

## Now appearing at their local bookstores... Readers!

Fewer authors these days are going on tour, both because bookstores and publishers don't find it profitable but also because some authors are electing a "greener" approach to book sales. To fly around the country increases their carbon footprint. In the face of this--and also mindful that brick-and-mortar bookstores could use a little more traffic--Melinda Blau is doing a reverse book tour. She used Facebook to invite readers to appear *on her behalf* and to take part in the "Consequential Stranger Collage." (The invitation is at: <http://tinyurl.com/lnmvss>)

The "event" as it's called on Facebook, captures the spirit of Blau's new book, *Consequential Strangers: The Power of People Who Don't Seem to Matter...But Really Do*—a fascinating read that exhorts us to look beyond our family and best friends to the wider social landscape. Here's how it works: First, you go to your local bookstore, a place Blau calls a "being space"--a safe, welcoming environment where the seeds of new relationships can be planted. Second, you ask someone in the store--another customer, a staff person--to take, or be in, a photo featuring the book. "It's bound to start a conversation," Blau notes in the invitation.. "You may end up making a new consequential stranger, or just having a moment of fun." All photos will then be incorporated into the Consequential Stranger Collage!

It's too early to gauge whether Blau's experiment will drive traffic to bookstores. But within a day of announcing the event on August, the author began receiving emails, messages, and tweets. People loved the idea. Without prompting, some had called their local bookstores to make sure that *Consequential Strangers* had arrived, so they could drop by and strike a pose with it. One woman brought her nephew who was visiting from Rome. Another, who sells tie-dyed clothing on line promised to show up in tie-dye herself. Several said they'd asked others to join them.

Local TV and newspapers are already picking up on this phenomenon thanks to the enthusiasm of one of the Blau's interviewees in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Diagnosed with MS six years ago, Mary Benes gave out water at the annual 150-mile MS bike ride. But because of the support of people she barely knew, who were willing to coax her through the grueling training, Mary was able to complete the course the following year – as a rider. When Mary read Blau's "invitation" on Facebook, she immediately called a bookstore in Tulsa, as well as people at the newspaper and TV station, to tell them her story and let them know she'd be at the Barnes & Noble on 41<sup>st</sup> Street at 7pm on Aug 24 *with* her bike ("because it's part of my story in the book").

With publishers, pundits, and prognosticators wondering about the future of the industry, this unusual "bookstore" event emerges as a reasonable—and hopeful--middle ground between the new media and the old marketplace: online venues encouraging off line socialization. Blau says that at first she was hesitant about blogging and twittering. "But I've come to see that I can really connect with people. The instant feedback and the give-and-take transform a book into a living entity."

### **Consequential Strangers**

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W.W.Norton

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