

Letter from America Summer 2016

To book tour or not to book tour? When my first collection of short stories, *Smoky Ordinary*, was released, I didn't know enough about promoting it to understand I had a choice. In not making one, I made one. Eventually, I learned that doing nothing to promote one's book had a predictable result: obscurity.

When my second collection won the George Garrett Award and was accepted for publication at Texas Review Press, I resolved to do things differently. As a result, this has been my season of readings. I have given more than twenty of them since *Get a Grip* was released at the end of 2015. Many took place locally, here in Baltimore. My home state of Maryland is in the "Mid-Atlantic" region – an area that is on the east coast and is considered to be neither north nor south. This central location makes it a good departure point for the eastern seaboard.

To the south, I traveled five times to Washington, DC, 50 miles away, an easy trip by car. I also did a reading 1100 miles away in Ft Lauderdale, Florida. To the north, I did readings 100 miles away in Philadelphia, 200 miles away in New York, and 400 miles away in Boston. Beyond the east coast, I made a special point of submitting proposals to the AWP conference this year, since I knew I would have a book out. I traveled the 2700 miles to Los Angeles for that event, joining an overwhelming melée of 12,000 (perhaps less-than-angelic) writers who descended on the City of Angels.

My own book tour was modest compared to some writers, especially because I often relied on air travel, and I went home for long stretches in between events. I have one friend who is, right now, traveling west in a camper van with his Bassett hound to promote his novel. He'll cover thousands of miles. It's not the first time he's done this, either.

Does any of this help book sales? People ask me this a lot. Honestly, I'm not sure. Most writers I know say the same. In that regard, it's kind of like having another birthday – you're not sure it's working for you, but it's better than the alternative.

One thing I can say for sure is that the past few months gave me some stories to tell. There was that one reading with the dogs, for example. Everyone was really quiet as they listened to me read my story, with the exception of the gallery owner's dogs, which were running all over the place, especially across the stage area. They were barking and buzzing past my legs as I read. But you have to picture that these dogs also had long pink feathers sewn into their fur, and the movement of the feathers made them appear almost to be flying, these strange little cherubs.

To be fair, I'd been warned. A writer friend had told me that, during his reading at the same venue, a cat had run across the stage with a rat in its mouth. This would have seemed like a tall tale if not for the fact that, on the night of my reading, the host mentioned unprompted that there had once been an incident in which a cat ran across the stage with a rat during some poor soul's reading.

Queue the dogs...

On the occasion of a different reading, I had a mini-crisis when no one laughed in the usual places or even looked at me. The whole time I was reading, I was thinking, *Oh my gosh, they hate this. Why am I here? What have I done with my life?* At this particular venue, a coffee shop, they had “featured readers” (me) followed by an open mic. The open mic attracted a crowd of regulars. When it came time for that portion of the program, the first reader walked to the stage, cleared her throat, and said, “I just wrote this poem. It’s called ‘Ham Sandwich.’” It turned out that the crowd had been hunched over their tables, composing poems during my reading.

At a reading in New York, I shared the bill with an Asian-American writer who had been billed as the new voice of the millennial generation. He’d recently been a guest on a national night-time talk show. After the reading, I overheard him say to the host, “Thanks for advertising this event to an Asian audience. I’ve never seen so many Asians in one place.”

“Actually,” I said, laughing, “they’re here to see me.” He blinked at me for a moment, perhaps taking in my red hair and freckles. I gestured to my Asian-American husband who was nearby with our large group of friends and family. I quickly wished I could retract my comment. He looked crestfallen. What would have been the harm in letting him think he had developed a legion of middle-aged Asian fans?

One evening in March, during the thick of my own teaching semester, I drove three hours across frozen cornfields to give a reading on the Eastern Shore of Maryland at a community college. My expectation was that, in such a rural area, few people would attend, and I was stressed about spending the time to get there and back. When I arrived, I found one of the largest audiences I’ve had, especially considering I was the only reader. There were rows and rows of chairs in a ballroom. I learned that many in the audience were earning extra credit for their English courses. Aha, I thought, with disappointment. Surely, I would receive a tepid reception, people checking their phones and sighing. However, the group listened with rapt attention for the whole thirty minutes I had been asked to read. They gasped and laughed in the right places, with bright, engaged expressions. Most of them lingered afterwards, buying the book and waiting to get it signed. I spoke at length with each person. Many had never been to a reading before. They were mostly local residents who had opted to take university courses as adults. One woman in her forties said she had recently read and enjoyed a book for the first time in her life. I met a woman from Iran who aspired to be a science fiction writer, but wanted to improve her English first. All of the people with whom I chatted had one thing in common – a burgeoning passion for the written word.

It’s easy to become desensitized, to think of a reading as a task to tick off of a list. It’s easy to think that one’s book and one’s engagement with an audience doesn’t have much impact. And if one thinks in narrow terms about the word *impact*, this may be true. I have often sold no books at all at these events. But the physical object of the book was not why I got into this whole racket. This book tour, something that began largely as an obligatory capitalist enterprise, perhaps brought me full circle – back to what motivated me to write in the first place, that urge to share the struggles of life, to connect with others. I’d thought that the tour would be my chance to affect others with my work, but it turned out that it was just as much a chance for others to affect me. And it seems like that kind of recalibration of one’s inner compass, one’s *True North*, is invaluable.

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