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My First Book: Reflections on the Steps and Struggles

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Recommended Citation

Michels, Steven, "My First Book: Reflections on the Steps and Struggles" (2013). *Political Science & Global Affairs Faculty Publications*. 25.
https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/gov_fac/25

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IT'S NOT UNUSUAL for me, as a regular online shopper, to have a book or three waiting for me at my apartment. But this delivery was different: These books had my name on the cover.

I knew they were coming soon, but I didn't think they would arrive on some random Monday -- a full month before the official release date. I was elated. And I tried not to hurt myself as I pulled open the box and beamed at its contents. There it was: *The Case Against Democracy*, written by me, published by Praeger.

But soon my emotions became decidedly mixed. For one thing, setting out into the world something so personal to be scrutinized and judged makes me a little anxious. Is this how parents feel when their children go off to school? I was sure there were errors, small or suicidal, lurking somewhere in the text. I've told anyone who gets a copy to keep them from me. And even now as I flip through its 316 pages, I avoid making brain contact.

What's more, having your first book in your hand is somewhat anticlimactic. I couldn't help but reflect on all of the steps and the struggles that had led to that moment.

Getting the contract was certainly more difficult than I had imagined. I had a pretty good idea -- that is, it was the best I could come up with. And as I wrote in an earlier article, I had timed the project to work on it during my sabbatical. But to reach a more popular audience, I was in the unenviable position of needing an agent.

The rejections were as numerous as they were curious. Some agents returned a pro forma envelope-sized slip of paper, explaining how my project was not right for them at this time. A few others cared enough to send a full 8½-by-11-inch rejection. But mostly I didn't hear back at all.

The most interesting response was one scrawled across my original query letter: "You're going to need a big name to represent you for this." I'm still not exactly sure what he meant by that, but I don't think it was a compliment.

After striking out on finding an agent, I was fortunate to find, on my own, an academic publisher that would not only let me write the book I wanted to write, but would actually help me do it. I had until Labor Day of the following year, a full 14 months away.

I had been doing research and taking heavy notes for well over a year. But somehow, getting an exact deadline turned into an opportunity for me to take a bit of a break. I procrastinated. And with every day and week (and month!) that passed without so much as opening the document, I knew that I was ruining my summer.

Eventually, I put myself on a strict but realistic writing schedule. I had to make writing more of a lifestyle than a task. To that end, I downsized my social obligations and tried to avoid anything that might distract me from work. "Write drunk; edit sober," Ernest Hemingway suggested. Unfortunately, I lack either the stamina or the courage to follow his advice.

Writing a book on current politics over a long period of time also meant that I had to stay on top of events as they changed and anticipate what might happen next. The first paragraph of the book changed three times before I settled on using the Arab Spring to frame my treatment of American democracy. And at some point, thanks to Nate Silver's forecasting in *The New York Times*, I decided to write the book anticipating an Obama reelection.

But such a superfocus on your book can bring its own risk: getting stuck in the weeds. I had wasted the entire previous winter trying to get the introduction to be perfect. I needed to avoid making the same mistake on the rest of the book, or risk having the party for my book release conflict with the party for my retirement.

Not a day went by that I did not think: This is a lot of work. There were times when I was confident that what I was working on had some merit, but they were equally matched by the notion that I what I was working on was complete garbage. (I'm still unsure.) I quickly came to understand what Thomas Mann meant when he said, "A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people."

Writing such a massive tome required some outside help, and I was not so stubborn to think that I could go it alone. Mark Twain made a habit of testing his writing on different types of readers. He was especially interested in the

reaction of "the sleepers" -- that is, the people who would nod off over a draft. I put together a list of 30 friends, colleagues, and former students whom I could trust to save me from being soporific.

It's far better to get negative opinion sooner than later -- on ideas and outlines rather than on full drafts. And it's better to ask it of select people rather than a regular group. The shotgun approach of sending out multiple but regular drafts to a large group gives those readers a chance to look the other way, or what psychologists call the "bystander effect."

You will get a lot of constructive criticism; take only the best of it. (See: weeds.) Some people will help you write your book, while others want you to write their book for them.

Having friends read your writing is always a test of the friendship. "Friends help you move; real friends help you move bodies," my friend Jay is fond of saying. Evaluating a friend's book falls somewhere between those two tasks.

One former student (and future co-author), Tim, proved his mettle by making the trek from Washington to New York to help me finish the editing in the final weekend. I've since nicknamed him "The Closer."

When the deadline came, my documents were ready, zipped, and sent off. I was done. I should have been relieved, but instead, I felt a bit of postsubmission depression. I wasn't sure if I needed a nap or wanted to hit the gym. I did neither.

What shocked me the most is the extent to which I wanted to keep writing. I was done with that particular book, but I had become a creature of habit. I couldn't resist the urge to send off a query letter for another book-length project, which I did within two weeks. (The full proposal is under review at a literary agency in New York.) If the second book doesn't pan out, I'm excited about the prospect about working on smaller projects, which now seem manageable to an absurd degree.

The edits were sent back to me for approval in early November, after I knew that the Obama administration would still exist in the present tense. The New Year came and went as I was compiling the index, a chore that would have been gratifying if it weren't so tedious.

Now that the book is out, there's some talk among my nonacademic friends and family about what might come of it. I often hear hopeful affirmations of how much money I might make from sales, or questions about a possible appearance on The Daily Show. For my part, I'm just hoping someone will think enough of it to review it in a decent journal. An invitation to speak at some exotic locale would also be welcomed.

Truth be told, having another month or two to write would not have made much of a difference. In fact, I didn't want another month. What I really wanted was to go back in time a year or so and have another crack at the whole thing. I did way too much research, wrote too many digressive words, and wasted a great deal of time. I can't help but feeling that I wrote around the book. The impulse to write another book comes from how much I've learned from writing this one. The next one would be far easier -- and potentially much better.

All in all, writing a book has made me reflect on the nature of the book. Most of us suffer from a vestigial prejudice in favor of The Book. Perhaps that will fade with the rise of e-books and e-venues. Every book needs a reason to exist. And it should be a good reason, not just some romantic vision of how it will look on your shelf or your CV.

Perhaps the biggest effect that writing a book has had on me is as a reader. I've always enjoyed writing book reviews, but now that I've gone through the process myself, I suspect that the critical element of my future reviews will be minimal. At this point, I can't imagine offering anything other than these short words: "Good for you!"

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By **STEVEN MICHELS**

**Steven Michels** is an associate professor of political science at Sacred Heart University, in Fairfield, Conn. His book, *The Case Against Democracy*, was just published by Praeger.