

Quotable quotes from *Getting Naked for Money*

On beginning a travel writing career

For as long as I can remember, I secretly wanted to be a writer. I also fantasized about visiting far-flung lands. It never occurred to me that I could combine those aspirations—and convince an editor to pick up the tab.

The signs were not auspicious. My parents weren't keen on travel, at least not the voluntary kind. Refugees from Nazi-occupied Vienna, they were in no rush to head back overseas.

Early on, I was encouraged by several teachers to believe I might have talent. In fifth grade, Mrs. Chudnoff chose me to helm the P.S. 92 magazine, *Hegeman Highlights*. My moment of editorial glory was short-lived: The magazine lost its funding almost immediately after I was selected to edit it. By the sixth grade, I already had a taste of the bitter disappointment of having a publication with which I was associated suddenly fold.

Some writers can look back proudly at their literary precociousness. Me, I found several entries in a pink diary dating to the days when the Beatles first arrived in the US that read: “Dear Diary, I love Paul. He’s so cute. I wish he would love me. Goodnight, Edie.” If I’d had the strength of character to love John or even George and the originality to choose a diary that wasn’t pink, I’m certain I would have become a writer far sooner.

Unresolved yearnings to be a writer are poignant when you’re a teenager, stylishly angsty when you’re in your twenties. At the end of your thirties, you’re in *On the Waterfront* territory, in danger of looking back and saying, with regret, “I coulda been a contender.”

I no longer wanted to be a wannabe.

This led me to a terrifying conclusion: To be a writer, I needed to leave New York.

On being a recovering academic

There’s nothing like getting a doctorate to destroy a girl’s confidence.

By the time I got my PhD [in American literature], my prose style had been pulverized. More than a decade of churning out timid academic tomes left me with the sentence structure of Henry James and the verbal clarity of Yogi Berra.

One day I was writing college papers praised for their lucidity. The next, I was submitting a proposal for a dissertation titled “From Apocalypse to Entropy: An Eschatological Study of the American Novel.” I switched thesis topics but didn’t kick the jargon and passive construction habits, because that’s how lit crit rolls.

When you’re as far gone as I was, it’s a long road to recovery.

On editing guidebooks

For Rough Guides

A job overseas that required only that I be single-lingual, a mistress of the American idiom, fluent in my native tongue...I was not only eager and willing, but supremely qualified.

Bad sentence structure, incorrect spelling, faulty grammar—those, I could easily correct. But the *Rough Guide to France* had a more basic problem that I hadn't encountered in the US: Socialists-with-Money Syndrome. Symptoms included renunciation of all trappings of wealth (although not necessarily wealth itself), glorification of revolution in every form, and knee-jerk dismissal of anything considered bourgeois, such as royalty or religion.

So, for example, in this book's Paris chapter, the Bastille listing was endless, while the palace at Versailles was dismissed as a "galloping excrescence." Sacré-Coeur cathedral was written off as a "carbuncle on the face of Paris."

For Fodor's

What I lacked in a Rolodex of travel writers, I more than made up for with a roster of academic contacts...Academics tend to enjoy good ethnic restaurants, non-touristy local attractions, and hotels with character. They are also accustomed to doing labor-intensive research for next to nothing. In short, they are extremely well suited to be guidebook updaters—second only, perhaps, to CIA operatives.

Yes, those rumors were true.

I'd long heard whisperings that Eugene Fodor was a spy, but I'd also heard that about Arthur Frommer; people were always confusing the two "F"-named guidebook icons. I didn't lend either story much credence until Fodor died in early 1991 and the obituaries recapped his resume.

On writing guidebooks

How to annoy a guidebook writer: After she returns from a week of rushing around, peering into hotel rooms, checking museum hours, and chatting up tour operators, ask her how she enjoyed her vacation.

The initial kick I got from going on the road for assignments was quickly tempered by the hectic schedule, the need to gear my research toward a guidebook template, and the low pay.

Especially the low pay.

The expression "traveling on someone else's dime" came pathetically close to describing my freelance earnings from Fodor's.

On being both a freelance editor and writer

I thought back on my previous interactions with [guidebook] contributors. I'd often sent only a terse "Got it, thanks" note in response to receiving assignments. I could justify this when I was too busy to look at a submission, but how long would it have

taken to get back to an author later and say, “Great job”? I rarely did that, and not only because I was distracted. I foolishly assumed that writers who were professionals knew they were good and didn’t need me to praise them. Offering them more work was sufficient proof of my approbation.

It didn’t take long for that bit of editorial karma to bite me in the butt when I started freelancing.

Maybe my most important bit of freelance consciousness-raising was a newfound sense of urgency about getting “my” writers paid... At Fodor’s it was part of my job to make sure that the company met its financial obligations to authors. Facilitating payment wasn’t a priority, however, and I got annoyed when writers bugged me. Didn’t they have a cushion to fall back on when there was a short check delay?

Talk about hubris. Would that every editor was required to spend a minimum of six months freelancing before working in-house.

On taking comps and freebies

As the editor of *The Wall Street Journal Guides to Business Travel*

Editors [at Fodor’s], like writers, were permitted to accept “help.” I went to Rome, a city I’d always yearned to see, to check out the business climate. I revisited San Francisco, a blast from my hippie past, for a professional assessment. I had previously bunked in a Berkeley dorm and dropped acid; this time I luxuriated at the Drake.

Taking freebies was and is against *Wall Street Journal* policy....Call it plausible deniability. I didn’t ask the writers who worked on the guides whether or not they accepted comps, but I would have bet a year’s salary that many of them did. I can’t imagine that anyone who lived in the US and had to travel to Beijing, say, would have been able to afford the research otherwise.

As the Travel editor at Tucson’s main (now only) newspaper

I knew the golden rule: no comps. I didn’t need the stern lecture I got from Dolores before the debut of my first Sunday Travel section [at the *Arizona Daily Star*]: “We don’t run pieces based on hosted travel, you know.” I knew, I knew. It had been drummed into my brain for years that, unlike guidebooks and many of the magazines for which I’d written, newspapers had Integrity. I suspected purity might be tough to achieve, but I planned to try.

Maybe the surprise wasn’t that I failed but the rapidity with which it happened.

As a freelance writer

If getting free hotels and meals while researching guidebooks made others suspect I was living high on the hog, going on press trips convinced them I was a freeloading slacker.

I wish.

Every now and then, I was invited on a journalists’ jaunt that fit the “junket” stereotype, down to the lavish suites, umbrella drinks, and large swaths of free time. Far more often, however, my familiarization (fam) tours resembled sleep-away camps run by speed freaks. In an elaborate juggling act, trip organizers would try to anticipate every conceivable interest of an eclectic group of writers while satisfying the publicity demands

of the destination or hotel picking up the tab. It was a lose–lose proposition. Running journalists through a frenetic gauntlet of activities only made them irritable and thus less likely to pen glowing reviews.

There was the rub: My comped resort stays often cost me more than a night at a Motel 6.

For one thing, I had a habit of guilt tipping. I tried to heft my own luggage, but couldn't always evade the bellhops—and felt bad when I managed. They had to make a living too. Although my unfashionable threads pegged me as a freelance writer, I had key cards to rooms that cost five times what I paid for the worn *Easy Spirit* clogs I was wearing. Had I stinted on gratuities, I would have looked like a cheapskate.

On Niche Travel

Visiting a Nudist Resort

We observed a wide range of shapes, from totally toned to way overweight, and ages, from teenagers to septuagenarians. The men seemed to care less about their appearances than the women did; at least a far larger proportion of them had far larger proportions. Mostly, though, I was riveted by the display of male genitalia. I felt like I was in the produce section of an exotic supermarket—no poking or squeezing, please.”

The only two main course options at the resort's restaurant were steak and salmon. Didn't naturism and vegetarianism go hand-in-hand? Proto-nudists Adam and Eve had followed a plant-based diet before losing their innocence. Then again, they would have been better off on a strict Paleo regimen, eschewing the apple and sautéing the serpent instead.

Staying at B & Bs

My idea of a good way to start the day didn't include socializing with strangers. ...Victorian-era furnishings were minefields for a klutz like me. I was in constant fear of breaking the spindly little legs of those delicate Queen Anne–style chairs, dislodging a frilly antimacassar from the arm of an uncomfortable fainting couch, or accidentally smashing a set of priceless china that belonged to the innkeeper's beloved great aunt.

Also, I don't do ghosts. For some reason, many B&B frequenters think it's a treat to have the disembodied disturb their sleep; a resident haunt is deemed a selling point. An innkeeper to whom I confided my lack of interest in spectral visits said, with great authority, “The dead only come to those who wish to see them.” Would that the living were as considerate.

Frequenting Spas

Over the years, opulent temples to self-indulgence became *de rigueur* in any resort worth its exfoliating Dead Sea salt.

Pampering was billed as personal growth, and spa treatments took on a religious tone, but without the strictures of established belief systems. Cultural traditions were mixed indiscriminately, centuries-old practices taken out of context. The so-called Thai Yoga massage, for example, combined movements from India with manipulations from Thailand—neither of which bore much resemblance to the Eastern originals. One session of Shirodhara, where warm oil is dripped onto an invisible eye in the middle of your forehead, can only be expected to yield greasy hair, not Ayurvedic enlightenment.

On living/traveling solo

Even in feminist circles, being single wasn't deemed a desirable choice. A room of one's own? Definitely. An entire life of one's own? Pathetic.

Small wonder the quest for "The One" might be harder to kick than crack or heroin.

The more comfortable I became with driving, the more I saw the advantages of traveling alone...I wanted to be free to have business meals with tourism reps and to take geeky detours at whim. At the Tombstone Courthouse State Historic Park, for example, I was fascinated by the barbed-wire display, a window into the role that fencing played in the West. When you're with someone who is hungry for lunch and not especially interested in history, it's awkward to say, "Wait, I just need a few more minutes with the barbed wire."

I had discovered the exhilaration of driving along Arizona's back roads, singing off-key and at the top of my lungs to the Dixie Chicks' "Wide Open Spaces," and had tasted the freedom of stopping to find a bathroom whenever I damn well felt like it. There was no turning back.