

Marlo and Me

by Richard Michelson for the Publishers Weekly BEA Show Daily in June 2007



Forget Scarborough Fair. Are you going to BEA is the refrain I hear among my book producing friends. Yes, we create the raw materials; the words, the illustrations, which then get packaged, and hopefully sold. But do our publishers love us enough to give away what we have created? To create a buzz? To invite us into their crowded booths, and introduce us to their thirty six thousand and eight hundred closest friends?

Years ago, when I was a brand new children's book writer, I wanted to burst on the scene and play house with the big boys and girls. Publicity, I knew, is everything. I cajoled my publisher, against their better judgment, into giving me a shot. I wanted to meet my public. I am an art dealer (curb your astonishment—some writers do have “day jobs”) and I know how to promote my artists. I handle some of the biggest names in book illustration, and I've become close friends with many of them. Over the years I've invited these friends to dinner, only to hear them say to me: “I can't make it that weekend—I'll be at BEA.” Now I had my own major publisher behind me and, sure I wanted sales, but I will admit I mostly wanted to be able to say, “Sorry I can't get together that weekend; my editor needs me at BEA to meet my fans.”

So there I found myself, on the signing floor with boxes of books at my feet, and feeling great because on one side of me was Marlo Thomas. I am now grown up enough to confess that my thirteen to sixteen year old self had a wild crush on *That Girl*, and I was surprised to see how quickly it reignited. We had our picture taken together (okay, holding up her book—in front of her book display). On the other side of me was John Lithgow. Less pretty, but equally cool. I got an autographed book.

Then their lines started to grow, and grow, and grow while, I tell you, fellow mid-list author, there was not one—not one person coming forward to meet me.

I am a poet with two prestigious university press books published. That means I am used to low turnout. I have driven four hours to sign books for three people, two of whom still know me as Little Rickele. But reader, there is no feeling like dying of thirst in the middle of the ocean. I kept a smile plastered on my face and finally a single soul walked towards me. I pulled out my pen and a book. “Excuse me,” they asked, is this the end of John Lithgow's line?”

Am I bitter? Of course not. This is no screed against celebrity books. On the contrary, I think it takes guts to risk ridicule in a new field where you are untested. I encourage creative people to try to spread their wings. So what if Dom DeLouise got Simon and Schuster's publicity dollars

instead of me. Frankly, if I were a publisher, I would find it difficult to tell Madonna that I decided to put my money behind Michelson instead. So what did I learn? That I need to build a network, one bookstore, one librarian, one reader at a time. That I need to have patience and to continue to write the best books that I can.

This year I again asked my editor about BEA, but he didn't recommend I go and I didn't push the issue, so I will not be signing copies of Tuttle's Red Barn at Putnam's booth. I will stay home and plan dinner. Or maybe I will drop by one afternoon and wander the halls. After all that first conference wasn't a total waste. Two years ago I was clearing out my shelves and I sold Lithgow's signed book on eBay. But you'll have to be invited to dinner if you ever want to see my most prized possession. That picture of Marlo and me is not for sale.