

# John Moe Conservatizes His Liberal Self

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How to Write a Book Series...

## John Moe Talks About a Little Research and Development

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So, how do you go about setting up interviews, tours etc. and conducting this type of research from which to write such a book? Moe was kind enough to answer some questions via email while on his reading tour.

Which came first--the book idea to Conservatize yourself or the book deal?

I had an agent and we searched for a long time, couple of years, for the right book. It all comes down to the idea in non-fiction and she needed one she knew she could sell. So when I finally hit on the idea to turn myself into a conservative, we worked that up through proposals and sample chapters and that led to the book deal.

Once the idea of taking a hard look at the "right" cropped into your head what was your process for distilling The Experiment into a month long venture? Were you ever concerned that this may not be enough time to get all the information you needed?

My editor, Mauro DiPreta at William Morrow, thought that giving it a finite time line would make for a better structure for the book. Spurlock did a month in Supersize Me and that seemed like a timeline people could get so we went with that. Although if you read the book, I don't get specific on it all that often since there were travel days and days that nothing much of note happened.

Once I started doing it and realized I had 3000-5000 words of notes every day, I wasn't worried it wouldn't be enough time.

How much pre-preparation did you do before your month amongst the conservatives?

I didn't have a whole lot of time to prepare. We signed the deal in April of 2005 and I had to get started in June so I had to plot it all out, make travel plans, set appointments, and arrange the whole thing pretty quickly and that was while I was working full-time in radio. I needed to hand in the manuscript by 12/1/2005 because they wanted it to come out before the mid-term elections.

While sitting at the coffee shop coming up with the parameters for your research (12 of which made it into the book), were there any rules that you later discarded that you'd be willing to talk about?

No, I think they're all in there. There's probably more rules than I even needed but I've always been of the opinion that more rules and restrictions makes for more creativity. If you can write anything about anything, it turns out a mess pretty often, at least in my experiences.

How did you go about setting up interviews etc. for The Experiment? Did you have any assistance from the publisher?

Not really, it was my own thing. A few of them were people I had previous contact with through my radio work and then in a few instances I just emailed and inquired. It helped that I was from a reputable NPR station and could mention that the book was being published by Wm. Morrow/ HarperCollins so they knew I wasn't some kook. Or at least a kook with a big name publisher. I found people to be really amenable to talking to me. Even the ones that didn't work out like George Will or Bob Novak made a sincere effort to accommodate me.

What was your notes taking process? Daily? Hourly?

I would go out and have an experience – test drive an Escalade or interview William Kristol, whatever – and pack the laptop with me. Then I would just write like crazy as soon as it was over so I wouldn't forget anything. Often that was in a coffee shop or even just sitting in my car. Then at the end of the day I would put it all together and make a passing attempt to clean it up and make it into sentences and paragraphs.

I imagine that the process was much like making a documentary in that the story you will write about (edit) reveals itself as you become more involved in The Experiment--was this true for you?

Yes, but I didn't know that and that produced a lot of anxiety. I had ideas of what the through line would be and wrote about that but I didn't really get the big story of it until I was well into editing. I thought it would be about the differences between liberalism and conservatism but it really ended up being about the complexity of human belief and the separation of individual philosophy from party constructs.

Did you have to keep tweaking the format/order or did you see how it would pan right away?

I knew structurally that it would be sequential. Something I didn't realize until I started working on book proposals is how

important the table of contents is. Editors want to know about that as soon as possible because they need to know how it's all going to be put together because that's obviously how it reads. So if you're writing about, like, mustard what's the first chapter? What's the last one? But with something like my book, the first chapter is about the premise of the book, the second is about getting ready for The Experiment, and from there it's all sequential until it ends at dinnertime on the last day.

How many words of notes did you end up with--how much did you cut?

The first draft was about 148,000 words. The final version was about 86,000. I lived in mortal dread that I wouldn't be able to hit the minimum in my contract, which was 65,000. I just couldn't ever imagine writing 65,000 words about anything. But at one point when I was halfway through the timeline and already at 92,000 I knew that would not be a problem.

I found that a lot of what I ended up cutting was me being reflective and interpreting what had happened over the course of the experience. So I'd go to the gun range, tell that story, and then analyze it for another two or three thousand words. When I realized I had to cut it way down (who wants to read a 500 page humor book?), I went through and sliced out almost all the reflection and analysis since I discovered it was all already there in the telling of the stories and cutting it could lead to a lot more action to move things along.

Did you find the editing process with HarperCollins to be a fruitful one--a good back and forth?

Yeah, it was fantastic. I'm someone who's done enough writing, and enough editing too, to not get all that attached to a particular phrase or paragraph or even chapter. I love being edited.

There were some anxieties. I write completely alone, I don't show my work to anyone until I'm satisfied with it, I've never collaborated. So when I handed in the manuscript, no other eyes had ever seen a single word of it. I was terrified that they would say "what the hell is this?! Give us back our advance!" Fortunately, that wasn't the case. Mauro sent me notes, edits, suggestions, and said that I was welcome to defend anything he suggested cutting or resist anything he wanted to add. But that was almost never the case. He understood the book from the beginning, I say in the acknowledgements that he understood it before I really did, and his notes made it better. Even the times that he suggested gutting a whole chapter, I would go back, re-read the chapter and realize that while it was often funny and interesting, it didn't necessarily fit the rest of the book.

Finally, is there anything that ended up not making it into the book that you'd like to share?

I had a really nice time at the Dan Quayle Museum in Indiana. It's a really sweet place made by supporters in his hometown. It's this tiny Norman Rockwell town in Indiana and the museum is in an old Christian Science church. They have all these wonderfully defensive and hostile displays about Murphy Brown and the "potatoe" incident along with memorabilia from every vice-president in American history, most of it purchased on eBay. Just a wonderfully weird and kind of sweet place. Didn't really fit in the rest of what I was doing. Much like Quayle in the modern world.

award-winning highbrow humor website McSweeneys.net. He is also a commentator for NPR's All Things Considered and a regular contributor to the nationwide public radio program Weekend America.

He lives in Seattle, where he hosts several public radio programs dealing in politics, business, technology, literature, and culture.

Some of his short humor pieces have appeared in the anthologies Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans, Mountain Man Dance Moves, and More Mirth of a Nation. This is his first book.