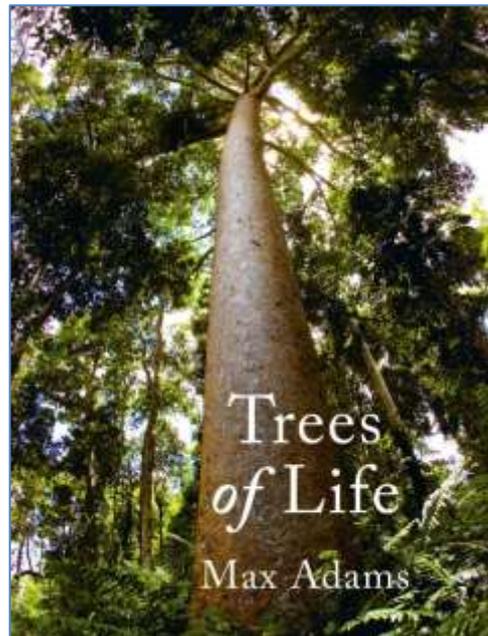


## Book updates

Normally, book sellers are gearing up for Christmas; and publishers are gearing up for the release of books in their Autumn catalogues: thousands of them. But with their Spring 2020 catalogues in shreds because of Covid-19, there is much reworking and trimming down. Even so, you might think there are just too many new books being published anyway. With the pace of publishing, and the need for fast turnover, increasing every year, there is pressure on writers to write more books – and that may not be a good thing. But, as every freelancer knows, it's hard to turn down the offer of work – any work, because you never know if it'll be the last. And it seems that the book buying public is still hungry. Both *The King in the North* and *Ælfred's Britain* have been Kindle bestsellers over the summer. Meanwhile, I'm told that *Trees of Life* is being published in Thailand. I only know because they questioned a piece on the sal tree. I had to go back and check my facts and slightly tweak the text, because in Thailand, they know their sal from their pipal. Almost the worst faux pas I have ever committed as a writer was the rather stupid statement in *Wisdom of Trees* that if you lived in a crowded, built-up city like Hong Kong, you might not see a tree very often. I was swiftly corrected (but not in time for paperback corrections) by a Hong Kong native who pointed out that the island is abundant in trees. Serve me right for not checking. Here, by the way, is the prospective paperback cover art for *Trees of Life*.



## A manuscript's life from submission to hitting the shelves

Many readers – and would-be writers – are curious about the processes that follow the submission of a manuscript. Well, with my non-fiction books it goes something like this, taking *The First Kingdom* as an example. My desk editor, who also happens to be the publishing director (I am lucky to get such special treatment) will read and comment, in general terms, and make one or two corrections of obvious (to him) mistakes. Some changes may be structural, and can involve substantial re-writing. I know (because we went for an autumn walk a couple of weeks ago), that sometimes he feels the need to make quite major interventions with manuscripts where he feels that the author has missed the narrative mark or has written too long (a frequent problem with both fiction and non-fiction, when content drives the story rather than emotion or argument). I'll usually get three weeks or so to make changes, if they are relatively minor. I enjoy a very good working relationship with my editor – I rigorously self-edit, and I hate to make him

get out his red-ink pen when what I really want is for him to read for the overall sense of the piece. When we fall out, it's usually over titles and cover art...

When we are both relatively happy, I'll send a version to the copy editor. Their job – usually they are freelancers, often academics – is to ensure consistency: in spelling, style, and references; to check facts and spot errors of grammar, sense and meaning. Usually I'll get a marked up manuscript (in a Word file) with comments, queries and notes for the typesetter. I'll take these points one by one and, while I'm at it, have a close read-through to see if I can spot things I don't like that I'd missed first time round. By this time it all looks a bit messy; and I'd be happy never to see it again.

The next time I see it, the manuscript has been typeset – so it looks exactly as it will on the printed page. Now it begins to look like a book, and that means that when I give it another read-through it seems less familiar (in its new font and with justified margins, page numbers and headers etc). That makes it easier for me to spot odd errors; but because I don't want to mess the typesetter around, I avoid if at all possible the temptation to change something that will result in the text spilling over into a new page – repaginating – which is a pain for them. But, now I see images, maps and general layout and sense the final product. In the case of *The First Kingdom*, all the schedules were designed to publish in November, so we have had a slightly more relaxed process than usual; and it means that Head of Zeus will be able to create some bound proof copies that we can send out to possible reviewers well before the hardback comes out in February 2021.

## Money matters

It sure does; and no more so than this year, when no-one is quite sure where the economy is going. I'm often asked how the system works for writers. Well, if you're lucky and get a book commissioned, you'll be offered an 'advance'. Technically this is 'An advance against royalties'. In other words, your publisher believes that your future royalties (and rights in other countries, formats etc) will exceed a certain amount. If you accept they will give you either a third or a quarter up front as a signing fee. You get the second tranche when you deliver what they consider to be a presentable MS (manuscript); then you get the rest (or a third quarter) on publication of the hardback. Sometimes you'll get a fourth quarter on paperback publication. So, if you're lucky and get offered something like £20-£30,000 for a book, that advance will come to you over a period that might be two years, or even three: i.e. it's not a living wage, despite what looks like a sizeable figure. When your book has 'earned out' – that is, the royalties earned exceed the value of the advance – you start to get royalties per copy, usually twice a year. I think of it as 'free' money – that is, I don't have to do anything more to earn it; but, of course, all the hard work on my part has already been done – not just the writing and editing, but promotions, lectures, festivals etc.