Book Tour Time

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"April is the cruelest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain…."

That's what T.S. Eliot said, and certainly April in New England is bleak, though it hardly seems cruel, when things are clearly itching to burst into bloom (and I've attached a snapshot of the forsythia, which has already burst, in my front yard).

But this month will seem a little cruel when, next week, I pack up and leave on a book tour which will take me to six cities in ten days. You get to feeling a little sorry for yourself when you wake up in yet one more hotel room and try to remember where you are…and why you're there.

It used to be easier before we all quit smoking; back then, hotel rooms always had an ashtray with a book of matches in it. Handy tool. The matchbook had the name of the hotel on it.

Digression:

(Note: it's still true in Japan. And when you leave your hotel in Japan, TAKE that matchbook with you, because when you are standing in front of a temple or a garden somewhere, climbing into a cab, and suddenly feel panic-stricken because you've forgotten the name, or the pronunciation, of your hotel: Asakusa? Narita? Seiyo Ginza? Chinsanzo?…just show the matchbook to the cab-driver).

However, one of the wonderful things about such a grueling travel event as a book tour is that you get to meet people who care deeply about the same things you do. In my case, that would be young people, and books. It is not at all like being a politician and having to field questions from constituents who don't like your views on health care or the military budget.

Here is the hard part of hitting the road to talk about a new book. You don't yet know what to say. It takes quite a while, and needs some of the input from readers – and, I suppose, reviewers – to get a sense of where this particular book fits: whom it's for, why it matters, what lies in between its lines. I don't know any of that when I write a book. I don't know it when it's published. I begin to know it little by little, as it takes on its own life in the hands of readers.

Of course you can't, as author, stand on a stage, or in a bookstore, on in a radio station, scratching your head and rolling your eyes and and saying, "Ah, well, I don't know, exactly…" even though that may be the closest thing to the truth.

So you fake it, a little. And then a little more. You pretend to understand your own book better than you truly do.

But sloowwly you stop faking. Because something happens. It begins to fall into place somehow, maybe because you've been talking to a lot of people, and answering their questions, and listening to them, and then…magically…it does seem to fit together.

I'm looking forward to that time. It may happen in Knoxille, or St. Louis, or Houston, or Kansas City, or Dallas, or New York – all of them the places I'll be before the end of April, this cruelest month.

There will be a morning when I wake up in a hotel room, and I won't know what city I'm in, for a moment. But my dull roots will have been moistened by spring rain. I will understand my own book for the first time. That is always a terrific feeling.

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