

A Special Beast

AS THE founder and coordinator of a well-known reading series in New York City, I have had the privilege, for the past six years, to hear many of the country's best writers present their work aloud. They stand behind the bar in an old tavern on the Brooklyn waterfront, beneath a ship model and some dusty statues of the Marx Brothers and Mark Twain, and for twenty living, breathing minutes they get a chance to bridge the isolated worlds of the writer and the reader.

I've had good luck with the series: Most authors have given captivating performances. Unfortunately, though, I have occasionally watched fine (and sometimes veteran) writers give clunky readings. I've seen them fumble to find their excerpts, read the wrong parts of good books, deliver their material too softly or too wildly, or fail to make real contact with the audience.

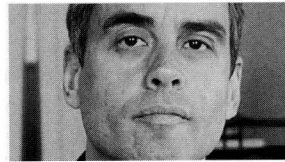
A reading, I have come to appreciate, is not just an oral broadcast of written pages. It is its own special beast, and it seems all too easy to misunderstand its true nature.

LIKE anyone, we writers tend to see the world in terms of our own needs and desires. As a coordinator, I work hard to provide authors with a well-promoted event, a pleasant, quiet venue, and an enthusiastic, respectful audience. But that's not my ultimate goal. I'm most concerned with providing a good experience for the *audience*.

And that's the most important tip I have to offer: Think about your reading in terms of what the audience wants. They're not interested in helping you test new material in order to see how it might go over with future readers. They're not worried about whether your reading provides the most accurate representation of your book. They're at your reading for one reason: They want to have a rich, enjoyable live experience. So conceive of your reading as a unique, self-contained dramatic performance, designed to make your listeners happy.

What does that mean, in practical terms?

I recently watched an experienced writer, author of a sharp, thought-provoking memoir, chop her reading



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GIVING READINGS THAT WORK

into six very different little excerpts. She was obviously concerned with demonstrating the overall scope of her book, but the reading felt scattered. (She also spent minutes flipping through the book, struggling to find those unmarked excerpts, which brings me to a simple recommendation: Use Post-it notes.)

A reading is not about the book; it's about the experience of the reading. For prose authors—even those reading from novels or nonfiction books—it's a good idea to choose one or two passages that have a strong dramatic arc, like a short story. Listeners love to be caught up in a gripping situation, and if you can build to a poignant, funny, or suspenseful climax, so much the better. For poets, be sure to mix it up a bit: Choose poems that vary in terms of length and rhythm, so that you keep the audience engaged.

It's wise to read an excerpt that has a strong sense of scene, with vivid details, conflicting emotions, and maybe some lively dialogue (which plays well because it feels like theater). Avoid material that's technical or expository or abstract. Good readings—like good written works—are not about describing an experience to the audience. They're about *providing* an experience. The best readings are moving in some way, so ask yourself, "Will this excerpt lead my audience through some kind of emotional journey?"

Read something that's relatively easy to follow. The author of a highly touted mystery spent almost half of his allotted time setting up his selection, introducing a vast cast of characters, and explaining a convoluted backstory. When he read a chapter, from the mid-

dle of his book, it was difficult to keep track of who was who. And it was hard to care. (To be honest, I've seen excep-

tions to just about every one of these rules—once or twice. Crime novelist Reed Farrel Coleman successfully presented the first chapters of three different novels, because he got the audience intrigued with the universal writer's challenge of how to begin.)

Reading in public—like writing for publication itself—is not

a self-centered exercise. It's a community interaction and requires a generous spirit. Of course, some series—open mikes, designed for experiments and trying out new stuff, for example—are informal. But if you're reading in a more formal venue, read work that you've polished to the best of your ability, work that stands with your finest. Authors often feel sheepish about repeating something they've read a lot, but it doesn't matter if you've heard yourself read the thing a hundred times, as long as it's fresh to the audience.

By all means, edit and rearrange published material in order to improve the live performance. You can cut paragraphs that might require backstory or seem a little slow, bridge separate sections so they run together smoothly, and water down cusswords, if your audience might be offended or children might be present. Create a new printout of your revision and you're good to go.

Should you talk as well as read? I've seen a number of successful readings in which the authors got up, looked down at their books, and just plunged in, but why not establish a more personal connection with your audience?

Good readings are not about describing an experience to the audience. They're about providing an experience. The best readings are moving in some way, so ask yourself, "Will this excerpt lead my audience through some kind of emotional journey?"

They can always read your book at home; part of the fun of going to a live event is experiencing the personality of the author. So break down the wall between you and your listeners. Thank the audience for being there. Maybe ask them a question about your topic. (Everybody likes to feel included.) Food critic Robert Sietsema even brought samples of unusual foods to pass around during his reading. Talk a little about why you wrote your piece, or about something interesting that happened during your research. Audiences get a kick out of that kind of informal sharing; it gives them added value.

During your reading, look up now and then and make eye contact. If you're a tad nervous, it probably won't hurt to simply say so. (If you need a little extra help, I recommend an anxiety-reducing floral tincture called Rescue Remedy, available at many health food stores. Of course, some readers may prefer to skip the flowers and go straight to the alcohol, but you'll have to judge the wisdom of that!) You don't have to be a polished raconteur; I've watched plenty of first-time readers charm their audiences just by being friendly and sincere.

On the other hand, a little personality can go a long way. A lively accent or some acting talent can give a reading extra pizzazz—as ably demonstrated by authors like Gary Shteyngart and Jonathan Ames—but sometimes the words should speak for themselves. That's especially true with comic writing. One reader telegraphed every punch line so broadly, with arched eyebrows and rising inflections, that she deprived audience members of their own appreciation. Trust your material: If it's funny, the audience will get it.

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I SHOULD point out that it's easy to misinterpret these suggestions to be dramatic, especially for poets. The last decade or two saw the rise of the poetry slam, but that performance style is not one I'm necessarily advocating. That movement neglected legions of subtle, shy, and talented poets, and introduced a noxious oral cadence—*da-Da, da-Da, da-Da-da-DAH*—that still lingers today. You don't have to be an actor or extrovert to give a fine reading. It's not about grandstanding—it's about sending your words floating out into the air, where listeners can breathe them in and feel them open up inside. *That's* drama.

A seemingly obvious but often overlooked suggestion to keep in mind: It's usually good to read loudly. On the other hand, I've hosted readers—Vijay Seshadri and Ernesto Quiñonez come to mind—who read quietly, but so beautifully and intently that soon everybody in the room seemed

drawn into the same magical bubble. For most readers, though, volume is the way to go. If there's a microphone, work it. Speaking right into it will exaggerate the bass and pop

consonants, so keeping a couple of inches back works best. Continue to stay aware of the mike throughout the reading; I've watched readers drift so far away that every elderly person in the room started frowning. Not sure if you're loud enough? Just ask.

Be sure to follow the coordinator's cues on reading length. Twenty minutes doesn't mean thirty-five. I know from long experience that our audience's attention begins to flag after three twenty-minute readings, so authors who read over that time rob their fellow readers of precious attention. Here's sound advice that dates back to vaudeville: Keep it

short and sweet. Leave 'em wanting more. How can you tell how long your excerpt will take to read? Practice reading aloud at home and time yourself.

Of course, we all hope to read to packed houses, but even well-known authors will occasionally walk into sparsely attended readings. The people in the audience—however few—shouldn't suffer because their fellows didn't show. Treat a small crowd the way you would a full auditorium, with complete interest and respect. (Actually, such readings sometimes end up being the most satisfying, because of the personal connections that are made.)

So who's the ideal reader, for a reading series coordinator like myself? She has promoted the event to her own friends and fans and brought some of them with her. (Even though we get a lot of regulars, help in bringing in an audience is always appreciated.) She begins by saying a few words to put the crowd at ease and establish a connection; makes sure everyone can hear; explains just enough to set up her excerpt; knocks the socks off the crowd by reading a superbly written, vivid piece with a strong dramatic arc; and then—just when her allotted time is up—she thanks the audience and gets a well-deserved round of hearty applause.

OF COURSE, to get to that point, you have to apply to read in the first place.

Look for series that are appropriate for your work. For example, my series is cosponsored by a local independent store called BookCourt that sells books at each event, so we feature only published authors. That's not meant as any kind of reflection on unpublished writers—it's just how this particular series operates. And I'm not big on either chick lit or dry postmodernism, so writers in those genres might do better applying elsewhere. How do

you discern if your work is right for a certain series? Check the roster of authors who have read there, and attend a reading to get a sense of the audience.

Send a short query letter to the series coordinator. Keep it professional and pertinent. Include information about when and where your latest publications will appear—journal titles with issue dates or publishers' names with scheduled publication dates—along with a brief description of your work and a one-paragraph bio. Offer to e-mail an excerpt or send an advance copy. And "I'm writing to ask about the possibility of reading"

goes over a lot better than "I want to read." As with any query, never talk up your own talent. A recent applicant described his debut novel this way: "In terms of style, think Don DeLillo and George Saunders." I opened the advance copy with nearly impossible expectations.

Thankfully, my hopes for good readings have usually been met. It's always deeply gratifying to watch a bar full of people sit mesmerized by an excellent reader. In this day of *Grand Theft Auto* and iPod movies, a fine reading spurs faith that words will always provide an indispensable experience, alive and full of joy. ∞

WHY READ?

AS AN author, I've read to big groups but also to a public library audience of one. (Well, *three*, if you count the librarians.) Whatever the size of the venue or the crowd, I relish the live connection, especially since I spend so much time in sweatpants, typing, alone.

But let's ask a business question: When it comes down to it, how effective are readings as a way to sell books? If we're talking sales at the actual events, the answer is: *not great*. Unless you're John Grisham, selling books solely at readings might make you a best-selling author in...oh, a couple of centuries.

So why bother reading at all?

I recently booked a one-week national tour, traveling from Houston, Texas, to Scottsdale, Arizona, to Los Angeles. From a short-term financial point of view, it was a disaster. In terms of royalties earned by sales at the events, I probably sold enough books to pay for one night in a hotel. But I don't regret it. I met several nationally important independent booksellers and showed them that I cared enough to visit their stores. In return, they promoted the readings to their customers, placed my books more prominently, ordered copies for their mail-order clubs, and generally became more aware of my work. So readings give you the opportunity to make an impression on booksellers. Enthusiastic sellers talk up books.

Typical locales like bookstores can be great venues, but also think outside the

box. I've read at a museum of Himalayan art, on a yacht circling Manhattan, and at a national monument. For my latest novel, *The Graving Dock*, a waterfront organization called PortSide NewYork set up a reading next to a real ship repair dock in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. By creating unusual events, I've attracted extra press attention. Newspapers and radio programs like to have specific public events that they can build their coverage around, so use your readings as a reason to pitch editors and media bookers on features or interviews. And make sure you spread the word to bloggers and listings editors. Readings provide a peg for generating wider publicity.

By participating in a reading series, you can come to the attention of its mailing list of highly interested, book-loving fans (even if they don't come to the actual event). The same applies if your work might appeal to a particular audience. I've been able to read for some unusual groups—fanciers of Buddhist art, divorced people, history buffs, maritime activists—and they've promoted my work through newsletters and word of mouth. Readings are an effective way to reach motivated audiences.

While they may not earn much money in the short term, readings can lead to better public awareness of your writing and of your career. What's more, they provide a compelling reason to change out of your sweatpants.