

How Chasing Mr. Wrong Led to Mr. Write

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The reason I attended the Maui Writers Conference that year was not because I'd dutifully saved my money, planned ahead, and was finally ready to put myself out there after years of hiding behind my fear of being rejected in a noble effort to publish my yet-to-be-written memoir. No, the real reason I decided to attend the conference that year was simply because I was chasing yet another good-looking-commitment-phobic-he's-just-not-that-into-me man/boy with mother issues with whom I'd had a brief affair while on vacation in Maui, and I wanted to appear to have a legitimate reason to return to the scene of the crime.

I'd known about the Maui Writers Conference for years, but always had a good reason not to go. Like I wasn't ready to show my work to anyone, or I felt too fat to wear a bikini, or God forbid I might actually have to write something if I attended a writers conference, or nobody likes me everybody hates me I think I'm going to eat a worm, and so on. But upon returning home from my vacation fling, before I'd even unpacked my suntan lotion, I sat down at my computer and registered for the upcoming conference. (Apparently lust trumped fear.)

Clearly I was a glutton for punishment, but after all, the title of my memoir was *Falling into Manholes*, so this rerun could be considered fieldwork, right? Perhaps my travels to distant shores to date unavailable men would be tax deductible, I reasoned (or rational-lie-zed), and made a note to ask my accountant.

Okay, so my motives for attending the conference were a little skewed, but it's not like I was completely unprepared. In the previous eighteen months I'd published two personal essays in small press anthologies, crafted a pretty good book proposal, and scored a literary agent. So, when Labor Day weekend rolled around, I packed a bikini and my worst intentions, and off I went.

Upon my arrival, instead of focusing on the conference, I was preoccupied with checking for messages from Cliff. We'd planned to meet several days later, but I couldn't imagine why he didn't want to rush to my side! To pass the time until our rendezvous, (or more specifically to keep myself occupied while waiting to be dumped), I wandered around the conference until I stumbled across a giant banner that said, "Jay Leno's Pitch to America." A line of would-be-authors were waiting to pitch their story ideas to the cameras in the hopes that they would be one of the few selected to be aired on the Jay Leno show. I'd never pitched my story out loud, and the prospect of doing so for the first time in front of a giant camera was horrifying, but I was looking for distractions, and this fit the bill. Terrifying and potentially humiliating, it sounded like the perfect dating substitute.

When it was my turn, I stood trembling at the microphone and blurted out, "*Falling into Manholes* is a funny, insightful book about how I learned to take the "me" out of men." OMG, I thought, did I say that out loud? I was feeling as though the only way this whole experience could be worse was if I were naked, when the male producer asked, "Can you give us an example?"

I froze. I hadn't written the book yet and wasn't prepared with a glib answer. Before I could stop myself I enquired, "Can I say blowjob on national television?"

Naturally, the producer said, "Sure!" so I proceeded to tell a story about "Brad," that involved "presidential sex" and Christmas shopping, before slinking away, determined to go into denial about what I'd just done. They won't pick me anyway, I thought, proceeding to my next humiliation stop: pitching my story to the Editor in Chief of Putnam, Neil Nyren.

Sitting across a little table from Neil, I was nervous. He looked serious, deadpan and bookish - not at all the type of person that I'd envisioned might be interested in my memoir, but I plunged ahead. Anything was better than obsessing about Cliff.

"I don't think this is really your kind of book," I began, "but you're the biggest publisher here, and you've been around forever and know everyone, so I'd very much appreciate your feedback on my little project."

At this point I lowered my face into my hands, as though to collect myself, and as I jerked my head back up, like an actress hurling herself into character, I launched into my schpeel.

"*Falling into Manholes* is a collection of coming-of-middle-age stories about looking for love in all the wrong places - food, alcohol, drugs, men - and finding it, in yourself." (The finding it in myself part was not quite true yet, but I was optimistic that my book would eventually have a happy ending - and not the massage parlor kind). I talked for a couple more minutes, during which time Neil maintained his poker face, but after I finished, he told me he liked my idea, and asked me to send him the essays I'd had published! As I took his card and rushed back to my room to email him the essays, I started getting excited about something I couldn't have articulated at the time. Something that felt like hope.

Two days after Neil returned to New York, he emailed that he loved my essays, and requested my book proposal. Several days later he told me that one of his women editors read my proposal and came into his office demanding that he "Buy this book right now so Wendy will move to Manhattan and be my new best friend!" That comment alone would have won my heart, but in the end Putnam paid me to write my story. Cliff may not have wanted me, but Neil did, and so did Jay Leno (I was "bleep job" girl on Pitch to America). And so it was that chasing Mr. Wrong led me to Mr. Write.

And as for the book, well, my relationship with my book had only just begun. Now all I needed to do was write my way towards that happy ending.

Wendy Merrill's memoir, *Falling into Manholes: The Memoir of a Bad/Good Girl*, will be released March 27, 2008. Check out www.fallingintomanholes.com for details and events.