

# THE TOP 10 MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS OF MY FIRST BOOK TOUR

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by Blake Crouch

On January 30, 2004, I embarked on my first book tour in support of my debut novel, *Desert Places*. During February and March, I did eighteen appearances in South and North Carolina, California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Colorado, and in the process experienced the dizzying highs and god-awful lows known as debut-novelist-on-book-tour-hell. So, without further ado, the top ten moments of my first book tour:

## 10. *Sometimes They Come in Pairs*

February 28, 2004  
2:30 p.m.  
Boulder, Colorado

I love Boulder. The pubs, the Front Range, the bookstores. I've somehow managed to park downtown on a bustling Saturday afternoon. I have a reading at High Crimes Mystery Bookstore, and I'm an hour early, so I decide to pop in, say hello, and head down to the West-End Tavern.

I stroll down Pearl Street, the afternoon warm, overflowing with joy to be alive. Ah, the bookstore. I step inside, take it all in.

Hmm. Where are the mysteries?

I say hello to the young woman behind the cash register.

"What can I help you with?" she inquires.

"I'm Blake Crouch. I'm here for the reading."

Blank stare.

"I know I'm early," I continue. "But I just thought—"

"I don't think we do readings."

"Well that's interesting, because somebody here booked me."

"This is a used bookstore. Daddy?" she calls. Daddy comes over. "This gentlemen says he's supposed to do a reading here today."

Blank stare.

"Isn't this High Crimes Mystery Bookstore?" I ask.

"Oh, no, that's next door," Daddy says.

Blushing now, I slink outside, already making excuses for myself. Well, where I grew up in the rural South, you're lucky to find one bookstore per county.

## **9. *Airport Chinese (There's a Lesson Here)***

February 8, 2004

10:30 a.m.

Charlotte Douglas International Airport  
North Carolina

Me (to my wife): Look, Chinese. I'm gonna get some.

Rebecca: You think airport Chinese food at 10:30 in the morning is a good idea?

Me: It'll be fine.

*Five hours later on a puddle-jumper somewhere over Colorado...*

Me (shouting over the noise of the prop): I don't feel so good!

Rebecca: What do you think it is?

*One hour later, kneeling over the toilet in my Durango home...*

Rebecca (patting my back): I told you Chinese for breakfast was a bad idea.

Me: Bwwwwwaaaaahhhh!

## **8. *James Carlos Blake***

February 14, 2004

3:30 p.m.

Glendale, California

I have a signing scheduled at the lovely Mystery & Imagination Bookstore in Glendale, CA. Upon walking in the front door, who do I see packing up but the legendary James Carlos Blake, on his book tour for the brilliant *Handsome Harry*. The owners introduce us, we talk for several minutes, and on his way out, Mr. Blake gives me this sage piece of advice: "Don't ever listen to the critics. You write what you want to write."

Now this is what being on book tour is all about.

## **7. *Longest Two Minutes of My Life***

March 5, 2004

11:15 a.m.

Northern Illinois

While driving south on I-94 from Milwaukee to Chicago, I encounter the phenomenon of tollbooths. Though I have no change, inexplicably I pull into the change-only lane. In the

rearview mirror, cars begin to line up behind me. Horns blowing. In a state of sheer embarrassment and horror, I shove a dollar bill into the coin bin.

Surprisingly, the gate doesn't rise. I beep my horn at the attendant in the credit-card lane, but he can't hear my horn over the cacophony of angry drivers behind me. I consider just driving through the gate (hell, it's a rental) but instead open my door to ask the woman behind me for change. As I step outside (a big no-no I learn after the fact), the attendant sees me, starts gesturing wildly and screaming for me to get back in the car.

Mercifully, he raises the gate.

I floor the gas pedal. Another banner day for the new novelist.

## **6. *Monterey Aquarium***

February 20, 2004

3:00 p.m.

Monterey, California

On the second day of the Left Coast Crime convention, Rebecca and I slip away from the Doubletree Hotel with my editor and catch a cab to the Monterey Aquarium. It doesn't get much better than strolling through the jelly fish exhibit and standing out on the pier overlooking the bay while talking about books with your brilliant editor. It's times like this when I pinch myself and know how blessed I am.

## **5. *Where Three or More Crouches Are Gathered***

January 30, 2004

12:01 a.m.

Charleston, South Carolina

I've just finished my first bookstore appearance and it went surprisingly well. I signed books at a Barnes & Noble in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, where I have lots of wonderful family who I don't know all that well. But they were gracious enough to come out, bring friends, and help me sell a heap of books.

We all go out for dinner afterward at a seafood restaurant called RB's. Having recently moved to Colorado, I'm craving fried oysters (I don't eat seafood where a sea is not present).

Drinks are consumed.

Crouches do this extremely well.

Toasts are made, several in fact by the same person, each one less intelligible than its predecessor, until finally our toastmaster is reduced to toasting himself.

Shots all around.

Really loud now.

Oh, here comes the bill, and—surprise!—they've charged one of my cousins for a meal they failed to bring him. Seeking to rectify the error on the better-late-than-never principle, the waiter brings him a doggy bag of his late, cold supper.

Three irate Crouches leave their chairs and surround the waiter.  
Sensing trouble, I step outside.

A few minutes later, my hungry cousin barges out of the restaurant, fighting mad. Someone tries to hand him the doggy bag as a sporty Lexus pulls up. My cousin grabs the doggy bag, says, “I don’t want this shit!” and launches it into the clear, Charleston night.

All things thrown must come down, and his doggy bag does...on the hood of said sporty Lexus. A perfect ending to the night.

#### **4. *Blown Away***

February 17, 2004

2:00 p.m.

Summit of Mt. Tamalpais

North of San Francisco

My agent gives Rebecca and me a...God, I hate to use the word “grand” but it really is...tour of the Bay Area. Fort Point, the Golden Gate Bridge, Marin, Greens Restaurant, The Presidio. She knows we’re mountain freaks, and so drives us to the summit of Mt. Tamalpais, (2571 ft.) twenty miles north of the city on a gray, cool, and rainy day, when the wind is blowing near hurricane force. At the top of the mountain, despite passionate pleas for my safety, I get out of the car and step into the gale. The wind is so strong it nearly blows me over. Trees limbs fly through the air, my agent’s car is shaking, I’m drenched in seconds—it’s awesome. We head back down the mountain into the city, and that night, I do a reading with the immensely-talented, helluva-nice-guy, Scott Phillips, (*Cottonwood, The Walkaway, The Ice Harvest*) in San Mateo, for two hardcore fans (his, not mine) who braved the worst weather I would see on tour.

#### **3. *They Say There’s One at Every Signing***

February 5, 2004

7:00 p.m.

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

There were many great appearances on the book tour, but none like this.

A big crowd.

Local news coverage.

Friends I haven’t seen in ages.

A lively audience.

Great questions.

Tons of books signed and sold.

And...my very first creepy fan.

I learn after the fact, that as Rebecca stands in the back, watching me talk to the crowd, she notices a woman gazing at her. A few minutes of weird staring elapse, and then this woman approaches her (while I'm talking) and whispers, "Are you the wife?"

When Rebecca confirms that she is, this woman proceeds to launch into a spiel about how much she loves art (Rebecca's a studio art major), how much she loves golden retrievers (I love golden retrievers), and how her best friend just moved to Colorado (we just moved to Colorado seven months ago).

*Yikes.*

Cut to the signing line afterward, Rebecca at my side, chatting with people in line just before they get to me.

Creepy Fan arrives, says to her: "So why don't you give me your address?"

Rebecca responds, "Why don't you email Blake the information through his website."

"Or you could give me your address."

"Yeah, you should probably just email him."

"But if you give me your address, I can introduce you to my friend in Colorado."

As Creepy Fan hands me her book, grinning, she tells me that she's been talking to my wife and is going to introduce us to a friend of hers out in Colorado.

"That's fantastic," I say. Since I've been signing a book and talking to someone else in line, I'm not yet aware that this person is completely off her rocker.

Rebecca grabs my leg under the table and squeezes.

When the woman is gone, Rebecca whispers in my ear, "Remind me to tell you about her later. *Craaaayzeeeeee.*"

## ***2. In My Mind I've Gone to Carolina***

February 3, 2004

3:30 p.m.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

On a brown winter day, I walk onto the campus of my alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, enter Greenlaw (English Department Building) and knock on the door of my old creative writing professor's office, Bland Simpson.

Bland believed in my book before I did, and he spent a semester with me when I was a student at UNC, helping to make it better. I haven't seen him in almost a year, since *Desert Places* was published, and it's a wonderful reunion.

We have lunch on Franklin Street and afterward I speak to a group of creative writing minors about my trials, tribulations, and triumphs in the world of publishing. It's amazing being on this beautiful campus again, and spending time with this gifted teacher who made such an impact on me as a writer.

### ***1. "It's better than getting your ass kicked."***

March 5, 2004

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Originally published in CrimeSpree Magazine (<http://www.crimespreemag.com/>)

Printed from <http://www.blakecrouch.com/>

See a related photo gallery at <http://www.blakecrouch.com/tourphotos/index.html>

1:15 p.m.  
Downtown Chicago

***The Dream:***

Before I'd booked the first airline ticket or packed my delicates, I had...we'll call them naïve expectations of what Being On Book Tour entailed:

standing-room-only audiences  
intelligent questions from fans who'd carefully read the book  
fawning  
hand cramps from the sheer volume of books I'd have to sign  
good directions to bookstores  
luggage arriving on the same plane as you, or at all  
did I mention the fawning?

***The Reality:***

Midday on a gloomy Friday, I drive into downtown Chicago for my second to last bookstore appearance, a signing at an independent just a few blocks from the Sears Tower. I arrive timely, am greeted by a friendly staff, and take my seat behind a small table laden with copies of *Desert Places*. The good news is that the bookstore is crowded. The bad news, they're looking at every book written since the dawn of time but mine. I'm centrally located near the new releases, and after a half hour of sitting there unnoticed, like the girl no one will dance with, I realize these browsers begrudge my presence. I want to make a placard to set in front of me stating: "Just because you look at the book doesn't mean you have to pick it up or...god forbid...make eye contact with its author." Perhaps sensing my frustration, the manager comes over, pats me on the shoulder, and offers these tender words of comfort: "Well, it's better than getting your ass kicked."

I'm not a hundred percent sure on that.

P.S. Bless the gentleman's heart who walked up, said hello, and bought the only book I sold during the hour and a half I was there.

P.P.S. The killshot: price for 1.5 hours of parking in downtown garage: \$25.

P.P.P.S. Finishing my first signing tour: Priceless.