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Writing for Readers: Thinking Through Publishing In a Changing Climate

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Writing for Readers

THINKING THROUGH PUBLISHING IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

On May 7, the Center for the Study of Women and the Department of Comparative Literature presented Ken Wissoker's talk "Writing for Readers: Thinking through Publishing in a Changing Climate." Wissoker, Editorial Director of Duke University Press, gave an informative, witty, and insightful talk geared toward graduate students working on dissertations and junior faculty working on their first books.

Thinking about publishing while writing or after completing a dissertation is apt to arouse anxiety in many scholars. Finishing a dissertation feels like reaching the top of a mountain peak, then from that vantage point, thinking about turning the dissertation into a publishable manuscript seems like climbing yet another, even more formidable mountain. As someone in that position, I have many questions: What is the first step in that process? How much do I need to have revised in order to approach an editor? What does the oft-lamented "crisis in academic publishing" mean for the prospects of publishing my dissertation?

Wissoker provided answers to those questions and more, offering helpful guidance on how to think about one's writing in the "post-bookstore" era of academic publishing. Wissoker stressed the importance of understanding the challenges to scholars hoping to publish their first books

posed by this new configuration of the academic publishing environment. As many independent bookstores have closed and have been replaced by corporate bookstores and by Amazon.com, there are fewer possibilities for attracting cross-over audiences who might find one's book while browsing in their local independent bookstore. Moreover, university presses consistently lose money on academic books and ship fewer copies to bookstores, which reduces visibility for books that may have difficulty appealing to readers. Wissoker advised the audience that it is now more vital than ever to write for readers and to take the needs of a book's potential audience seriously in a consistent way.

One of his most useful insights was that there are material differences between writing a dissertation and writing a book. When writing a dissertation, a writer is writing for evaluation by a dissertation committee. When writing a book, one is writing for readers. It's crucial to understand this distinction when thinking about how to revise a dissertation for publication. In dissertations, writers often hide behind the voices of others, tentatively floating their own argument after presenting a long string of block quotes. Dissertation committee readers will read dissertations, sifting through long quotations of theorists, seemingly extraneous material inserted to please a particular member

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of the committee, and actively search for the argument because they are not only paid to do so but because they also understand the nature of the dissertation genre, which functions to satisfy the requirements of a Ph.D.

This is not the case with readers of books. The reader wants to know upfront what the argument and the story are. Carefully crafting an introduction becomes important in this regard. The writer needs to think about what the readers need to be convinced of and what they need to see in order to be convinced. Wissoker offered several metaphors for the function of the introduction. The introduction is about establishing an arc, with each chapter afterward filling in pieces of the arc. The introduction is like a circular parking garage, he argued, providing an orderly descent for the book to follow. Writing the book is a dialectical process between the introduction and the chapters.

In addition, Wissoker advised the audience that knowing who the potential readers for the book might also be essential in the new configuration of the academic publishing industry. Is the book for other academics in the field? For academics in other fields? For a general audience? Or some combination of all three? When writing the book, it is important to think about the audience and how to keep everyone on board and about what they will be looking for and what they will be looking to avoid. Lastly, he emphasized that being present in one's field and building interest in one's book is indispensable.

After his talk, he generously took questions from the audience and walked the audience through the steps of academic publishing, demystifying the process of selecting a press, approaching an editor, revising the manuscript, and responding to reader reports. His excitement about various projects he has shepherded through the process was evident and his practical insights about writing were delivered with good humor. Wissoker's talk about how to think about one's writing in the process of reshaping a dissertation into a book was useful on many levels and helped to make the path to publishing seem much less daunting.

***Sharon Sharp** recently received her Ph.D. in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media with a Concentration in Women's Studies at UCLA. She is currently revising her dissertation *Yesterday Now: Television, Nostalgia and the Mediation of the American Past* for publication.*