

Drinking with Men: A Q&A with Rosie Schaap

By Jen Laskey
Contributing Writer

In her memoir, “Drinking With Men,” Rosie Schaap chronicles her life in bars and regales readers with stories about the community and camaraderie she has found (predominantly among men) in her favorite watering holes from New York to California, Vermont, Dublin, Montreal and back again.

Less about drinking and more about conversing and connecting, Schaap’s memoir pays homage to the best aspects of bar culture and celebrates the restorative qualities and life-affirming nature of the “neighborhood bar,” where you can sidle up and just be yourself in the company of others who appreciate a proper drink and a good place to enjoy it.

Schaap writes the “Drink” column for the *New York Times Magazine* and has also been a contributor to “This American Life” on NPR. She and I overlapped for a year while studying writing and literature at Bennington College, and we’ve intersected at various points in New York over the past couple of decades, usually at literary readings . . . at bars. When I found out she’d be a featured author at the 2013 Nantucket Book Festival, I got in touch with her to find out more about “Drinking With Men” and the other projects she’s working on.

Q. You explain the premise throughout your book, but for literature/drinking/bar enthusiasts who haven’t yet read “Drinking With Men,” why were you moved to write about drinking with men?

A. It seems so obvious to me now, but it took me a long time to recognize that, as a woman who spent a lot of time in bars, I was occupying space in a mostly male world. Every time I’ve fallen hard for a bar, I’ve invited my closest women friends to join me there for a drink. Inevitably, they have a good time. But they seem to feel no need to return the next night, or the next, or the next. Bar “regularhood” is largely a male condition, and I came to understand that even here in New York, where all things seem possible, being a woman regular remains anomalous. Still, even as a woman among men, I found lasting friendships, support and community in the bars I love best.

Q. Are there any parallels between the content of your *New York Times Magazine* “Drink” column and the stories in your collection?

A. Perhaps not as many as some might think. I love making and drinking good cocktails (and write about them often for the magazine), but they’ve never been at the heart of my life in bars. People are what make bars interesting



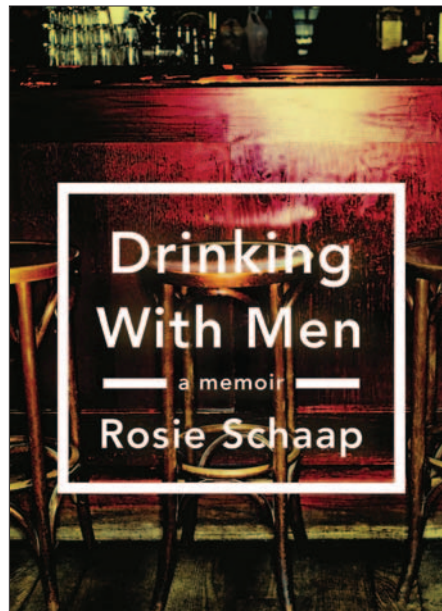
Rosie Schaap

to me, more than whatever I’m drinking. A cocktail can certainly be delicious in itself, but without good company, and good stories, it’s a pretty empty experience for me. But the pleasure of writing a column is that I’m not necessarily expected to be a critic or a trend-spotter. Both in the book and in the column, what I get to do is tell stories – that involve drinking.

Q. With all of the time you’ve spent in bars, one would assume you’d have many stories to tell about the characters you’ve met and events you’ve witnessed. When you were deciding on the stories to include in this book, did you know exactly which ones needed to be shared from the get-go? Were there any particularly compelling stories that didn’t make the cut?

A. There are so many ways to approach memoir-writing. I understood at the outset that the only person I intended to look terrible in the book was myself. While I was writing, some of my old bar buddies would tease me and ask what kinds of scathing things I was writing about them. I’m not sure they believed me when I said, “None,” but now that the book is out, I think they can see that it was true. My book isn’t a tell-all or a comprehensive autobiography. Sure, I personally treasure some stories that reflect badly on people I know and love, but I keep those among us. They didn’t have to be part of “Drinking With Men.” I also cut a story about the last time I visited Marz Bar – the notoriously grimy East Village punk dive – before it closed. It’s a story I still love to tell, but its scale made it a bad fit with the rest of the book.

Q. You’re also a poet, and as I recall, a great lover of poetry. What role does poetry play in your life these days? Why might poets make



“Drinking with Men”

good bartenders? Who are a few of your favorite poets (living or dead), and if they were all lined up and seated at your bar, what drinks would you mix for each of them and why?

A. Reading poetry is the most stable, reliable, anchoring practice in my life. I still do it every single day. But I doubt all poets would make great bartenders. (Thinking harder, I’m not sure it’s a natural fit at all). I suspect Yeats – aristocratic and rather awkward – would have been a disaster behind the bar. Emily Dickinson? Not a chance. For a one-night-only guest shift, Byron would’ve been a riot – but probably too busy talking and flirting to bother himself with pulling pints and pouring shots. My friend Wyn Cooper, also appearing at the festival, excels both at the making of drinks and the making of poems. Among living poets, I’d love to make a martini for Philip Levine and tequila with a sangrita chaser for Moira Egan. Among those long gone, I would love to knock back a few drams of Scotch whiskey with Robert Burns. And I haven’t a clue what William Blake (who, as I recount in “Drinking With Men,” once kind of saved my life) liked to drink, but I’d give anything to find out. (Incidentally, one of my favorite pubs in London, The Gowlett, is located just off Peckham Rye, where Blake is said to have had his first vision of angels).

Q. Are you working on any creative-writing projects with poetry or fiction?

A. I don’t write as much poetry as I used to, but I frequently fantasize about getting back to it – and I really hope that happens. As for fiction, I started writing a novel many years ago and lost momen-

tum (bet you’ve never heard that one before). Fiction doesn’t come easily to me, but I’d like to finish it someday.

Q. Is this your first time on Nantucket? Are you familiar with any of the bars here? Do you plan on doing any barhopping?

A. I visited Nantucket once as a teenager, and am thrilled to return after all these years. So I don’t know its bars at all, but plan to hit as many as I can in three days.

Q. Do you have your eye on any other travel destinations because of the bars or bar culture that you’re planning to visit or that you would like to visit?

A. I’ve spent a lot of time in the republic of Ireland, and still have deep affection for many Dublin pubs. But in the past five years or so, I’ve been spending more time up north, in Belfast. I find that city’s bar culture exciting and varied, and I think that some of the bars there say a lot about how the city has, and hasn’t, changed since the Good Friday Agreement. I want to write about that, and I plan to visit Northern Ireland again later this summer.

Q. What kinds of books do you typically read, and what’s on your summer reading list?

A. Good books, of any kind! I will say without hesitation that the must-read book this summer is my friend Kate Christensen’s beautiful, soulful, food-filled memoir, “Blue Plate Special.” I read it in manuscript, and can’t wait to have the real, bound book in my hands to read it again. I’m also looking forward to reading Lawrence Osborne’s latest novel, “The Forgiven.”

Q. It’s rumored that your next book is going to be about whiskey. Can you say anything more about it at this time?

A. The rumors are true. I’m writing a great, big guide to whiskey, that I hope will be exceptionally fun and user-friendly and accessible. There’s great whiskey at every price, and I want to encourage readers to trust their own palates. To paraphrase Duke Ellington, if it tastes good, it IS good.

Rosie Schaap will be a featured author with Will Schwalbe in an American memoir-themed reading at the Nantucket Book Festival on Saturday morning. The event will be held in the Great Hall of the Athenium, 1 India St., from 9:30 to 11 a.m. and she’ll be reading from “Drinking With Men.”

Surely, you’ll also be able to find Schaap at the Saturday evening “Authors in Bars” event, where Book Fest “unwinding, interacting, and imbibing” will take place at Ventuno on Federal Street and The Brotherhood on Broad Street, starting at 9 p.m.