Sometimes, I fear I’ve crossed over to the dark side, you know the place. It's where publishers and university writing centres are encouraging us to go, in a quest to find that elusive non-specialist reader. There are rewards and some costs in taking that advice to toss out the kind of writing with which we’ve become familiar while crafting theses – cautious writing hedged in by deference, theory and footnotes.

Once, a thesis would have been the key to a university-based teaching and research career, but no longer. This can be a disheartening thought, until you remember that historians are writers, and after the thesis that can lead us to rewarding places.

**Human Remains**

My first book, *Human Remains*, grew out of my PhD thesis. It was published three years after I'd completed the degree (in Australia, as *Human Remains: Episodes in Human Dissection*, and a year later in the UK and US by Yale University Press, with the sub-title *Dissection and its Histories*).

*Human Remains* tells the story of how medical men obtained bodies to dissect during the nineteenth century, when the only legal supply was small and came from the gallows. Most medical men and their students therefore necessarily obtained bodies elsewhere. Corpses were snatched from graves and hospital dead-houses, and sometimes people were murdered to turn their bodies into objects anatomists would buy.

The book’s narrative moves back and forth between Britain and the far-flung colony of Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania), where men dissected the bodies of those who had been displaced from families and friends by transportation or immigration, as well as Aboriginal bodies which they reduced to parts to send to one museum or another.

**Taking some risks with the thesis**

In the midst of researching and writing the thesis on which this book is based, I attended a two-week course at the Australian National University in Canberra called ‘Sleight of Sight’. It brought together PhD students from different disciplines around Australia, who spent a fortnight together thinking about and practising our writing. Greg Dening and Donna Merwick were among those who inspired us. When I returned to Melbourne I knew I wanted to write the thesis with a book in mind. This involved taking some risks. Your supervisor may advise you not to do it, recommending you write a more conventional thesis, and later spending time turning it into a book. I think that would be a harder task, which involves a different kind of risk. You might find the re-writing such a chore it will never get done.
Fresh from ‘Sleight of Sight’, I began to write with specific readers in mind. They were people who enjoyed literary non-fiction, and were curious about the past.

The risk in writing with them, rather than the examiners in mind was that the thesis would then not be easy to categorise as one thing or another. I was writing about telling episodes of dealing with the dead, but not in the way of medical history, or history and philosophy of science, or anthropology, though my research drew on each of these. There was therefore a danger that it might be examined by someone who would want it to fit neatly into their own disciplined way of reading, for theses are not meant to disconcert.

Both of my examiners noticed I’d taken risks. One liked that, writing ‘this is not a study that plays it safe’, but was bold in its design and a ‘welcome departure from the cookie-cutter familiarity in approach and execution that too often characterises theses’. The other examiner would have preferred me to write in a different way. He began a sentence with ‘MacDonald is a masterful storyteller, but’. Ah, the but. The thesis did not fit in the place he had prepared for it. (This examiner doesn’t know it, but I now use him as a critical device, taking perverse pleasure in writing in ways of which he would disapprove).

Attracting a publisher’s eye

After that came the daunting task of attracting a publisher’s eye. I wrote a book proposal – chapter outline, sample chapter, author resumé, and a list of the kind of people who would read this book – and sent it off to Melbourne University Publishing (MUP), choosing them because they were no longer a strictly academic press, and were encouraging academics to reach for a wider audience. Of course, I heard nothing back. My proposal had joined all those others in the pile of unsolicited manuscripts which publishers hate to receive.

Happily ignorant of this fact (I’d never heard of a ‘slush pile’), while I waited for a response I wrote and submitted two journal articles and – more importantly as it turned out – a feature article for the *Age*. At the time, newspapers were reporting scandalous behaviour that had occurred during autopsies in England and Australia. Then the German anatomist Gunther von Hagens provocatively set up shop in an abandoned brewery in London’s Brick Lane, where he performed an unlawful dissection, advertising it as the first to be held in London since 1832. That was my cue. I knew about those early nineteenth-century dissections, which were performed on murderers’ bodies. So I contacted the *Age* and asked if they’d like a feature article about them, which they did.

The best outcome was that someone at MUP read the article and retrieved my book proposal from the slush pile.

Making Human Remains

Within a month, I had a contract, a deadline, and a list of advice to follow. I had to get rid of any remnants of academic writing. The literature
review was the first to go – that deadly first chapter, how I enjoyed ridding
myself of it. Next, out went the careful language behind which we hide. The
third instruction was more confronting for an historian: most of the
footnotes had to go, for it seems that non-specialist readers find them
intrusive.

I found this the hardest piece of advice to follow, knowing that
historians would also read Human Remains, and might judge it harshly for an
insufficiency of footnotes. History is an evidence-based discipline, and
footnotes matter. They allow readers to follow in our footsteps, but they
also accomplish more than that. They show how diligent we have been in
our research – where we’ve travelled, what obscure material we have tracked
down – and so are a measure of our own authority, though they can also be
our undoing. The footnotes in some Australian histories have allowed
hostile readers to snuffle around in the undergrowth looking for mishaps.

The final piece of advice MUP gave me was to bring the story into the
present. That was also a testing moment. It had taken me four years to
research and write about dissection during the nineteenth century, and my
publisher wanted the twentieth century completed in three weeks! In the
end, that tight schedule was good for me, it made me write boldly. I plunged
readers into a new beginning, in that Brick Lane brewery, to witness von
Hagens’ dissect a man named Peter Miess. Then I wrote a new closing
chapter which dealt with the scandals that continued to erupt: children’s
bodies being secretly eviscerated, corpses in a morgue being attacked with
hammers and knives. I could go on.

And in writing the new material, I finally learned what Human Remains
was all about: it illuminated the roots of this confronting, contemporary
behaviour, which lay in the culture of the nineteenth-century dissecting
rooms in which some surgeons came to feel a sense of entitlement to other
people’s bodies.

A book’s after-life

When Human Remains was published, I thought that was the end of
something, but it was just the beginning. I soon had to learn to do more
unfamiliar things, like being interviewed by journalists, opening newspapers
and journals with heart in mouth to read reviews of the book, and hearing
from readers who contacted me.

Journalists are amongst a book’s first readers, and the key to gaining
others, so it’s important to prepare for the questions they might ask.
Invariably, in my case, one is ‘what started you investigating this macabre
topic?’ Fortunately, I could remember, and it was a good story. I’d been in
a museum, looking at all kinds of objects, and coming across some body
parts displayed in jars. I retreated to the coffee shop – as you do – and sat
there wondering whose bodies those had once been part of, and how they
had become available for display.

Another set of questions historians can expect from the media relates
to the contemporary relevance of our research – what it reveals about
current moral and social issues. I’ve been asked questions like, whose
bodies are being used now for dissection; what do I think about the ethics
of organ transplants; what are the racial implications of the human genome project; what will stop unlawful practices with the dead? These questions lead down a path towards current policy and law. I’ve even been asked to predict the future (and find, depressingly, that where the use and abuse of the dead is concerned, I can).

Books also enter the public realm when they are reviewed. If they’re written for a non-specialist audience, being reviewed in broadsheets and magazines counts for as much as reviews in academic journals, though to maintain a toehold in the academy we need good reviews in both places. So far, *Human Remains* has managed it, in the US, UK and Australia – even in the *New York Times*, which was an unexpected delight, especially because the reviewer wrote ‘the narrative … sparks and scorns and spins you around … Though MacDonald’s approach is studious, her book is never weighed down by its scholarship’.

The only exception has been one Australian academic reviewer who commented ‘This book does not seem to have been written primarily for historians’. Well no, it wasn’t. But it does need to work for them too. Fortunately, other historians have been less disconcerted at reading a history written for a wider audience, and *Human Remains* has taken on a pleasurable after-life. It was short-listed for the Ernest Scott Prize, and won the Victorian Premier’s Prize for a First Book of History.

As for those non-specialist readers, it’s been a surprise and delight to hear from some of them and learn what it is about historical writing they most enjoy. It boils down to wanting to feel while they read, that they have entered the past, and the sense they can do that in books that are attentive to people and place and have a strong narrative. Coincidentally, I think this is the most enjoyable kind of history to write. *Human Remains* narrates a past by focusing on the actual people who came to lie on nineteenth-century dissecting tables, and the surgeon-anatomists who dismembered them. One reader told me of her relief at finding the book was intellectually stimulating without being ‘bogged down’ in theory (though in London, the *Sunday Telegraph* reviewer said he had unearthed Foucault ‘loitering in the index’).

**New beginnings**

Writing a book gives you a kind of authority you do not get from writing a thesis alone. In my case, this has converted into a successful application for an ARC Discovery Project and Postdoctoral Fellowship. I’m sure it was having a book contract that tipped my application over into the successful ones.

At the same time, I’m writing for non-academic publications, like the *Age, Australian, New Scientist,* and the *Australian Literary Review*. My advice for historians would be to take each of these opportunities as it arises (and it will). No matter how obscure our topics, they are relevant to contemporary debates. When James Bradley’s novel, *The Resurrectionist* was published recently – it is about body-snatching — I could pen an article contrasting what is possible in two different kinds of writing about the past – history and historical fiction – and this article then entered a larger and ongoing debate.
Sometimes, though, especially for early career researchers, writing for both academic and non-specialist readers can feel like walking a tightrope. You fear falling off, on one side or the other: being dismissed by academics (‘a masterful storyteller but’), or forgetting the importance of crafting each sentence to seduce a wider audience (Foucault loitering).

The trick is to be as adventurous with our academic writing as we can be, while also writing good history for the more popular publications which are read by people who are curious about the past. And getting the balance right is always a work in progress.