



THE **CAMEL,** THE **BRA,** AND THE **BUICK**

HOW AUTHORS **WOW** AUDIENCES WITH
UNUSUAL BOOK TOURS

By Melissa Hart

Jené Luciani, New York-based author of *The Bra Book*, once signed copies at the Salvation Army, where she did brassiere fittings for women in need, then presented them with bras and copies of her book.

"I like doing events like the fittings at the Salvation Army because I feel it's a way that I can give back," Luciani says, recalling one such event that featured a giant inflatable dinosaur wearing a bra. "In general, signings can get monotonous," she adds. "I'm glad that over the last nine years, and two editions of the book, mine have been really interesting."

On a tour designed to get the word out about a newly published project, many authors opt to appear at bookstores to read from and sign their new work. Others, worrying that they may find themselves speaking to an audience of one, get creative. To keep a book tour fresh and exciting for everyone involved, some authors are thinking outside the box, creating nontraditional events at motorcycle rallies and lingerie shops and camel farms, and driving from city to city in vehicles that range from camper trailers to elderly Buicks.

A donation-fueled destination

Oregon author J.C. Geiger believes a book tour is an excuse to do something big, something fun. "Writing a book is so solitary. There's so much drudgery; you should always err on the side of celebration," he says.

When he launched his young adult novel, *Wildman*, a story inspired by the breakdown of his '93 Buick Century, he took his volatile vehicle on the road from his home in Oregon to his publisher in New York City – a 10-day tour funded by presales and donations. He agreed via social media to drive five miles for every presale copy of



Wildman and one mile for every \$5 donation to the American Library Association (ALA). He livestreamed his road trip on Facebook.

"People were with me not just in few moments of excitement and success, but for all the drudgery as well – long drives through West Texas cleaning splattered bugs off the windshield," he says. "It felt like I was taking a road trip with hundreds of my friends and acquaintances and relatives."

Periodically, on his drive, Geiger would receive a text message when anyone bought a copy of his book or donated to the ALA, and he thanked them on his livestream. "I'd be on Facebook, and I'd have my college roommate chatting with my editor chatting

with my fifth grade language arts teacher," he says. "It was magical."

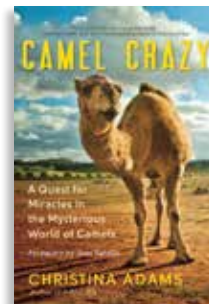
Geiger's tour inspired 100 new donors to the ALA and \$4,000 in donations, which delighted him. "I wanted to design a tour that fit the spirit of the book but also make it a project that spoke to the broader community and give something back," he explains. "Libraries saved my life. My kids' lives are richer for having libraries and librarians. I wanted to highlight that community and make the tour bigger than one person and one book. It's a lot more fun to do something when it's benefitting a larger group."

Geiger remembers one particularly arduous day on his road trip, sweating in his Buick in the North Carolina sun. Though he'd let family and friends know about his book tour, he found himself temporarily stranded due to lack of sales and donations. "I was calling, texting, and emailing people," he explains. "I wouldn't feel comfortable harassing a person to buy my book," he says, "but I was totally fine harassing people to get me to the finish line."

He did, indeed, make it to New York City, where his publisher – originally skeptical of the idea – greeted him with checkered flags, road snacks, and a trophy. "Don't think about the way you think a book tour's supposed to look," Geiger advises authors. "Think about what would be the most interesting and joyful experience you could have."

Touring in camel country

When California-based author and journalist Christina Adams signed the contract for *Camel Crazy: A Quest for Miracles in the Mysterious World of Camels*, she knew she wanted to appeal



directly to readers who had an interest in the animal. She began touring camel-related organizations around the world in preparation for her book launch in the fall of 2019.

"As writers, we all think everyone should read our book," she says. "But the fact is, most people don't go out and purchase a book unless there's something in it for them. Early on, identify the core groups that are going to get something out of your book."

Adams found her core groups through social media outreach, locating camel farms and dairies, camel fertility clinics, and surgical clinics that treat the charismatic mammals. "It's so easy to go on Instagram and connect with those niche audiences that will amplify your own posts and your voice," she says.

Organizations regularly bring her in to speak about her book, and she feels comfortable approaching them for invitations to present. "If your message

is that you're going to support their underlying cause and that you'll raise awareness of their values, contact them," she tells other authors. "Find places where your messaging dovetails with their mission."

Outreach on a motorcycle

Toronto author Liz Jansen found her place at BMW motorcycle rallies. Jansen wrote the memoir *Crash Landing: The Long Road Home*, about a life-changing motorcycle accident she experienced at age 60. She's toured in both Canada and the U.S. in support of her book, inspiring curiosity wherever she travels.



"To me, it's not a big deal to get out and ride," she explains. "But others are astounded at a 65-year-old woman riding solo. On my trip to Virginia, a tiny

89-year-old woman came up to me in the grocery store and described how she rode a dirt-bike for many years but gave it up in 1984 when she married her second husband, a pastor. Another woman approached me at a gas station, wanting advice on how to deal with her college-age daughter who wants to learn to ride."

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Jansen notes that planning an unusual book tour requires a certain amount of boldness. Last year, in planning her 2019 tour of major Canadian cities, she found herself bogged down in the details of how to get copies of her book to her various venues. Eventually, she decided to ship them and ask people from motorcycling communities across the country to store any post-sales surplus. “I told myself to stop being a little scaredy-cat and get out there and do it,” she says.

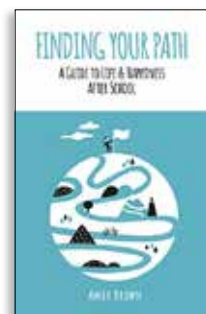
Jansen offers a variety of talks and workshops tailored to fellow motorcycle riders and, separately, to other writers. She titled one of her presentations “Adventure Gone Amuck.” The class teaches people how to navigate life’s challenges, using her own accident – which totaled her bike and shattered her shoulder – as a metaphor. “I talk about how I dealt with my crash and the tools you can use when your own life turns upside down,” she says.

As her book includes a spiritual component, she offers another presentation involving writing and journaling, guided meditation and storytelling. “Go with the theme of your book, whatever that is,” she says. “Who’s going to be reading your book? Not just people in bookstores but people in communities interested the topic of your book. That’s your audience. When you meet people

with whom you have something in common and speak their language, it’s much easier to sell your book.”

Back to school

Australian author Amba Brown, now based in New York, enjoys planning and participating in bookstore launches, but she wanted to market her *Finding Your Path* educational series directly to



schools. She and her husband took six months off their day jobs, purchased a camper trailer, and drove over 12,000 miles around Australia. They visited up to 10 schools daily. “While my primary role was being face to face with the schools, my husband managed everything backend, mapping out our days, emails, distribution, and the partnerships with new stockists,” she says.

Her series is comprised of three books focused on transitions for starting kindergarten, starting high school, and finishing school. For her Australian tour, Brown cold-called educational institutions in each town, introducing herself and requesting a few minutes with the principal, librarian, head teacher, or school counselor. She introduced the series and left copies for review.

“Often educators would purchase a copy of the series and multiple books on the spot, and I would send them an invoice afterwards. If someone wasn’t

available to meet with me, I would leave a sample of the book with a letter for the relevant individual at the school and speak with them later via email or phone,” she says.

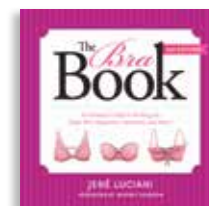
While she occasionally experienced push-back from receptionists irritated by her cold calls, Brown considers the Australia tour a success. Her travels allowed her to get resources into the hands of over 250 schools, many of which purchased copies of the series for the school along with copies for each of their transitioning students.

“At the end of the trip, the books had not only covered all of the costs, but also I was able to introduce the series to a large, interested audience who are now repeat customers,” she says.

Brown notes that bookstore tours attract friends and family but can be limiting to authors hoping to establish a new audience for their work. “Bookstores are full of thousands of other books,” she says. “What if instead you created your tour around where your audience is?”

A media-worthy tour

The Bra Book author Luciani knows her audience: people tired of wearing ill-fitting brassieres and desperate for advice. She believes bookstore tours can be effective when properly promoted, citing her own successful events at Barnes & Noble and New York City’s Book Expo. However, she’s also signed



books in the bra departments of major department stores and lingerie shops.

“Get creative,” she tells authors. “A really kitschy idea will for sure draw them in, but you also have to know your audience.”

She describes a “bras and brews” event at a bookstore and brewpub in Hudson, New York – an event that taught her how important it is to be aware of your audience. The signing, she says, “pretty much flopped. I think that’s just not an audience that necessarily cares about a proper-fitting bra, or would have watched my various appearances on the *Today* show or *Dr. Oz*, whereas a lingerie store would be more fitting.”

Luciani’s attracted plenty of media attention with her lingerie shop and thrift store bra fittings, which in turn ignites interest in her book. People who’ve attended her events and seen her TV appearances and her Ted Talk seek her out for her bra-fitting expertise.

“I’ve had people ask me to sign their bras, take photos with them, give them fittings in bars and in Walmart while I’m shopping,” she says. “I think when people see your passion about a topic – especially with nonfiction – and that you’re not just there to ‘sell them’ something, it shows.”

Contributing editor Melissa Hart is the author of *Better with Books: 500 Diverse Books to Ignite Empathy and Encourage Self-Acceptance in Tweens and Teens* (Sasquatch, 2019). Twitter/Instagram: @WildMelissaHart

