

Fear of Flying (with apologies to Erica Jong)

by Wendy Mass

Here's what they don't tell you when you publish your first book—sooner or later, you're going to have to fly. And I don't mean fly as in soar, stretch your wings, excel. I mean fly as in strapped inside a huge metal object hurtling 400 miles an hour at 35,000 feet. In my case I've been invited to speak in front of a few hundred young adult librarians and middle school teachers about my two novels that came out this year—*A Mango-Shaped Space* and *Leap Day*. After two public speaking classes, I have gotten over my fear of speaking in front of large crowds. Flying, however, is a different story.

It is a week before the conference, and Amy, the publicist who will be accompanying me, is firming up the flights from Newark to Chicago. I make her run all the options by me, because people who are scared of flying know everything there is to know about planes. We know what models have what number of seats, how many aisles, and if the engines are in the back or under the wings. We know that "direct" doesn't mean "nonstop" and we ONLY FLY NONSTOP.

I ask her what kind of plane it is. She is surprised. Apparently no other author has ever requested that information before. "A Focker 100", she says. This *clearly* is not acceptable. I don't know what a Focker is, and I don't want to know. I'm sure it's a fine plane, but it's too late for me to start getting familiar with a new layout. If it doesn't start with the word Boeing or Airbus, I'm not interested. I don't want her to think I'm crazy, but since I suspect it is too late for that, I tell her to keep looking. We finally settle on United and its good ol' familiar Boeing 737, apparently the largest plane that travels this route (I had made her verify this because, as we all can admit by now, bigger really is better).

Five days before the trip I find myself on the Amtrak website. Eighteen hours each way, for a one-day conference. Even I can't justify that. A caring friend offers me Xanax for the flight. Another offers Valium. I start to worry about the mental health of my friends.

My husband points out that business people and movie stars have to fly all the time, even if they're scared. So I google "celebrities" and "afraid to fly" and come up with quite a few: Drew Barrymore, Aretha Franklin, Whoopi Goldberg, Billy Bob Thornton. I read how they learned to work around their fears. Even Ray Bradbury, legendary for his fear of flying, conquered it in his sixties when he realized he wasn't going to run screaming up and down the aisles.

Nevertheless, four days before the trip I find myself on the Greyhound website. Seventeen hours each way. That's better than the train. But it would get me into Chicago at four in the morning.

Three days before the trip I make my husband promise that if I don't return, he will still love the cat, whom I suspect he only pretends to love because I'm here. He promises and then laces up his sneakers and goes for a long, long run.

Two days before the trip I email two of the other authors who are speaking at the conference and who live relatively near me. I suggest we drive. Road trips can be very inspirational for writers and isn't life all about the journey? As a response, Meg Cabot (*The Princess Diaries*) tells me to read a specific chapter of *Bird by Bird*, that seminal book on the writing life by novelist (and fearful flyer) Anne Lamott. David Levithan (*Boy Meets Boy*) claims he hadn't gotten any sleep that week and that driving would be too dangerous. It's a good thing I like these people because they are letting me down.

Bird by Bird tells me that even a straw, if facing the same way as the current, can funnel all the strength of a river. I am not entirely sure what this means, but I interpret it as *go with the flow, baby*. I will try to *Be the straw*.

The day before my trip I find myself reading statistics on air travel. There is a greater chance of winning the lottery, they say, than being in a plane crash. But two good friends of mine have actually *won* the lottery so that argument seems flimsy to me. I make an emergency appointment with a palm reader across town. She tells me I will be safe, but she also tells me I was an Italian countess in my last life and if I pay her double, she will ensure that my marriage will last forever.

The day of the trip, I tell my husband that maybe I shouldn't go. After all, we're newlyweds. He pushes me out the door and firmly closes it behind me. Maybe I should have paid the palm reader.

Be the straw, I tell myself as I check in at the airport. At first the lady behind the counter tells me they have no record of me on the flight. For a brief moment, I feel joy at this. Then she finds my name.

I meet Amy at the gate and tell her that as we board, she'll need to touch the side of the plane for luck. She doesn't even bother to ask why. I then make her talk to me for the whole two-hour flight. She keeps glancing longingly at the *Glamour* magazine on her lap but I pretend not to notice. We land and I feel triumphant. David Levithan is waiting for us at the gate. He took the Focker. My speech goes well, even though I have to follow Meg Cabot, who could give Tony Robbins pointers on engaging an audience.

Amy apparently has a "family issue" (ie: she's ditching me). In her absence, I make the elderly man in the next seat talk to me for the entire flight. When the plane arrives at the gate, he takes off down the aisle faster than I'd have thought anyone his age could move.

Newark has never looked so good as when I left the airport that night. This experience has forced me to accept that being an author is about more than just writing books alone in my office. Certainly there are authors who don't travel and don't make school visits or talk at conferences, but I don't want to be one of them. I want to be someone who meets the book-sellers who hand-sell my books in their stores, the librarians who recommend them to their patrons, and of course the kids who read them with a flashlight under the covers when they are supposed to be sleeping.

Is it too much to ask that they live within driving distance? ■

Wendy Mass lives in Sparta, NJ. She recently took a 23-hour train ride to avoid a 3-hour flight. Visit her at www.wendymass.com.

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