

Latinidad - Spring 2021: Before and After the Book Deal

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BEFORE YOU SEND IT OUT

“I had a discussion with Marcela about a novel I’ve been working on for over thirteen years. She was supportive in her critique and creative. From her I realized that my writing in the novel is solid but needs rethinking. And she accomplished this with humor and kindness. She saw the music and the crazy images, as well as the need to cut. Mainly, I figure I’m going to get some extra stories and a solid novel out of our discussion. And a wonderful friendship. This was an honest discussion. If you can’t handle honesty, don’t bother talking with Marcela. If you are ready to move forward, make an appointment to talk.”

—Lolita Hernandez, author of *Autopsy of an Engine and Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant*, winner of a PEN Beyond Margins Award, <https://www.lolitahernandez.com/>

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1. Saludos

Critically acclaimed novelist Courtney Maum is a generous friend to writers. Her guide *Before and After the Book Deal: A Writer’s Guide to Finishing, Publishing, Promoting, and Surviving Your First Book* is both comforting and bracing, like hot tea spiked with bourbon. Nearly every page reveals a turn of phrase or tip demanding to be highlighted. The perfect complement to craft books such as *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott, *Before and After the Book Deal* should be read by every aspiring author. To learn more, read the Q&A below with Courtney Maum.

Helping Latinos get published,
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2. Q&A

Courtney Maum is the author of the novels *Costalegre* (a GOOP book club pick and one of *Glamour Magazine*'s top books of the decade), *I Am Having So Much Fun Here Without You* and *Touch* (a *New York Times* Editor's Choice and NPR Best Book of the Year selection), the popular guidebook *Before and After the Book Deal: A writer's guide to finishing, publishing, promoting, and surviving your first book*, and the forthcoming memoir, *The Year of the Horses*. A nominee for the Joyce Carol Oates Prize, Courtney's writing has been widely published in such outlets as the *New York Times*, and *O, the Oprah Magazine*, and her short story *This is Not Your Fault* was turned into an Audible Original at Amazon. Courtney is the founder of the artist residency, *The Cabins* and she privately coaches writers on how to preserve the mystery and joy of the creative process in a culture that wants artists to become brands. You can sign up for her newsletter at CourtneyMaum.com

Q: Toni Morrison reportedly said, "If there is a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, you must be the one to write it." In the introduction to *Before and After the Book Deal* you wrote, "There are a lot of craft books that tell you how to write a book, but I couldn't find any that covered what it feels and looks like when you actually publish one. And so I sat down to write the crowdsourced turducken of a selfhelp craft book that I couldn't find." Was there a specific moment in the publication of your first novel *I Am Having So Much Fun Here Without You* that made you realize you must be the one to write *Before and After the Book Deal*?

A: While I was on book tour for my debut, I was sitting alone in a hotel that my publisher had generously paid for in a city far from home, and I'd just done yet another book event for a standing room only crowd of like four people. Night after night on that two-week tour, I felt like such a failure. Because no one had told me what to expect on tour, I thought I was supposed to sell cartons of books every night, I thought the bookstores were supposed to be packed, I thought I was supposed to debut on a bestseller list. After the first week of tour, I cracked and called my agent, confiding about my embarrassment over my lackluster crowds. My agent laughed and said that all of this was normal, that the tour wasn't about sales, it was about building relationships with booksellers. That was the moment the seed was planted for *BEFORE AND AFTER THE BOOK DEAL*. I hung up the phone thinking, well, if that's what this is all about why didn't anyone tell me before I left on tour?

On the second week of tour in another hotel room, I wrote a piece for *Buzzfeed* about what the debut experience was like for me. It was candid and honest and it didn't buckle under the weight of the "hashtag grateful" thing—what I mean is that I think I found a way to acknowledge the privilege and luck of being a touring writer while also sharing how truly hard it is/was. The

response to that essay was super positive, not just from writers but from editors and agents. So I thought, maybe I have something here! But I couldn't write a book about publishing until I'd published more books.

Q: In addition to having authored the acclaimed novels *I Am Having So Much Fun Here Without You*, *Touch*, and *Costalegre*, you are a Corporate namer, founded the artist residency, *The Cabins*, and you have published widely in outlets such as *New York Times* and *O, the Oprah Magazine*. All this and you have a child. You must be a ninja at time management. How do you do it?

A: I would say that time management is, in fact, my strongest and most valuable skill. To the extent that I can do this (the pandemic makes it challenging, natch) I reserve Mondays and Tuesdays exclusively for my own writing: not for emails, not for freelance work, not for errands or socializing. Wednesdays and Fridays I use for freelance work and administrative stuff for the non-profit arts program I run, *The Cabins*. Thursdays I try to get back to my own creative projects again. I don't work on the weekends—it's crucial that I really unplug and recharge on my days off. Usually on Sundays I cook a bunch of different dishes that I can reheat throughout the week so I don't have to take too much time on food prep for my family (or listen to my husband claim "there's nothing to cook.") I'm loyal to this schedule, week after week, year after year. I've also educated my daughter to value what I do and to understand that I find joy and value in it, too. By this point (she's seven, now) my daughter understands the timeline of book production. She comes to book events with me. She looks at different cover comps. I try to get her invested in what this whole book-making thing entails so that she feels inspired when Mama's office door is closed instead of excluded.

And finally, I protect my time. Not just my writing time, my time. I carefully review who asks to friend me on social media and I block people the second something offensive happens. I've tried to whittle down my friendships to the ones that bring me joy and emotional nourishment. Pushing out the sub-par people (and Internet trolls) from my life leaves me with a lot more free time!

Q: Your chapbook *Notes From Mexico* and novel *Costalegre* are set in Mexico, and you are learning to speak Spanish. What first drew you to Mexico and how has the country and its language influenced your writing?

A: What first drew me to Mexico was an invitation—my husband's father's first wife has a beautiful hacienda in *Costalegre* we first visited in 2007. Accordingly, my first trip to Mexico was effectuated in a bubble—*Careyes*, though rural, is a really privileged place—but since then we have traveled much more widely throughout Mexico. It's hard not to fall into platitudes

when you're talking about your affection for a culture that isn't yours, but one thing that really draws me to Mexican people and Mexican culture is that a lot of Mexicans aren't jaded. My husband is French, and I'm sorry to generalize, but the French are truly jaded. Many French people come at things from a place of defensiveness and negativity. They're anti entrepreneurship, and they even describe the weather and other things starting from a place of negativity: "Il ne fait pas moche," (It isn't ugly out today), "C'est pas mal," to describe a dish ordered in a restaurant ("It's isn't bad.") Whereas in Mexico, I think a lot of people approach things from a place of optimism and faith. I find that attitude so energizing, so magical. It changes the way I think about a lot of things and makes me feel lucky for the incredible things I already have.

Q: As The Query Doula you help writers prepare their manuscripts and query letters for an agent's eyes. What have you learned from the writers you have coached?

A: Across the board, regardless of whether I'm coaching a fiction writer or a memoir writer, I would say that most people have a hard time communicating what their story is about and why they are the only person who can write it. The more people identify and own the reasons that push them to write in the first place, the more they will see what their story is. When writers stand up and say, "this highly specific thing is my preoccupation and here is a book about it"—the material truly sings.

Q: What are you working on now that my readers should put on their radar?

A: I'm working to organize the next group retreat for The Cabins, and I'm under contract for a memoir called THE YEAR OF THE HORSES about the year I turned to horse contact to get me out of a serious depression and free fall in my home life. I currently have two ongoing writing courses: one teaches accountability called "Write Day by Day" and the other one, "The Book Deal Toolkit" at Catapult, walks participants through the various materials they need for a book deal. That course information is all on CourtneyMaum.com where you can also subscribe to my newsletter, which has free publishing and writing tips. Good luck to everyone out there working on creative projects—we've got this!

3. Resources

COMMUNITY OF WRITERS ONLINE WORKSHOPS

Deadline: March 28

The Community of Writers will offer online workshops in poetry from June 19 to June 26, in fiction from July 11 to July 17, and in creative nonfiction

from August 1 to August 6. Workshops, craft talks, publishing panels, readings, and one-on-one conferences are offered. Faculty include Kirstin Valdez Quade, Hector Tobar, and Alex Espinoza. For more information, visit <https://communityofwriters.org/>

MIDDLE GRADE FICTION PRIZE

Deadline: April 6

The Kraken Book Prize offers \$750 and publication by Regal House Publishing for a work of compelling fiction for the middle grade market. For more information, visit <https://www.regalhousepublishing.com/>

\$40,000 CREATIVE NONFICTION GRANTS

Deadline: April 26

The Whiting Foundation offers up to eight grants of \$40,000 each for creative nonfiction works-in-progress to enable writers to complete their books. For more information, visit <https://www.whiting.org/writers/creative-nonfiction-grant>

ADRIENNE RICH AWARD FOR POETRY

Deadline: April 30

A prize of \$1500 and publication in Beloit Poetry Journal is given for a single poem. For more information, visit <https://www.bpj.org/about/rich-award>

\$2000 POETRY PRIZE

Submission Period: April 1 - May 1

The Backwaters Prize offers the winner \$2000 and the honorable mention \$1000 for a poetry collection or a single long poem. Both winners will be awarded the publication of their book by the University of Nebraska Press under its imprint, The Backwaters Press. For more information, visit <http://thebackwaterspress.com>

RAYMOND CARVER SHORT STORY CONTEST

Submission Period: April 1 - May 15

A prize of \$2000 and publication in Carve Magazine is offered for a short story. For more information, visit <http://www.carvezine.com>

\$2500 ESSAY AWARD

Deadline: May 18

The Conger Beasley Award for Nonfiction offers \$2500 and publication in New Letters for an essay. For more information, visit <https://www.newletters.org/>

\$15,000 BOOK PIPELINE UNPUBLISHED CONTEST

Early Bird Deadline: June 1

The Book Pipeline Unpublished Contest is exclusively for unpublished manuscripts across six categories of fiction and nonfiction: Literary, Mystery/Thriller, Sci-Fi/Fantasy, Young Adult, Middle Grade, and Nonfiction. Winners and finalists receive: \$15,000 to winners (\$2,500 for each category winner); immediate circulation to publishers, agents, editors, and other execs; and consideration from producers seeking projects for film and TV adaptation. For more information, visit <https://bookpipeline.com/>

CHILDREN’S PICTURE BOOK AWARD

Deadline: June 15

The Little, Brown Emerging Artist Awards seeks to encourage the development of high-quality children’s picture books that resonate with readers of diverse backgrounds and experiences, that in some manner draw from the rich cultural experiences of this country—whether they manifest in character, theme, setting, plot, or are derived simply from the artist’s own experience of identity. For more information, visit <http://lartistaward.com>

SEEKING REVOLUTIONARY QUEER WOMEN OF COLOR

The Aunt Lute Foundation is a multicultural women’s press. The priority of their staff is to publish fiction and nonfiction by women, both transgender and cisgender, not traditionally served by mainstream publishers, particularly works by women of color. For more information, visit <http://www.auntlute.com>

www.auntlute.com

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“The late writer Terry Pratchett has a quote about the revision process that always comforts me: ‘The first draft is just you telling yourself the story.’ A key to success during the revision process is thinking about developmental edits as writing support instead of criticism. Your editor is your partner, not your enemy. This bears repeating: your editor/partner is working to turn your manuscript into something readable by a wider public, instead of something that can only be appreciated by you.”

—Courtney Maum

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