

## **My Excellent Book Tour Adventure: The Story Behind My Novel**

**By Mindy Friddle**

It all begins with a voicemail message from your agent, who says simply, “I have some very nice news.” That novel you wrote at nights, on weekends, around a job and family, with dirty dishes in the sink has paid off—your 300-page manuscript will be published. Your agent receives thousands of manuscripts, rivers of them pour through her door and over the transom every day. She has plucked yours out and found it a home. You are lucky. Decide never to forget that.

Call everyone. Repeat the news to your father who says he had no idea you’d written a novel and asks repeatedly if he’s in it. Your mother brings over champagne and a cheese ball. Your contract arrives. Your husband takes a picture of you at the kitchen table, signing it.

Fly to New York and meet with your agent and editor. Have lunch at an exquisite place with no prices on the menu. There are puddles and swirls on your plate and tiny chocolate sculptures for dessert. Discover there will be no big advertising budget. No big national tour. You’ve done your research, and you know that’s typical. Each year, 375,000 books are published. Resources are stretched thin. Most authors in today’s publishing world are proactive, helping to plan their own tours, sending out their own press kits, setting up interviews. Writing may mean toiling in isolation, but publishing is a different skill set: public speaking, cold calling, pitching articles. Motel Six tour? No problem. Glad-handing at a bookseller trade show? Bring it on.

A few weeks later your editor sends your manuscript with suggested changes. She scrawls in the margin—*Boiled peanuts? Is this a southern thing?* She’s a good editor because she edits. You’ve heard that more and more in the publishing industry, editors don’t have time to edit the manuscripts they acquire. They are too busy working with sales and marketing. Send her your revisions, along with your mother’s recipe for bourbon slushes.

Enlighten friends who mistakenly believe most writers make wads of money from their books. Laugh when they make little jokes about buying beach houses or convertibles. Explain that your modest advance is barely enough to buy a used Korean car with flood damage.

Write the catalog copy for your book, an important paragraph that helps booksellers decide where or not to order your book from the publisher. Write the copy for the cover, which has to hook potential readers. Realize that a website isn’t that dusty space behind the refrigerator and is an important tool for authors. Hire a friend to design a website.

Your copy-edited manuscript arrives one day and you are asked to review the final changes. Copy editors are the engineers of the publishing world, concerned with structure and consistency. While your editor looked for language and similes and expressions on characters' faces, your copy editor maps out family trees, reminds you when Hydrangea blooms in your area, keeps up with how many beers characters drink, and capitalizes Styrophome.

Your editor emails you with good news: Sales and Marketing has chosen to promote your novel in a brochure of first novels called "Fresh Fiction," in an effort to boost bookstore orders. You learn that independent bookstores are wonderful at "hand selling"—recommending books to customers. You resolve to contact The Open Book and every independent bookstore in South Carolina to solicit advice.

You pore over material about book marketing and publicity and you make timelines, spreadsheets, and lists. In the spring, you go to New York again, on your own dime, and meet with your publicist. Take the marketing plan you've put together, detailing "sales handles," sample press releases, and target audiences. You discover that most books have a shelf life shorter than milk—after three weeks, bookstores often return those books that aren't selling. No other product or commodity spends a year in development and then gets three weeks on the shelf! Feel overwhelmed and a little discouraged. How will you ever have time to write anymore with all this publishing work to do? Watch Bono on CNN talking about the plight of third world countries. Consider a new career in disaster relief.

Find out the major buyer of a large bookstore chain loves your novel but hates your cover. The art department works for weeks on a new "jacket treatment." More covers are designed and discarded. The porches look like they're from Charleston and the statue looks like Cupid! This isn't a house on the battery, you tell them. This isn't a lawn ornament—it's a cemetery statue. You frantically take photographs of houses and cemeteries in Greenville with your digital camera and email them to the art department and they understand then. The new cover is perfect. The bookstore chain triples its order.

Alas, the new cover has derailed the production timeline. Printing is behind; the publishing date promised in the catalog is iffy. The galleys—the bound manuscripts that go out to reviewer and other authors for quotes before the finished books—are sent out plain, sans covers. Ugly, hopeless, ragtag galleys. How will your book survive this? Outside in your garden, the squirrels have long devoured the tulip bulbs you meant to plant. The bags of mushroom compost are unopened. The weeds are thriving. Remember how long it's been since you bought a flat of annuals or scrubbed dirt from beneath your fingernails. Consider a new career in landscaping.

One day in April your editor leaves four frantic messages on your voicemail, and when you call her, she announced that your novel has been selected for the Barnes & Noble "Discover Great New Writers Program." Your editor is jumping around in glee in her sunny corner office in the Flatiron Building in Manhattan and you are jumping with joy in your kitchen.

Find out that you are getting only twenty free “author “copies. Explain you’re from the South where twenty books aren’t even enough for one side of your family. Meanwhile, your publisher sends you boxes of promotional postcards. It’s up to you to organize the mailing lists and postage. You delegate to your 14-year-old daughter who labels and sorts hundreds of postcards for the price of a new pair of jeans from Abercrombie & Fitch.

Your book launch party in Greenville is a dream come true: Standing room only at the Metropolitan Arts Council. The media are good to you with generous coverage. You have an awesome hometown.

The reviews come in. Glowing ones from *Publisher’s Weekly*, *Kirkus*, and *Booklist*, which are crucial, since booksellers and librarians tend to order books with positive reviews from those trade journals. And then the *Washington Post* and *Charlotte Observer* weigh in with miraculously generous reviews. Newspaper in Atlanta, Savannah, Greensboro, Charleston, Columbia, Memphis, Oxford, Mississippi, even Indiana have reviews that seem too good to be true. And then a snark-- three sentences from a certain New York newspaper--an outright dismissal of your book. Your agent—who occasionally takes on the role of therapist-- warns you about the ups and downs of writing and publishing. Plies you with words like talent and promising career. Warns you to toughen your hide. But writers are sensitive creatures, you argue. How do they bear this kind of life? You toughen your hide.

Your book tour starts and so you hit the road, heading through seven states and dozens of bookstores. Your husband takes every day of vacation he has to accompany you, which is comforting since book tours can be lonely and grueling. Each stop is a sales call—a way to meet booksellers, garner media coverage and leave behind signed copies of your book. Sometimes an eager group of readers show up. Other days there’s no one at all.

At a little town in Georgia, you have a book signing at an antique mall. You look out at a sea of empty chairs. And then, suddenly, a large group of women burst through the door--eager, happy readers. One of them asks, “Is this where the scrapbook workshop is?”

In Birmingham, the bookstore forgot to order your books, but no one shows up anyway. On the way to Atlanta, you have a flat tire. You drive ten hours one Saturday to a book festival and sell one book. You read about a new study that indicates writers have one of the highest incidents of depression and addiction problems of any profession. Understand why.

Oh, but Greensboro, North Carolina is good to you. You line up a book review, a newspaper article, and two television interviews. There’s a large, friendly crowd for the signing that night, and you need a microphone.

And then there is Savannah. Every guest at the Bed and Breakfast where you stay buys your book. The bookstore sells out. There’s a wonderful full-page review in the Savannah newspaper. You love Savannah.

You arrive back home exhausted but gratified. Think of all the people you've met who love books, and who talk about the characters in your novel as if they know them. You've been to the beaches of Jacksonville, Florida, paid homage to William Faulkner's grave in Oxford, and walked Beale Street in Memphis. Your editor calls to tell you the book has hit the Southeastern Independent Booksellers bestseller's list and is in its fourth printing. There will also be a Large Print edition. Find out that Picador has selected your book for a paperback edition to come out in June. You have a new editor and publicist at Picador, and new plans for a paperback tour. Are you ready? Yes, you assure them. You are.

Greenville resident Mindy Friddle is the author of the novel, *The Garden Angel* (St. Martin's Press). Visit her website, [www.mindyfriddle.com](http://www.mindyfriddle.com), to read her weblog "Novel Thoughts: A Writer's Journal," an informal discussion on writing, reading and publishing.