

The Joy of Touring

by Ralph Keyes

SOME awful things happened to "Workaholics" author Marilyn Machlowitz on her recent book tour. When she arrived with a reservation at midnight, the Denver Fairmont was out of rooms. Then the psychologist got bumped off a New York television program by a seven-year-old with gonorrhea. And in Los Angeles a show ran out of time before it got to her, even though she'd already been made up.

Machlowitz also found it hard to regain her taste for coffee after consuming so much of it in three weeks' time.

Would she ever again subject herself to such an ordeal?

"Are you kidding?" says Machlowitz. "I'd go out again tomorrow."

What exactly is the appeal of book touring?

It's hardly based on a good press. Most authors back from tour sound like Napoleon describing his visit to Moscow. The wife of a friend of mine once asked whether her husband, an academic who had just written a semipopular work, would enjoy the tour his publisher was urging on him. Everything she'd read about book promotion made it sound grueling. All I could think of to say was this: "It is grueling. But if there is any part of him which enjoys being the center of attention, that part of him will enjoy touring." (She laughed; her husband is not without vanity.)

Judging from three tours of my own and discussions with other authors, ego fulfillment emerges clearly as the major appeal of this experience. Show producers seem overjoyed to see you (they usually are; producers live in dread of no-shows). Smart interviewers imply you're the most important guest they've talked to since at least the last one. People sitting next to you on planes are more than usually impressed by the work you're engaged in. And when passersby whisper to each other on the street, it could be because they just saw you on television, not because of the funny way you walk. [Continued on page 19]

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During her three weeks of touring, Marilyn Machlowitz recalls pleasantly being recognized by four strangers: a woman on the plane between Minneapolis and Cleveland; a man on the monorail in Seattle; a fellow shopper pinching grapefruit at a grocery on Third Avenue in New York; and a woman in the lobby of the Sir Francis Drake in San Francisco who asked, "Didn't I see you on TV this morning when I was drying my hair?"

Machlowitz also had friends and relatives say that they had seen her on television while they were home sick. "I never knew whether to say, 'I'm sorry you were sick,' " says Machlowitz, "or, 'I'm glad you saw me.' "

Cataloguing the various excuses offered for having "happened to see you" on daytime television is among the more educational aspects of touring. The only announced sighting of me during my own most recent tour was by a United Airlines pilot who examined me carefully as we deplaned in Cleveland, then said, "Weren't you on the tube this morning? I just happened to catch a couple of minutes of that show as I was leaving the hotel."

Somewhat more encouraging were the bootblack and cab driver in Columbus, Ohio, both of whom not only said they'd read about my book (after I mentioned its title) but reported back enough of what it was about (height) to establish their credibility.

Such interactions are a pleasant contrast to my more typical daily contacts with bank clerks making whispered phone calls about my check or auto mechanics who can't figure out how an American man can reach the age of 35 without having heard of a throwout bearing.

This is a second lure of the tour: the simple break it offers in routine. Some writers dread being torn from their typewriters. Others crave release. For tourphiles, book promotion is like parole from solitary confinement. Not only do touring authors get to leave behind their list of Things to Do (Joan Didion tried taking a carton of correspondence along on tour; after three days she mailed it home untouched), they get to travel in style. At times limousines joyfully whisk authors about and the quality of casual glances thrown their way is upgraded as pedestrians strain to see just *who* is sitting behind that slit of a rear window.

The hotels where limos deliver their passengers are likely to be ones we seldom see from the inside. Staying at first-class hotels may initially feel like putting on airs. But it actually has practical value. This is because reporters and the like constantly ask, "What hotel are you in?"

At first this question seems to mean, "Where are you staying?"

But I think what it really means is, "How's your publisher doing by you?"

Or simply: "How's your publisher doing?"

So it's nice to be able to respond, "Beverly Wilshire-well," or "Drake-well," or "Hay-Adams-well."

Two-tour veteran Philip Goldberg finds that for him a major touring pleasure is "being treated as if I were rich and famous.

"I like staying in better hotels and eating in better restaurants than I would frequent if I paid for them myself," he explains. "I can never figure authors who call touring 'a sacrifice,' unless they're rich ones who are already staying at good hotels and eating in fancy restaurants."

For Goldberg, author or coauthor of six books (including "How to Manage Your Boss," which is about to be published by Rawson, Wade), another appeal of touring is the opportunity it presents to talk face to face with others about ideas he normally shares only with his typewriter. "On tour," he explains, "I get to see how people respond—as if they were readers. Often this will give me new insights, ones I wish I'd had the opportunity to include in the book I'm promoting."

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This is a third attraction of book promotion, one of value to almost any writer—the opportunity touring presents to see new settings, meet new people, and get a first-hand look at new trends in the media. On the “Today” show my interviewer was the actress Mariette (Polaroid) Hartley, filling in temporarily in an abortive attempt to compete directly with the more entertainment-oriented “Good Morning America.” Phil Donahue’s enlarged presence could also be felt in the number of programs that called themselves “Donahue-type” shows with aw-shucks hosts waving microphones like sceptres as they snaked through the audience.

Cable television was a good deal more prominent this time around than on tours past. For authors this trend is a boon. Cable is far more relaxed than network television, and more willing to tread new paths. On Warner Qube’s two-way cable experiment in Columbus a young crew built a well-produced hour around my appearance that involved polling viewers about their heights, then instantly tabulating results. Only after the show ended was I told that a question viewers are also sometimes asked is, “Do you want this show to continue?” If the majority vote “NO,” the guest gets to leave early.

This also seemed to be the year of “magazine” format shows. One virtue of such formats is that their voracious appetite for guests leads to more company backstage. For a sociable person this is a fourth appeal of touring: the opportunity it presents for becoming part of a temporary little community of producers, hosts and fellow guests who are floating between shows.

Green rooms (so named for the presumed color of the inhabitants’ feelings) are the center of this community. Guests-to-be huddled within can develop the closeness of death-row inmates, or foxhole buddies. My most memorable green-room gathering was for a magazine-type show in San Francisco. It included Marilyn Machlowitz, Egon Von Furstenberg, the silicone-enhanced dancer Carol Doda, and a red-blazered woman who was to interview her. “At least two of us here have plastic boobs,” this woman cheerfully told us as Doda arrived. Hers, she explained, had been reconstructed after surgery.

We then were joined by an older, nondescript woman whom I took to be a producer’s wife, or perhaps the cleaning lady. After listening in on our talk for a time, this woman picked up my book, glanced through it, then tested the volume with her hand like a cut of beef brisket.

“This is a heavy book,” she finally commented.

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Heavy,” she repeated. “It seems to weigh more than most books this size.”

“Maybe that’s because it’s so packed with content,” I suggested.

“Screw you,” she replied (in somewhat stronger language).

Who was this woman?

She turned out to be a noted New York film critic, there to tout her latest collection of reviews and essays. Her appearance was to follow mine. Our relationship didn’t pick up much during the next half-hour. Then I went out to do my five-minute spot. Have you any idea how comfortable it feels to make such an appearance knowing that a noted critic is critically observing your performance?

Despite such hazards, the opportunity for contact with colleagues also promoting books is, on balance, a touring bonus. In Los Angeles and in San Diego I crossed paths with Michael Medved as he promoted “The Golden Turkey Awards.” “How’s it going?” Medved asked when we first made contact.

“Hectic,” I replied. “They’ve got me doing six or seven appearances a day.”

“Don’t break my heart,” responded Medved. “I’m doing twelve.”

Michael Medved turns out to be something of a tour-holic. He even likes doing late night radio call-in shows (staying on one in Chicago until 6 A.M.). Articulate, gregarious, and effective enough on television to be invited for encore appearances on “The Tonight Show,” the Los Angeles author contrasts his fondness for touring with the agony of writing. “I find it very easy to talk,” explains Medved, “but very hard to write. So for me touring is a wonderful thing to do. I can’t think of anything I enjoy more. It’s a way to sort of live out an adolescent fantasy. To live a gypsy’s life. Hit a new city every day. But at the same time you’re doing something eminently responsible, businesslike and structured.”

During five book tours (for “What Really Happened to the Class of ’65” and “The Invisible Presidents,” among other titles), Medved has developed a novel approach to enriching the experience. Basically what he does is treat each trip as a semifantasy. Or as he puts it, “impersonate a grownup.”

One Medved fantasy is of himself as a politician campaigning, hustling, catching planes, making speeches—“trying to gather votes at every turn.” Another fantasy involves advancing into enemy territory, following paths mapped by scouts (publicists), foraging, maneuvering, living by his wits. Because he doesn’t like cabs, Medved commonly will ask seatmates on planes how they’d like to take the next day off and chauffeur him about for pay. Nine out of 10 times, the writer told me, the talk among tourphiles tends to confirm the worst fears of anyone concerned about writers becoming promoters. Good interviewers are endorsed (Larry King, Susan Stamberg, Dorothy Fuldheim in Cleveland, Boone & Erickson in Minneapolis), and others warned about. Opinions are ventured about cities seldom seen. (“I hear Miami’s a good book town but a bad media town; you’ve got to have both”). And polls are taken about favorite cities to tour. Minneapolis is mentioned frequently in such polls, as is Portland and, especially, Seattle.

Seattle was the only city from which not one but two television producers sent me courteous thank-you notes. Even the radio announcer there who had to bump me because he had so many calls backed up about Iran was polite about it. (“Could you say anything about Iran?” “Only that the Ayatollah’s taller than the Shah.” “Well, maybe next time.”)

Nearly every interview I was part of in Seattle—on radio, television or for the newspaper—was handled professionally. One television host not only had read my book but had taken notes on it and had in hand a series of well-constructed questions that he fired at me for half an hour, Mike Wallace-style. This prompted my single decent ad-lib of the tour (entirely inadvertent): “How tall was Jesus?” “God only knows.”

Perhaps because of the quality of its local media, Seattle is one city where a poll of booksellers reported that local shows sold more books than national television. It’s also got clean air, a space needle, and the market by Puget Sound. Among the joys of touring, Seattle ranks high.

There are many more. Most, as I say, get back to ego. Three months after returning, Marilyn Machlowitz looks fondly back on her own tour as “a lifetime’s worth of attention forced into three weeks.” And she is not embarrassed about feeling that way.

“A lot of writers don’t give themselves enough recognition,” suggests the psychologist-author. “They’re so hyper-aware of their shortcomings. I think they owe this to themselves. Touring can be the reward that everyone sees for all those hours of writing that no one sees.”

Most important, she adds, “The recognition you get while on tour can make it that much easier to get back to your typewriter.” □