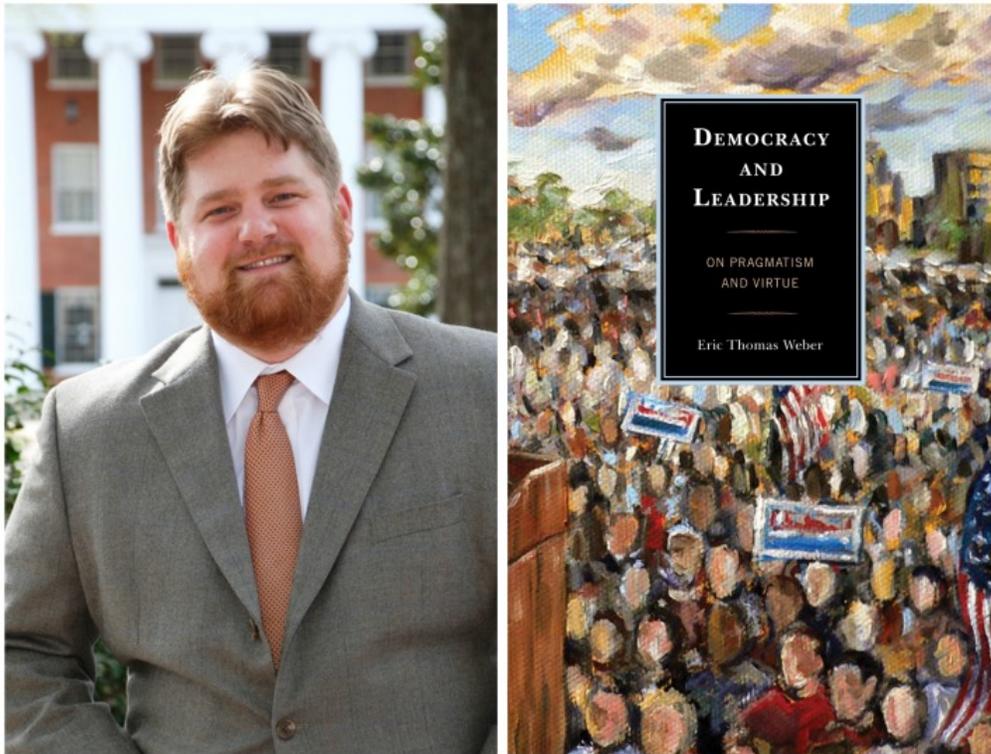


Interview With Dr. Eric Thomas Weber @erictweber

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Southern Authors Interview With Dr Eric Thomas Weber



Where were you born?

I was born in Washington, D.C., at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where my father was serving. What brought my family to Mississippi was an exciting job in the department of Public Policy Leadership at the University of Mississippi.

When did you start writing and what inspired you to start?

For me, writing means mainly two things, but they're connected on a spectrum. I practiced academic writing from high school through my doctoral studies in Philosophy. My writing for audiences beyond the academy really was motivated by my philosophical hero, John Dewey. Dewey was an able technical thinker, but he wrote a great deal for outlets like Harper's, the Nation, Scribner's Magazine, etc. He was the quintessential public philosopher and public intellectual of his time. The motivations for his writings beyond the academy were rooted in his democratic philosophy. I try to follow in his footsteps, which is why I began writing for newspapers and online publications. My public writing really got

some speed in 2010.

When did you first consider yourself a writer?

I suppose I was an aspiring writer when I started work here in Oxford in 2007. My career is certainly the life of the university professor, but quite often that can mean thinking of yourself as a writer. I really thought of myself as a budding writer when I began writing articles for newspapers and pitching books to literary agents. In academia, you generally don't go through an agent, submitting your work directly to publishers instead. So, when I began planning books for wider audiences, ones for which I would likely need an agent, I suppose that's when I really started thinking of my future as a writer. I would say I'm still only in one of the early stages. My first books were primarily contributions to scholarly debates, though I've always worked to show how theory connects to real life and practical application. My first two books helped to prepare me for the next steps of my writing. My third and most recent book, *Democracy and Leadership* has attracted a good bit of attention beyond the academy. That's starting to make me feel like "a writer."

Do you see writing as a career?

If you use an expansive sense of the term "career," sure. If one means something like the idea of writing as one's primary or sole source of income, I would need to qualify my answer. If you think about it, getting tenure as a professor requires writings, in most fields anyway. So part of what can make or break your career is your scholarly writing. The life of the professor involves a lot of other kinds of work, much of which is teaching. All that said, in the big picture, yes, I do see writing as my career. After all, I teach courses on my area of specialty, on subjects connected to my research. So I teach about things that I write about. It's an ideal arrangement for writing and for teaching, really, at least if you can get or make enough focused time to write.

What inspired you to write your first book?

My first book was based on a significant revision of my dissertation. I thought that the dissertation had something important to contribute to debates in my field, so I reworked it for a few years. It's called *Rawls, Dewey, and Constructivism*. It sounds technical, and honestly, it is. Some of its central themes can be explained simply, though. Constructivism is a term for thinking about how people come to form concepts, to have ideas and knowledge. When a baby thinks peekaboo is fun and startling, it's because the child has yet to develop a basic construction about objects and the fact that when they disappear they can come back – "object permanence." Other concepts are much more complex, built upon numerous other constructions and concepts. The examples of greatest interest to me included what it means to be a "person" and also what "justice" means.

A great thinker on the subject, John Rawls, wrote an influential set of works on the topic, and he seemed to be on the fence about how to think about the origin of concepts like justice. The great educational and political philosopher John Dewey had a great deal to say about how people construct concepts. My first book connects the insights of these two thinkers to show a way to address the problems I saw in Rawls's hesitations about constructivism.

Though these are technical and abstract issues, I was curious about them. There are so many things we don't know about human experience. Studying constructivism seemed to push the envelope as far as I could push it in order to understand human experience and both how and why people's understandings of the world can come out so differently. I wanted to arrive at my own understanding of the basics of human nature and psychology, to reach and feel for the limits and origins of what we can know. Studying constructivism has helped me situate my thinking in the history of philosophy, which has profoundly influenced all of my work since.

Can you tell us about your challenges in getting your first book published?

My experience may be unhelpful for some writers, because my first book was published by an academic press. Some of my challenges were the same for any first author. They say it's hardest to land your first book. That's absolutely right. My first publisher wanted to see the proposal for my second book and issued me a contract for it. So, it was clearly the first book that was hard to land.

For the first book, I made a list of 30 presses and submitted proposals to 10 at a time. In academia, publishers will generally tell you that it's ok to submit your proposal simultaneously to other presses. If and when they invite you to submit the full manuscript, at that point many don't want you sending it to other presses simultaneously.

I went down my list. The main challenge was to stay positive even when I heard no from many great places. A mentor and friend said, "You only need one." He was right. In the end I had two publishers express serious interest and I went with the one I preferred.

How many books have you written? Which is your favorite?

I've written three books, or four if you count a manuscript that's under review. Fingers crossed. My favorite book so far is *Democracy and Leadership*. It's certainly generated the largest response, by which I mean invitations to travel and give talks about the book. That's been exciting. People, so far mostly at colleges and universities, but not only, have wanted to hear about my theory of democratic leadership, something which people still today think is a contradiction. It was a very difficult book to write in a number of ways, but the enormous amount of work seems to have paid off.

Talk about your most recent book. How did you come up with the title?

Democracy and Leadership: On Pragmatism and Virtue presents a theory of leadership drawing on insights from Plato's *Republic*, while abandoning his authoritarianism in favor of John Dewey's democratic thought. The book continues the democratic turn for the study of leadership beyond the incorporation of democratic values into old-fashioned views about leading. The completed democratic turn leaves behind the traditional focus on a class of special people. Instead, leadership is understood as a process of judicious yet courageous guidance, infused with democratic values and open to all people.

The title for the book pays homage to John Dewey. One of Dewey's most influential works was titled *Democracy and Education* (scholarly edition, free online edition). He showed how invaluable each one was for the other, as well as how we needed to rethink education, letting go of outmoded views about it. My project took a similar approach, but for thinking about leadership. The aim is to let go of outdated ways of thinking about leadership. At the same time, one of the great philosophers, Plato, had so much of value to offer on the subject. The key was to follow Dewey's guidance in updating Plato's ideas about the virtues of the good society for the sake of democratic leadership.

How is this title published? (Self-Published or through a publisher)

It was published by Lexington Books, a division of the Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, in November of 2013. Its first release is marketed especially to scholars and academic libraries, which typically have significant book budgets. The press will come out with a more affordable paperback edition within roughly a year.

What drove your decision to publish this way?

Lexington Books has put out a lot of books that I admire. They do good work. They have huge distribution around the world. And, they were a second press to believe in my work, which I thought would be of value for my writing trajectory. It also didn't hurt that I liked the design options for their books.

Is there a message in your book that you want readers to grasp?

Yes. It's a mistake to think that leadership is just for a select group of people. That's a way of denying one's own responsibility to speak up, participate, and help direct public efforts. The better way to think of leadership is to see it as a process of guidance, done best when following certain key virtues outlined in the book.

Are experiences based on someone you know, or events in your own life?

It's a work of non-fiction, but yes, I certainly draw on my own life experiences. Even more so, I drew on as much

research as I could get my hands on and read. I found myself surprised over and over by what I found when checking my assumptions or looking for examples of things I was talking about. That's part of the point of research. For me, it's always a lot of fun – looking for information about things I'm interested in and care about.

What was the hardest part of writing your book?

This time around, I struggled with the introduction. I had written an introduction and then felt dissatisfied with it in a big way. It needed a lot of revisions for flow, removing repetition, etc. I'm one of those writers who needs to start somewhere, however rough, and then sometimes hack it to pieces. When I realize that I disagree with something I wrote, I learn a lot in the process of figuring out why. When I can answer that question well, it's straightforward to figure out what I should have said.

Did you learn anything from writing your book and what was it?

Absolutely. The main thing I learned is that sometimes to take the time you need to focus on a big project, it's ok to put other things on hold – even if some people get mad about it. I tend to juggle a ton of things and want to keep them all running smoothly. In this case, I had to be ok with either letting some things drop or with delegating. I also had to push myself hard to say no more often, or to see whether someone else could help me. It was a big effort for me to change that behavior, but it also gave me the time to focus and get the project done.

If you had to do it all over again, would you change anything in your latest book?

It was so much work. The idea of having to do it over again sounds like having lost all that work. I'd rather not imagine that scenario. Seriously. It's too upsetting for a hypothetical...

Do you have a new book coming out soon?

I am presently working on 5 book projects, with one main book on the front burner. None of these are scheduled for release yet. They're not presently under contract. I'm taking my time on these books and hope to have one of them come out before the end of 2015 or not too long after. There's a chance that one of them – the one that's written and finished – might come out in 2014. We'll see.

What is your favorite social media outlet for marketing/promotions?

I use a combination of LinkedIn, Twitter, and a Facebook author page. I can't say that I have a favorite. They all reach a different audience, yet you can link your accounts in some ways. So far, I've had the smallest draw to my Facebook author page, but probably the deepest impact there. Twitter has tremendous power to spread messages, but I've not yet seen it take off for me. LinkedIn, believe it or not, has yielded the most connections for me, but I suspect that the connections I've made there have not been as deep, in general.

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Describe your writing space. What do you like? What would you change?

Comfortable chair & good computer, first. Next, one innovation made a huge difference. Years ago I read an interview of an author who was photographed in front of his writing desk. I noticed something odd – he had a wide-screen monitor turned 90 degrees. Eureka! I thought. It's such a pain to be writing or editing on a screen that only can show you a thin horizontal strip from the longer page. I tried out his lay out, improved by having two monitors, one vertical and one horizontal, and I was hooked. I could write on the vertical monitor where I could see the whole page and more, and I could see it in a size that's bigger than a sheet of paper. My eyes have been so much more comfortable. I used to get headaches after a lot of writing – no more.

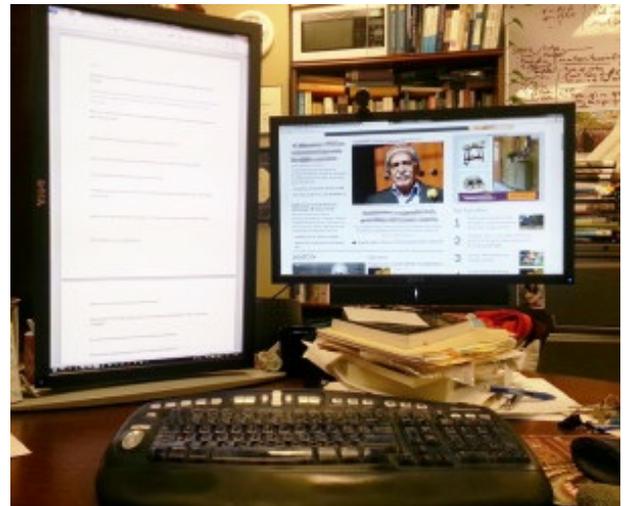
Having two monitors allows you to reference a PDF file or Web site on the standard orientation monitor – the horizontal one – and to do so without minimizing or moving your writing window. It's not uncommon to have two monitors today, of course. But having two kinds of orientation is so useful, since different documents read better in different ways. Newspaper Web sites can be a dream to read on the vertical monitor, though when I'm writing and just want to quote a passage, I'll keep the newspaper site on the horizontal monitor, prioritizing the vertical one for my word processor.

As an academic writer, the value of seeing a passage as well as its relevant footnote is just bliss. But even for general writing, when you're looking at flow, seeing more of the page or all of it makes it so much easier to think through. Here's a picture, including some mess:

As for what I would change, I suppose in usual circumstances (when I'm not on sabbatical), I'd mainly just wish I had more time here for writing. It's pretty fantastic.

Who are some of the authors you particularly admire or who've had some influence on your own writing?

The greatest influence on my writing is a former professor of mine, who remains a friend and mentor, Professor John Lachs of Vanderbilt University. He writes with a poetic elegance that I wish I could achieve. His humor has been called irrepressible, which is right, and he is able to convey complex ideas simply, while always attending to the practical relevance of the ideas he discusses for real life. I aspire to write more like him at every occasion. For one example of a beautiful book, check out *In Love with Life*, a jewel of contemporary philosophy that is among the best guides for how to be happy that I've encountered.



Beyond Professor Lachs, John Dewey's philosophy has had a profound impact on me, though not all of his publications are written in a style that I would emulate. Instead, Dewey inspires me with his engagements as a public intellectual. He was the consummate public philosopher, writing for all manner of magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and more. For one example well-known among Dewey scholars, check out his little gem for the popular

magazine Common Sense, titled “Democracy Is Radical” (which in this scan is the republished version from his Collected Works). He delivered radio addresses and met with groups of many kinds, sharing what were some of the insights that his scholarly work implied for application to real life and policy. I aspire to be both a scholar and public writer in the way that Dewey modeled. I don’t know of any other philosopher of the twentieth century so influential that he or she made it onto a stamp. I should add that one of my books in progress is actually an edited collection of his public writings. It’s been a lot of fun to go through his works for this project.

Several scholars and public intellectuals have also been role models for me. One is Louis Menand, author of Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Metaphysical Club*. Another is Michael Sandel, who has authored several impressive, accessible, and engaging works of philosophy, including *Justice* and *What Money Can’t Buy*.

In the last few months, I heard about Stephen King’s book, *On Writing*. Mississippi author Robin O’Byrant recommended it on her Web site. I ate it up. Believe it or not, I’ve only known King through the movies that were made of his books, at least until now. His book on writing is one of the most enjoyable books I’ve read about the subject. While I’ve only really written nonfiction, he inspired me to start writing a story. A few weeks into working on it for a few hours a day and I’m nearly up to 20k words, with a strong sense of a lot more to come. It’s been a joy and I have Robin and Stephen to thank for that. It’s helpful to put down my long nonfiction projects for a break each day and to let loose telling a story. Robin was right: check out King’s book.

What is the best advice you could give an aspiring author?

Get comfortable receiving criticism. Come to want it, even, though not for doing silly stuff. Want criticism for your best efforts. If you put your work out there, it will be criticized. So, you either want to be criticized, or you don’t want to submit your work for other people’s eyes. John Lachs gave me this advice over a dozen years ago: if you can learn to take criticism well, and even to appreciate it and want it, you can go very far.

Fiction writers may have a different take on this idea – mainly that one needs a thick skin. For nonfiction writers, if you don’t see yourself as engaging in a conversation with others, you come across as arrogant and tone deaf, or worse, purely ideological. If you’re genuinely engaged in a conversation with others, respecting them means being ready to listen and learn from critics. That doesn’t mean giving up your convictions, though having one’s convictions tested is the best way to reaffirm your commitment to them.

Seeing criticism as a source of insight not only makes it easier to take criticism. It makes you want to get your ideas out there. If you’re looking for valuable feedback in what others have to say, it makes it easier – I didn’t say easy – to look past ugly or empty comments. When you search for substance in others’ criticisms, they’ll appreciate it, you’ll learn, and you’ll be ready to send your work out again soon.

List your favorite quotation or words you live by.

“The greatest punishment for those unwilling to rule is to be led by those who are worse.” From Plato’s *Republic*, Book I, 347c.

Thinking outside the box, if you could do/be/accomplish anything in the world, what would it be?

If I could fit it in one lifetime, I would (not in any particularly order): 1) own a set of coffee shops with performance venues which work with my music company/label, Tempest Records, and which feature book readings and signings for touring authors, as well as community and academic engagements. I would 2) continue the life of the author/teacher/scholar, working in a lovely university environment. I would also 3) spend some time working in advocacy for topics I’m passionate about, such as education, justice, accessibility, and the humanities. Connecting a few of these, I think that I would 4) eventually work in some kind of organizational role in my university and community, preferably one that continues to enable outreach efforts and advocacy. And finally, one day, if I think I could help guide public endeavors better than other people in office or running for it, I would 5) go for it and run for that office.

Who is your favorite author and what is it that really strikes you about their work?

For a philosopher, it might sound cliché to say it, but the answer really is Plato. You can pick up his dialogues and often feel as though you're in the room, listening to a conversation people are having now. He wrote 2,400 years ago, yet his works are often still so fresh and lively. His work has rightly been called the cause of a first true enlightenment for humanity – not the one we capitalize. He shared with us conversations that Socrates had with real people, originating philosophy in the context of conversations held in the public sphere. His work ranged from the technical and abstract to the immensely practical and artful. Plus, he wrote in story. There's a reason we still read and teach Plato. Actually there are many reasons.

What book are you reading now?

I just finished Stephen King's *On Writing* and am now reading a work of philosophy called *A Philosophy of Culture*. It's perfect for what I'm working on in my academic writing. I'm about to dive into *The Poisonwood Bible* too, which has been on my to-read list for longer than I'd care to admit.

What is your favorite book by another author?

When I was in my early twenties, I was blown away by *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I read it at a crucial time in my life when I needed to make big decisions about my future. I also truly loved *Hamlet*, but *Zen* was more influential for me.

What books have most influenced your life?

Easy: Epictetus' *Handbook* (aka the *Enchiridion*, great cheap paperback or free online version). Epictetus is one of the most famous stoic philosophers. When I went through the hardest time of my life, which had to do with terrible health problems for my daughter, Epictetus's *Handbook* was powerful. It kept me strong and happy. Stoicism can sound like a harsh philosophy, but because of my mentor Professor Lachs's insights, I see that it's a vital philosophy for happiness, especially if you can balance it with an optimistic and pragmatic outlook (see Lachs's excellent *Stoic Pragmatism*).

Are there any new authors that have grasped your interest?

Carol Dweck's work on the power of *Mindset* for success has been captivating.

What author support groups/activities do you participate in?

I had a great time with a writing group called *Agraphia*. I organized it with my colleagues, following the recommendations I found in a cute, short book called *How to Write a Lot*. I'm starting up again with a colleague next week, actually. It's about getting yourself to plan your writing schedule and projects for a week or two at a time. Then, you meet and talk about your plans. The next time you meet, you say what you accomplished since your last meeting, and then commit to goals to hit by the next meeting. It's a simple idea, but it's also so easy not to plan. It's so easy to push things off. The psychological power of having to set plans and tell others about them, and then to experience the uncomfortable pangs of telling people what you didn't get done... that's a highly motivating set of forces. I'd recommend the practice for anyone who wants to be productive.

Name one entity that you feel supported you outside of family members.

That's easy: my university. A lot of people like to joke: "What are you going to do with 'Philosophy,' teach?" Hah! The joke's on the comedian. The life of the professor can be a dream job for writers (especially if you're super lucky to have one of those coveted tenure-track / tenured positions). Your institution lets you have some time for writing, more or less depending on a lot of things, and also supports your travel to present your work and get feedback. It gives you an amazing library of resources, as well as a wealth of colleagues and scholars to talk to about your work and theirs. I'm truly blessed to have an incredible opportunity and support system for my writing.

Do you have anything specific that you want to say to your readers?

Take an hour from time to time and write a letter to the editor of your newspaper. You may not think that it'll get published, and sometimes it may not. But, you can really have an impact on people, getting them to think about things from your perspective for at least a few minutes, if not a lot more. It's empowering, creative, and fun. Also, believe in the power of ideas to make life better. Ideas can do a lot of harm too, of course, but that's precisely why it's so important that we get things right. That's why writing and reading are crucial moral imperatives of good citizenship, on top of being delightfully fun and rewarding.

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