



# BOOK BREAKING and Book Mending\*

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In January 2018, Karin Wulf, a history professor at William and Mary and director of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, wrote an installment for her blog *Vast Early America* entitled: *Efficient Reading*. Professor Wulf tossed a lifeline to doctoral students everywhere struggling with the overwhelming impossibility of keeping afloat in their ocean of weekly reading requirements. The “real” title of her posting, she began, was “How to Gut a Book in 5 Easy Steps.” She proceeded to describe a process for getting the gist of a book without having to read it cover to cover. I knew the process well after recently completing a PhD in history at York University in 2015. Although I would be surprised if anyone in a doctoral program in history would not already know Professor Wulf’s system of what I call “book breaking” (a nod to ship breaking), her effort to codify the gutting process is indispensable to anyone embarking on their studies. But the blog post also resonated with misgivings I have had about academia’s messy relationship with books, with how its books are written, published, and consumed.

I have an unusual relationship with the academy. After a career of some thirty years as a journalist and author (and illustrator and graphic designer), a superb doctoral supervisor, Carolyn Podruchny, convinced me, that in 2010 at the age of 51, I should return to higher education to secure a history PhD. I was never sure of exactly what I would do with one if I survived the process, but it was a now-or-never challenge that I thought I should accept. I had no illusions about the academic job market, and had no plans to abandon my established career—in fact, I wrote and published *Double Double*, on the Tim Hortons restaurant phenomenon, with Harper Collins Canada in 2012 in the midst of my studies. One of the hopes the academy had for me was that I could bridge the worlds of academic history and “public” history, which includes the stuff published by trade houses. I had by then published a number of books with leading trade imprints (Doubleday, Penguin, Bloomsbury) on historical figures and subjects, especially exploration history, and I had a book on Christopher Columbus and John Cabot, *The Race to the New World*, in edit at Palgrave Macmillan in New York as I began my course work in the autumn of 2010. I had won a National Business Book Award for *The Bubble and the Bear*; *God’s Mercies* had been a finalist for the Writers’ Trust and the Governor General’s literary awards in nonfiction. *Double Double* would be a finalist for the NBBA as well. I may be wrong, but I do not think anyone with my experience in trade publishing had ever made such a hard right turn into academia in Canada.

To understand the relationship between books written and published by academics and academia itself, you need to understand the nature of

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doctoral studies. My PhD studies at York University had two components: the first was course work in three fields and the second a dissertation. For course work, I chose Canadian, American, and Indigenous history as my fields. Every week for two semesters, I would attend a seminar in each course to discuss the week's readings with about five to ten other students under the supervision of a professor, who would pose questions, guide the debate, and mark our performance over the course of about three hours. Each course also had several essays to write, based on readings. A week's readings were a mix of books and journal articles drawn from a larger reading list or syllabus. A typical week would add up to about three books per course (the rule of thumb seemed to be that four journal articles were the equivalent of one book). That meant reading nine books a week. The entire syllabus of one course might contain about 100 books, and the essential thrust of course work is for the student to demonstrate mastery of the curriculum. As well, in Canadian history, some of the readings were in French, and you were expected to be able to read and comprehend them at a basic level. A considerably basic translation test was administered in the first semester, which you were required to pass before completing your doctorate.

Once you had successfully completed course work, with grades of not less than A minus, you faced the hurdle of the comprehensive exams or "comps." The severity of comps varies from university to university, but at York, the comps in history were an ordeal. Students who completed course work in the spring usually opted to take comps the following fall, spending six months in mad and desperate preparation. For comps, you would secure a waiver in one field and prepare yourself in the other two. You were expected to know the entire syllabi of those two courses, which you would demonstrate in two four-hour written exams and an oral examination by a panel of professors. At York, you also had to design an entire 26-week course aimed at a third or fourth grade level with a syllabus, weekly lesson summaries, and a draft of one full one-hour lecture. Once this nightmare was behind you, you were no longer considered a student but a "candidate," and could move on to producing the book-length dissertation that would secure your doctorate.

Three weeks into my course work, I nearly quit. In addition to having a ninety-minute one-way commute to get to campus, I was overwhelmed by the weekly reading requirements. My first week included Bruce Trigger's *Children of Aataentsic*, a 600-plus-page doorstopper of a history of the Huron-Wendat people, and there were about eight other books besides to digest. I learned very quickly that reading in a doctoral program was not like reading at home. Consuming a book cover to cover was impossible. You had to learn how to "gut" a book, as Professor Wulf describes—absorb its essential contents so that you could discuss the author's ideas and evidence intelligently in that week's seminar. Even for comps, with its months of preparation, there was no way to read the entire syllabi of two courses (and I gave myself eighteen months, not six months, of preparation, as I also worked on *Double Double*). You had to learn the academy's version of speed-reading, which Professor Wulf so ably describes. Foremost, you read the book's introduction and conclusion, and the introduction and conclusion of individual chapters, and looked at sources and notes. If absolutely desperate, you get by with a scholarly book review—whatever it takes to gather enough knowledge to discuss the work in a seminar or a comps exam.

Professor Wulf stresses:

I don't always read this way. For work that's in my research area, and when I'm reading for the joy of reading history (which I try to do regularly), I read more deeply and thoroughly. But thinking historiographically, getting a sense of how evidence and argument are related within a book (or essay), and how those relate to other scholarship, I find pretty well served by this approach.

Professor Wulf's advice to doctoral students for coping with crushing reading lists is excellent (and I share her aversion to going so far as to rely only on a book review). But after I defended my dissertation and earned my doctorate in April 2015, I remained with a persistent disquiet about how people read and write in higher education. Because easily gutting a book is only possible if they are written in a way that allows them to be fluently gutted.

I have spoken on several occasions in academic settings about my views on academic and trade publishing. One such occasion was when I received the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies award for the best dissertation in humanities, social sciences, and art history in 2016. I had a whole room full of university deans as a captive audience. In that setting I remarked in part on how in ethno-history, so much academic energy is devoted to upholding the importance of stories in Indigenous cultures, and yet academia itself seemed hostile to story-telling as a way of conveying important truths. I otherwise have tried to point out an insidious feedback loop where academic writing is concerned. Authors who survived their doctoral studies by book breaking write academic works in the humanities. (And I suspect some of the phenomena of “imposter syndrome” in doctoral students is rooted in a guilty sense that at least some of their supposed knowledge is at times embedded in pretending to know much more than they really do. The study process encourages bullshitting skills when students feel compelled to perform in order to survive the seminar evaluation.) When successful doctoral candidates then publish, there is a natural inclination to write in a way that makes book breaking possible, especially if they hope to see that book on a course reading list. Professors, not just students, need to be able to get the gist of a new book quickly. It should come as no surprise that authors write books in a way that is compatible with the way they are meant to be consumed. If the target audience has no time, need, or inclination to read books in their entirety, then authors of books at a basic level write them not to be read in a conventional way. It is a short bus ride from that reality to academic books, which are not particularly readable. By “not particularly readable” I do not mean that writers do not present ideas clearly, or that the prose is necessarily stilted or burdened by jargon. What I mean is that the books are written without regard to elements and narrative techniques that are fundamental to non-fiction in a trade setting.

It is a fair question how many books on reading lists are ever read in depth, for the sheer joy of it, by people who have to study them. I had several hundred books on my course lists. My dissertation’s bibliography ran to 37 manuscript pages. I can only name a handful of titles that I ever read pleurably, cover to cover. There was no time to do so, and for seven years, first as a doctoral candidate and then as a postdoctoral fellow, I read almost nothing outside my studies for pleasure. The process very nearly killed my love of reading.

Not all of academic publishing is producing books designed foremost to be gutted or broken. My unscientific sense is that academic publishing in the humanities and social sciences is improving, and that a lot of really good books are already emerging from academic presses. As an author, you can accomplish a lot for the purposes of book breaking by writing a good, engaging introduction and conclusion, without succumbing to the ultimate book breaking concession of writing a plodding, summarizing



introduction in the vein of “In chapter 1, I will discuss XX. In chapter 2, I will discuss YY.” If you get these elements right, there is no reason to construct chapters that have bland introductions that tell the reader what you are about to discuss, and conclude with an equally mellow review of what you have just discussed—more tell-tale book breaking structures. I have had the pleasure of publishing two titles with leading academic presses under editors Jonathan Crago at McGill-Queen’s University Press and Mark Simpson-Vos at UNC Press, who believe that books can be written to high academic standards and still be readable and accessible to a trade audience. I have also published *Half Moon* in 2009 with Bloomsbury Press. While Bloomsbury is a trade publisher, my editor was Peter Ginna, who had come to the trade side from Oxford University Press and knew how to publish books that were sturdy in scholarship while also accessible. Peter has gone on to edit a valuable volume on the book trade, *What Editors Do*. A number of academic presses have been publishing books that presume a market beyond the halls of learning, and more of them are becoming aware of the crossover sales potential of some titles in the trade market. I am proud to say that while I have had good reviews in the past in *Publisher’s Weekly* for trade titles, the first book of mine that earned a starred review there was *The Place of Stone*, based on my doctoral dissertation, for UNC Press.

It takes more than a vague commitment to readability for an academic press to produce truly accessible, compelling, and enjoyable books. Above and beyond the specific subject, legibility needs an author who has some grasp of the tricks of the trade, but imparting those is not part of the academic curriculum. I feel it tremendously helps academics to find writing outlets, such as blogs and general trade publications, that allow them to work on their prose craft. One key skill is the use of narrative as a tool to explore events, individuals, and ideas, which does not mean resorting to hackneyed novelistic techniques. Just as important is an embrace of biography, drilling down into the lives of individuals in a narrative so that they become well-rounded people or characters. (Spoiler alert: people like to read about people.) These “microbiographies” have been a signature part of my academic books. I strongly believe that the histories I write percolate in important ways at the





personal level of people in my work. I tend to do a fair bit of research using tools of genealogists. Names on pages come alive that way, and the history they experience (or in the case of scholars I have examined, the history they shape) is more comprehensible, enriched, and compelling.

Fostering readability requires an editor who wants to publish readable texts and who knows how to coach a writer. It also requires blind reviewers (usually two scholarly experts review academic manuscripts) who are on board with the aspirations of the publisher and author. But it also may require academic presses to adopt a more trade-oriented approach to the way manuscripts should be prepared. In the academic world, the standard system is for the author to turn in a finished manuscript with footnotes and bibliography, for evaluation by the editor and the blind reviewers. The trade editor has a substantial role in substantive editing, in helping to shape the manuscript as a work in progress. An author is much more accustomed to preliminary editing and guidance from their editor on a partial manuscript, and may even have their agent pitching in. Good books do not just arrive fully formed with properly formatted footnotes. Every writer needs help in shaping a manuscript, some more than others. Academic editors that already have an instinct for how to get readable books out of academics are a godsend, but I suspect that more than a few legible books from academic presses got that way because the author knew how to achieve that objective on their own. Academic presses may need to rethink processes of acquisition and editing, and consider how they can secure or foster editors with skills beyond those involved in turning a doctoral dissertation into a book. Those skills are especially important in what academia calls the “second monograph,” the book not based on a doctoral dissertation but rather arises from new research.

Books that are written to be readable do not necessarily have to be pitched at a general reader. Merely by acknowledging readability as a worthy goal of the writing and editing process, academic authors and presses can aspire to produce books that are more than a study burden, or a checkmark in a scholar’s to-do list for personal progress through academia’s ranks. Even when a harried doctoral student is forced to break or gut a book to survive a week of seminar discussions, we can still hope that they will think, “That book looked interesting. When I get a chance, I want to read all of it properly.” Anyone who has been through the ordeal of a PhD has had those moments with those special books. Wish that there could be more of them.