



DANCERS AT THE NEW ART ON NEWBURY

HAREM SISTER HITS THE ROAD: A TALE OF SCUKES AND SWAMP YANKEES

By Michele Fontaine

This past summer I did what many new authors both dream of and dread – my first book tour. I'd read many road trip horror stories of grueling schedules and anonymous motels, so I decided to keep mine as simple and pleasant as possible. Since my family lives around the Boston area, I combined visiting them with promoting my novel, *Harem Sister*.

One of my first readings took place at a bed and breakfast in my hometown, Westport, MA. The Paquachuck Inn sits at the end of Main Road in this formerly sleepy fishing village gone condo. Just beyond the inn, splintering docks and lobster shacks attest to the town's recent past. We natives call the new settlers Scukes – tourists who arrive between the cucumbers and the squash. They call us Swamp Yankees, in reference to the many cranberry bogs that dot the Cape Cod area.

When I arrived at the Paquachuck, I found the front screen door locked. There were no staff on hand. With fifteen minutes until the reading, I took the only sane course of action. Settling into a rocking chair on the wraparound porch, I admired the sunset.

After a few moments, I noticed a narrow screen door on the side of the inn was ajar. I let myself in and began setting up by a fireplace, before which stood two murky brown couches. Within minutes, two of my aunts and a cousin appeared at the front door. I walked through the gloom and let them in. Still no staff. Another cousin of mine arrived bringing my audience to a grand total of four. This was not a well-advertised reading and I saw part of the reason why. On a table by the door lay all the postcards I'd sent the hotel to promote the event. They'd obviously gotten soaked and were glued together in a brick.

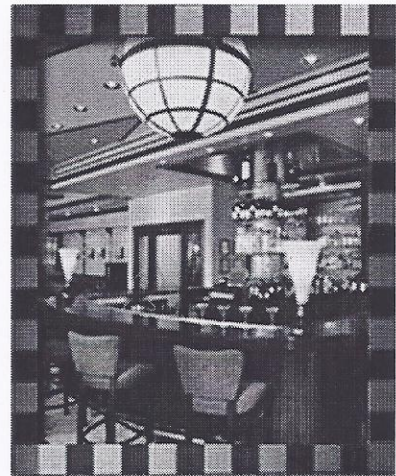
Summoning my aplomb, I began reading from *The Forbidden Temple*, my just-finished sequel to *Harem Sister* and caught myself not being present for one horrible moment. A line about the eunuch Harem Keeper had just escaped my lips:

"His voice was like an unmarried, unsatisfied aunt . . ."

I looked up in dread to see my spinster aunt glaring at me. Almost as a confirmation of my damnation, a biblically earnest thunderstorm boomed in just as I uttered my last lines.

I read at a number of different places on the East Coast tour. The third location was Cambridge's Hotel Marlowe, sister to San Francisco's writer-friendly Monticello Inn. In contrast to my other reading locations, at the Marlowe I slept like a starlet in a \$350+/night complimentary suite that was outfitted in leopard and red velvet. The hotel also treated me (as well as my sister and a friend) to a complimentary dinner at their in-house restaurant, Bambara. I read to a capacity crowd in their opulent library and received promotion from the adjacent Borders Books in the Cambridge Galleria.

The last and most memorable reading was at the New Art on Newbury Gallery in Boston, which featured an exhibit called "Local Artists Go Nude." Naked artwork graced every square inch of the bowling-lane-sized basement space. My favorites were a series of fluorescent pop girlie canvases rendered by an incarcerated painter.



HOTEL MARLOWE BAR

I had hired belly dancers, sight unseen, to act out some passages from my book. The ladies were friends of my belly dance teacher here in California. We agreed to meet for lunch the day of the show to review the choreography. I sat at the appointed outdoor café for half an hour and finally flagged the hostess in frustration. She escorted me to a table I'd passed on my entrance. Two very animated Rubenesque women sat before me. I managed my expectations in a heartbeat and joined them with a smile.



ROOM AT THE HOTEL MARLOWE

As it turned out, my unflappable zaftig ladies were exactly the cohorts I needed for this ambitious event. Several hours later, adorned and expectant, we sipped wine and waited for our crowd to arrive. The gallery remained quiet. It was 90 degrees out, with 90% humidity on this Wednesday night and at 6 p.m. we realized we'd set the 6:30 reading time much too early. Anyone still capable of gasping for air in Boston was probably hovering around an air conditioner and would surely remain there until the heat subsided.

Undaunted, my dancers took to the street. Undulating and beaming, they snaked their way around the block, swords balancing on their heads,

and lured a few more people in. Co-gallery owner Yasmin McCarthy began hawking the event on the street, just like her Egyptian forebears, and pulled in a few more. At last, we decided the show must go on and I began to read to the small circle of simmering devotees.

By the time we'd finished, I realized how much of a success this and the other events had been after all. I'd learned a great deal about summer event timing, planning, and expectations. As we packed up, I breathed a sigh of relief that this book tour had officially ended and that I had actually pulled it off—with swords and shimmies—even among the Scukes and Swamp Yankees of my homeland.