For almost my entire adult life, I have edited Harvard University Press books—close to 300 altogether. I have had the privilege of working head-to-head with some of the greatest minds of two, or even three, generations—mythic Harvard-campus figures like John King Fairbank, Nathan Glazer, Lani Guinier, Jerome Kagan, Ernst Mayr, and Fred Whipple. And prolific international authors such as Mary Beard, Merlin Donald, Alison Jolly, Gilles Kepel, and Mario Vargas Llosa. Practically all I’ve ever known about the world, beyond family and friends and a bit of travel, comes from books.

**The ‘Book’**

What I like about books are not the usual things that people mention as they wring their hands about the world going digital. It’s not the smell of ink on paper, the tactile turning of pages, the lending and giving of favourite books to friends, the practicality of books for beach reading (no worries about sand, water, dead batteries, or lack of wireless connection). It’s not the usefulness of books as coasters for hot cups of coffee, or the social cachet that comes from having a well-stocked library in one’s home.

Don’t get me wrong: I like the physicality of books quite a lot—as an avid book owner. But as an editor and, more importantly, a reader, what I like about scholarly books is something else. More than anything, I like their length. I like ideas and opinions and narratives that are too complicated, too nuanced, to fit into a New Yorker article or a Wikipedia entry or a series of public lectures. But at the same time, I like the boundedness of books—the sense I get at the end of 300 or 400 pages that I really have a good firm grip on the subject. This is of course a delusion—there are dozens of other books out there that grab the subject in quite a different way. But the feeling that I’ve mastered something—however fleet-
ing—is what keeps me going back to books. What I feel at the end of a good book must be something like a runner’s high—though, not being a runner, I guess I should call it a ‘reader’s high’.

Another thing I like about scholarly books is their table of contents. When I was a developmental editor, I would tell authors that I wanted them to write three pieces for me. The first one was an advertisement: 250 words that would persuade readers that of all the books in all the bookstores in all the world, this is the one they must read next—buy it! Of course the true purpose of this writing exercise was to get authors to focus their own minds on what the book was all about.

... every book, non-fiction as well as fiction, scholarly as well as general interest, must tell a good story.

The second piece I asked authors to write was a novel. Needless to say, I didn’t really want them to write a novel, but that was my way of telling authors that every book, non-fiction as well as fiction, scholarly as well as general interest, must tell a good story—and they should never let irrelevant truths (too much information) get in the way of that.

The third piece I asked my authors to write was a poem. And this is what the table of contents is. It’s a page of verse that signifies and anticipates all kinds of mysterious, enlightening things to come. A good table of contents, like a poem, attends to metre and metaphor, alliteration and allusion, form as well as function. It aspires to be lyrical. It wants to sing.

The table of contents leads to another thing I like about non-fiction books, which is their division into chapters. Chapters are not like essays. Essays—in a magazine, let’s say—relate to one another in sort of the way that out-of-town first cousins relate to one another at a family reunion. They have polite conversations (and maybe you’ll notice a family resemblance here and there), but mostly they come together briefly and then they go away to live their separate lives. Chapters in a book relate to one another in the way siblings do. Every one of them is looking around at every other one all the time, sizing them up and figuring out when to play together and when to get out of the way. A book with chapters is a tight-knit little family—there’s tension in every relationship, but they’re still all in it together.

In serious book-length non-fiction, I also like the interactivity of text with illustrations, graphs, tables, and notes. In other words, what I, as a reader, like about scholarly books can be very readily transported from print to digital. And when you do that, you get some important bonuses.

The most talked about bonus, in this age of Kindles, Nooks, and iPads, is transportability. You can carry hundreds of pounds of books with you on one small electronic device. Readers of ebooks also get searchability. You don’t have to depend on a static, sometimes inadequate index—you can search for any word or phrase you want. Discoverability is another big plus with ebooks. In both Google-type searches and library system searches, listings for ebooks are starting to appear above print listings because the digital edition can immediately connect people with the information they’re seeking.

Ebooks also increase availability. You don’t have to depend on a nearby booksop or library to carry a physical copy of the book, and you don’t have to rely on parcel service for delivery. This is a huge advantage for developing countries, and it’s a new way for presses like Harvard to fulfill our mission, which is to disseminate scholarship around the world. And finally, there is accessibility. Ebooks are wonderful for people with failing eyesight, weak muscles, and reduced mobility. I’m coming to appreciate this more and more as years go by.

So the big question we’re asking ourselves at Harvard University Press these days is not, ‘How do we save the printed book?’, though certainly we hope to do that. The questions we’re asking are, ‘How can we save the unique features of a scholarly book that make it such a valuable form of communication? How do we preserve a book’s boundaries if it no longer has a binding? How do we promote a book’s authoritativeness along with its authorship? How do we save the contents when the container—hardback, paperback, ebook—is constantly changing?’

Now, I realize that boundedness, authoritativeness, and static content are not the things that most people