

I DIDN'T SEE IT COMING

There were 15 of us shoehorned into a meeting space the size of a bathroom. It was lunch break, on the last day of a conference on democratic transitions or some such, in Dakar. It was early 1994. Samir Amin, the Egyptian economist and author of *Eurocentrism* and dozens of other books, was presiding.

"And you, Marais," he said, "you're in charge of the book on South Africa; we'll talk about the structure later."

"I think there's been a mistake," I protested. "Everyone here is an academic. You write essays and books – that's what you do. I'm a journalist. I write articles. I can't do this."

"That doesn't make sense," Amin said, with a dismissive wave. "You'll write the book. We'll talk later."

We talked. I relented. I wrote the book like a journalist would. Or like I thought a journalist would: Gather information, sift and filter. I read, did interviews, read again, then began writing... only to see more questions proliferate. So I read and discussed more, wrote, read more, wrote, realised there was more

reading and talking and thinking to be done. You get the picture.

That's when I realised Amin was wrong: This really is different. Not so

much because you're now writing 120 000 words, as opposed to 1 200 or 4 000 (yes, there was a time

when 4 000-word pieces

got published – and read by people besides family and close friends); it's not the sheer toil that's so unique. It's the liberty it involves.

A book deadline isn't like a newsroom deadline. It's not that hulking presence that sucks the air out of the room, leaves you cross-eyed and flinching. For most of the process, it is a faint, distant glimmer. Between it and you lies this vast expanse of freedom – to experiment, pursue ideas, change your mind, discover that a passing remark flares into pages of discussion, or that pages of text should invert into a footnote. Most of all, you acquire the freedom – the luxury – to reflect, to "lose" yourself in the process of thought.

I tried to finish my first book, *South Africa: Limits to Change*, while senior producer on SABC Radio's AM Live back in the mid-1990s. Awash in the flicker of daily news, I figured this was the perfect launch point for longer-form writing. The facts lay close at hand; all that was needed was the time to stitch them together. Wrong.

The bustle of daily, even weekly, news and analysis involves a different arrangement of time and space. It pins you in the realm of the immediate and the literal. Room for reflection is cramped, and this imposes a certain obviousness, which a rare few journalists consistently manage to escape. You're not really thinking; you're making judgment calls, a lot of it instinctive and instantaneous.

A book, I found, involved a more languid, "dreamy" process. You migrate from the literal to the lateral, the angles of approach multiply, and thinking becomes more elastic, fractal, unpredictable, narcotic even.

Magazine journalism can involve something similar, but within a much more regimented order. I experienced book writing as a spellbound, trance-like affair. Still do. And I still can't find that zone on-demand in the hour or two I lever from another schedule. I locate it only when I have the time to lose myself in it.

Another difference emerged. I was now constructing (and dismantling) arguments, marshalling factual data to test

or compose them. Those data were not simply illustrative, the decorations one applies to an opinion, nor did they point decisively to simple, singular conclusions. Often they were gateways to other circuits of questions, and yet more exploration.

News journalism, I felt, had prepared me poorly for working with data, especially statistical data. In the downsized newsroom, the tyranny of deadlines invites a casual approach to facts. Often they're not even checked, and primary sources are neither sought nor provided. Repetition seems to confer on data the status of factual "truth".

If anything, that degeneration has worsened. The dissolving barrier between news and opinion seems to sanction ever more lax and opportunistic handling of factual data. Odd, because the internet makes it so much easier and quicker to check and contest "facts". But it has also, of course, spawned a vast excrescence of showy, flippant opinion, much of it in the form of blogs. The upshot is a bigger, more frantic contest for readers' attention (and time), which encourages an even more cavalier approach, and which rewards flashy notions over careful exposition. It also delivers on the interactive appeal of writing in ways that books cannot rival.

Almost all journalism nowadays enters the public realm in both inked and digitised formats. The latter invite readers to comment, signal their dis/like, and insert an article into the chitter of social media. It exposes journalists to readers as never before, all of which titillates – including the disapproval. Like all performers, journalists crave attention – and even criticism gratifies the ego.

On that front, long-form writing disappoints. For the most part you're deprived of an audience. It will arrive at some point, but by then the thrill will feel faint. Your book might trigger pride (or surprise – I often have no conscious memory of having written entire sections, and find myself reading them as a stranger would), it might even encounter admiration. But it never acquires the immediacy, the quick "high" of journalism.

So the sprawl of time and the freedom that makes writing a book such a distinctive and bewitching experience comes at price. Whereas journalism is a social act, long-form writing is a solitary, almost hermetic one. Which makes book writing – for all the reflection, self-questioning and ambiguity it involves – an extremely declarative act. Yet it separates the author from the witness.

Recompense arrives in the form of recognition, though that positions you at the mercy of readers. It's an exacting but proper type of democracy. Your book demands not five or 15 minutes of a readers' attention, but claims entire days of their lives. Leaving aside publishers' marketing (meager to absent for serious non-fiction), those readers decide the book's fate, as they should. They, and pure happenstance – some event or development that directs topical interest toward the book.¹ You can work the lecture and interview circuit, but it won't shift the basic arc of that destiny. And much of that, oddly, occurs by word-of-mouth, slowly and incrementally. By the time you realise your book's done surprisingly well, you can barely remember writing it.

What will have changed, though, is the perception of others. Suddenly, there are invitations to conferences and seminars (to speak, rather than only observe and listen), requests for interviews, slots on talk shows, pleas for articles and soundbytes. Emails arrive addressed to "Prof Marais", and interviewers decide that you're an "economist" or "public health expert" – even when you're nothing of the sort.

One is taught to associate books – and their authors – with a certain assuredness, a sense that the written text is basically a transcription of knowledge and insights that mill, more or less fully formed, in the author's mind. That may apply to writers in academia, but not, I think, to those who stay journalists at heart.

What we "journo-writers" bring to the craft is curiosity, a kind of puzzle-solving monomania, and the arrogant confidence that we can crack the code, any code. The pleasure of writing, of materialising a book is not so much the writing of it, but the process of discovering what you write: the exploration, the hunt.

The rest feels incidental... until you feel the heft of the published volume, and find yourself wondering, "How did that happen?"

Hein Marais' new book South Africa Pushed to the Limit is published by UCT Press and Zed Books.

1. When I wrote a short book on AIDS policy in South Africa in early 2000 (*To the Edge*), for example, nobody knew that Thabo Mbeki would embroil himself and the government in AIDS "denialism". Serendipity meant the book got outsized attention. Five years later, a much better book of mine (*Buckling: The Impact of AIDS in South Africa*) encountered none of that good fortune.

