

BY STEVEN ROSS SMITH }

# Miji Campbell: Pushing Through Anxiety

Every year from 2010 to 2013, Miji Campbell headed from Red Deer, southeast to the mountains, to the Banff Centre for short retreats to focus on a challenging writing project. I was Director of Literary Arts there at the time. In each of those years in Banff, occasionally, after our individual workdays—hers keyed on her writing and mine focused on program administration on behalf of writers—we'd sip a few glasses of wine and gaze out at the spectacular mountain views and commiserate on the conundrums of the writing process.

I always enjoyed it when Miji turned up. It meant we could pick up and continue our dialogue about writing, which had actually begun years earlier. Miji and I first met in Lumsden, Saskatchewan in 2003 when she attended Sage Hill Writing Experience as an aspiring writer. She had just defended her Master's thesis: *The Anxious Chronicles*, a work of nonfiction.

At Sage Hill, she hoped to begin developing that thesis into what she called, "A creative nonfiction book-length something. But I had no flipping clue what I was going to do with it. I wrote one little piece there, which turned out to be a new direction for the story. Then I had to go back to my teaching job and shelve the project."

At Banff, Miji and I relished discussion of the writing process, its interruptions, its resistance to effort. We shared our thoughts and concerns, our common writerly ground. I too was delaying my own writing practice, working instead, full time, administering learning opportunities for others. Such commiserations as Miji and I enjoyed there weren't really in my job description at the Centre; they were a kind of extra-curricular perk I was sometimes able to engage in with the writers I considered friends who came to the Centre for the literary programs I oversaw.

Miji's project did evolve over the years of our conversations. By her time in Banff she could look back to see the progress. "If you'd told me that at the beginning, how hard it would be, I don't know if I would have started. But this story was in me and I just kept going, one step at a time."

In 2005, she thought she was almost finished. But suddenly, with the turn of the new year, her steps were halted. The very thing she was writing about rose up and paralyzed her. "I struggled then with serious anxiety. That challenged my story: in the original story, I was a self-actualized human being, a woman who was perfectly able to deal with her anxiety. And then I had this comeuppance of mythic proportions." She describes the anxiety freeze as, "dire for five months, January through June 2006." But she "journalled daily and nightly, keeping track of my day and this new and often frightening experience. Somehow I knew I would need that raw material someday.

"I also tried to work on the manuscript once or twice a week, which calmed me down when I got into flow. In the early *Chronicles* version, I triumphed over the anxiety by eating well, getting enough exercise, practising relaxation and getting in touch with my inner child. I realized that, as a result of my new experience with debilitating anxiety, the existing story would ultimately need a new ending."

By 2007, Miji had brought the manuscript near to completion. Through 2007 and 2008, she sweated over pitch letters, submitting tailored queries to 12 small literary presses. Responses came back, all negative.

Despite the rejections, Miji was encouraged. "Comments from several publishers, often hand-written on the form letter, were positive. They really made me feel that there was something to my story." That bit of confidence was enough to push anxiety aside and make Miji brash on a trip to Toronto.

"I threw myself over the transom, so to speak. I literally walked in the door at Westwood Creative Artists and asked if they would be interested in seeing my manuscript. It eventually made its way to one of their literary agents, who loved the story and my writing, but told me that, in order for publishers to take a risk with a memoir, it must be really tragic, or the person had to be really famous, or the story at least had to be set in an exotic locale." Miji's book had none of these traits, yet the encouragement that she had received along the way from nonfiction writers Marni Jackson, Betsy Warland and Charlotte Gill, pushed her ahead.

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Photo Credit: Erin Wallace

According to Miji, in 2013, I gave her an important nudge to finish the project by reminding her that “we weren’t getting any younger.” (After all, we’d begun the discussion ten years earlier.)

In 2013, Miji had read a book that inspired her: J.J. Lee’s *Measure of a Man*. She’d also read a perceptive review of it by book blogger Monique Sherrett. Miji wrote Sherrett an enthusiastic note to compliment her on the review. As well, she queried Sherrett’s knowledge of memoir publishers, and received a reply: “Funny you should ask, Jesse Finkelstein and Trena White have just opened up a consultancy. They do nonfiction; let me introduce you.”

Finkelstein and White’s new enterprise was Page Two Strategies, a multi-faceted publishing facilitator working for authors and companies, drawing on their substantial experience in the industry with such houses as Douglas & McIntyre and Raincoast. “They took me on. It was just good timing,” says Miji. “They believed in the book and I thought: ‘You don’t know if you’re ever going to have another kick at the can.’ I wanted the book to be the best that it could be.” So Miji hired Page Two Strategies as the general contractor for her book. They brought a professional level of knowledge to the publishing process.

“They provided all the help that I needed at every step, from the substantive editing of the manuscript all the way to copyediting. They researched and priced out everything: graphic design, printing, promotion and they found a distributor.” As they were not a publishing house, Miji decided to publish, as she says “independently,” rather than seek a publishing house.

Finally, on November 20, 2014, over ten years from its beginning, Miji held her book in her hands: *Separation Anxiety: A Coming of Middle Age Story*. Her attention, her labour, her smarts and a bit of serendipity had paid off.

It’s one thing for an author to have a book in hand, another to get it into the hands of readers. Page Two connected Miji to Vancouver-based Zoe Grams at ZG Communications, a publicist Miji calls amazing. “Grams got the book excerpted in *Reader’s Digest*. I couldn’t have made that happen.”

But Miji had to do a lot of her own legwork. “I put myself out there, doing everything from bookstore signings to literary festivals to library events. Zoe arranged some of these, but a lot of it was just me making cold calls and writing emails saying, ‘Hey, I’d like to do this.’”



Miji's one-offs and tours have made her a car-boat-jet-setter, dashing around Alberta to Calgary, Canmore, Lethbridge, then turning east to Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Toronto, and bobbing west to Kelowna, Penticton, Vancouver, Victoria, Courtenay, Parksville, Nanaimo, and Salt Spring and Galiano Islands. Since 2015, she's commanded attention at over 50 different events and she's sold out her first print run of 1700 copies. Because the book is a consistent seller, the distributor requested more copies, so Miji plunged on with a second print run. She is optimistic about selling those, too.

2016 was a pivotal year for Campbell. The time and energy demanded by her two professions—writer and teacher—were abrading each other. Something had to go, so Miji retired from teaching in June. Then, in October, *Separation Anxiety* won the inaugural Whistler Independent Nonfiction Book Award. (Coincidentally, J.J. Lee was one of the judges.) Miji was invited to be part of the judging for the 2017 award.

"The experience with *Separation Anxiety* has connected me with people I never knew I knew and that has seeded the next writing project. I'm seeing my mother with fresh eyes; I'm intrigued by who my mom was at 29 years old before she was my mom. I'm not sure what the shape will be, I don't know where it all leads, but I just have to get started."

I know that when we next meet, Miji Campbell and I will raise a glass to her success. I imagine we'll talk about the nuances of the writing game, the tenacity that keeps us going, and the pleasure of relaxed moments when we can laugh and ponder the constant yet changing view of the mountains.

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There are many ways to leave a gift in your will. You may leave a percentage of your estate after all your other gifts are made. You can leave a specific dollar amount, or property like shares, mutual funds, or real estate.

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