

Eric Jay Dolin on Writing and Publishing a Book

First, let me begin with my background:

I grew up near the coasts of New York and Connecticut, and since an early age I was fascinated by the natural world, especially the ocean. I spent many days wandering the beaches on the edge of Long Island Sound and the Atlantic, collecting seashells and exploring tidepools. When I left for college I wanted to become a marine biologist or more specifically a malacologist (seashell scientist). At Brown I quickly realized that although I loved learning about science, I wasn't cut out for a career in science, mainly because I wasn't very good in the lab, and I didn't particularly enjoy reading or writing scientific research papers. So, after taking a year off and exploring a range of career options, I shifted course turning toward the field of environmental policy, first earning a double-major in biology and environmental studies, then getting a masters degree in environmental management from Yale, and a Ph.D. in environmental policy and planning from MIT, where my dissertation focused on the role of the courts in the cleanup of Boston Harbor.

I have held a variety of jobs, including stints as a fisheries policy analyst at the National Marine Fisheries Service, a program manager at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, an environmental consultant stateside and in London, an American Association for the Advancement of Science writing fellow at *Business Week*, a curatorial assistant in the Mollusk Department at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, and an intern at the National Wildlife Federation, the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management, and the U.S. Senate.

Throughout my career, one thing remained constant--I enjoyed writing and telling stories. And that's why I started writing books--to share the stories that I find most intriguing (I have also published more than 60 articles for magazines, newspapers, and professional journals). In about 2003, I told my wife I wanted to be a fulltime writer. She said sure, if you can earn a living. So I kept writing when I could, and finally hooked up with an agent in late 2004, who helped me sell the book, *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America* (W. W. Norton, 2007). That book enabled me to get a two-book contract from W. W. Norton, and in the summer of 2007, my wife turned to me and told me I could quit my day job, and become a fulltime writer. That scared the hell out of me, but I took the leap, and did quit my job. So far, it is working out.

My most recent book, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: the Epic History of the Fur Trade in America* (W. W. Norton, 2010), was chosen by New West, *The Seattle Times*, and The Rocky Mountain Land Library as one of the top non-fiction books of 2010. It also won the 2011 James P. Hanlan Book Award, given by the New England Historical Association, and was awarded first place in the Outdoor Writers Association of America, Excellence in Craft Contest. My last book, *Leviathan*, was a bestseller and was selected as one of the best nonfiction books of 2007 by *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Providence Journal*. *Leviathan* was also chosen by Amazon.com's editors as one of the 10 best history books of 2007. *Leviathan* garnered the 23rd annual (2007) L. Byrne Waterman Award, given by the New Bedford Whaling Museum, for outstanding

contributions to whaling research and history. *Leviathan* also received the 2007 John Lyman Award for U. S. Maritime History, given by the North American Society for Oceanic History, was named an Honors Book in nonfiction for the 8th annual Massachusetts Book Awards (2008-2009), and was awarded a silver medal for history in the Independent Publisher Book Awards (2008). My next book, due out in September, is *When America First Met China: An Exotic History of Tea, Drugs, and Money in the Age of Sail* (Liveright (a division of W. W. Norton)). For an almost complete list of the 11 books I have written, please see my website, www.ericjaydolin.com.

My comments are going to relate to what I know best—Publishing books with established publishers for general audiences; Although my comments are not related to academic publishing or self-publishing, I think some of them apply there as well.

Some of the following insights might seem simple or common knowledge, that doesn't make them any less true or valuable.

- First, love or at least enjoy writing, because you'll be doing a lot of both. Doesn't mean researching and writing should come easy. It doesn't for me. It's hard work, but if you don't get some satisfaction out of it, you will not be successful.
- Have some talent as a writer. Be at least competent. There are bad writers who get published, but you don't want to be one of those.
- Have a thick skin, or at least be able to pick yourself up off the ground after getting knocked down or having obstacles placed in your way. Any good gets many rejection letters. I have a file cabinet full of them. If you can't handle rejection, do something else.
- Related to having a thick skin, is being persistent. Don't give up. As the cliché goes, if you don't believe in yourself, nobody else will.
- Have a good idea that not only interests you, but will interest others, and be marketable. Publishing is a business. Publishers are in it both to publish good books, and make money, but if they don't make money, they can't publish books. And, presumably, you also want to make money. There has to be an audience. How big that audience needs to be depends on the publisher. Most major publishers have to be reasonably confident that they will be able to sell 10,000 hardcover copies before betting on a book. The threshold is lower for other, smaller, publishers. Keep in mind, it is not always easy to know what is a good idea. Publishing is like gambling, you never know what is going to catch on or hit it big. Many books are published with high hopes, but perform poorly, and vice-versa. When my publisher sent my proposal for *Leviathan* to 25 publishers, 22 wrote back saying the same thing—this book won't sell. Well, they were wrong.
- Get a respectable agent. You can sell books without one, but it is much better to have one. They know more than you will ever know about publishing, and have

connections you don't. They can give you valuable advice, hold your hand when things are tough, negotiate contracts that benefit you, and, generally, be your most important advocate and supporter. For the first seven books I wrote, I didn't have an agent, and pitched the books directly to publishers, and that can still work. But, again, if you can get a qualified agent, do. One of the best ways to find an agent is to look at books that are like the ones you want to write, and read the acknowledgements to find out who is the writer's agent (it is not always clear, but many times is). Then, you can write directly to the agent, getting their address through the Association of Author's Representatives -- <http://aaronline.org/> -- this organization is also a great place to find reputable agents.

- If you write a book, invest your time and energy in marketing it. Hopefully, your publisher will support your efforts, and market the book by sending out a slew of advance review copies (to generate reviews), arranging radio and TV interviews, and supporting a book tour, or even paying for direct advertising. But most of the onus for marketing will fall on you, and one of the best marketing tools is the talk. Since writing *Leviathan* I have given more than 150 public talks, at museums, libraries, and bookstores. For the vast majority of these, I get paid, and that pay adds up to a significant percentage of my yearly income. It is tiring, and not always all that glamorous, but essential to getting the word out. For my upcoming book on the China trade, I will be giving talks, but not as many as I have in the past, because they are a major investment of time and energy, and I want to devote much of that to my next project—still, for the China book, I will probably give 20-30 talks. Social media is also a good way to market your book, but I am from the generation that didn't grow up with social media, and I am still not sure how to best use it, or if it is really effective—I don't have much personal experience.

Now for a couple of myths about publishing.

- It is easy to write a book. If I had a dollar for every time someone who found out I was a book author, told me they were going to write a book one day, I would certainly be able to buy a very nice dinner. It is hard to write a book, or at least a good book that people want to read. That is not to say it is harder than other professions, just that it is not easy. It is a major commitment of mental and physical energy. You can only do it if you are motivated.
- You'll make a lot of money. If money is your primary goal, don't become a writer! Only precious few make good money. The Author's Guild recently concluded that the average book author makes \$9,000 per year. And if anything, it has gotten worse in recent years. Advances for books have gone down recently, so that an advance that might have been 100k five years ago, would be only 50k today. With bookstores closing, and the reading behavior of the public shifting, I think, if anything, making money through publishing is going to be getting harder, not easier.

My advice to those who want to be fulltime writers, is, if at all possible, be born rich. Either that, or have a good support system. My wife has a good job and she also is a big supporter of my writing. I couldn't do it without her. It's not only the financial support, but, more importantly, the emotional support.

I hope I have not discouraged any of you. That was not my intent. Being a writer is great. I love it, and if you love it, you'll figure out a way to do it in one form or another, despite all of the obstacles.

If any fellow has additional questions about writing and publishing, please don't hesitate to contact me via the contact page on my website – www.ericjaydolin.com. I am happy to share information and insights with others.