

Letter from America Spring 2016

When I ran into a writer friend at the local shopping mall, he asked me about the release date of my book. My short story collection had won an award and was coming out with a university press. I told him the date was three months away.

“So you’re busy promoting it then?”

Gulp. No. I understood that I’d need to promote it after it came out, but what should I have been doing right now?

“Girl, you’ve got to get on that,” he said. “What about reviews? What about guest blogging?”

No one teaches you this stuff.

Writers, most of us, think of the writing itself as the work. Once that’s done, well, what else is there? What else could possibly matter? It turns out there’s a lot, and I wish I’d been more savvy with my first book. It came out, was snapped up by family and friends, and then more or less disappeared. I may not have known much, but I did know I didn’t want that to happen again. So I started asking around for advice. After several long email and phone conversations with people more experienced than I was, I grasped that I was woefully behind on what would turn out to be the full-time task of being my book’s marketing director. I should have started several months earlier. I also began to understand how deeply uncomfortable I was in this role – it seemed icky, for lack of a better word, to be engaging in self-promotion.

Regardless, I settled down at the computer day after day. I sent scores of emails. I asked friends and family to email their local newspapers to request reviews. It seemed like a terrible imposition, but many were quite excited to be involved. These efforts yielded few responses – but the ones that did come through turned out to be invaluable.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the greatest response was in my own city of Baltimore, partly because I live here and partly because the book is set here. A connection to a place makes attention more likely, I learned. Although Baltimore’s daily paper, *The Sun*, didn’t review the book, I was lucky enough to have it named in the best of 2015 in the year-end round-ups in *Baltimore Magazine* and *Baltimore City Paper*. I was also interviewed on the local National Public Radio station. These things happened not just because I put myself out there (though this was obviously important), but also because I reached out to people who had reason to believe their audiences would have some reason to care.

As I figured all of this out, I contacted publications in other places where I had personal connections. Even though newspapers have dwindled, there are still about 1300 dailies in the United States. I couldn’t write to all of them, and certainly most of them would have no reason to think their audiences would care about my book more than the many others being published. The one major city newspaper that committed to reviewing it was the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* – my dad is from Minnesota, as are many other Flanns. Flann sounds Irish, but is an adaptation of a Scandinavian name, and all of us who have it are related. Minnesota was where our forebears settled – the Flann ground zero, if you will. I made sure to explain all of

this in my email. Also, a cousin who lives in the area wrote to the paper on my behalf. It astonished me how much work it was to get just one review.

In addition to pursuing reviews, I wrote numerous guest blog posts, and I asked several writer friends to interview me for blogs. All of this is to say that I've put a ton of time into this marketing endeavour that I could have spent on writing new work.

I'm still trying to figure out what's worth doing and what's not. Does any of this result in book sales? Or am I just creating a brand, a name people might remember? And does this further my work or just my ego? I wish I knew. What I do know is that doing nothing will have a predictable result.

Nothing. Not even crickets.

As much as it unsettles me to hawk my book in the crowded marketplace, jostling and elbowing for space, even that mess is preferable to the fate that nothing promises, for it is literary death. And don't we write in the first place to sidestep the abyss, to reach toward something, anything?

I've been surprised to discover that the silver lining to all of this has been the people with whom I've connected, their generosity and camaraderie. As I mentioned, writers gave me advice, made introductions on my behalf, and interviewed me for blogs. Family and friends reached out to newspapers and promoted the book on social media. Being from stoic Midwestern stock, it isn't my nature to ask for help. But when I did, it strengthened my relationships. I remembered again that accepting the aid of others can be generous, as it requires me to reveal what matters, to share. Maybe when we face our struggles together, we're all made better by it. At the very least, it makes the work of marketing less icky and sometimes even – dare I say it – kind of fun.

Kathy Flann