**From Dissertation to Book - Erez Manela**

SPEAKER 1: Now we are going to move on to our responses from a couple of distinguished professors at Harvard. First is Erez Manela, Professor of History. And then Peter Der Manuelian, the Philip J. King Professor of Egyptology will follow. And then we'll take your questions.

EREZ MANELA: Well, thanks to the organizers for inviting me to do this, and thank you all for being here. I think the perspective that I can offer will be very different from that that you just heard from the editors because I don't have their experience in receiving manuscripts and don't generally have the vastness of their experience in the publishing world. What I can say is based on my own experience, having published my dissertation book in 2007, having some other dealings with publishers over other projects, and speaking to colleagues and friends about their own experiences.

And the one thing that has struck me with that experience is how diverse and how different these experiences can be across disciplines, across fields within a discipline, and among different presses. So for example, to give an example with the divergence between disciplines, I don't know much about linguistics but my impression of monographs in linguistics that I have seen is that they tend to be full of specialist jargon. They tend to speak to a very narrow audience.

And yet, at least those that I've seen obviously got published. I don't know, of course, how many got rejected. But it seems at least within that discipline, the norms of monograph publications do call for that type of format. Now on the other hand, within the field of history, which is my own field, I have seen people publish their first books, their dissertation books, with trade publishers. And in fact, I have seen one of my own colleagues win the Pulitzer Prize for their first book based on their dissertation.

It's not common. I wouldn't expect it, but it does, it does happen. And in fact, within the fields in history that I am most closely associated with, that is, Modern American history, Cold War history, international relations, I think there is quite a good chunk of first books that get published with trade presses, with Random House, with Blackwell, several others that I could name if I gave it a few minutes of thought. But it's not that rare.

There's also a diversity among institutions. I think there are different institutions, different departments, view publishing your first book with a trade press differently. And so whichever department, or institution if you're from MIT, you're in, try to get a sense of what your colleagues might think about your choice to publish with a trade press. In some contexts, it might be seen as a poor decision. In other contexts-- certainly if it wins a Pulitzer Prize, and that book was published by trade press, I forget which one, but by a trade press-- it might be seen as a brilliant decision.

Now even within the scope of university presses, there are significant differences I've found by talking to people who have published in different presses and by reading books that have been published in different presses. So for example, while some presses will never publish footnotes, that is, the notes that are actually at the foot of the page, and will rarely publish bibliographies, other presses regularly publish footnotes and almost always publish bibliographies.

And so depending on what kind of book you want to publish and on who you think your audiences are, it really pays to do your research on the different presses, to look at books that they have published recently in your field, and to see if just in terms of the format of the book-- footnotes versus endnotes, art versus no art, bibliography versus no bibliography, length of the book, and so on and so forth, design-- whether these are, this is the sort of format that you imagine for your book. And if you do that kind of research, I think you'll be much, much happier and perhaps have much quicker success in the process of finding a publisher.

I've heard before from a number of editors the advice of eliminating jargon. Certainly some presses emphasize that. On the other hand, for example Duke University Press, I haven't seen a single book they've published that isn't full of jargon. And so again, there's a significant amount of diversity. With regard to length, yes, 100,000 words is a common recommendation.

On the other hand, and I've just now finished a-- in parentheses, I teach a lot of what we call, to my graduate students and occasionally even to undergraduates, what we call first books. First books, that is, books based on dissertations because I think graduate students have a great deal to learn from reading books that are based on these sort of intellectual projects that they are beginning to be engaged in.

And so I read and have read recently, first books, not just in my own field but in a number of other fields. And so we just taught a book called Gay New York, which was published in 1994. It was based on a dissertation, is a major, still considered a major contribution to American history, to queer history, to gender history, and is at least twice as long as the recommended 100,000 words.

I can easily think of four or five other examples, recent, more or less, recent examples that are much longer than that. My own book, incidentally, is not, just because I don't like to write a great deal. I prefer to say things succinctly. But there are contexts and there are ways in which you need to say things at length. You need to have thick descriptions.

And some presses do publish books that are significantly longer, do take a chance on books that are significantly longer if they think they're important enough, if they think they will sell significantly, if they think they'll be taught in classrooms, if they think they'll go into a backlist where, 16 years later, people are still teaching them in courses. And so I don't know what exactly, what set of judgments editors have in deciding whether to take a chance on a book in that way or not. But certainly just looking at things that have been published more or less recently, you can see a great diversity of formats, of lengths, of shapes, forms, sizes.

Now with regard to getting a contract, approaching a publisher, again, I've found, at least in my discipline, a significant diversity among fields. It's fairly common for me when I talk to people in fields that are considered, I suppose, by presses a less marketable-- let's say, I don't know, medieval Russian history-- that they experience, it's just an example, that they have significant, it takes them a significant amount of time to find a publisher. And it's not an easy process.

I've rarely come across a colleague, you know, who's at Harvard or has graduated from Harvard, who did not manage to find a publisher ever. That's despite trying. But it can be a long and can be an arduous process. On the other hand, and I think, and I actually would like to pose this as a question to our colleagues here from the presses, my sense here is that in general, and again, there are differences between presses, in general, academic presses, university presses, have, are more reluctant now to publish what they see is narrow monographs than they might have been 10 or 20 years ago.

On the other hand, there's a flipside. They're more eager, I think now, to publish things that they think will have a substantial market. So what that has meant for people in American history, in Cold War history, again, which is fields that I know, are fields that I know very well, is that we are finding it very easy to get publishing offers. In fact, we oftentimes-- and I've heard this, I've experienced this myself, I've heard this from others-- we don't need to approach publishers because publishers approach us.

They somehow hear about the projects and they send us inquiries about, would you be interested in sending me a chapter or a proposal or something along these lines. Quite a few of my colleagues have been approached by literary agents, again, out of the blue because they've heard about their projects. I've so far myself have resisted that temptation for reasons which I can discuss in the Q&A if anyone is interested, but quite a few of my colleagues, again, in the fields of Cold War and Modern American history, do have literary agents and do publish through literary agents, sometimes placing their books in university presses, sometimes placing their books in trade presses.

And they have found agents to be, so you probably didn't want me to mention agents in this context. I know it's a freighted, it's a freighted issue. But they find them especially useful in that part about negotiating that Phillip just mentioned at the tail end of his talk. And while it's true that on the whole, publishing with an agent is more common in one's later books, not the dissertation books, I can think of, again, quite a few examples of colleagues who have had an agent even with their first book.

So again, there's a great deal and great degree of diversity in this experience, I've found. And I'd like to keep my remarks short so I'll end here. I'm eager to hear what questions you have and to respond to your concerns.

PETER DER MANUELIAN: Shall we move on to me? Or, OK. Great.