that we can all sympathize with. And that is, yours is not the only email that I received today. Like most of you, I'm drowning in e-mail. I receive about 1,000 work-related emails every month, and the vast majority of them are about dozens of book projects that are already under contract and being written, recently completed and need to go into production, and currently in production and need to be ready for the next catalog season.

And at any given time, some percentage of these projects, hopefully a small percentage, are in crisis mode. Sometimes I'm involved in a very delicate contract negotiation with some big name author. Sometimes a manuscript has to be rushed into production immediately to meet some important deadline. And sometimes an author is irate about a copy editing, typesetting, or a cover design job. That one doesn't happen too often, but it does happen occasionally, it and needs to be addressed quickly.

So, a significant chunk of my attention and energy is already monopolized by authors who submitted book proposals to me at least a year or two ago. I don't say this to discourage anyone from contacting me. But I do want to make it clear that, on a typical day I'm not just sitting on my hands hoping that someone sends me a book proposal to look at. I usually have a pretty full plate already.

The second point that I'd like to emphasize is I already received far more book proposals than I could ever hope to publish. Buried somewhere in those 1,000 work emails I received every month, are about 20 to 30 queries from potential authors who are interested in seeing their books published by MIT Press. So during any calendar year, I'm likely to receive somewhere in the neighborhood of 250 to 350 book proposal submissions. Essentially what this means is that, even if I apply the most rigorous standards for acceptance and rejected 90% of what I received, I would still have enough book projects to meet my signing goals and to keep MIT'S production department busy. And in case you're wondering, an acquisitions editor should be publishing between 20 and 40 new books per year, depending on what field you work in.

So I'd like to emphasize that no matter who you are, or where you got your PhD, or how good your ideas are, if you submit something to me at MIT Press, there's a very good chance that you will receive a polite rejection letter from my assistant. Please don't take it personally. The problem isn't necessarily with you, the problem is really the system that we all operate in. I believe academics refer to it as a social dilemma. This embarrassment of riches that I sift through every month definitely has an influence in how I respond to authors and their book proposals.

So a third point I'd like to emphasize today is, there are entire catalogs-- or entire categories of books that I frequently reject out of hand. For example, English language translations. For whatever reason, whether it's the subject areas I've worked in or the publishers I've worked at, English language translations don't seem to do very well. And when I say work very well, I am speaking in the crudest possible way about copies sold and revenue generated. I wouldn't go so far as to say that I would never publish a book translated into English from a foreign language, but it's pretty unlikely that I'll be interested in them.

Anthologies of previously published material is another category I'm wary of. MIT Press used to publish anthologies very successfully in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of those anthologies are still in print and continue to sell steadily, but we've seen a pretty dramatic decline in the sales of new anthologies over the past decade. So I'm not quite so eager to publish in this book category anymore.

In philosophy, the edited conference volume is very difficult sell these days, and I've passed on quite a few of them in the past year.

And finally, the humble festschrift, the edited book in honor of an esteemed professor, is something that we'll do occasionally, if the right people are involved and it fits our list, but for the most part, I try not to make a habit of it.

I realize I'm starting to sound like a broken record here, but without wishing to be negative or discouraging, I would also include the revised doctoral dissertation on this list. I don't think there's any publisher anywhere in the world that is currently plotting to corner the market on revised doctoral dissertations. I'm not sure exactly how many dissertations are written in the US every year, but I'm pretty confident that only a tiny percentage of them are worth publishing. And the ones that are worth publishing, generally have very modest sales potentials. And by modest, I mean a few hundred copies, so the potential return on investment is pretty low. To put it in stark, realistic terms, even if your revised dissertation merits publication, we're still kind of doing you a favor by publishing it, not the other way around.

However, I will confess that I've recently broken my own self-imposed rule in four of the five categories that I've just listed. Within the past year I've signed up an anthology of previously published material, and within the past month alone, I've signed up an edited conference volume by a philosopher, a festschrift for a philosopher, and a revised doctoral dissertation from a philosopher. Furthermore, it's quite possible that in the spring of next year I'll sign up another revised doctoral dissertation from a political theorist. So it is possible to get a book published by a respected University Press, even if it falls into one of these less desirable categories.

What did these authors do to beat the odds? I'll focus on the two doctoral dissertations since that's the purpose of today's gathering. In the first example, the philosopher who I've already signed up did something very simple, he shamelessly used his connections. He became friendly with a series editor of ours and asked her for help in crafting his proposal and submitting it to us. This was a very clever strategy because, if I didn't want the book, I would have to reject two people, not just one. And the second person would have to be a senior faculty member who had previously published a book with us and is a pipeline for future book projects. So even if I really wanted to reject this project, I would have been forced to come up with a very compelling reason to do so and communicate that in a very delicate way.

And the second example, the political theorist who has not yet signed up. I had actually approached her last spring to review a manuscript for me, which she did a great job on, by the way. A couple of months later, she contacted me and asked if I was interested in reviewing her award-winning dissertation, and in seeing if it would be of interest to MIT Press. The fact that this person had written a very constructive review for me in a timely manner put her in a positive light already, so I was a bit more receptive to her proposal than perhaps I would have been otherwise. But what really got me interested in the project was that it had a unique interdisciplinary thesis that I had not seen anywhere else-- attempting to merge empirical psychology with political theory. Plus she clearly knew the MIT backlist very well, and could articulate how her book would fit into our overall publishing strategy. So she had clearly done her homework and presented herself in a way that made me take her seriously.

In both of these instances the authors had a tentative connection to the press that they were able to exploit-- one through a series editor, one by acting as a reviewer. Because of these connections, I probably gave these authors a little bit more of my time and attention than they normally would have. And by a little more of my time I mean, gave their emails a couple of minutes rather than a couple of seconds. Of course, if the proposals they had submitted to me had been poorly conceived or uninteresting, the conversation probably would have stopped there. But the fact that they were also able to deliver that they were able to deliver well-crafted proposals that were able to withstand the peer review process was what really sealed the deal.

But what if you don't have an in with the publisher? What can you do to improve your chances of being taken seriously? The first thing I would suggest any aspiring author is do your homework. And I've always wanted to say that to a roomful of professors, do your homework. Don't just start sending queries out to any random publisher. Spend 30 or 40 minutes on Amazon looking for the three or four most relevant publishers for your work and focus on them.

By relevant publishers, I mean publishers that consistently produce books on your subject area to this day. If the last book that a publisher produced on a particular topic was over 10 years ago, that's usually a sign that they pulled out of that area and aren't looking for new projects. Maybe 10, 15, 20 years ago one could be acceptably ignorant on this point, but today there's really no excuse for the author who sends his manuscript on pre-socratic philosophy to the MIT Press, which actually happened to me recently.

Second, when making an initial approach to a publisher, keep it brief. Really, I only need three or four sentences to determine whether or not I'm interested in seeing something, not three or four paragraphs, not three or four pages, certainly not three or four chapters. Three or four sentences are fine. If I want to see more material from you, I'm perfectly capable of asking for it.

What you want to avoid at all costs is this, is my lone, low tech visual aid. This is an actual book proposal that was sent to me about a month ago from an author. The very first email that he sent me. And as you can see it is six pages of single-spaced material, full of all the jargon that Elizabeth was railing against a few moments ago. Plus another 20 pages in attachments. Unless this is a love letter written to me by Gisele Bundchen, I'm not going to read this. I think I spent about 30 seconds perusing it, and then I forwarded it to my assistant to. reject. So, don't be this guy. Really, there's absolutely no need to send that much material in an initial email.

Third, if I do respond to your initial query and ask to see more material, you will really help your case if the material you submit follows APA style or Chicago Manual Style. If I have to make formatting changes to read what I've sent, that's not a good starting position for you. There is absolutely nothing wrong with double-spaced, New York Times Roman font at 12 points. And it will greatly increase the likelihood that I will spend a few minutes, rather than a few seconds on your project. This seems like a very simple thing to do, but you'd be surprised how many authors get tripped up on this small detail.

Fourth, if you think your submission is-- if I think your submission is interesting and worth considering, I'll send it out to three or four external reviewers to look at. When choosing a reviewer, I'm not looking for your arch nemesis or someone who wants to make your life miserable, but it just so happens that reviewers can be harsh and a little nasty sometimes. So when you respond to reviewer reports, it's best to stay above the fray. Don't get petty and personal in your response. Try to separate the substantive criticisms from the personal ones, and respond to those. When I present projects at are publishing committee meetings, my colleagues definitely reward mature adult behavior. So, an author who responds to reviewer feedback in a constructive way, not a defensive way, is more likely to be approved.

And finally, after all this, if we do get to the stage where I send you a contract for your revised dissertation, I do have one piece of advice for you on negotiating-- don't do it. Standard contracts don't vary much from publisher to publisher. And unless there is language in the contract about waiving constitutional rights or giving up a firstborn child, just sign it and send it back. Getting your first book published by a reputable press is more important than haggling over electronic royalties. Save it for contract number two.

Thanks for listening.

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