Turning Your Dissertation into a Scholarly Book

There are significant differences between a dissertation and a scholarly monograph or book. The former typically has a fairly narrow focus and is written, in part, to convince a particular elite audience, a committee of senior scholars, of your knowledge, research competence, and originality.

A scholarly monograph, on the other hand, is intended for an entirely different audience, and one large enough to make it worth the investment of an academic press. The audience for the monograph may include some academic scholars, but it is more likely to be made up of undergraduates and, we hope, the intelligent pagan trade market. The monograph will have to meet their needs and not assume they know more than they actually do about the topic and, at the same time, not "write down" to the practicing pagan. If your book is intended for classroom use, faculty will be the ones who choose to adopt it or not, so they will be looking for a book that can be taught, one that will stimulate students and one students will actually read. That means it has to be interesting, highly readable, and make a significant and original contribution.

The reasons for this are market-driven. Since the early '90s, academic presses have been finding it increasingly difficult to publish first books and monographs in many areas of the humanities and social sciences. Library purchasing provided the traditional economic foundation for scholarly publishing, but the limited funds for university library acquisitions and the increase in the number of serials often gobble up library budgets.

According to the Association of Research Libraries, in 1986 the ratio of book to journal expenditures was 44 percent to 56 percent; in 1998, it was 28 percent to 72 percent. That means that in order to be published, a scholarly book must be marketable, it must be relevant to a significant number of potential readers.

We believe that books in our Pagan Studies series can have a built in readership. We also acknowledge that means considerable rewriting is usually necessary to turn a strong dissertation into a good book.

Here are some suggestions for doing just that:

1. The first thing you want to ask yourself is who your intended audience is. Are you writing a text for undergraduate students? If so, you need to use language they will understand and make the book engaging enough so that they will want to read the whole thing, and not the Cliff Notes! Are you writing for other academics? That requires a totally different approach.

2. Then ask yourself what you would want to read, not have you shown all that you know about the topic. Think about why your work really matters, and for whom. What is your original contribution and how important is it? The greater a work's significance, the wider its potential market.

3. Do away with road-map openers and non-transitions ("First I shall take up .... Then I shall treat....").

4. Claim your own authority. After all, you did the original research and thinking. That means you should include sources only where necessary for your argument and don't over document. Cut passages that are there only to demonstrate your competence and eliminate long literature reviews. The audience for your book will expect you to have mastered the background of your topic. You don't need to prove it again.
5. Make your manuscript interesting to a wider audience than your dissertation was. For example, why would you select a book for a particular course? With books being as expensive as they are, why would a student want to read it? Why would an educated pagan practitioner who is neither academic nor student want to buy it? At the same time that you expand the manuscript's marketability, you need to maintain its scholarly authority and value... a challenging but doable task!

References:


Some helpful books:


