Optical Engineering

Writing a Book

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SPIE

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I used to joke around (most of you who read my editorials know that's what I do most of the time anyway) that when I wrote my first book, I did it to stay married. My ex-wife was in medical school at the time and studied long hours most nights. So instead of hanging out at the pub, which is what I really wanted to do, I started writing a textbook at night that corresponded to a course in electro-optics that I taught at the University of Memphis. That book took five years to complete.

I wanted to share some encouragement and some lessons that I have learned after six or seven books and three publishers. First of all, don't let someone tell you that you can't write a book. As a young assistant professor, I made the mistake of mentioning that I was writing a book, and I can't tell you how many "what makes you think you can write a book?" looks I received. I have always cherished my ignorance about these things. For most people, the only time you start doubting whether you can do something is when others doubt it for you.

Second, getting a publisher for good, solid technical books is not that hard. In our area, SPIE Press is a good place to start and they provide a very high quality book product. Their business interaction is a joy and their contract is only three or four pages, where some publishers have a 20 page contract. There are many other publishers that provide great books as well. All the publishers usually want is a short proposal that includes a description of the project, an outline, sometimes a table of contents, who will likely read it, and a list of similar and competitor books.

Third, if you want a co-author, picking a writing partner(s) is critical to your future happiness. If you are working with someone who constantly does not meet your expectations, then you start to have hard feelings about the collaboration.

In contrast, if you work with someone who completely takes over the project and is not willing to include your contributions, then you may also regret committing to a book project. Make sure you have similar goals, similar motivation, and that you can easily iron out issues with your writing partner. If you have had bad research paper experiences with a co-author, do not choose them to co-author a book project.

Fourth, I have always been more pleased with the final book than I thought I would be with respect to the content that I provided. It's probably because I am overly critical of myself on such projects and, usually, the editorial staff and production staff of these projects are magicians at producing great books. Also, there are *always* errors in books. No matter how hard you try, there are always some errors. I taught a course out of one of my books and I told the students I would pay one dollar for every error they found. That semester, I almost went broke. Now I try harder to minimize errors, but I am also more realistic, as I think it is impossible for an entire book to be without a single error.

A book can open doors for a junior or midcareer author if it is well written and well regarded. It can give you opportunities and invitations that you would not have received otherwise. Also, writing a book should be fun, otherwise don't commit to it. I have a picture of each of my 13-year-old triplets strategically placed in different books as part of my fun in writing them. The kids complain that they can't find them, but they lose interest after flipping through a few pages. I still know where they are and can flip to them quickly.

Writing that first book did not keep me married. Now, I spend quite a bit of time at a smoke-filled blues bar in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, and I have a great time there. I am currently reviewing the galley proofs of my final technical book and I don't have a desire to ever write another technical book. I have, however, started a fiction book called the *Slow Learner's Club*, and I think the reason I am writing this book is to have an excuse to spend time in the pub.

A Note on the Kingslake Award

The *Optical Engineering* staff, associate editors, and I would like to congratulate the 2011 Rudolf Kingslake Medal winners, Lucy Cohan and David Miller of MIT, for their paper "Integrated modeling for design of lightweight, active mirrors." It is an outstanding paper that has been and will be appreciated by many of our colleagues.

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Editor