

Marshall Poe Interviews Rob Tempio on the New Books Network Podcast

Marshall Poe (MP)

Hello everybody. This is Marshall Poe and I'm the editor of the New Books Network, and this is an episode of the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast, that's brought to you by Princeton University Press and the New Books Network. Today I'm very happy to say that we have Rob Tempio on the show, and Rob will talk to us about *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers*, which is a wonderful series that is just out from PUP. I encourage you to go look it up on their website and buy all 19, by my count, contributions to it. Rob, welcome to the show.

Rob Tempio (RT)

Thank you for having me Marshall.

MP

My pleasure. Could you begin the interview by telling us a little bit about yourself?

RT

Sure thing, so my name is Robert Tempio. I work at Princeton University Press where I've worked the past 15 years. I'm essentially an acquisitions editor at the Press. My title is publisher, but that doesn't mean much. I basically do the job of an acquisitions editor, which is I acquire books for the Press, in the fields of philosophy, political theory, and what we call the ancient world—which encompasses Classics archaeology ancient history across the whole of the ancient world from the Greco-Roman world to China and other places.

MP

You cover a lot of ground. (laughter)

RT

I do, I couldn't be happier with the arrangement of fields I have. My background is in philosophy. I studied philosophy as an undergraduate and some graduate school, but I cover areas beyond that, and I couldn't be happier with the agglomeration of fields.

MP

Great, that's great. I told you it was going to ask this question because the listeners really want to know. Do you have any advice for people who are pitching books?

RT

(laughter)

It's a tough question to answer. I mean, what one simple thing is, you know, just be as clear as you possibly can, and don't assume that the people you're pitching are going to immediately grasp the whole of what you're talking about, don't assume too much on their part. You know, people in publishing are smart, they're generalists, but they don't know everything so don't just launch in media res and sort of start talking about your project assuming they're going to know. Even your editor, or editors in your field, they may know a lot but they may not know enough about your specific topic so just know it's okay to start with the basics and don't be afraid to sell it! Why is this important? Why is this interesting? Say that upfront. And have a proposal all ready, a book proposal, even a short one is an incredibly important part.

So sometimes people just say, I have a manuscript, are you interested in looking at it? (shared laughter)

RT

It happens quite a bit. So, having a book proposal is essential first step, I think.

MP

Yeah, I've published with a few University Presses and I actually have a Princeton book. I published a book at Princeton, and my only advice to people would be that, they should bear in mind that there are lots of presses. Yeah, many, many. If you've written a good book, it will find a home. So, be brave and prepare.

RT

Yeah, yep.

MP

So, let's move to the *Ancient Wisdom* series. How do you come up with the idea for the *Ancient Wisdom* series, and what were you hoping to accomplish with it?

RT

Well, I can't say, I mean, I can't say I came up with the idea of it. The genesis of it has been quite organic. It started with the first book in the series called, *How to Win an Election*, which was pitched to me by Philip Freeman, who is a classicist now at Pepperdine University. That book consisted of a letter that was written by the famous Roman statesman, Marcus Tullius Cicero's brother Quintus Cicero, and it was written for Marcus to advise him on how to win an election to the Consul in 64 BC in Rome. And it's this amazing letter that survived from the ancient world. There are some questions about its, you know, its authenticity. We know it's an ancient letter but whether it was actually written by Quintus...

But it is this amazing letter, advising [Marcus] on how to win this election. So, we published that as *How to Win an Election*. It's very short and we decided to include the Latin on the facing pages in part because it was so short. But also, thought it would be a nice way to give students, who are studying Classics or Latin, a short, easy text in which to compare it with.

And it just took off! It did really well. We published it in 2012, during the 2012 Presidential election, and it just took off. And I met with Philip Freeman and said, "you have an idea for another one?" And he said, "how about *How to Run a County*?" which was selections from Cicero, the Roman Statesman himself, about advice on how to how to run a country. And it just started to feel natural, that this would be a good way to frame these ancient texts, and to open them up to a broader audience.

And as a kind of entrée into some, some obscure, some difficult to read texts, some just surprisingly modern-feeling texts and it just got going. I had an idea for one called *How to Win an Argument* and pitched that to somebody who did a great job with it. Someone came to me with an idea for one called *How to Dye*, which is selections from Seneca. And then as I approached Scholars, it just became "have you thought about this idea?", and I started to have ideas for them, and I continue to have ideas for them as well. That's that's pretty much how it got going. So it was very organic.

MP

So is the series done, or can people keep pitching? (laughter)

RT

They can certainly pitch! I do get pictures, quite often, but it's not done.

Now, I've got, you mentioned, 17 [series books] in print with two more coming in the Fall. Yeah, that'll make 19, and we've been doing two a season. [The Press] publishes in two seasons; Fall & Spring, and we've been doing two per season for the past few years now. I've also got several in the pipeline and I'm certainly open to pitches for them.

And it has just become a great way to enter these texts. I use the phrase a lot, please forgive it, but I often say they're kind of gateway drugs. They bring people in and they're not meant to be the last stop. They're meant to be a first stop before you go on and maybe read the whole text itself, if it's only selections from it, or read more about this particular author or this particular topic.

MP

Well, that's what the New Books Network is. We're that first stop, right?

RT

Yes, exactly.

MP

You hear the author talk about the book, and then maybe you go read the book, or listen to decide if it's worth investing your money or time... (shared laughter)

Actually what you've said makes my next question redundant. I asked a kind of humorous question about how you made the choice and essentially, the choice was kind of made for you.

But I do want to ask, why no Plato so far? The fans want to know.

RT

It's a very good question. And I, you know, I love Plato. I've talked with various people about it and I'm talking with two authors right now, or I should say translators, because the authors are technically the ancients themselves, it's Plato himself. So, I'm talking to two scholars about translating some Plato for the series, so stay tuned. There might be Plato coming!

MP

Alright Plato fans, just wait. Don't send Rob any angry letters.

RT

When I was presenting the books to my colleagues each time, after about the first six or seven, I would refer to the series as an informal one. And this is where my colleagues—I have to pay tribute to my colleagues, they said to me, you keep saying this is an informal series why don't we make it a formal series? And so that's when we came up with the moniker, the *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers*. It was staring us right in the face because we were finding such interest in these texts. Also, the designer for the first volume in the series, this is why book packaging and design is so important is that the designer for the first volume of the series, Karl Spurzem, did such a great job with it, it just lent itself to doing more.

MP

I mean, it's great. It has a kind of standard-looking feel and the titles are a little bit humorous. But they are more direct than you would see. There are no colons in the titles, which is unusual for academic books, and which I very much appreciated.

RT

For the first one in the series, it was Quintus Cicero, not Marcus Cicero, and we couldn't find a picture of Quintus Cicero so he put a picture of Marcus on the cover and put "Figure 1. Quintus' brother Marcus". (shared laughter)

MP

Yeah, we don't have any images [of Marcus' brother Quintus]. (shared laughter)

All right, well, let's see, there are 19 titles. Actually, 17 in print, and we're not going to get to them all by any means, but I thought we could talk about some of them in terms of gateway drugs. And the first one that came to me, sort of captured my attention, was Suetonius on *How to Be a Bad Emperor* and that made me laugh! How to be a bad Emperor?

It's very topical. So, who was Suetonius if can you tell us briefly and what does he have to tell or say about Joe Biden?

RT

Well, so Suetonius, was a Roman historian who lived in the late 1st century, early 2nd century AD. He's known to us from his great work, "The Lives of the Caesars", which is a series of biographies of the first 12 emperors of the Roman Empire. He covers from Julius Caesar to Domitian. And he wanted his readers to see what emperors were really like so, he wrote not just about major historical events or their policies, though he did cover those, but about their private lives as well. So, you know, think of him a bit like the Michael Wolfe for Bob Woodward of ancient Rome. (shared laughter)

And as you can imagine, this one was published last year, it takes a scholar, you know, roughly a year or so, to do these. It was commissioned prior to that. So, we didn't exactly have Joe Biden in mind for this, but maybe the former president. And it's not so much what he would tell them but maybe what he tells *us* about *them* and that their private lives in fact, tell us a lot about their political lives, right?

The Tiberius Rome II Emperor for instance was known to retreat to his villa on the Isle of Capri. Where he could ignore public affairs and just sort of give free reign to all of his vices that he had that he had sort of rather badly concealed for so long. He always thought that their personal lives should give us some indication of how they behaved as an emperor.

MP

So he had his own Mar-A-Lago, kind of, on the Isle of Capri? (shared laughter)

RT

Exactly, exactly. And of course, you know, we publish this in the midst of a pandemic, a Covid crisis where, you know, certainly here in America, but not only in America, responses were slow and perhaps not as an apt. One of the emperors covered in this book is Nero who famously fiddled, although he didn't really fiddle because fiddles weren't invented yet. He who fiddled, while Rome burns. So, it had this sense that, you know, maybe reaction times should be quicker than they are.

MP

So to move on, the next one that captured my attention was *How to Be Content* and I was actually thinking about the ex-president, Donald Trump, who was arguably—to refer to the first book, a bad emperor. And no matter what you think we're non-political here on the NBN. But there are *some*

people who feel ... yeah. So he's out of power, and now he's probably discontent. What would Horace say to President Trump?

RT

Well Horace would say you know quit your complaining.

MP

(laughter) That's not really possible for Donald Trump!

RT

It's true but there's an action. There's a Greek word for this and it's—I mean Horace was a Latin poet but he criticizes, or rather he writes about the vice that the Greeks called mempsimoiria, which is a “criticism of one's own lot in life” and they can simultaneously be envious of the lot of others.

MP

That's apt!

RT

So, I would think, I think...Yeah, exactly.

I certainly think it would be to really quit complaining. I mean this particular book, I love a lot. It's the first one we did that was specifically by a kind of a famed, Roman poet, although we have other poetry ones in the series. The content part is very important because there's so much written about happiness. And I think of contentment as being different than happiness. Happiness is, to use a kind of social psychological terms, maximizing and contentment is more satisficing. And, Horus was about enjoying moderate pleasures in life, enjoyment in the simple pleasures of life. He too would go, he too sort of lived on a kind of country estate and to him, that was the maximum...not the maximum, the, the best kind of life to lead.

So in terms of being in the countryside, living the simple life, having moderate pleasures, but part of that was being content with one's lot in life and not wishing for more than one has.

MP

Yeah, that does not strike me as fitting Donald Trump's personality. I don't have to go deep into personality types, but he is a striver of a certain sort. Yes, he's sort of always looking for something else. He probably would read Horace profitably.

RT

I mean, just to talk about what we all recently experienced, as bad as it was being in lock down, during a pandemic, and as bad as it was on so many levels, there's a certain sense in ... there were lots of people who talk to me about relishing certain aspects of it, right?

Not having too many commitments, not being over-scheduled, you know, and there's a certain element of just being content with the few things you have. Horace writes about being surrounded by books and being in perfect contentment as such, and for a year, some of us got to do that.

MP

Right, you know, and I'm reminded of the phrase. Be careful what you ask for, you might get it.

RT

Yeah, right, right, right, right.

MP

So yeah, so to continue the Donald Trump theme, I'm going to go onto, I don't know how to pronounce these names, Ob-sew-poh-ee-us?

RT

It's actually, as Mike Fontaine, the translator of this puts in the introduction, it's "Jobs-so-pay-us" And it's very interesting. Vincent, Vincent Obsopoeus (jobs-so-pay-us). This is a unique one for the series because Obsopoeus is actually from the 16th century. So he is, he is a German poet. He was a teacher essentially taught a High School teacher, who was a humanist.

The name Obsopoeus is something he gave to himself in part because he was so enthralled to the classics as the humanist and being an aspiring kind of Neo-Latin poet. His aim was to sort of brand himself as such, and his father was a chef for local princes, so the name Obsopoeus essentially is the Greek word for "cook". And so that's how he got his name.

MP

(laughter) And so he wrote he wrote the book in your series, *How to Drink*, and the reason to ask about this one is I was thinking maybe Donald Trump has taken solace in drink. I don't know, but you know what would Obsopoeus have to say about drinking and Donald Trump and whether that's a good move.

RT

Well actually it's interesting because Donald Trump, you know, doesn't drink.

MP

He doesn't drink? I didn't know that!

RT

He doesn't drink, and I don't know that he's ever, or that he never has but he famously does not drink at all.

MP

I did not know that!

RT

Yeah, neither does Biden actually. And but yeah, Donald Trump does not drink...

MP

Well then, what would Obsopoeus have to say to those of us who *do* drink, and I don't drink either by the way (laughter)

RT

I think what he would say would, would not please someone like Trump, because if he did drink, you can imagine like everything else in his life, it would not be in moderation.

And that is what Obsopoeus has to say. I mean, his he's writing this at a time when it's the early Reformation, the Crusades were long over, there are all these sorts of knights and warriors, and drinking is on the rise in the Germany of the period, and he is trying to get essentially the bros of his period to calm down and to settle down and to drink more moderately. And that is what the poem is essentially designed to do.

It's called *The Art of Drinking*. Part of the reason we included in the series is because it's very much written in the style of the poet Ovid, who famously wrote a book called *The Art of Love* and this is it's meant to be a kind of imitation of that but about drinking.

Yeah. Okay. So Donald Trump doesn't drink, so he's not taking solace in drink, let's move on to another title. (shared laughter)

How to Think About God— maybe Donald Trump is finding comfort in religion.

RT

I don't know.

MP

I think a lot of people take comfort in religion. What does Cicero have to say about it, or Kick-eh-ro, as my friend pronounces it? about God, and our relationship with God, or rather Gods because he had a bunch, didn't he?

RT

Well, they did have lots of gods and we jokingly almost called the book *How to Think About Gods*, but they ultimately did think... The stoics, of which Cicero was sort of inclined towards though he really didn't declare himself a stoic but he was more inclined towards stoicism, did believe in something that was more singular.

It's not unfair to say it's something more like "the force" as we know from Star Wars. Something that sort of provides us the kind of logical principle that governs the universe. I don't know what kind of solace someone like Donald Trump might find in this notion of God but it's certainly something that is not so much a personal God, but much more kind of order of the universe type of God. He might not like it in particular because it sort of recognizes that most things that happen, were fated to happen.

MP

Yeah.

RT

Which was meant to be solace for *some*, quietest even. But, um, for those who think they're destined for greater things and find out, maybe not so much, their lot in life may not be so pleasing to know that it was fated.

MP

Yeah, the stoics always remind me, and I don't know anything about them to be honest with you, but they always remind me a little bit of Buddhists in a sense that, you know, to use the expression, "shit happens", it doesn't happen to *you*, it just happens.

RT

Right? Exactly, yeah. I think that's, I think that's fair. I think. Yeah.

MP

Let's take *you* out of the equation, *you* are part of *it*. So, you are happening too. Donald Trump is probably not reading Cicero. (shared laughter)

But he might be thinking about running for election again, he talks about this and you have another book of the series by Cicero, *How to Win an Election*. We've mentioned this before but, Donald Trump, knew how to do it and that was to *steal* it, and you know that didn't work. But he may run again, so what advice does Cicero have?

RT

Don't do it, for any reason. (shared laughter)

MP

I could've told anybody that!

RT

But mainly because, you know, [he should] enjoy the blessings of old age, you know.

You know of course Cicero wrote this at a time when he was essentially forced out of politics. Julius Caesar essentially, took over Rome and Cicero was humiliated, he retired to his estate, you know, the parallels there are just sort of too funny. Notice this constant retreating to one's estate and Cicero is essentially retreating to his estate.

He's taking up the study of Greek philosophy again, I mean, he's a real Statesman scholar, so he's relishing the fact that he gets to spend time with Plato and Aristotle again and write about them. He writes a lot of philosophy during this period, and on the one hand, he wanted to stay engaged in Roman politics, but on the other hand, he said this is a blessing and I get to I get to spend like my final years doing this. He didn't know how soon they were going to be his final years because, after Caesar was assassinated, you know, Rome was in tumult and he was eventually assassinated himself Cicero, by Mark Antony.

MP

So, Donald Trump is...he is at a certain number of years and it's really—you have another book in the series called *How to Grow Old*, which I assume that Cicero says retreat to Mar-A-Lago and read Plato.

RT

Do you mean *How to Die*?

MP

I was coming to *How to Die* next, but yeah, okay, we can talk a little bit about *How to Die*. Trump is going to die, I mean, we're all gonna die, right? (Right) and maybe, maybe Trump is thinking about the end, he doesn't strike me as the kind of person who thinks about the end. (no) I mean, he probably tried to cheat death somehow like he tried to cheat the election system, so ambitious. But what does Seneca, this is Seneca in this case, what does Seneca say about how to die?

RT

Well, Seneca says lots about how to die. By the way, Cicero is perhaps the most prolific author for the series. He was a prolific Roman writer. Seneca, who was an advisor to one of the bad emperors, Nero, also wrote a lot and is probably the second most prolific contributor to our series. We have several books that draw on his work. Seneca was essentially a stoic and his advice on *How to Die* was, you know, essentially, why worry about it? Think of it like, before we were born.

MP

Right that's a good point.

RT

We didn't exist, essentially, we didn't exist for years before we were born, and death would be much like this. It's not dissimilar to what the epicureans say, but he also views it as the death is the end of all our woes, right? (paraphrasing): "The debtor afflicted by no ills, no shadows loom over the dead. The death is the undoing of all of our sorrows so take solace in it" right?

MP

You know that's more that's kind of more Buddhism in a way without the reincarnation. Because the Buddhist think that all life is suffering. (Yep.) So I can, I can certainly get behind that and a lot of life is suffering and it is,

RT

Yep, and that there's escape from suffering.

MP

That's what, that's what the Buddha taught.

RT

There's another book in the series in the works called well, we're still working out the title I have to confess. But Seneca wrote a famous short book called *On the Shortness of Life*, and in there there's a sense in which death gives life meaning. The fact that we know we're going to die and that our time is limited, should make us think hard about how we use the limited time we have, and how we spend it. And, and I can tell you, it makes you think about the time you spend on social media. Or Twitter! (shared laughter)

I don't want to spend precious minutes on Twitter when I know...

MP

I don't really either. I've got trouble expressing myself in 156 characters and I can't, I just can't have a coherent thought in whatever the number of characters is... But this does raise, it's an interesting kind of digression and I don't know the answer to this question: I read *The Iliad* recently, I don't know why but I did, and I agree that the Greeks at least as Homer describes them were very interested in two things; personal honor and how they were going to be remembered. Boy were they interested in how they are going to be remember, right?

RT

Right.

MP

Is this true of the Roman authors as well, that they were just extraordinarily concerned with what we would now call their legacy? Because I know Donald Trump is concerned with that.

RT

Yeah, certainly it's reflected in and many aspects of their society, including, you know, their public buildings. And so much of the evidence we have from the ancient world, both Greek and Roman, but especially Roman is inscriptions and the inscriptions reflect quite a lot about their concerns about how they were going to be remembered.

And so, yes, that was mean, that was a way to achieve immortality. I think of Aristotle, right, who said there is no man happy until they're dead. There's a part in Aristotle's ethics, where he even talks about or speculates about whether or not you could become unhappy *after* you're dead if someone in your family does something to disgrace you! (shared laughter)

Not only do you have to worry about being unhappy in life, but you have to worry about being unhappy after you're dead.

MP

Yeah, that's...that's a bit much. I like the eternal peace, version.

RT

Exactly.

MP

All of your suffering ends and you're just stardust or something, right? I think we would say.

Well, we haven't had a chance to talk about all the titles, and as you know as we said there are 17 in print and 19 total. Are there any particular titles that we haven't talked about that you would want to flag for the listeners that you like that you would recommend?

RT

Yes. There's this one that just came out called *How to Tell a Joke: An Ancient Guide to the Art of Humor*, and this is also drawing on Cicero who was obviously a great orator and Rhetorician known for his speeches... I like to characterize this as the translator of it, Mike Fontaine who also did *How to Drink*, does. He says this is essentially a book about how to win the room and just to come back to our theme of Trump, this is something that Trump was often very good at.

MP

Oh yeah. Was he ever!

RT

What with, you know, his, his name calling and his ability to cut to the quick with a joke or dismiss a comment with a joke, it's not exactly what Cicero had in mind, but Cicero in this book is talking about how you use humor as part of persuasion and how to get people over to your side and how to yeah, use humor to essentially win the room.

MP

I've often thought about Donald Trump, that he would have been a great stand-up comic and he kind of missed his calling because he has two characteristics; one, he's a very witty guy, he's quick (Yep.) You can't doubt this whether you like him or not, and the other is that he does not care at all what people say about him. (Exactly) He does not care! And if you know, if you talk to any comic, they go up on stage and sometimes they use this word *died*. "I died up there." Donald Trump would not care.

RT

Yeah, exactly right.

MP

He would be perfectly suited to be a great stand-up comic. I wish he would have been a stand-up comic.

RT

Instead, right? Exactly. There is another one, just to mention is forthcoming in the fall, which is *How to Be a Farmer*, and that one, interestingly, is not any single author.

It's, as the translator of it says, it's a like farming, it is a work of many hands. And that is a series of short excerpts from across the Greek, and Roman corpus about the rural life. The translator of that is a very interesting guy named Mark Usher at University of Vermont, who runs a farm in addition to being a Classics professor at the University, he runs his own farm with his wife.

MP

Wow. Wow!

RT

And it's appropriately called Works & Days Farm, which is the title of Hesiod's great poem about farming. And that is a really wonderful volume of selections about the farming life and that one's coming out in the fall.

MP

Well, I'm from Kansas and my "people" as we sometimes say, were farmers and they just ran away from. (shared laughter). My house doesn't even have a lawn! I paved my lawn. I don't want to have anything to do with growing anything ever again.

RT

(laughter) I mean, so many people became weekend-farmers, right after especially during the pandemic. Where people could get back to cultivating their gardens.

MP

Well, so that's good. I hope they buy the book. I have a question and there is a standard traditional final question on New Books Network, and it is, "what are you working on now?" Let me adjust that to "what are you working on now other than this series, and is there anything else in the works that you're excited about?"

RT

Yeah, absolutely. I have a big book coming out in the fall called *Plagues Upon the Earth: Disease in the Course of Human History*, which is by a historian of Rome named Kyle Harper at University of Oklahoma, and it's a big history of the role of disease and the rise and fall of civilizations.

You'll definitely want them on the New Books Network.

MP

Yeah, we will want him on!

RT

It's a great book, and it was commissioned years before the pandemic, so the timing couldn't be better in terms of him finishing it and getting it out.

And the other book I want to put a plug in for too, that I'm working on that's coming out in the spring is a short book called *In Praise of Good Bookstores*. And that's by Jeff Deutsch, who is the director of the Seminary Co-Op Bookstore in Chicago.

MP

I've been there many times.

RT

Yeah, and it's a great little series, a kind of to use an ancient term, pay-on to the value of good bookstores, as cultural goods and community goods.

MP

Yeah, well, just to put a plug in, we used to be a member of the Amazon affiliate group, which meant that when you bought, when you click through the New Books Network and you bought a vacuum cleaner, we got two percent or whatever that vacuum cost, but about a year ago, we stopped that.

And now we are a member of the Bookshop dot-org affiliate group and I can tell the listeners that what Bookshop dot-org does in addition to paying us a small commission on all purchases besides books, they give money to bookstores. That's part of their mission. They're some sort of, they're not exactly a corporation they are.... something I don't know. It's called a "Public Benefit Corporation" or something?

RT

Yeah.

MP

I don't know what this is exactly, but their mission is not only to sell books for authors and presses but also to support local bookstores. And as somebody that likes local bookstores, I would encourage people to go look at Bookshop.org and see what they have to offer.

And it is, you know, it's a direct competitor to Amazon. There's no other way you can talk about it. Amazon does *not* give money to local bookstores. I think I can say with some confidence, they do a lot of other good things. That's great. I like Amazon, but they do not give money to bookstores.

So anyway, let me tell everybody that we've been talking to Rob Tempio today about these series *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers*. The series is ongoing, so if you have ideas for books flood Rob's email inbox with proposals (shared laughter)

Maybe it will run for a century, who knows? We'll work our way through the entire classical, you know, oeuvre. It'll be incredible! There will be hundreds of books in it? I don't know.

So anyway, Rob, let me say thank you very much for being on the show.

RT

My pleasure. Thank you, Marshall.