

A Conversation with
Paulina Porizkova
author of
A MODEL SUMMER

Q: Your novel *A Model Summer* recounts the experience of Jirina, a lonely girl from Sweden who suddenly finds herself modeling in Paris. How much of the story is autobiographical?

A: The story and all the characters are fictional; the rest is all true.

Q: How did this book come about?

A: I've always known that I'd write one day, but I got sidetracked first by modeling and then by acting. Besides, unlike modeling and acting, I figured writing could wait until I got old and ugly. The seed of this particular novel took hold a long time ago. I was on the phone with an old school friend, trying to describe my working day. A 15-hour trip to the Seychelles? A photo session with a famous actor who kept hitting on me although he was married and older than my father? Four hours of hair-brushing and makeup application? Posing in a hundred plus degrees in a Moroccan desert swathed in furs and woolen hose while little white scorpions crawl over your boots? How perfectly awful. Even I could tell how "bad" that sounded to someone working behind a counter flipping burgers. My complaints were other people's dreams. My friend's inability to understand coupled with my inability to properly explain became a challenge. I knew then what I needed to write about.

Q: Is this the book you envisioned when you started writing it, or did any of the developments surprise you?

A: Everything about this book was a surprise. I thought I had the character, the setting, and that I was about to write a cynical, gritty portrayal of the fashion biz as it had never been done. Instead, as Jirina came into existence on paper, the story became smaller, deeper, and far more intimate. When I sat down to write, it was as though she possessed my body, and used me to tell her story. I was no longer in control of what was playing out on paper. The characters took over and I watched and recorded their actions. Jirina and the rest of my characters had become so real to me that they felt like memories rather than dreams. My only regret was that I couldn't share them with anyone, since they didn't actually exist. There were so many times I closed my laptop at the end of the day and wanted to gossip about Jirina, Evalinda, Rob and the rest of them, and had to remind myself that I'd made them up.

Q: You are best known as a supermodel, but you've also acted in a number of movies. How do you think your acting experience influenced the way you wrote *A Model Summer*?

A: I'd often climb into the skin of one of the characters to see how they'd react to a situation, and use that experience to determine how the plot evolved. I'd laugh, cry and live in my characters, just as I would in an acting part. Quite exhausting at times!

Q: What were the best and worst parts of being a model?

A: This is the very question I hope to have answered in the 300 plus pages I have written.

Q: Are you still involved in fashion?

A: Yes, I still have to get dressed every day.

Q: What do you want your readers to take away from reading *A Model Summer*?

A: What the best and the worst parts of being a model are.

Q: *A Model Summer* shows a side of modeling that few have seen. How do you feel about the way modeling is depicted in the media today?

A: It's not so much a question of *how* it's depicted as *what* is depicted, and the depictions are not so much inaccurate as unusual. Quite naturally, the public only hears stories of great successes or tragedies. These account for but a tiny part of the working whole, but it's all that the public has to go on. So, of course, when one hears the word "model," one immediately thinks of magazine and E! channel images of unfairly gorgeous young girls in free designer clothes holding on to their famous boyfriends, or anorexic wrecks throwing up their champagne backstage before passing out on the runway. The truth is, for every supermodel you hear about, there are thousands of models you never will. And it's not for lack of interesting lives.

Q: What makes Jirina's modeling experience typical/atypical?

A: I tried very hard to make Jirina's experiences as typical for their time as possible, while creating a plot that would draw the reader in. Although *A Model Summer* is not autobiographical, it contains quite a few "borrowed" incidents: some from my life, some from my friends, some that were simply overheard. One does not have to go far in the fashion industry to find a good story.

Q: How long did it take you to write this book?

A: My (admittedly awful) first attempt was written perhaps fifteen years ago. I wasted two hundred pages before I realized it wasn't any good. Part of the problem was that although I was fluent in spoken English, I lagged behind in writing. English was my third

language, and not having gone to school past ninth grade, I lacked basic grammar and punctuation skills even in Swedish, never mind English! I decided to put writing aside for awhile in favor of reading a million books, improving my written English, and building life experiences. But even in that first feeble attempt I found the voice of Jirina. Through the years, her voice stayed in my head, popping up occasionally to remind me she was still waiting.

Eventually (and much sooner than anticipated), the day in which I was judged old and ugly arrived. I sat down to write. I had my topic: the everyday work, the thrills, the tedium, and most importantly, the kind of judgment a model is exposed to on a daily basis and the effect this has on a very young girl. My protagonist had been brewing in my head for years, I had read a million books, and my English had definitely improved. I was ready. And then I found out that reading does not necessarily a writer make. I still had lots of technical issues I hadn't been able to soak up through reading. For example, dialogue: did one use a dash to indicate the spoken voice? The single quotation mark or the double one? Or did one simply write, "she said, he said?" I wrote my first chapter entirely without dialogue...needless to say, I soon enlisted in a writing workshop! It took me two workshops and five years to finish my novel.

Q: What are some of your favorite books/authors? Did any particular inspire you to write *A Model Summer*?

A: Most of the inspiration for my novel came from my job, but I have read hundreds of wonderful books (if not thousands, and yes, I'm totally bragging) and every good or great one must have put its imprint on me somehow. My favorites these days tend to be long, epic novels about foreign countries, cultures, and politics such as *The Soldier of the Great War*, *Acts of Faith*, and *A Fine Balance*, but I also adore fantasy novels like *Cloud Atlas*, *A Winter's Tale*, and wonderful coming-of-age novels like *The Saskiad*, and *Purple Hibiscus*. When it comes to authors, I can list only the dead ones for an obvious reason: their life's work is done; there will be no further surprises. In no particular order: Austen, Dickens, Balzac, Maupassant, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Fitzgerald.

To request an interview with Paulina Porizkova, please contact:

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