By Hein Marais

There were 15 of us shoehorned into a meeting space the size of a bathroom. It was lunch break, on the last day of a conference on democratic transitions or some such, in Dakar. It was early 1994. Samir Amin, the Egyptian economist and author of Eurocentrism and dozens of other books, was presiding.

"And you, Marais," he said, "you're in charge of the book on South Africa; we'll talk about the structure later."

"I think there's been a mistake," I protested. "Everyone here is an academic. You write essays and books -- that's what you do. I'm a journalist. I write articles. I can't do this."

"That doesn't make sense," Amin said, with a dismissive wave. "You'll write the book. We'll talk later."

We talked. I relented. I wrote the book like a journalist would. Or like I thought a journalist would: Gather information, sift and wave. "You'll write the book. We'll talk later."

A book deadline isn't like a newsroom deadline. It's not that hulking presence that sucks the air out of the room, leaves you cross-eyed and flinching. For most of the process, it is a faint, distant glimmer. Between it and you lies this vast expanse of freedom – to experiment, pursue ideas, change your mind, discover that a position you're at the mercy of readers. It's an exacting but proper witness.

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