
BUSIER THAN EVER: IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Scribble, Scribble, Zoom, Zoom

by Barbara de Marco
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On March 12, in the middle of a raging Southern California rainstorm, a writer friend and I drove two hours, from Orange County down the coast to San Diego, to attend Left Coast Crime, an annual conference for crime writers and readers. In addition to appearing on a panel about noir, we planned to launch *Crossing Borders*, an anthology sponsored by the San Diego chapter of Sisters in Crime and published by Down & Out Books, in which my driving companion and I both have stories. We checked into the Marriott, hurried to catch the first two panels, then walked to a nearby restaurant for an early dinner. The book launch was scheduled for that night.

We returned at six only to discover that the conference had been shut down, following Governor Gavin Newsom's order, announced that afternoon, restricting events of more than 250 people. Our group numbered 400. Force majeure meant the Marriott would refund the conference organizers as well as those of us who had already checked in. That was welcome news, but for us and so many others who had been looking forward to the conference and the launch, it felt ominous, and like a giant letdown, especially after months of planning.

We drove home that night, apprehensive and anxious as to what the future would bring. The consequences of COVID-19 seemed remote to those of us living in Orange County, but not for long. That weekend we went on lockdown.

And so my virtual life, and that of so many other writers, commenced, and while I expected my work to slow down, it only grew busier.

My three face-to-face classes moved to Zoom. (My Gotham Writers Workshop class was already online.) My speaker series, usually based in a local indie bookstore, moved to Zoom, as did my class's annual reading at said bookstore. A poetry reading I was involved with, also on Zoom. I started a free-writing group—yes, on Zoom—and writer friends and I started a critique group. Guess where? Zoom, of course. Interviews for my radio show were now conducted via Zoom audio and uploaded to be broadcast.

I hope I remember how to engineer my show at the university station when — and if — we're ever allowed back on campus. I have a virtual and growing stack of emails from publicists promoting books. I wish I could feature all their authors on the show.

And then there was my own writing — a novel-in-progress and a short-story collection, readying for agents.

When asked how things were going and whether I was writing, I heard myself regularly repeating, *I'm busier than ever*. Which prompted my curiosity as to how other writers were faring in the pandemic. I asked around. *Busier than ever*, they repeated. And those with new books coming out, who were scheduled for tours, found that alternative tour venues — there's Zoom again — were key.

Poet Jane Hirshfield's new volume, *Ledger*, was released just as lockdown began. Her scheduled in-person book tour segued to virtual tours and workshops, and she began spending hours on Zoom and adjusting to life online. "[I'm] learning to make and send video recordings," says Hirshfield, "when I'd never so much as taken a selfie."

Author Rachel Vail, who's married to a neurologist and epidemiologist, said when it became clear to her things were about to get bad with COVID-19, she cancelled her end-of-March book tour before everything shut down.

"It was a weird time to have a book coming out," she says, "and this one especially, which I wanted to handle carefully and lovingly. As luck would have it, this spring was going to be my busiest publishing season, maybe ever." She loves her early-chapter book series, and while she hates self-promotion, she says she would have done anything, and talked to anyone, to promote them. "But now bookstores are shuttered, schools are remote learning only. If there's a good way to promote my five newly pubbed books, I sure don't know what it is, so busier than ever? I don't know. Only time will tell, I suppose. I do now know how to play five chords on the ukulele, at least."

Debut author Ava Homa's novel, *Daughters of Smoke and Fire*, came out in May, when the media and most of the country were focused on the

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pandemic. Her efforts to promote the book often felt overwhelming. Learning to deal with various software systems, preparing for virtual events, and responding to interview questions via email was a lot to contend with.

"Who knew speaking about one's book to an audience in quarantine would be so difficult," says Homa. "Where's the line between confidence and humility? Isn't Facebook Live some weird public monologue? Why did I feel like crying after some Zoom events?"

But good reviews gave her a boost and encouragement to get to work on her next novel. It's been hard, though. She fights despair. On the upside, she has grown less afraid of Zooming.

Many writers are dealing with despair. When her book club appearances were cancelled, Debbie Burke took it hard. After an initial depression lasting two weeks in March, she became busier than ever, launching a new thriller and making videos with iMovie. "Movie making is not something I would have attempted if not for AG mentioning it as an option. AG has been an exceptional source of ideas and education for me, and I receive far more value than my annual dues of \$135."

When the lockdown orders arrived, Los Angeles poet Terry Wolverton looked forward to Zoom yoga, online meditation and other classes, and activities like gardening or organizing her closet, but the wish was short-lived. The face-to-face workshops she teaches went on Zoom, and her students in Antioch University Los Angeles's

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low-residency MFA program needed more mentoring. Consulting clients continued to need her too.

“I’m wildly grateful to be able to continue to earn a living on my laptop,” she said, “and I wouldn’t trade that situation, but I’ve found that I’ve had to forego the Zoom yoga and Master classes, and my office is more disorganized than ever.”

Though Jon Reiner became sick with COVID-19, he said he had to work through it to keep up with his commitments: personal essays for an online site, *Pendemic*; health-related corporate writing; teaching for Gotham Writers Workshop; and his own creative work. Fortunately, his health continues to improve.

Novelist Katharine Weber also came down with COVID-19 in London in February, before there was a name for it. She became well enough to return to the United States, but then lockdown happened with her family still in Great Britain. She doesn’t know when she’ll see them again, so she is on a writer’s retreat at her home in “steamy”

Connecticut. Her writing office behind the house has an air conditioner, so that’s where she spends most of her time, putting together a collection of short stories, posting writing prompts on Twitter, and making the most of it.

Scott Alexander Hess set up a formidable schedule and says it has given him increased focus. “This is indeed different from pre-COVID, when I had to travel to different locations for work. While I could focus to write, the moving around created gaps and disrupted the flow.”

Before the pandemic hit, MediaPost journalist Laurie Sullivan, based in Wyoming, wrote two articles and one blog post a day. Now she writes an additional article five days a week, each one running between 400 and 500 words. She writes the extra daily piece because there’s so much more news. “I want to ensure that readers have the information they need to make better advertising and marketing decisions,” she says.

There are authors, such as Patricia Highsmith biographer Joan Schenkar, who refuse to do virtual events or participate in social media. “A lynch mob IMO too much of the time,” Schenkar writes, yet she remains involved with her readers. “I’m still a prolific e-mailer and continue to answer questions from readers of my books and plays and writers who are doing research on subjects related to mine. And the emails have doubled and then tripled in this time of confinement for everyone.”

In January, mystery writer Christine Goff, who inaugurated online webinars for Sisters in Crime (SinC) a little over a year ago, took over as program coordinator for the Colorado Book Awards (CBA). With the arrival of COVID-19, the organization moved all its events online, to Zoom and Facebook Live. “Insanely busy,” she says, though now, with the CBA over, she will concentrate on SinC again and the re-release of her novel.

In May, Viking released Jennifer Steil’s novel *Exile Music*, so she started writing essays, doing radio and print interviews, and promoting her book on social media. She also spends time promoting other authors. “Literary community is important to me, and I know how many writers are in my situation.” She’s also working on another

novel, made even more difficult since she and her daughter were evacuated from Uzbekistan, where her husband serves as the U.K. ambassador. She doesn't know when they'll see him again. "I have not watched a movie since the start of this pandemic or had any free time. I stay up late in London doing literary events online with U.S. venues, and then have to get up at dawn to launch my daughter's school, so I am chronically exhausted."

Jennifer Chow's first Big Five book came out right around shutdown, so she, too, rescheduled in-person events to online marketing. She also supports other authors via Instagram Live launches, Facebook parties and Noir at the Bar. "Before the pandemic," she says, "I met weekly with my local writing group. Now, I'm almost daily connecting with other writers. Inspired by those around me, I've also been investing more into the craft of writing, such as by frequently attending Sisters in Crime webinars."

Xu Xi had several contracts and appearances cancelled due to COVID-19—all involved domestic and international travel—but has "wound up with more work than expected, in terms of being commissioned to write or to run workshops remotely or give online talks or editorial/mentorship contracts or requests for contributions of new and previously published work to anthologies." Staying home has a bright side: she's finishing a new novel and sent off a textbook manuscript in July.

The fact that parents around the country are homeschooling their kids has worked to children's author Anne O'Brien Carelli's advantage. She hears from readers on her website and has been invited to participate in online book-related events. By not traveling, she's reached a wider audience. She's discovered kids love to meet authors, and teachers appreciate "someone else carrying out the instruction. Parents either attend or hover in the background during a Zoom session because they are readers too. I'm enjoying every second of it, and it inspires me to take time to block out the world and keep writing."

Michele Herman's freelance developmental editing business was slow, so she offered a pandemic discount for the month of May, "which

worked like a charm," she says. "Manuscripts have been pouring in."

The pandemic and lack of socializing gave memoirist and novelist Marie Carter more time to work on a book proposal. "A month into my search," she says, "the book found an agent and now I'm busy with making his suggested changes and doing further work on the book." A Gotham Writers Workshop instructor, she says, "I'm also finding teaching for GWW is busier than ever."

When the quarantine hit, New York City novelist Lee Matthew Goldberg would leave his apartment only to go up to the roof. His home became his writer's residency. Mid-April he started to go outside and resumed his daily trek to Central Park, which he calls his refuge. For the last decade, there has been a certain tree in the park he sits under to write. "The tree perfectly contours to my back and has a good mix of sun and shade," he says. "Out of the Spanish Flu of 1918 came the Roaring Twenties, and from the Plague came the Renaissance, so I hope other creatives have been as inspired as I was during these weird times and that we're moving toward a new era of art. Regardless, I'll be finishing the last edits of my book at my tree." **AG**

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