

Books that transform: Eerdmans editor Jon Pott

interview by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

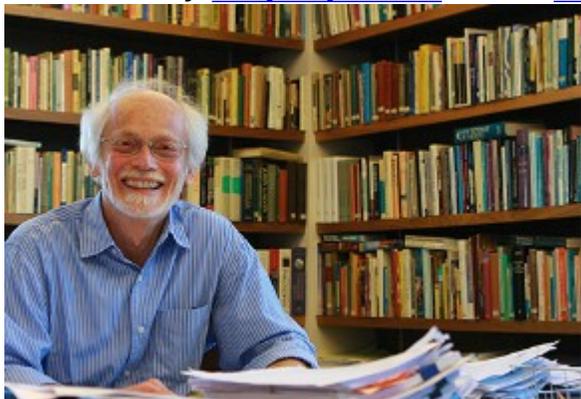


Photo courtesy of Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Earlier this year, Jon Pott stepped down as editor in chief at Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company after a career of almost 50 years. During that time he oversaw tremendous growth at Eerdmans and witnessed dramatic changes in religious publishing.

Eerdmans is somewhat hard to describe: it has a Dutch Reformed background and is socially progressive and theologically rather conservative. It is intellectually rigorous but interested in a nonacademic audience. How would you describe it?

I see myself as very much in line with the thinking of Bill Eerdmans and other predecessors. During my time as editor, Eerdmans benefited from and was able to nurture an emerging center ground between progressive evangelicals on the one hand and traditional mainliners on the other.

Eerdmans has a long history of publishing evangelicals, but I have always seen its deepest roots as mainline. When I came in 1968, we were already publishing Dutch Reformed theologians like G. C. Berkouwer and their Dutch Calvinist counterparts in the United States. They were preceded by thinkers like Abraham Kuyper. We would soon also publish Karl Barth, if we weren't already. There was a strong European Reformed connection from the beginning, complemented by connections to, among others, American Presbyterians like B. B. Warfield at Princeton.

As the conversation grew in the 1960s between evangelicals and the mainline, we were deeply engaged with what might be called the emerging evangelical renaissance, and we were well positioned to nurture it. On the mainline side, we saw the frustrations of people who felt that their traditions were being thinned out theologically, and we were able to reach out to them as well.

A lot of people might think of Eerdmans as an evangelical publisher that became increasingly mainline.

When I first took the job, one of the toughest tasks we had was to convince mainliners that we were mainliners. We were seen by many of them as almost exclusively an evangelical house, though that was not how we saw ourselves.

It is less of a balancing act now. In fact, the two worlds have become much more intermingled. I am not sure how much sense it makes to talk in these terms. More or less theologically conservative does not translate into more or less evangelical or more or less mainline.

Eerdmans also had a long history of being culturally transformationist. One taproot goes back to Kuyper, who saw culture as something to be transformed, not averted. That had important implications for Eerdmans as it engaged the mainline and progressive evangelicals.

What were some of the decisive books that Eerdmans published while you were there?

John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* was and remains an important book for us. It was tremendously influential not only in its own intellectual summons but for the connections it encouraged in the Radical Reformation tradition. One of those connections was to Stanley Hauerwas, who has been an important contributor and friend.

Another watershed book was Richard John Neuhaus's *The Naked Public Square*, which, like *The Politics of Jesus*, became a part of the vocabulary. It connected us with what became the neoconservative side of our market, and it contributed to the view that Christians had a responsibility in the public square.

Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* raised the question about where evangelicals had come from and where they were going. Nicholas Wolterstorff's

Lament for a Son was certainly one of the most important pastoral books the company has ever done.

Were there any books that seemed risky to publish?

Eerdmans has always been well positioned to do its own thing. It is not a denominational house; it doesn't belong to a broader organization. It can take risks.

We've been adventurous on a number of progressive issues. We did an edited volume in Christianity and ecology that became a classic textbook called *Earth-keeping*. Jim Brownson's recent book *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* was an attempt to argue sympathetically for homosexual relationships from within a relatively conservative position. William Stacy Johnson's book on gay marriage, *A Time to Embrace*, was an edgy one for the program.

What kind of book do you wish someone would write today?

How about something like *What St. Augustine Would Say to Brené Brown*? I would like to see the academy produce more theologically rich books that are also spiritually compelling for the general market. The concerns of someone like Brené Brown could be addressed at deeper levels.

Academics tend to think that reaching a broader audience is a matter of dumbing down their material. But it has to do instead with narrative, the ability to dramatize, and to connect with people where they are and not treating stories mechanically as case studies. You draw the questions out of human life.

There are wonderful exceptions to my general observation: Lauren Winner, Richard Lischer, Neal Plantinga, and Barbara Brown Taylor come to mind, as does the late Lewis Smedes, one of Eerdmans's homegrown heroes.

You've seen some major changes in book publishing. Which ones stand out?

Technologically, it really is a Gutenberg moment. The availability of print-on-demand makes smaller initial print runs possible and reprints more feasible. The sheer speed and proliferation of communication can put editors under more pressure, with e-mails demanding instant responses and new proposals. The publisher is often under pressure to make faster decisions on the basis of less material for fear of losing the project to someone else. Authors are not as wedded to a single press as they once

were.

On the sales and marketing side, we all know about the decline of bookstores, though some, thankfully, survive—even flourish—through admirable resourcefulness. The direct publisher-to-customer relationship now made possible by online sales can be a great boon to the smaller publisher of more specialized books.

What should we look for in the future of religious publishing?

I would expect that targeted electronic promotion will make possible more niche publishing to and through particular organizations. Eerdmans recently published a pastoral book for the dying called *A Faithful Farewell*, written by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre. I wonder to what extent books like this, as well as its sequel, *A Long Letting Go*, can be promoted directly to, say, hospice organizations or hospital chaplains.

It will also be interesting to see how the broad landscape of religious affiliations continues to evolve. Academic publishers will have to take into account the sheer size and intellectual vitality of many evangelical seminaries. At the same time, creative work continues to come from mainline schools and must be vigorously supported. How will denominational affiliation continue to evolve? Might we see an interest in retrieving confessional traditions and going into them more deeply?

In a culture of a staggering proliferation of words, might we, thanks to the likes of Christian Wiman, be opening ourselves ever so slightly to the still small voice of poetry? Fewer words counting for more? Perhaps this is simply the wishful thinking of a retired editor.