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## Short Books: Context and Case

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### Abstract

The digital transformation of higher education invites rethinking of all elements of academic work. That now includes the form of the scholarly book, including the appearance of short ones, seen by authors and publishers as opportunities for altering expectations and practices. Writing about short books reveals their intentions and utility. And experience with a new series of short books displays their timeliness, if with problems of professional recognition.

### “Significance, Not Length”

Fifty years ago, when print monographs reigned, the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* included in its inaugural issue a case for the short book, naming it an “ideal form” for some scholarly purposes. According to William McClung (1969), then at Princeton University Press, neglect of short books represented a “serious irrationality” among academic publishers. For him, “The essential criterion for academic book publication should be significance, not length. If this principle prevailed, books of all lengths would be published” (p. 46).

Can we define a short book? Practices vary and there is no agreed-upon word or page count. Perhaps the best definition is that a short book is longer than an article and less than a book, or at least the conventional scholarly book, typically about 200 pages. McClung refers to an “intermediate length of writing,” which leaves considerable room for different realizations of “short.” Oxford University Press specifies 35,000 words, about 120 pages of text, for its well-known *Very Short Introductions*. The series title, with “very,” leaves no room for prospective readers to expect anything else. The short books being offered by other publishers are sometimes half as long but with no effort in the series titles to suggest that some books are very, very short ones.

### Questions of the Short Book

For McClung, the economic argument against short books made sense, if that is the only criterion used to estimate their value. Thus, the fixed costs of publishing make it impossible to apply pricing differentials reflecting page counts. Nor is it possible, with what is plain about the limits of the audience for scholarly books generally, to reduce prices with

the hope, in retail vernacular, of “making it up in volume.” In effect, the first question McClung asks of the short book is: Is it economically sustainable? From the evidence of activity in short book publishing among scholarly and commercial presses, the answer today is yes, reflecting in part the distance from McClung’s analysis and the advent of electronic publishing, though many short books appear in digital and print versions.

But McClung is more interested in the case against short books reflecting the conventions of academic publishing, or how the image of a book is “fixed” in the scholarly system. “The concept of the long-form book has remained largely unquestioned and thus affects us almost unnoticed. . . . [S]hort books are usually expected to be frivolous, superficial, appropriate for gifts, but rarely serious” (p. 49). But McClung asks a second question to overturn such expectations: Are there cognitive advantages for readers in short books? He believed there were, largely because even 50 years ago “the pace of publication has produced readers who read quickly, skim, and select.” But the short book “can be read as a unit, at a single sitting [of about two hours], as a singular and coherent intellectual experience.” Indeed, as an “ideal form of expository writing [a short book] probably maximizes the richness of content within a length [of about 100 pages] that can be absorbed by the serious reader under ideal circumstances in a single period” (p. 46).

The problem of the short book might also be seen as a disciplinary and professional one. Thus, a third implicit question of the short book: What will it mean for the academic reward system? McClung invokes an observation about graduate education, made in the same year of his account of short books, by Henry Riecken, then president of the Social

Science Research Council. Riecken (1969) wondered if “too many research problems were ‘thesis sized’ because they are undertaken with that objective in view” (cited in McClung, 1969, p. 52). Thus, as McClung puts it, research felt the adverse consequences of “the absence of flexibility that would allow the expansion and contraction of projects as needs dictated.”

Of course, the need addressed by traditional long-form books is for tenure and other academic rewards. The short book (much less in an open access format) presents potential problems in demonstrating research achievement, as in citations and reviews, according to academic and institutional norms. At least that is the conclusion a *Chronicle of Higher Education* columnist drew from interviews with administrators and scholars. While one acknowledged that the short book “might actually prompt us to rethink some of the fundamental assumptions about productivity and achievement,” most anticipated advising younger colleagues to adhere to the long-form tradition, leaving publishing innovation to well-established scholars (Cassuto, 2013). Advocates of short books see more than a genre experimentation in the format. As is suggested below, there is the opportunity also to influence the method of scholarship itself.

### **The *Very Short Introductions***

An experienced observer, though mindful of recent university press experiments with short books, says that the format has languished for decades (Esposito, 2012; see also Colestock, 2012). The *Very Short Introductions* (VSIs) series from Oxford, launched in 1995, has been an exception. The *New Yorker*'s Kathryn Schulz (2017) explored the reasons why the series has found a sizeable global audience: over 500 titles, translated into 49 languages, have sold over 8 million copies.

Schulz read a dozen VSIs carefully, and “skimmed or skipped around” in two dozen more. Looking at the whole series she sees a kind of encyclopedia, the latest in many efforts since antiquity to represent all of human knowledge (or nearly so). But of course readers may know just a few of the VSIs, turning to them for the essentials of a subject. In her account of what it is like to read one Schulz hints at the appeal of “reading whole” favored by McClung. “Looking at [the books], it strikes you that, if you had to hop a flight from D.C. to Cleveland, you could be well on your way to mastering the basics of

Microeconomics or Medieval Britain by the time you arrived” (Schulz, p. 76).

Schulz learned from Oxford that the series is “basically limitless.” About 50 new titles are added annually and, for now, another 500 titles are in various stages of planning. Is the “very short” format a liability in the digital age? According to Schulz the most impressive VSIs are “the ones that shine despite their lackluster subjects.” Her favorite among those she read is Peter Ungar’s *Teeth: A Very Short Introduction* (2014). Its prose is elegant, and sometimes even humorous, but it is best when convincing us—succinctly—“why such an unprepossessing topic should command our attention.” There is the intellectual achievement, in “command” of a subject, that McClung insisted could be found in a short book as well as a long-form one.

The *Very Short Introductions* may dominate the territory of short books but there are now other scholarly, commercial, and independent publishers making claims of their own: for example, University of Minnesota Press *Forerunners*; Stanford University Press *Briefs*; Princeton University Press *Shorts*; Rutgers University Press *Pinpoints* and *Quick Takes*; Palgrave Macmillan *Pilots*; and Cambridge University Press *Elements*.

### **“Transforming Authorship”**

In promoting its short books as modern pamphlets the Prickly Paradigm Press ([prickly-paradigm.com](http://prickly-paradigm.com)) intends to give “serious authors free rein to say what’s right and what’s wrong about their disciplines and about the world, including what’s never been said before.” The result will be “intellectuals unbound, writing unconstrained and creative texts about meaningful matters.” Presumably, academic publishers have the same hope for their conventional long-form print monographs. But plainly the short book prompts the publishing imagination (if you will) toward the wishes of scholars to invigorate their composing practices, and even their intellectual and scientific vocations.

At the very least the short book can offer significant operational change in writing and publishing. Cambridge University Press invites contributions to its new *Elements* series of short books by highlighting the novelty of the new format, or “an opportunity to develop a theme in greater detail than is possible in a traditional journal article, yet more concisely than would be expected in a full length book.” There

is also the speed of publication after peer review (within 12 weeks of submission of the final manuscript) as well as visibility to individual readers and libraries, the latter as part of “digital collections” offered by CUP. In fact, the e-book is the primary format, with print “on demand.” But that limit is also presented as an advantage in “platform functionality.” Thus these short books are updatable annually and can display video and audio files. Cambridge wants “original, cutting edge insights into frontier topics.” That is precisely what a *Forerunner* author says about the impact of working in the new format. University of Texas anthropologist Thomas Hartigan claims there is more to the short book than “marketing metaphors.” His work on *Aesop’s Anthropology* (2014) guided him toward the view of a book as a “platform” for his thinking as it evolved and his interactions with colleagues grew richer via social media, making his work “remarkably generative beyond the book itself.”

Minnesota sees *Forerunners* as a form of “gray publications that [can] transform authorship” (Kasprzak & Smyre, 2017, p. 97). “Gray” refers to work–conference presentations, white papers, organizational reports, and “thought in process” digital work that is posted online—that can form the basis of a timely short book. The work is “iterative” and even “drafty,” reflecting what some will see as a publishing heresy in “encouraging authors to become increasingly comfortable with releasing their writing before they’ve perfected it” (p. 93).

### **The Story of the *Charleston Briefings*<sup>1</sup>**

Short books can also be defined by their intended audience. *The Charleston Briefings: Trending Topics for Information Professionals* is a short book series (12,000 to 20,000 words) published by ATG Media, publishers of *Against the Grain*, the longtime publication associated with the Charleston Conference.

The origin of the *Briefings* is in a common complaint about trade business books, which are typically about 50,000 words or 180 pages. I often found that these books had useful information, but that they could have made their point in about a quarter of the length. I heard this criticism over and over from other readers as well and then noticed it in book reviews.

Why are these books published so consistently at 50,000 words if this means they are bloated? It

occurred to me that publishers make decent money on these books when they charge \$25 for the hardback and \$15 for the paperback or Kindle versions. If they allowed the books to be only as long as they needed to be—perhaps 12,000 to 20,000 words!—they would not make anywhere near the same profit.

So, in late 2015, I broached the question of a brief book series with Katina Strauch, publisher of *Against the Grain*. Why not create an e-book series that addresses the professional concerns of the audience that typically comes to the Charleston Conference—librarians, scholarly publishers, vendors who serve those communities—at a length that is appropriate to the content? Rather than padding the book with anecdotes and examples to reach 50,000 words, just let them be the length that works for the content.

Though Katina was enthusiastic, we were told over and over again by experts that publishers had already tried brief book series and that they had been a failure. We were told that, in spite of the obvious fact that many people complain about bloated 50,000-word books, a brief book isn’t long enough to accomplish important work.

We ignored the critics and proceeded with the planning. We decided to make the series open access and to pay for the publication process with sponsorships. The books would be written in the readable style of quality journalism, but with content that was suitable to scholarly publishing. I found and worked with four different authors to produce briefings on libraries as publishers, library marketing, reading in a digital age, and the challenges of the peer review process. We worked through the purpose and audience of the series, the reason for the brief format, and the need to be both rigorous and readable.

Katina and I brought in people who are knowledgeable about OA publishing for advice and we eventually contacted Michigan Publishing, who already have an e-book platform for open access books, to work on the design, editing, and distribution of the books.

I worked with each author on the first draft of their briefings and they revised based on my suggestions. I then found a peer reviewer and the authors revised again based on their comments. I then handed the

books off to Michigan Publishing and we worked with the authors to be sure that the manuscript was correct and that we met our deadlines. We unveiled the series at the Charleston Conference in 2017.

The reception of the series among readers has been very positive (e.g., Gotschall, 2018; Orcutt, 2018). Readers have acknowledged the timeliness and value of the topics, the qualifications of the authors, and the quality of the research and writing. Everyone has said that the length is appropriate to the topics and that the Charleston Briefings accomplish their intended goals well. As editor in chief of the series, this was very satisfying.

Imagine my surprise, then, to learn at my own university that *The Charleston Briefings* are not books and that I am not their editor! How did this come about?

The library in which I work has an annual Book Recognition Event to honor the authors and editors of books published in the previous year. I decided to submit the Briefings to the event. After all, I was the editor in chief of the series and they were books.

Yet, when I submitted the four *Briefings* I was told by the committee that they are too short to be books and, since I didn't contribute an introduction to each volume, I can't be called the editor! I asked if they would consider a novella a short novel? If so, why are the *Briefings* not short books?

I asked whether, having planned the series from the start, worked with publishing consultants, located the authors, worked with the authors to understand the series format, talked with them about their topics, read and critiqued the first draft, found the peer reviewer, worked with the authors on the peer reviewer's critiques, worked with the authors on the printer's drafts and comments, and made sure that the final draft made it to the publisher on time . . . I might not be considered the editor?

They said no.

I could only accept their verdict. We made an amicable decision to disagree. But this tempest in a teacup

does suggest that, for all the changes that have taken place in publishing and the fact that short books are becoming more popular every day, the status of short books is not settled.

## Conclusion: Prospects for Short Books

Prospects for the success of short books, as publishers acknowledge, will reflect the interest of scholars in writing them and then how well they can be marketed, including those intended for librarians. All books face the problem of finding audiences, even those designed for particular ones and presented in the format of a series. Short books may have an advantage in what they demand of time and their adaptability to digital formats and mobile technology. While conventional academic audiences may be uncertain about their authority in relation to standard monographs, other audiences may find in them paths to ideas (and to scholarship) they had been unwilling to take. That is what Oxford's *Very Short Introductions* appear to demonstrate. Series of short books from other publishers often feature more specialized titles. Of course, open access publishing (not an option at Oxford but a feature at some of the other publishers, including the *Charleston Briefings*) will make them accessible in ways that conventional monographs can't match. But that only highlights the question of financial sustainability.

The fate of short books is part of the turmoil in publishing, as advances in devices and software put pressure on academic publishers as well as commercial ones. The announcement of "Tiny Books" by Penguin Random House in 2018 means that readers of popular fiction will be invited to read short books in horizontal flip form, in the manner of swiping on a mobile device (Alter, 2018). That is a format unlikely to be welcomed even by adventurous scholars. And experimentally inclined university press professionals may be no happier about such a future: "It's easy to wonder how something will look in print. It's harder to think first about how something will look on a phone" (Kasprzak & Smyre, 2017, p. 97). Short books are more than novelties. They prompt us to think about what we want in scholarly and publishing innovation.

## Note

1. This section is presented in the first person by Ismail.

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