

Strategies for Publishing Feminist Books

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Introduction

What I suggest here is really identical to what I would say if my title were simply “Strategies for Publishing Books”. But since all my books are feminist in orientation, everything I know about publishing books comes from publishing feminist books. Keep in mind that I’m basing my comments on my own experience and opinions, from publishing five single-authored books and three edited or co-edited books. If you’re in any doubt about the suitability for your own situation of anything I say here, consult your mentor, department chair, or dean at your institution.

Background Information

The publishing industry is run by publishers who are more and more anxious about the bottom line. This means that if you want your book to be published, you have to “sell” it to a publisher. You need a new idea or theme or area of research that does not simply duplicate what is already on the market. And you should not assume that you will automatically publish your dissertation as a book. If you can, great. But if you’re not having a lot of success in marketing it to a publisher (and you *do* have to market it), and/or if you are sick and tired of it, it’s better to cut your losses. Publish a paper or two from your dissertation, and move on. It’s better to be motivated by an exciting new project than to struggle on for months or years with something that bores you to tears.

Getting a Contract

Not everyone agrees with me about this, but in my view, the number one error that academics make with respect to their books is waiting until they’ve written the whole book before they seek a contract. There are two reasons for seeking a contract early on: 1) because if you have a contract you can work with the editor(s) to ensure that the book ends up in publishable condition; and 2) because having a contract is tremendously encouraging and helps you to keep going when the going gets hard.

To find potential publishers, visit book displays at conferences and talk with the publishers’ representatives. If sales people come around to your department, flogging

their newest texts, ask them what their press is looking for. Get advice from other scholars about their successes and failures with presses. Focus on the presses that publish the books that you most admire, and accumulate a list.

In **choosing the publishers**, first, aim high; you have nothing to lose. So include at least a few of your “dream publishers”. But don’t waste your time with publishers who never publish the sort of thing you have written. If, for example, the press mostly prints novels and poetry, or the culture and history of the southwest, don’t bother.

Second, consider both large and small presses. Large publishers are more likely to have extensive distribution systems, and perhaps better advertising. But your book will just be one among many. With small presses there are not the same advantages of distribution (although sometimes they may be affiliated with another press), but you may get more personal attention from the editors.

Third, consider both university and non-university presses. A university press will have scholarly credentials, depending on its reputation and the university with which it is affiliated. But it may also be desperate for money and want a “subvention”—money supplied by the author to support publication. A non-university press will not have the same scholarly credentials (though it may be very reputable), but it also may not have the same financial desperation.

Fourth, consider both home-grown and foreign presses. For me, in a small country, it is often worthwhile to be published by a large company in the US or UK. At the same time, publishing with foreign presses means I may have to make changes, not just to the style but to the content of my book, to make it acceptable to and suitable for a foreign press. Big international publishers may have more prestige, but local publishers may care more about you as a scholar and writer, and be more likely to promote your book in an individual way.

Fifth, consider both established and new presses. Established presses are a known quantity (although these days you can never presume there will not be upheavals), but they may be stodgy about some subfields. New presses can be more risky, but they may also be more willing to take a chance on *you*. (You also get to be among the first books they publish).

In finding potential publishers, their websites are a tremendous help. They not only give you information about where to send your inquiries; they also indicate what sorts of books they do and do not publish. The website will also tell you what sort of prospectus to send. Pay attention to their requirements, but if you don’t meet them completely, you can always say in your cover letter that you would be happy to send more information if the publisher is interested.

My recommended strategy for getting your first book contract involves sending out prospectuses to a large number of publishers. I have to admit, the first time I did this, which was more than twenty years ago, before email or the internet, I sent out packages

to 110 publishers. Perhaps you don't have to aim for quite that many! But thirty is not too many. Unlike with journal articles, it's considered acceptable to submit your prospectus to more than one publisher at a time. (There are a very few that require you to attest that you have not sent the prospectus out to others. I don't believe in putting all my eggs in one basket; so I would not write to such a press on my first query.)

When you **prepare a prospectus** to send to a publisher, it should usually include the following:

- 1) a cover letter. Be sure to mention that you can send sample chapters, if desired.
- 2) a *short cv*, with emphasis on your publications. You should have some journal articles or book chapters. There don't have to be a lot, but publishers want to know a) whether you can produce, and b) whether you can produce to a high standard. Don't include committee work or teaching on the cv (unless, perhaps, the teaching is *directly* related to the book you are trying to get published).
- 3) a table of contents with clearly-titled chapters indicating the scope of the book
- 4) a one-page description of the book. Include a description of the likely market for your book, and why your book will serve a unique need. Know, or find out, what are the likely competitors to your book, and explain why yours is both different and better. Indicate realistically whether your book might serve as a text, and if so, for what level(s) of students. Don't be afraid to be positive and enthusiastic in describing your book.

The **responses** to your prospectus will likely vary. Some publishers will get back to you and say, contrary to the impression the website gave you, that they don't publish the sort of thing you are offering. Some may say they recently published a book in that area and will not be doing another. Some may turn you down, but recommend another publisher. And some will follow up with you and ask for more information.

At that point, they will usually want sample chapters. Although, if you follow my advice, you will not have finished the book yet, you should have at least three ready to send. (They may want only one or two.) The press will then likely send your work for review, usually to other academics. Sometimes they will ask you to suggest possible reviewers. Take advantage of that opportunity by naming people who, you think, have strong reputations in your field and will also be open to your feminist perspective.

Don't let publishers sit on your proposal and chapters for too long. Keep a written list of when and where you sent the material. If you hear nothing after a couple of months, then feel free to send a polite and general query, via email.

A brief note on contracts:

After this process you may be fortunate enough to get more than one contract offer. Whether you get one or several, you can negotiate with publishers. As a rule, contracts always benefit the publisher more than the author, but you still have the right to ask for changes to clauses of the contract. Remember that at this point, you have a “product” that they want. In my experience, the following are open to negotiation

- the date for final submission of the manuscript
- the size of the royalties and the amount of the advance, if any
- copy-editing
- index
- right of first refusal for your next manuscript (Don't give away the right of first refusal to your first publisher. If you want to use that publisher again you can always send them a prospectus, but once you've published one book, you want the freedom to try another publisher, because your reputation will be stronger.)
- permission to use your own work in future publications of your own
- who holds the copyright (I recommend retaining the copyright to your work. It may result in more work—permission for reprints will come to you—but it also gives you more security and more control over your work.)

I suggest you keep a running list of those publishers who show interest in your work, even if you turn down their contract offer. They could be among the first people you contact for your next book proposal!