



Nauman's Nautica

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by A.D. Nauman

Thoughts on navigating the turbulent life of an author

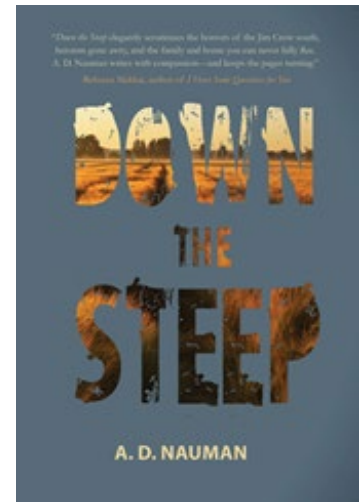
(Nautica [noun] /'nawtika/-- navigation, seamanship)

(Nauman [noun] /'nawman/-- my last name)

November/December 2023

Hi Friends, and Happy Approaching Holidays!

My book launch party has come and gone. It was fabulous! Truly, it was a highlight of my life, largely because so many of my favorite people came out to celebrate with me. Thank you to those who were able to do so! After the launch, I went on a little book tour, which is what I've written about this month. (Quick reminder: my novel, *Down the Steep*, is set in Civil Rights-era Virginia, where I mostly grew up, and it's the story of the teenage daughter of a Klansman who learns to overcome her own racism.)

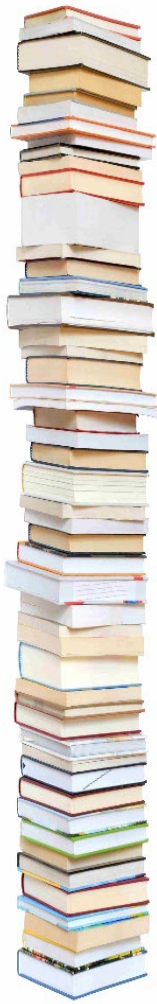


I wrote the below with all of you, my newsletter readers, in mind. Some of you have been on book tours yourselves; I thought it might be fun to compare notes. Some of you are about to go, some are hoping to go someday, and some may just be curious about book tours. So...

What's It Like to Go on a Book Tour?

by A.D. Nauman

It's exciting, fun, affirming, exhausting, confusing, and stressful. It's a balance of thrill and disappointment, with occasional flashes of angst—a bit like marriage, actually: it's something you dream about and then, faced with the reality of it, you must make major adjustments to your expectations. But overall, you're profoundly happy to have done it. You feel as though you've entered a new stage of your life.



I was invited to two book festivals, one in Nashville, one in Baton Rouge. I also spoke at a writers' conference in Deerfield, Illinois, and I did a reading with two other authors in Richmond, Virginia. These events occurred on near-consecutive weekends. Each was its own adventure.

I drove to Nashville, breaking up the trip with an overnight stay in Seymour, Indiana. In Seymour I learned this important lesson: no matter how desperate you are for food on a road trip, do not order a salad at a Cracker Barrel. Vending machine Fritos would be the healthier choice.

My good friend Mark from St. Louis met me in Nashville for the festival, and he deserves several medals for being, as he was calling it, my "comfort human." I was wound super tight, worrying about the panel I was to be on, which was about "coming-of-age" stories. I suppose that's what *Down the Steep* is, but I was not consciously writing a "coming-of-age story," and to me that phrase evoked images of wealthy boys at a Vermont prep school. I researched the term ahead of the festival, and at dinner the night before the panel, I pulled out my multi-page list of definitions and attributes. Mark talked them through with me, offering insights of his own, so I'd feel prepared. If there were a "Most Marvelous Mark" award, he would win it, no doubt. Back in my hotel room, I had a mini panic attack over which shirt to wear with my new suede blazer. I took pictures of all three—red, green, tan—alongside the blazer and texted them to various people (including Mark) for their opinion. Everyone voted for a different color.

But the next morning, when Mark and I arrived at the festival venue, I was tremendously excited. I got a nametag—my first author nametag!—and entry to the authors' hospitality room, which had snacks—free snacks! I met my two fellow panelists: a young, handsome Nigerian man with a natural charm and a skinny man in an all-pink suit, complete with a shimmery pink bowtie. The latter was Jeffrey, who'd written a novel about coming-of-age gay in small-town Georgia. Looking at these two men, I feared that I—a middle-aged, ordinary-looking white woman—may pale in comparison. At least I was wearing the red shirt. Jeffrey did steal the show toward the end of the discussion; not only was he a big personality in a pink suit, he was a trained actor. But the panel went well; Mark asked the planted question; and as we wrapped up, I was on a high.

Then it was time to sign books in the author tent, across from the bookseller's tent. Festival attendees were to purchase their books, then walk over to us for signing. We were seated at long metal tables, each under a name sign. (My name was on a sign!) I cleverly had a copy of my book propped on a stand and a pile of bookmarks—my promotional “merch,” with pictures of my book and me, snippets of praise from other authors, and ordering info. To my left sat the handsome Nigerian; beyond him was Jeffrey. To my right sat a best-selling nonfiction author—a journalist—who already had a mob lined up for his autograph. No mobs were waiting for me, or my fellow panelists, or most of the other authors sitting in a row and smiling. I too sat smiling, waiting. Minutes crept by, and no one approached me, but I kept smiling, the way middle-aged white women are supposed to do. Then, someone did approach me—a new friend and fellow author, Jan. “April!” she exclaimed. “They sold out of your book!” Oh, the momentary thrill! The heart leaping happily into my throat! I wanted to jump up and hoot! But then—wait. That seemed unlikely. If all the books had sold, someone would have come for me to sign their copy. More people approached to say the bookseller had told them my book “must’ve sold out.” Jan went back to ask again; of course, Mark did, too. And the cold bitter fact hardened in my heart: for some reason, the bookseller did not have copies of my novel.



The authors were supposed to stay at the table for half an hour, so I stayed and tried to grab people's attention. I handed out bookmarks. I sold the copy of the novel I had on the stand. But a dark feeling of angst crawled through me: what an awful situation. I felt powerless and helpless—all seemed lost. Then, suddenly, I realized that the best-selling journalist sitting next to me, with the endless line of fans, was Timothy Egan, whose book, *A Fever in the Heartland*, was about the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. All the people in his line were interested in a book about the Klan! So as they finished with Tim, I yelled, “Here's a *fictional* book about the Klan!” and gave them a bookmark. Perhaps all was not lost: it's easy to order my novel online. Nonetheless, joyfully belting out the word “Klan” did not feel right.

Later, the bookseller told me the shipment of my books just hadn't arrived in time, and I got a brief lesson in supply chains. It turned out the bookseller had ordered from a distributor called Ingram, which is notoriously slow, rather than IPG, which is more reliable. I made a mental note: instruct booksellers to order from IPG. That, and never order a salad at Cracker Barrel.



The next weekend, at the Louisiana Book Festival in Baton Rouge, the bookseller did have my books, and I got another author nametag (!!). Donning it proudly, walking around, I felt affirmed: no longer was I just an audience member, just a consumer; I was one of the creators! I felt proud, bona fide, *real*. Other people treated me with visible respect. Then this thought occurred to me: I'm the same person I was six months ago. Maybe we could all just, in general, treat each other with more respect.

On this trip I was joined by my sister Connie, who was taking a turn as my "comfort human," putting up with my undulating stress levels. The evening before the festival we went to a swank authors' reception at the Louisiana Library, a lavish event with acres of trays of Louisiana delicacies. As I delightedly surveyed the free food, I caught sight of a skinny man in an all-purple suit, with a purple shimmery bowtie. It was Jeffrey. Jeffrey was everywhere. We chatted only briefly, not sharing a panel this time. The next day, I would spot him again in one of the tents, dressed in a banana-yellow suit.

Connie and I stayed in a gorgeous historic downtown hotel, which, I'm pretty sure, was haunted. (It *was* almost Halloween.) When we arrived in our room, I discovered the wardrobe had an odd smell, and I felt unsettled, uneasy.

Something about the décor made my skin crawl. So we asked to switch rooms. The new one, I said, was much better. Connie pointed out it was the same as the first room, just without the wardrobe smell. Yes, this hotel was very possibly haunted. It was definitely understaffed. And overnight all the Coca-Cola vanished from the refrigeration unit in the lobby: management was replacing the Coke with a different product, and the process had begun on the morning after I, a person who needs Coke like most people need coffee, checked in.

In Baton Rouge, I was scheduled to be on a panel titled, "Fiction: Courageous Women Navigate Fate, Politics, and War." I was so proud! I got to feel courageous, writing about politics. I wore the tan shirt with the suede blazer. My fellow panelists were a thirty-something best-selling author, Kimberly Brock, and a beautiful young Russian woman who rivaled the Nigerian man in her ability to garner interest. All right then. The fourth panelist was an ancient woman—even older than I—and I felt pettily happy sitting beside her.

This time in the book-signing tent, people did approach me with their newly purchased copies of *Down the Steep*, but not a lot. Not hordes. I was seated next to Kimberly, who said usually

you don't sell a lot of books at these festivals; you come to meet other authors, librarians, teachers, readers—to make connections and gain exposure. Another lesson learned.

The following weekend, I was off to the Evanston Writers' Conference in Deerfield, Illinois. Because I could easily drive there, I brought a box of my own books to sell, just in case, which was a good thing, because the conference organizer had ordered from Ingram rather than IPG, and my books hadn't arrived in time. (At least Jeffrey wasn't there.) The main lesson here: be ready to roll with the punches. Not only did I have books to sell, but I managed to come across as really nice about the mishap, and now the conference organizer likes me.

By Deerfield, I'd learned to say that my book tour was fun and exciting, omitting the "stressful." People didn't want to hear "stressful." I don't blame them. People want happy endings without complications: my dream came true and now I am bathing in the bright light of unmitigated joy. But for those of you with a book tour in your future, please be prepared: it's stressful.

I was on two panels in Deerfield, the first with Garnett Kilberg Cohen, a literary writer I admire greatly, and the other, yet another beautiful thirty-something best-selling author. This woman emphasized the need to think of yourself as a *brand*. After three best-selling novels, her fourth novel, released at the start of the pandemic lockdown, didn't sell well, and her publisher dumped her. It's not about the *books*, she repeated, it's about the *brand*—the *author* is the *brand*. I kept smiling, even as my soul was shriveling up.

But hey, in Deerfield, I got, in addition to a nametag, a name *tent*. And my spirits soared in anticipation of the next panel, "Writing for Social Justice." One of my fellow panelists was Jill Wine-Banks, MSNBC contributor, author of *Watergate Girl*, and all-around amazing woman. By that point in my travels, I'd become strategic, even a bit Machiavellian: I got to our assigned room extra early and grabbed the middle seat at the panel table, so I would be assured of a seat next to Jill. I also gave her a copy of my novel.





That evening, I had to ditch the banquet. I'd sat through most of the keynote speech, which was delivered by a handsome thirty-something best-selling author who expounded on how brilliant he and his writing are and how everyone loved everything he ever wrote. Toward the end of it, I felt about three inches tall. Plus, I'd ended up at a table of ancient best-selling romance writers, including one who looked like an anorexic Dolly Parton. I know we're not supposed to be snobbish toward romance novels. Oh well.

On my flight to Richmond, two weeks later, I was able to pinpoint the cause of most of my book-tour stress/distress. It wasn't the traveling—I adore traveling. I love road trips and plane rides and hotels, even haunted ones. It wasn't the public speaking; as a teacher, I'm used to and enjoy that, too. What stressed me the most was all the interstitial socializing, those unstructured social interactions with strangers that introverts find enervating. I am a classic introvert. This is not a bad thing. Most writers are. However, I also suffer from social anxiety, which *is* a bad thing—very painful. I constantly fear I'll say or do the wrong thing and people will dislike me. My inner middle schooler gets very loud in situations like these, reminding me I'm not part of the club, whatever club that is. There always seems to be a club, which I can never belong to.

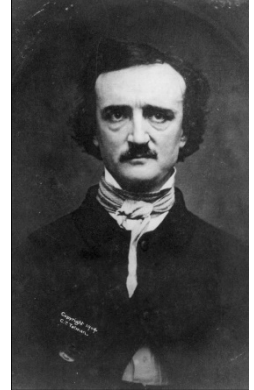
Furthermore, I think female authors are expected to be relentlessly “nice” in a way that feels draining, and that isn't required of men. It seems that, when male authors stand around silent and aloof, others assume they're thinking brilliant thoughts. Aloof female authors are likely to be viewed as stuck up, or perhaps suffering from a mental illness like Sylvia Plath. Women must be exuberant, encouraging, full of positivity and accepting of everything. For example, maybe I've had enough of vampire stories. Maybe I'm tired to death of books about missing and murdered girls, as well as historical fiction about beautiful spunky gals in previous decades who overcome obstacles at work while falling in love. If I were indeed tired of such books, I wouldn't feel allowed to express it. That would be “off-putting.” It is exhausting to be female in general, much less a female writer on a book tour.



But knowing all that helps. I rolled into Richmond feeling like a seasoned professional. My sister Connie was with me again. This time our hotel was not haunted; however, there was an intermittent, loud, grinding mechanical noise in our room. (The hotel was fully booked so we couldn't switch rooms—kudos to us for coping.) My reading with Jody Hobbs Hessler and

BettyJoyce Nash at the Book People, an independent bookstore, was wonderful. Jody and BettyJoyce were wonderful. The bookstore owners were wonderful. Copies of my novel were available, and some people bought them. Not hordes, but okay. Jody and I and our plus-ones went for drinks after the event, and, yes, that was wonderful, too.

The morning before the Richmond reading, my sister and I visited the Edgar Allan Poe museum. Poe had lived in Richmond off and on. Inside the museum entrance was an upright coffin, in which guests could stand for a photo. We declined. We moved along and saw original manuscripts, a fancy waistcoat and socks, an uncomfortable desk chair, a childhood bed, the \$10 receipt for “The Raven.” In the courtyard we encountered a black cat who knew how to work the tourists, ambling around to get pets and treats. In the gift shop, I bought a biography of Poe, and I found I could not wait to start reading it.



But why am I ending my little book tour story with Edgar Allan Poe? I wondered that myself. And why have I set aside all the other books I bought on the tour so I can read a decades-old biography of this macabre author?

Here’s one reason: I’m intrigued by the era he inhabited—the early to mid-1800s. To be clear, I’m not *nostalgic* for it: life expectancy was 39 years then, people were enslaved, and women were a hundred years from being able to vote. But I like to imagine a quieter, calmer world, not such a frenetic tangle of people and stuff, back before human beings aspired to be brands, before books were referred to as “product.” I imagine the sound of horses clopping, not the incessant beeping, buzzing, honking, and banging of the world today.



Also, I’ve loved Poe since I was a kid. I love the wilds of his imagination. Yes, his work is disturbing, bizarre, brimming with angst. The man was surrounded by death; the people he loved most kept dying young. In his writing, he struggled to make sense of his existence. His fictional landscapes are full of animated corpses, moving tapestries, objects that come to life, black cats and birds with strange powers, sounds with no apparent origin, characters who perceive the imperceptible and lose their sanity. Poe’s characters die and somehow come back to life. I cannot reconcile this metaphysics with our 21st-century existence—with book merch and nametags, giant tents packed with stacks and stacks of books, banana-yellow suits, free snacks, worries over shirts, disappointing salads, superficial envies, quests for diet Coke, the grand pursuit of sales. What has made our desires so small? How is our exterior world shaping our interior lives? Who gets to determine the purpose for our writing?

That first weekend of my book tour, when I was driving home from Nashville, just north of Indianapolis my GPS told me to exit the highway: there was construction or an accident or something ahead, and Siri had found a faster route. So I left the highway and was taken through a network of narrow country roads, through cornfields and small towns and more cornfields, turning when Siri told me to, turning again and again. Mindlessly following directions, I lost all sense of where I was, disconnected from the mental map I usually keep in my head. Then, as I was driving alongside yet another cornfield, in the middle of who-knows-where, the GPS signal cut out. A long pause ensued. The map hovered uselessly on my dashboard screen. Finally, Siri said, “Proceed to the route.”

“Siri,” I replied. “I don’t know the route.” For too long she was silent, and I was just driving, hoping and trusting that eventually I’d end up where I belong.

That’s what it’s like to go on a book tour.



See more pictures at
[instagram.com/adnauman/](https://www.instagram.com/adnauman/)

Now for what’s really important:

THE BOOKS!

