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Essay by Joan Frank

Lessons From the Bumpy Road of Book Promotion



I once asked an admired, awarded, serious literary writer who's something of a Name, of some gravitas in the writing world—yet a kind and generous friend to me—how she was feeling following an ambitious (pre-pandemic) book tour.

“Fragile,” was her answer.

That response puzzled me.

It struck me as a bit self-indulgent, even petulant. After all, the hard bottom line is that most writers would kill to encounter the “problem” of book tour fatigue. In a best case it means a publisher believed in your work enough to fund the tour. More commonly, you had to fund it yourself—but that meant you'd be even more motivated to make it count. If we throw our souls into getting work accepted for publication, it follows we must next throw our souls into creating buzz for the product. True, each phase of this requires Herculean stores of drive, energy, stamina, and also—trickier for introverted writers—a willingness to wade into clusters of people, both in person and remotely. Book tours for a major publisher, of the sort my friend endured, have routinely been defined as ultra-demanding.

But surely (I told myself again after she confessed) tour-fatigue was a luxurious problem: a bona fide spoil of the long struggle.

In other words? Suck it up, Major Writer. Do your duty.

But after a visit to a book group some while back (also pre-pandemic)—I was forced to reconsider my flip stance. What anyone outside the process might presume to be a joyful task, not to say honor and privilege—turned out to be, well, not so much.

I'd assumed until then that talking to book groups guaranteed a love-fest.

An author visiting a reading group could feel, I figured, pre-vetted. A bunch of individuals had read your book, agreed it was worth pursuing, and invited you to visit and talk about it. To my mind that meant they'd liked it enough to want to learn more.

Maybe most of the time, that's still what happens. An author sits down (if onscreen now) among a collection of friendly faces and, prompted by their eager questions, thinks out loud to them about the making of the book, her writing path, and whatever funny or sad or silly anecdotes she can link up for their entertainment.

This last round, I drove to a gathering of intelligent, affluent women in a beautiful, woodsy setting (one of those houses built by its progressive, artful owners). Everybody was well-educated, fit, confident. They'd all read the book (a positive sign), and several of them cornered me at once to sign their copies. So far, so good.

But after we'd seated ourselves in the cozy, sunken living room, and a couple of members had made nice noises about enjoying the novel, I noticed several others sitting with tight mouths and folded arms, eyeing me narrowly.

One of this latter faction remarked, as her opening salvo, that she did not believe my characters' ages. At 58 and 62, they weren't old enough, she felt, to consider themselves to be aging.

She herself was fifty-something.

I stared at her. True: I'd made those two main characters a little younger than they should technically have been. Nobody wants to read about super-old people. I blinked like a raccoon in flashlight beams, trying to think of a way to say this.

But before I could, another member suddenly declared that those same two protagonists, old friends who irritate each other and finally erupt into a climactic whopper of a fight, *did not really love one another*.

This completely blindsided me.

Was I expected to *argue*?

A third member then cocked her head. "How did you come to write in so many sentence fragments?" she demanded, in a tone striving for idle curiosity—which only underscored her obvious, sharp dislike of sentence fragments.

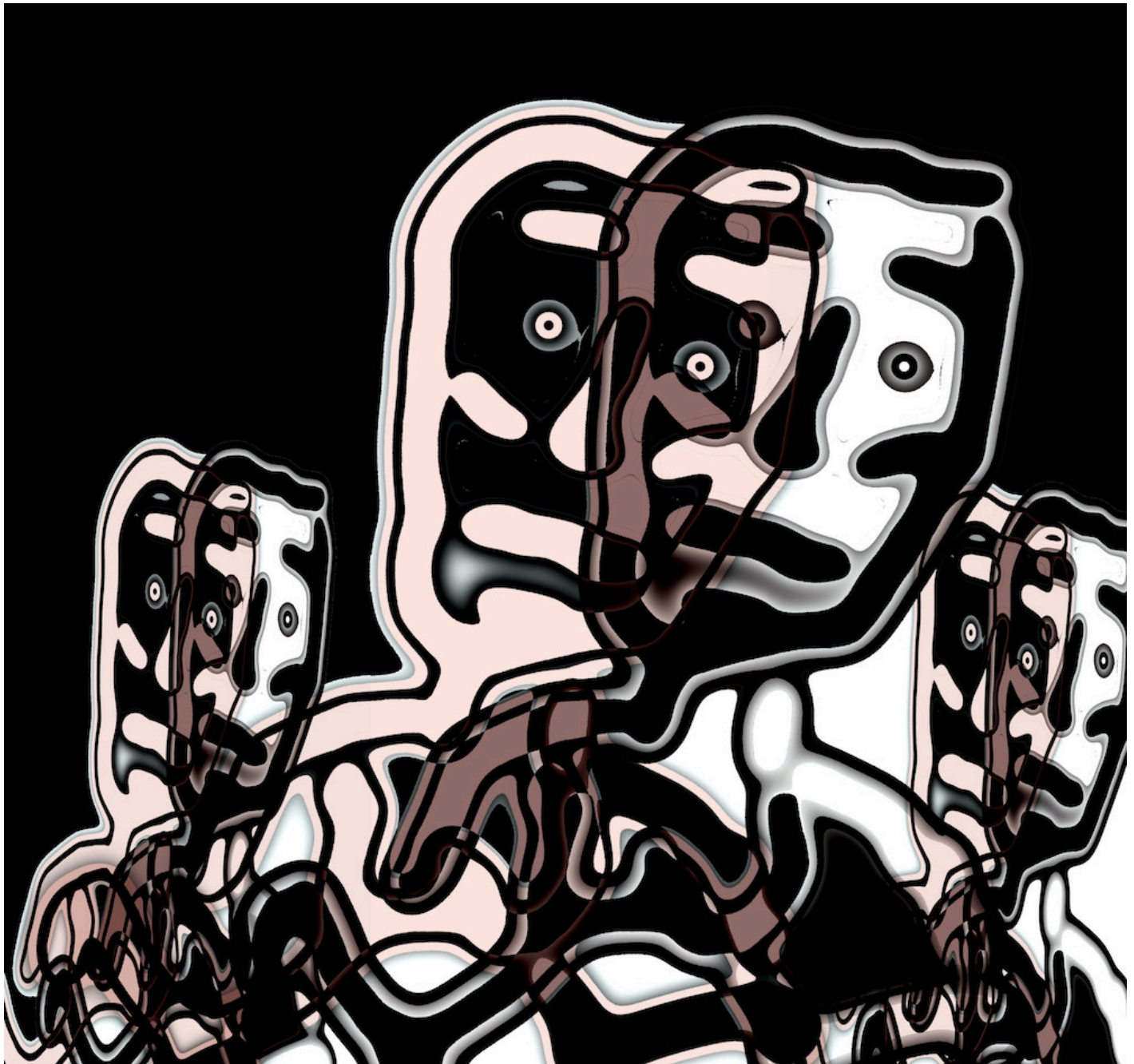
Slowly, I explained that I was closely tracking the interior thoughts of these characters, and that to my knowledge people didn't tend to think in structured, grammatically complete sentences—rather, thoughts came in clumps of words with abrupt starts and stops. Often, I added, certain words and phrases referred to personal history, which then functioned as a kind of shorthand.

This explanation met polite silence. I'd thrown a pebble down a bottomless well. My stomach started to sort of squinch. I put my little plate of olives aside.

As for characters not loving each other? I opened my hands: "That's up to you," I said as cheerfully as I could. Those characters *belong to you now*, I reminded them—trying to echo Elizabeth Strout's brilliant response when listeners buttonholed her about who the model had been for Strout's fabulous protagonist, Olive Kitteridge. I reasoned that if I dared contradict these women's convictions about who loved who, or about characters not acting their ages, they would simply turn on me and tell me I was wrong: dead wrong.

The women laughed uneasily when I suggested the above to them, recognizing (I hoped) at least some of the built-in absurdity of our impasse.

We stumbled on. I could not allow myself more than a single beer, since I knew I had to drive. And though on the face of it people were civil, by the end of the night I was feeling—there's no other word for this—brutalized, like a witness on the stand whose alibi sounded fishy. I couldn't wait to flee home, get a stiff drink down, and talk it over with my husband.



A college teacher who's spoken all his life before roomfuls of individuals, he reminded me (as I stared at my margarita) that people bring unknowable baggage to their readings—and to the author herself. You simply can't, he said, second-guess what backstories will shape their responses—why one or another seems to be watching you with suspicion, scorn, even rage. No rating sheet's handed back to authors, except in the form of unpredictable behavior. No follow-up evaluation notes appear, unless you count book sales.

Much of the time that's exactly what counts, and what is measured: sales. Never mind what a book cost its maker at any level, figurative or literal, to create or promote. The reader naturally styles herself as its consumer, wielding a personal manifesto of consumer rights. She expects a warranty of satisfaction. If that feels missing to her, its absence will be announced, by word of mouth or a bad online review, or both. Or as a sour face and accusatory questioning during book group visits or bookstore readings.

I confess here to writing a species of literary fiction that's urgently interior and cerebral. I'm not ashamed of this because that also happens to be the kind of work I like to read. But I still burn, remembering the evening an audience

member took me to task for it during a packed bookstore launch of an earlier story collection.

She raised her hand and asked calmly, “Do you read newspapers?”

I gaped at her.

She repeated the question. I'd understood her the first time, but felt so amazed by this poison-tipped arrow of a tactic that it took me a couple of beats to shape a response. The woman was suggesting, fairly bitterly, that the work I made paid no attention to the *real* news: that my stories were hopelessly interior, self-immersed, oblivious of what was important in the world—therefore, irrelevant.

Plenty of criticism of this nature has been aimed at writers like me, and also at certain writers in prior eras, such as Jane Austen, for example. (I don't wish to suggest my work compares with hers, but to offer a broad parallel.)

I am still trying to understand my feelings about such moments, because I'm supposed to be a seasoned pro. I've been writing for thirty years. I've spoken to classes, bookstore audiences, reading groups. I'm supposed to have learned to steel myself against *that look*: the wary eyeballing.

Yet the group in the arty woodland retreat, for all its surface courtesy and pleasant food and rural-chic, reminded me I'm still as vulnerable as any newbie—prey to feeling attacked, dismissed, misread, or just plain ignored.

Granted: a writer tends by definition to have no skin. She is hopelessly—some would say ruinously—sensitive to the subtlest nuances of atmosphere, language, behavior, but especially language. How to defend this, after eleven books? *Nolo contendere*. I should be tougher. Cagier. Cannier. You put your art into the world: you take your lumps. People have crazy stuff to work out. You shut up. You carry on.

But it's hard out there for the skinless. Being flung onto the defensive for my work made me feel like I'd eaten something that had gone bad. Worse, I felt lonelier. Most of those people seemed not at all to *get* the novel's vision, its passion, its quest. They seemed instead to want to pick quarrels with tiny particulars, as though my “correcting” said particulars would fix some larger, overall problem. They seemed never to grasp or take to heart the story's raw thrust, its vibrancy, the “force through its green fuse,” to swipe a famous phrase.

But how can any author hit any reader in the heart, if not through her work?

Debating skills won't cut it.

Some authors might shrug here: “Not my circus.” Others may slump and nod sadly: the art has failed. But that can't make sense if a majority of readers have loved the same work. Which, thank the freaking stars, they did.

One thing's sure. Self-castigation won't fix this. Nor can it make more art.

So I've pondered how to retool, how to carry on after confrontations like these (because there'll be more). How to replenish and protect what is needed for carrying on: vigor, urgency, fearlessness. Freedom. Confidence to make a mess, to spatter.

It's one thing to consider a notion of hostile readers in the abstract: a dim clump of grumbling citizens (in my mind they're mud-streaked and dressed in gray rags like peasant revolutionaries), milling around resentfully at the horizon. You can read the terrible reviews they write on Amazon and elsewhere: often crude, cranky, sometimes misspelled.

It's another thing to be eating their pasta salad, petting their cat, and gazing into their vexed faces as they insist you explain why you did something they did not like.

I'd like to have answered them more simply.

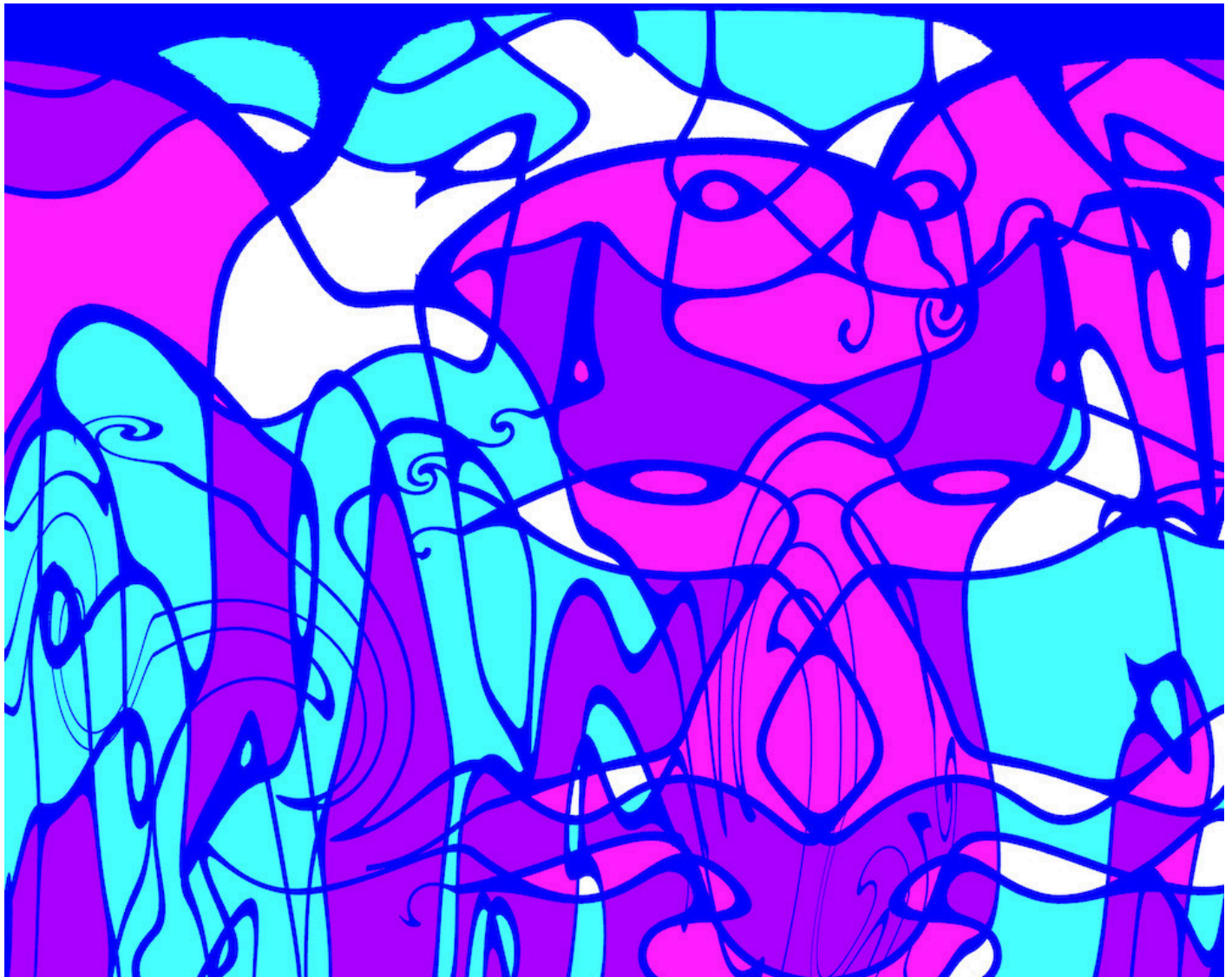
I made this book and I'm proud of it, but its life is its own now. You can like it or hate it. I can't be required to defend or

justify it.

Except no one really believes that. Maybe not even me. I laid down those damned sentences, didn't I?

Nonetheless, statements like the italics above should probably be printed in the front matter of any new book. They can serve as a generic caution, a standard-issue, a no-comment comment alongside the usual disclaimers meant to deflect lawsuits: "These characters are purely fictional," and so on. I've always believed that the moment an author tries to defend or justify her work she is tacitly validating her accuser's objection, like trying to form any response to "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?"

Meantime the author-as-mortal faces, as noted above, a different kind of loneliness. Loneliness, of course, is nothing new to writers; it's a pre-existing, often chosen condition. We go off by ourselves as a rule. Solitude is treasure.



This new loneliness, however, springs from, let us say, a rather rude reception. Roughly translated? *Your baby's ugly.*

Hearing this, a writer's brain circles the world in three seconds, resuming at square one. You want people to read, and to love reading. You bang your gong to bring attention to the hard-wrought book. Then? Gird yourself, earnest artist. When attention comes, it will contain naysayers.

There will always be people who'll love your work—and almost unfailingly, some who won't: a fringe gang of thumbs-

downers with intensely specific agendas. The writer must allow for this, even try to prepare for it—must learn to grow some temporary skin or at the very least, place herself at a psychic distance.

She cannot feel obliged to solve it. Humans are too various.

Above all: she must never, never never let it puncture or stall or tarnish or poison or even shade her ownership of, faith in, and energy for her work.

I recently watched a PBS feature on the life of conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, 75 years old at the time of its airing. In it, MTT described a moment when, as a very young, up-and-coming conductor, he had politely asked the mighty Leonard Bernstein what Bernstein had thought of MTT's just-completed performance of a difficult orchestral work.

Maestro Bernstein answered, and here I must paraphrase: “Once you take possession of it and truly make it your own, you won't need to care what I or anybody else thinks of it.”

Fragile, me? So it seems. I could spend time regretting it, but I no longer have that kind of time. And I can't recommend regret as a fruitful way for anyone to use what time remains.

So just here, friends, arrives the saving upside: Skinlessness and vulnerability must qualify as another tool in the toolbox, part of an author's catchment system, her intake radar—the hypersensitive, hyper-porous apparatus that locates, gathers, and sifts incoming materials. From these, eventually, she makes new work. I am doing it here, writing about the blunt trauma of being dissed by a book group. How can I want to retract or eradicate a necessary tool? A best friend used to enjoy (fondly) calling me “a pulpy mess.” I couldn't argue with her. An excruciating awareness conferred in childhood, something never grown out of—chronic, messy—turns out also to be something I happen to need.

Bruised? A little. But bruises go away. I notice them for a while with a kind of morbid fascination, the way we all do. I may write about them. Then after a time, like the rest of us, I turn away to other projects.

By that time, everything else has become so much more interesting.



Art Information

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“Panic” was previously published in [Hinchas de Poesia](#) [9].



Joan Frank is the author of ten books of literary fiction and nonfiction. Her latest novel, *The Outlook for Earthlings*, is published by Regal House Publishing. Recent books include *Where You're All Going: Four Novellas* (Sarabande Books, 2020), which won the Mary McCarthy Prize for Short Fiction, and *Try to Get Lost: Essays on Travel and Place* (University of New Mexico Press, 2020), which won the *River Teeth* Literary Nonfiction Book Prize. She lives in Northern California.

For more information, visit [Joan Frank's website](https://mail.talkingwriting.com/your-babys-ugly) [10].

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