

WRITERSWORLD Newsletter - Issue No. 78

A homeless woman, writing a blog about her experiences of living in a car, has now signed a book deal with a major publisher and is nominated for a media award.

By Sean Coughlan: First published BBC News Magazine

A few weeks ago, Anya Peters was homeless and living in a car, hanging around the places where she could wash and eat and keep herself looking respectable. Her contact with the outside world was through an online diary.

But this blog, published under the name of Wandering Scribe, was picked up by readers around the world and has provided a remarkable way out of her homelessness. She has written her own escape story.

The story of her homelessness and her previous life is going to be turned into a book, with a publishing deal signed and the hardback scheduled to reach the bookshops next Spring



In the space of a hectic few days, Anya Peters was taken on by Curtis Brown, one of the biggest literary agencies in London - and the subsequent book proposal sparked a bidding battle between publishers - eventually won by Harper Collins.

Still living in her car, she found herself in the surreal position of being homeless and taking calls offering her book deals, with reports about her blog appearing in papers such as the New York Times and Le Monde.

First bath

The blog itself has now been nominated for a media award run by the New Statesman magazine.

"It still feels like a dream - it's completely turned around," she says.

And she has finally parked up. This weekend, after nine months living in a car, she moved back into rented accommodation. Although the publishers say the amount paid for the book is confidential, it's been enough to set Anya Peters back on her feet again.

But despite anticipating a perfect first night in a house again - "warm, scented bath, Beethoven on in the background, a glass of something" - she says that it didn't quite work out that way. Her stuff was still in the car, she felt unsettled and disorientated after her long stretch living outside.

"I have the privacy that I have craved all these months. It is the strangest feeling though ... So far I have mostly just wanted to run out of the place. It is too warm and I can't breathe or recognise all the unfamiliar smells or sounds, and nothing feels like mine yet."

Despite the first-night nerves, she is delighted by the upturn in her fortunes.

Writing in her blog, she said: "Not sure if I'm dreaming this or not...but I think Lady Luck just came strolling down my laneway, rolling her big, shiny dice. Words have come clattering to a stop, and all I can do for now is smile."



Since last summer, Anya Peters had been part of the "hidden homeless", showing no outward signs of sleeping rough in her car each night and without any contact with other homeless people or housing advisers.

Agents of change

Surreptitiously using facilities such as showers in hospitals and computers in libraries, she maintained both her public appearance and her communication with the outside world through her online diary.

This Wandering Scribe blog, which reported both the practicalities of homelessness and the emotional reaction to her circumstances, struck a chord with readers - with thousands following the diary.

It also caught the attention of literary agent, Camilla Hornby at Curtis Brown, who contacted Anya to talk about the idea of a book about her life.

"We're often approached by people with blogs, but they don't usually translate into a book. Here was an account of the everyday details of being homeless - and it was written in very beautiful prose, it inhabited another realm.

"I wanted to know more about the glimpses of her past life - and why this articulate woman was living in a car like this."

Publishers Harper Collins are expecting the book to appeal strongly to the big market for stories about overcoming tough experiences - the so-called "misery memoir" - and are confident it will be in the top 10.

The success of the Wandering Scribe blog also highlights the shifting relationship between new media and traditional publishing - and how the book market is trying to tap into the vast potential of an online audience.

Second chance

Even if the book becomes a top 10 chart topper, for a hardback that can mean only selling five hundred copies a week - while the Wandering Scribe blog has averaged 11,000 readers per week since March. And the BBC News Magazine story about her clocked up more than 200,000 readers.

While the prestige might lie with the publishers, the numbers are driving in a different direction. And the blog will continue - keeping up the next instalments for a regular readership who have followed her story.

But as homelessness recedes and the book looms, it will inevitably raise questions about the boundary line between her blog as an online diary and a marketing tool.

What has Anya Peters learned from her time living in a car?

"I don't ever want it to happen again. I didn't have the security net of people and relationships before when things went wrong. I'll never try to do it on my own again. This is a fantastic second chance."....**THE END**



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