

Rome wasn't built in a day and neither are books; the secret is starting

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At a reception, prior to a lecture I recently gave at Raleigh's North Carolina Museum of History, I found myself in an exchange not uncommon on such occasions. My interlocutor, a seasoned professional with a background in writing, was telling me that she had occasionally contemplated writing a book herself. But, upon further thought, she always found the undertaking overwhelmingly daunting.

Our exchange was brief, and she never described her book idea. So, I have no idea whether her story would make a book or if she possessed the requisite temperament and discipline to bring it off. But I'd heard that "overwhelming daunting" excuse before and thus had a ready retort: "That's where you go wrong," I said. "Rome wasn't built in a day. And neither can your book."



Author Tom Chaffin.

At least when you're starting out, I continued, you're not working on a book. You work on chapters.

Drawing on your initial research, develop a chronological outline, then re-dive into the research, and eventually, from that outline, select a chapter. Wherever it falls in the outline — beginning, middle or end — doesn't matter. Just pick out the chapter that you feel most ready to write — and start writing there.

Write for an hour. Or the rest of the day. Books don't write themselves, and the more hours you put in, the sooner the work finishes. And when the next day arrives or as soon as possible, return to your keyboard and pick up where you left off.

Of course, there's far more to it than that. The demystification of the processes that go into creating a book of non-fiction-narrative — from finding the right idea to poring through successive edits of the completed manuscript — cannot be distilled in a brief column. But once you're at work on that chapter, guided by the trusty outline that you designed, the enterprise suddenly feels less daunting. After all, you're now vested in a

project. You're no longer contemplating work on something. You're now actually working on something that's now gloriously underway — that long-contemplated first book!

Before I wrote books, I spent my early professional years in journalism — in Atlanta where I grew up — and successively, Savannah, New York, San Francisco and Paris.

During those years, before the Internet shredded free-lance fees, I worked mainly for magazines as a freelancer. Early on, during that period, I also completed a B.A. in English from Georgia State University and an M.A. in American Studies from New York University.

But pining to write longer works, I returned mid-career to graduate school and, in 1995, at Emory University, completed a doctorate in U.S. history. Since then, I've been intermittently tempted by academe's perquisites; and, from time to time, have found work there. But from the day I began my doctoral work, beyond its intellectual enrichments, I viewed my own doctorate as a union-card to enable my transition from magazine journalist to book author.

For my dissertation — on a failed 19th-century U.S. invasion of Cuba, a narrative that became my first book — I completed a manuscript begun while I was still earning my living as a journalist. Beyond that, weary of editors who (in retrospect with good reason) cut from my magazine pieces my dives into the historical past, I eventually realized that I longed to be able to freely explore the past — and, at that, on far larger canvases than those afforded by magazine assignments.

For going on three decades now, I've thus been writing books, character-driven, non-fiction narratives of history and biography. Though I've piled up no financial riches, I've never looked back. Books and the world of books, as well as the people and places I've come to know through the work, have afforded my life a spiritual and intellectual richness that I never imagined growing up amid modest circumstances in postwar suburban Atlanta.

Equally treasured are the vicarious pleasures of travels in time and space that attend living with — of immersing oneself — for three or more years in a historically distant milieu or life. Owning that world, I've sailed to distant, tropical climes with Charles Darwin; explored the American West with John Frémont; traveled in Ireland and Britain with Frederick Douglass; experienced the American and French Revolutions with Thomas Jefferson and the Marquis de Lafayette; completed a global voyage aboard a Confederate raiding ship; and dived aboard the Confederate submarine "H.L. Hunley."

It's been said that everybody has a book in them. Perhaps. But that doesn't mean book-writing is for everybody. It's no holy calling, and in our era of the Internet, the world hardly suffers from a shortage of reading materials. That said, some books do make the world a better place. Writing them requires a certain temperament, a particular set of skills, self-discipline, and, for the long haul, a tolerance for being alone. Not to make too fine a point of it, but, for me, the COVID lockdown, in many ways, came as a redundancy.

In recent months, taking a small break from my usual routines, I've found myself reveling Rip-Van-Winkle-like in once-familiar pleasures, including socializing more regularly with friends and accepting lecture and teaching invitations. Even so, I have little doubt that I'll eventually find my way back to old habits and old solitudes. In Leonard Cohen's sage words, "Owning everything, I have nowhere to go."

Tom Chaffin is the author, most recently, of "Odyssey: Young Charles Darwin, the Beagle, and the Voyage that Changed the World" (Pegasus Books).

