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# Poets & Writers

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FROM INSPIRATION TO PUBLICATION



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## Confessions of an Author Nomad

PROMOTING YOUR BOOKS AT ALL COSTS

**T**HREE years ago, I drew the sad conclusion of every writer without a spouse or trust fund: I could either write or pay rent. Not both. The former didn't generate enough income for the latter. So I ditched my apartment, shoved my stuff into storage, and hit the road. I've been crashing artists colonies, college campuses, and the spare bedrooms of friends and family ever since. Some people call me homeless, but I prefer "nomadic."

I first tasted the itinerant life in the spring of 2004, when my debut memoir, *Around the Bloc: My Life in Moscow, Beijing, and Havana* (Villard, 2004), hit store shelves. The bulk of my twenties had been devoted to that project, so I was eager to share it with the world. Nine months before its publication, I drew up a twenty-five-page marketing and promotion proposal, bought lox and bagels, and hosted a breakfast at my New York City publishing house. My publicist nearly choked when I asked her for five thousand dollars to fund a tour.

"We've allotted five hundred dollars," she said. "Would you like that in postcards or gas money?"

At the time, I was living in Brooklyn, New York, with multiple roommates, on a nonprofit salary. I had been saving my book advance for something sensible, like an IRA or furniture that wasn't swiped off the street late at night. Yet, every marketing manual I'd read warned that books have about six weeks to "sink or swim." I decided to invest in a life jacket.

After pouring myself a stiff drink that night, I looked over the hundreds of bookstores, libraries, colleges, cultural centers, and literary festivals that I had compiled for my proposal. Where to begin? With an e-mail, obviously, but wasn't it considered gauche to pitch yourself for an event? Maybe I should write my queries under a pseudonym. Possibly "Rita." Let *her* do all the outreach.

Before turning in, I sent a lone e-mail to Nuestra Palabra, a literary organization in Houston, Texas, asking to be added to its mailing list. I awoke the next morning to an amazing response. Someone at Nuestra Palabra had visited my Web site, which was included in my e-mail signature, and forwarded it to the director. Would I give a reading there in



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March, for Women's History Month?

This was it: a sign from the literary gods. I didn't need my publisher, or even Rita. I could coordinate this tour myself. Do it the Langston Hughes way, with a car trunk full of books and a friend.

So I called my friend Sheryl Oring, a typewriter performance artist, and we started hunting down gigs. That spring, we spent three weeks driving 6,500 miles across the Southwest—Austin, El Paso, Albuquerque, Tucson, Las Vegas, Los Angeles. Sheryl typed at truck stops, laundromats, and grocery stores by day; I read at bookstores, colleges, and cultural centers by night.

Sure, there were mishaps. Like that bookstore in Santa Fe. I landed the gig by swearing to the owner I had legions of family and friends in the area. (Fact: I vaguely knew one person there.) Two minutes to showtime, my audience consisted of two people: Sheryl and the owner, who was positively glowering. I stepped into the parking lot "to go look for my friends" and was considering bolting when I noticed a coffeehouse across the street. I walked in, plunked down a postcard on everyone's table, and announced that I had driven all the way from Texas for a reading, but nobody had shown up. Incredibly, six people followed me out the door. One even bought a book. [Lesson No. 1: Unless you are a rock star (literary or otherwise), never book a nonpaying gig in a city where you don't know *at least* a dozen people.]

Overall, however, our do-it-ourselves tour was glorious. Not only did we break even (our honorarium equaling our gas bill), we also reached out to audiences and compiled an extensive mailing list. Hiked through Bryce Canyon. Drank sangria. Bought red cowboy boots. And felt, for the first time, like real artists.

Around this time, I also did my first residency at an artists colony—Ragdale, in Lake Forest, Illinois. There I met a novelist who introduced herself as something marvelous: "a colony whore." Every year, she applied to dozens of residencies for the maximum

time (generally two months) and then lined them up, one after the other. In this way, she stayed completely focused on her work, while befriending artists from all over the world. She spent a fair amount on plane tickets, of course, but saved bundles on rent and groceries.

What a coup! I didn't have to squander my career on a futon in Brooklyn, day jobbing and night writing. Not when I could be...a colony whore! Inspired, I started applying for heaps of residencies, grants, and fellowships.

While awaiting responses, I juggled the New York City day job with mini book tours around the Northeast. Gradually I realized what most memoirists do: I was living backward, not forward. I had just turned thirty, but was spending every waking moment promoting experiences I'd lived at age twenty. It was time to move on, but where? To what? My next book idea required an extended stay in Mexico, but how could I afford it?

Nothing had surfaced in the grant search, but I decided to take a leap of faith that something would. After requesting a sabbatical from the day job, I jetted off to Mexico on New Year's Eve, 2004. A few weeks later, a miracle landed in my in-box: Princeton University had selected me as a Hodder Fellow for the 2005–2006 academic year. I'd applied on a whim and a prayer, thinking myself unqualified. But here it was. [Lesson No. 2: Let *them* tell you that you're unqualified for that job/residency/grant/fellowship. Never make that judgment call yourself.]

This changed everything. Not only could I quit my job and stay in Mexico, I could proceed with a modicum of confidence. After eight months of research in Mexico, I relocated to New Jersey for the fellowship, wrote a new book, and commenced a third. And when the fellowship expired in August 2006, I began my nomadic life.

What does this mean, exactly? Basically, three-quarters of my possessions sit in storage in Manhattan. [Lesson No. 3: Never store your stuff in Manhattan, unless you are *positive*

you will return within the year. Ship it somewhere cheaper. Like Dubuque, Iowa.] The rest are either with me or at my parents' house in Corpus Christi, Texas. Mom monitors my mail. Dad deposits my checks. And I float about, writing, speaking, teaching, and sleeping wherever I can. In 2007, the tour for my second book hit thirty-five cities—many of which I visited multiple times. The following year, I made it to thirty-two cities, including in countries such as Mozambique and Spain.

How do I land these gigs? By asking. Every year, I send a thousand or so e-mails to college professors, headmasters at boarding schools, and directors of cultural centers. The bulk are banished to the spam box, either by the computer or the recipient. But one in every ten e-mails yields a response. I mail recipients a portfolio (a DVD, press clippings, and a book) about my services (a choice of four keynotes and eight workshops). Then I follow up, wait, follow up, wait. For every five packets sent, one generally results in an invitation. From there, I haggle a good rate that includes transportation, room, and board. Then I call whatever libraries, bookstores, and book clubs I can find in the area, plus all the local media outlets: radio and TV stations, newspapers, blogs, and the like. If I'm feeling extra ambitious, I track down potential audiences through Web sites like MeetUp.com.

What has risen from this? Well, let me ask you this: Ever heard of me before? No? Okay. There you go.

But my first memoir made it to a second printing, though it hasn't generated any royalties yet. [Lesson No. 4: Try really hard not to write a book about communism. It won't sell. Trust me.] Perhaps because it was more accessible (that is, not about communism), my guidebook *100 Places Every Woman Should Go* is now in its sixth printing, has been translated into Spanish and Portuguese, and has earned some ten thousand dollars in royalties. My second memoir, *Mexican Enough: My Life Between the Borderlines*, has raked in thirty-five thousand dollars in speaking

honoraria and awards since publication last year. So I'm not exactly rolling in dough. Still, I earn more now than at the day job back in New York City—plus, I incur so many write-offs that I hardly pay any taxes. And, for the past four years, I've contributed the maximum to my IRA and accrued no debt. [Lesson No. 5: If you're a writer, your whole life is a write-off. Save receipts for everything, from taxis to lattes.]

*Practically every penny I earn from my books goes straight back into their promotion (or the research for the next book). If I wanted to actually live somewhere (as in, pay rent), I would have to get a "real job." But if I had a "real job," I couldn't do this.*

Of course, I've worked myself into a little trap here. Practically every penny I earn from my books goes straight back into their promotion (or the research for the next book). If I wanted to actually live somewhere (as in, pay rent), I would have to get a "real job." But if I had a "real job," I couldn't do this.

And I love this: the freedom, the adventure, the frequent flyer miles. I get paid to explore what impassions me, and—better yet—to share it with others.

So for now, it's hand-to-mouth living for me. This means sacrifices. Big ones.

Let's start with the one you're probably thinking about. Relationships. Aye. I once thought my ideal mate was a nomad like me. It seemed so romantic at first, rendezvousing in airports and plotting layovers (pardon the pun) in exotic locales. But then I discovered how many other women were sharing

this pleasure. Heartache! A lonesome drought ensued, until I finally found my perfect match: a surgeon who does pro bono work overseas (that is, someone who not only understands my itinerancy, but who also has the resources to join me on occasion). Added bonus: free medical care. The downside: We sometimes go a month between visits.

Love isn't the only relationship difficult to maintain. You can't be a very good friend (or sister, aunt, or daughter) when you're only around a couple of weeks a year. And when I do visit (generally on a book tour), I am terribly needy. Fetch me at the airport! Feed me! House me! Can't talk now—gotta be there at six! I pledge eternal gratitude in the Acknowledgments sections of my books, but after three years of cadging favors, I can feel the strain. [Lesson No. 6: You can't be grateful enough in this biz. Send handwritten thank-you cards to everyone you encounter: reviewers, conference and festival organizers, bookstore owners, librarians, and especially the hosts of your crash pad.]

Being a nomad also takes a physical toll. Once upon a time, I was a vegetarian who cooked wholesome, balanced meals. Today, I can draw a detailed map of every hot dog stand in Houston's George Bush Intercontinental. (Terminal B, Northwest Concourse, Gate B88 is the bomb, yo!) And exercise. Five years ago, I was a belly dancer who vigorously practiced yoga. Today, I can barely squat in lotus position. And wrist injuries. Do you have any idea how strenuous it is, yanking luggage out of overhead bins day after day? Talk about repetitive stress. And don't get me started on my digestive tract. It's *scary*. (Did I mention that the nomadic life is turning me into a drama queen?)

I've developed weirdly obsessive compulsions too. Like the house keys people are forever lending me—I'm terrified of losing them or, far worse, failing to use them to lock up. Whenever I depart someone's house, I check the locks no less than five times before walking away (and have been known to race back after a block or two to check

them again). Then the worry transfers to *losing* the owner's key, and I proceed to stroke it, in my pocket, throughout the day. That's right. I finger keys. Neurotically. Can't help it.

The nomadic life has deleteriously impacted my writing as well. I've met writers who sire entire manuscripts on planes and trains, but I conk out three minutes past the gate. The only time I really write anymore is at colonies. Over the past three years, I've spent nine months blissfully ensconced at Art Omi International, the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center, the Writers' Colony at Dairy Hollow, Ragdale, and Can Serrat. But considering that I do this full-time, three months a year doesn't exactly produce reams of writing.

So there you have it: the wonderful and the horrible of nomadic living. To do this successfully, you need a split personality. Exactly half of you must be a highly organized hustler who nabs great gigs and airfares. The other half must be a universe-loving hippie who

believes that whatever happens is beautiful. If you're too much the former, you'll be an ulcer-laden basket case; if the latter, you'll wind up sleeping (and reeking) on a park bench.

How much longer can this last? I ask myself this daily. Even the real nomads out there—the Mongolians, the Romany—set up camp occasionally. I'll do so soon, as I plan to pursue an MFA degree. The only aspect of the writing biz that seems remotely secure these days is academia, so I thought it prudent to pick up teaching credentials. However much I love the nomadic life, I don't want to be fingering somebody's house key when I'm sixty.

That said, I can't recommend this enough. If you've poured years of your life into a manuscript, how could you not give it a fighting chance? Sure, there are plenty of people who say the book tour is dead. Unless you are a celebrity, it is pointless. Do it virtually (via blogs) or not at all.

Yet, there is nothing quite like mak-

ing a live audience laugh—or weep. Like being invited to a campus by a student group that held fund-raisers for your airfare. Like receiving a T-shirt from a guitarist who named his band after a catchy phrase in your book. Like holding a workshop for an aspiring writer who flew halfway across the country to take it.

Yes, book tours can be disillusioning. I used to think authors could make their books best-sellers through willpower alone. But we can't. What we need is a miracle.

And that's fantastic. Because miracles happen. Like my Princeton fellowship. That one application, assembled the night before deadline, bought a whole year of time and space to think and create. If I've learned anything in this business, it's that the more you fling yourself out there, and chase those dreams and miracles, the higher your likelihood of catching one. [Lesson No. 7: Miracles happen, especially if you pursue them.] ∞

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