

Q & A: Getting Naked for Money

That's quite a catchy title your book has. How did you come up with it?

This memoir has been in the works, on and off, for nearly a dozen years and has gone through a series of incarnations and titles, including *Misguided: Confessions of a Travel Slut*. An agent favored that one; it was a play on the facts that I wrote guidebooks, have no sense of direction, took freebies—and had sexual adventures on the road. The word “slut” was used ironically, but it still made me uncomfortable. Then I got an assignment from *More* magazine to go to a nudist resort, undercover and uncovered, and the title *Getting Naked for Money: An Accidental Travel Writer* was born. It was less controversial than the earlier one and got “writer” into the mix, which I liked, but I still debated about it.

I wanted to sell books, of course, but I didn't want people to think the memoir was about a hooker – or that it was fluffy. There's a lot of humor but much of it is acerbic. The clincher in deciding to go with the title was a photographer friend's suggestion for the cover art: an illustration of Botticelli's Venus as a reporter. It's a classic art allusion so it has a certain amount of gravitas – but it's also funny, and thus reflects the book's tone. A terrific illustrator who specializes in parody, AJ Morrow, brought the image to life.

Speaking of taking freebies: You're forthright in this book about getting comped as a travel editor and writer – and about tacitly (or explicitly) being aware that the authors who worked for you at various guidebook companies and at a local newspaper took freebies too. Isn't that unethical?

No guidebooks would get written if authors had to pay all their expenses out of pocket – at least not the ones that rely on first-hand experience and cover a wide range of accommodations and restaurants. Few travel publications pay all expenses and if they do, the writer rarely goes incognito – another thing that skews the way they are treated and thus their objectivity.

Purity is elusive in other ways. Travel writing is filtered through the lens of a publication's writing guidelines, often dictated by its advertising in subtle and not so subtle ways; magazine editors attend conferences where rates are deeply discounted; and many travel editors of smaller newspapers pull stories off the news wires, which removes them one step from the writers and from the source of their travel.

So what's unethical is the hypocrisy, the wink, wink, nod, nod that goes on in travel publishing, the pretense. A full disclosure statement such as, “The travel for this article was based on a press trip hosted by X national airline,” or “The writer was hosted by X hotels,” would allow for transparency.

To address only my own experience as a guidebook author, there was never any quid pro quo for comps. Space is limited in books; if I didn't like a place that hosted me but wasn't well known, I wouldn't include it. Why call attention to a business only to diss it?

If a place were too well known to exclude, I'd be honest and point out the downsides of staying, dining, or visiting there. When my name is on a book or a chapter of a book or my byline is on an article, I wouldn't undermine my credibility for a free meal or a free room. No one one ever offered me a large – or even a small -- sum of cash to include their establishment in any of my guidebooks. Sadly.

You've been divorced for ages and never had children, yet you express no regrets about these facts in your book. Are you just putting on a brave front to cover the pain of your pathetic life?

My life *is* often pathetic for many reasons, but they don't include not having a partner or children. Just as there's a spectrum of sexuality, I believe there's a spectrum of behaviors and yearnings associated with gender that are passed along genetically, as well as reinforced by society. I once had an energy healer in Sedona tell me that I needed to get in touch with my feminine side. I wasn't insulted. I honestly never heard that biological clock ticking. I allude to having had a pre-Roe v. Wade abortion in the book. There was never a question, then or now, of wanting a child. I sometimes think about how my life would have been different if I had children, but with curiosity rather than longing.

I cherish my independence, my ability to pursue my own interests. I have lots of friends and a great dog. And Netflix. I get depressed and upset—how can you live in this world and not experience those emotions?—but never lonely or bored.

You're pretty brutal about academia. Why?

I grew up thinking that certain genres of writing – travel writing and food writing, for example – were not “real” and that was reinforced in graduate school. There was no nonfiction in the canon except essays by the Transcendentalists, which I hated. Why should nature be a proper subject for meditation and not food or travel? Women were not well represented either. Superb books like *Tracks* by Robyn Davidson or any of M.F.K. Fisher collections of food essays were not deemed worth study – and, in retrospect, I consider that a pity.

Worse was a problem endemic to academia in general: That it was filled with jargon. I went in with a fairly fluid prose style. I left with the sentence structure of Henry James and the verbal clarity of Yogi Berra.

I have few regrets in life, but I'm sorry that I spent all those years studying books chosen by those with a less than expansive view of writing and gutting my prose style.

What, besides become a writer, was your greatest accomplishment?

Learning to drive. I was phobic about it. Once I left public transportation-rich New York City and moved West, I had to get over my fear of driving if I wanted to be independent and to pursue a travel writing career. At first, I missed the reading I used to do on the subway, but the arrival of audio books solved that problem.