

"You Can't Write Early Medieval History That Way": An Interview with Jamie Kreiner

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REPUBLICS OF LETTERS features an occasional series of interviews with scholars who have recently been in conversation with the medieval and early modern community at Stanford University. These interviews seek to capture ideas in motion: how current and recent work came to be conceived, how projects develop and change, and how new knowledge emerges into public view. In keeping with the journal's aim of reflecting on the present moment in our disciplines, these dialogues invite self-awareness, retrospection, and analysis of the relevant fields.

In September 2025, Stanford's Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies hosted Professor Jamie Kreiner, Robert and Dorothy Wellman Chair in Medieval History at UCLA and a former SHC Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow (2011–12). Her recent book, *The Wandering Mind: What Medieval Monks Tell Us About Distraction* (Liveright, 2023), explores how early medieval monks experimented with their own cognition, showing their elaborate strategies to strengthen memory, to manage the wandering drift of attention, and to think about thinking itself. What generates a thought? How does it behave? Do you let it pasture, as a monk suggested, or gather it, as we still say? What emerges is the realization that distraction is not the blight of the digital era but a challenge that has always accompanied human life. A full millennium before ADHD became a diagnosis, monks were already building what we might call technologies of focus and social systems of accountability—tools that, in many ways, would feel useful today.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about *The Wandering Mind* isn't its subject matter but that it is a trade book. Kreiner wears her scholarship on her sleeve—one-fifth of the book consists of endnotes—but she also bets on accessibility, on the idea that history can be both rigorous and gripping. That bet, it turns out, has paid off—so much so that Stanford's Emanuele Lugli, associate professor of art history and director of Stanford Public Humanities, sat down with Kreiner to ask: What happens when an academic chooses to write for the general public? And how does that choice reshape what history itself can be?

[The following interview has been edited and abbreviated for clarity.]



Emanuele Lugli: *First, congratulations on the book. How did you come to focus on distraction? Was that your starting point, or a way to engage the general public with the early Middle Ages?*

Jamie Kreiner: When I was in grad school, I was reading monastic literature and immediately noticed how psychologically astute the monks were. I knew I wanted to return, eventually, to thinking about how they understood the mind. Much later—by then I already had tenure—a colleague of mine, a historian of psychology, said, “My gosh, you should write a piece for *Aeon* about how monks got distracted all the time.” In some ways, the idea came directly from that conversation. I think talking with nonspecialists about our research is one of the best ways to see what others find compelling. So, while writing the book, I would regularly check in with friends and ask, “What do you think about this? When you think of X, what comes to mind?”

Lugli: *It's interesting that you mentioned tenure. I wonder if scholars only allow themselves to write trade books—or, which is really the same thing, to speak to nonspecialists—after tenure. Before then, we're so focused on making a contribution to our field, on networking with other specialists, on proving we belong, that anything beyond that orbit feels almost illicit. But after tenure, we enter a new, almost magical realm where we can rethink how we want to write, where we want to write, and even why. That, I suppose, is how an article for *Aeon* becomes possible—not just as a detour, but as an experiment in seeing what a work can become.*

Kreiner: I agree. Even though I was post-tenure and had already written two other books, I was really intimidated by taking on a project like this, because it involved working on regions of the Mediterranean that I was not a specialist in. We're all trained to stick to what we really know, and I felt I had to figure out what framing could justify stepping into areas I only knew secondhand rather than as a primary researcher. What ultimately made me feel okay about it was that there are many historians I respect who have gone beyond their specific areas of specialization to say something intelligent and mind-expanding about a larger world that their own

specialization touches on but does not encompass entirely. But it took me a while to get out of the habit of thinking, “Well, I just have to stick to the things I was trained in or wrote my dissertation on.”

Lugli: *What helped you in the process? Did you have a model of trade history in mind that served as a reference?*

Kreiner: I’m not sure that I had a specific reference in mind. I liked thinking about how it would be possible to write something engaging that wasn’t just a biographical narrative with a plot. Because a lot of trade history does work that way, particularly in American history. The public really wants a gripping story with characters, and you can’t write early medieval history that way. Norton, the press I ended up going with, said, “Take a look at some expansive and engaging histories—like Jill Lepore’s work.” Lepore is just a really smart historian who’s capable of taking on the secondary literature and doing interesting stuff with it. So if she can do it, if others can do it, why can’t an early medievalist?

Lugli: *That’s actually something I noticed while reading the book. You include a few recurring figures—John Cassian, Evagrius of Pontus—but never turn them into central actors. You also present monks almost as a compact group, even though they span from the fourth to the ninth century and from Seville to Baghdad, while sidestepping many historians’ anxieties about precise periodization and cultural differentiation. Were these choices entirely yours, or did your agent and editor gently guide you in that direction?*

Kreiner: That impulse did not come from my editor or my agent. Maybe in the very early stages, they asked, “Are there some protagonists you could center the story around?” And I thought, “Well, if we do that, it’s going to be a very familiar story, and it will be much more circumscribed. We won’t be able to cover all these different regions, and we won’t be able to see the debates as clearly.”

While writing the book, I also had to grapple with the part of me trained academically that sees all the ways things could be argued to death. But if you stop to defend every point, you lose the coherence and momentum of the narrative. You can’t pause to justify the entire geography or to argue that certain women deserve a specific presence in the story. You do have to make choices about things you simply aren’t going to argue about. The challenge is doing that defensively, without making it seem as if these are all resolved issues or making explicit claims that the study itself doesn’t support. But there are a lot of implicit arguments embedded in the narrative—ones that, in an academic book, would have required a whole monograph just to justify.

Lugli: *Tell me if you agree with me on this. I sometimes feel that trade writing is mostly about editing—not just the words, but the material itself and even our own positionality toward it. In academic writing, we stake out more or less fixed positions, weighing arguments for and against a point, rehearsing every possible take on a problem. We rarely cut*

anything. But trade writing is different. There, you can't get lost in the weeds; you have to keep moving. For me, trade writing is primarily a matter of keeping the focus wide while editing relentlessly.

Kreiner: I also think the editing starts much earlier with trade books than with academic studies. I spent far more time on the book proposal before the book was even written. I must have gone through at least three substantial drafts with my agent. Then, after talking to the editor, there was another very substantial rewrite. The description of each chapter might be only three paragraphs, but crafting a tight structure and a clear tone of voice was essential to show how the book would read. All of those editing decisions on the front end saved a ton of time later, because a lot of strategic cutting and choosing had already been done. The introduction alone must have gone through five substantial rewrites back and forth with my editor, which I loved. That's one of the things I really appreciated about working with a trade press: You have much more intensive engagement with your writing than you do with an academic book. That was great.

Lugli: *Can you tell us a bit more about the impact that the book has had, either in terms of your own intellectual development or the interdisciplinary conversations the book has generated since its publication?*

Kreiner: As I was saying, writing for a trade press means you've got to be more strategic about introducing readers to a complex world. I found that the payoff is that a wider audience will actually find and finish your book, and some readers even make the effort to write to you personally—some of them what you might expect, like retired people deeply interested in history. But I also heard from undergrads, cognitive scientists, and psychotherapists. Even monks were reading it! There are so many intelligent readers out there that we don't often consider, because we're mostly used to teaching 18- to 22-year-olds. Despite all the other forms of media now, there are still readers. I've also heard from podcasters and screenwriters about how the experiences of early Christian monks resonated with them. Some of these emails sparked conversations that are percolating into new projects. But I'm even more grateful to the responses for confirming that it's possible to enliven a distant historical period in the present.

Lugli: *The sheer range of coverage for your book, from the New York Times to the American Benedictine Review, already says something about the interest out there. I wonder how, if at all, this has shifted the way you think about writing history. I know it's a big question—maybe too big—but even a fragment of an answer would be revealing.*

Kreiner: It has definitely changed me, in that it's hard to imagine going back to a traditional academic book format. I still love treating journal articles as a space to get really technical and just speak to each other, but I enjoyed the challenge of writing for a wider audience, because it forces us, more pointedly, to think about what we find interesting and what truly matters in our work. The same goes for teaching:

If you give people enough guidance and time to work through something difficult, they can arrive at a surprisingly complex and nuanced understanding by the end. In that sense, it's both more pleasurable and more difficult.

Lugli: *You've done all this work almost entirely on your own. Maybe some friends gave you an agent's email address, but it sounds like you figured things out as you went along. What do you think universities could do to help scholars like you thrive? What kinds of resources would have been most useful?*

Kreiner: I think it's a good thing that universities like Stanford have started bringing people in to talk about non-trade book publishing—whether that's giving talks, writing articles, or contributing op-eds. I don't think academics fully realize that each of these is its own complicated domain, with rules just as specific as publishing an academic monograph with a traditional press. I've definitely had a ton of colleagues ask, "How do you get an agent?" and "How do you talk to a trade editor?" These remain very mysterious questions. Even a modest effort—such as a half-day workshop or a one-off event once a year—can provide the exposure and guidance that help demystify the process.

Another thing that can change is our own internal culture around how we talk about and evaluate work that isn't published in traditional academic venues. The AHA [American Historical Association] has already gone a long way by suggesting ways public history could be incorporated into tenure and promotion requirements. But there are still many subtle, casual ways in which academics can be dismissive of work that comes from outside the academy.

Lugli: *At the same time, it's heartening that there are still people who can think broadly, seeing connections between publishing and academia. In a way, your book is the result—not just of luck, as I mentioned before, but of encountering people generous enough to share their expertise and contacts. Those conversations open doors, rather than leaving us stuck behind them.*

Kreiner: I really like that way of thinking about it. I mean, it genuinely feels encouraging that so many people want to support serious work. Norton is there to make excellent books, and their agents are there to help those books come into being. It's not just lone voices fighting for themselves with no one listening—we do have advocates outside. A