

VODKA AND APPLE JUICE: TRAVELS OF AN UNDIPLOMATIC WIFE IN POLAND

JAY MARTIN

ABOUT THE BOOK

When Jay's husband lands a diplomatic job in Warsaw, she jumps at the opportunity to escape a predictable life in Canberra for a three-year adventure in the heart of central Europe.

She shelves her corporate wardrobe and her professional career and throws herself into life as a diplomatic wife – glamorous cocktail parties, judging Anzac biscuit competitions, traipsing through snow to find the right brand of coffee for visiting minister Penny Wong, and hacking away at a sometimes impenetrable language – as signs emerge that her marriage may not see out its third Polish winter.

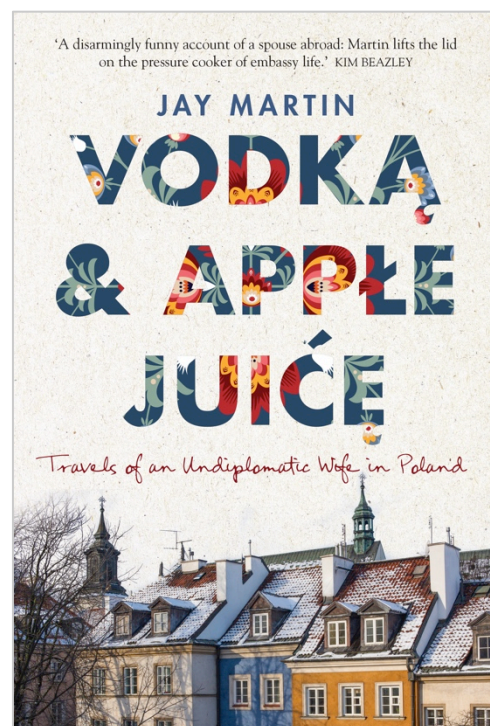
This is a story for any woman who's ever parked her career and found herself floundering, as well as those who've ever wondered 'what if?'.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Martin grew up in Melbourne and lived in the UK, Vietnam, India, Japan and Perth before moving to Canberra, where she worked as a social policy adviser and inadvertently married a diplomat. While in Poland, Jay worked as a freelance writer for Australian and European publications, volunteered at the Warsaw Uprising Museum, and baked one decent chocolate cake. She came to understand snow and vodka, but never, really, pickled herring. Jay lives in Fremantle, Western Australia, with her husband and a cat called Very.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do we read travel books?
2. The author describes Poland as the character who features most of all (p. 308). Does Jay Martin's Poland sound like a place you would like to visit?
3. What are your impressions of the expat life, and diplomatic life, after reading Jay's story?
4. The expat life can be seen as one of great privilege. The life of a diplomat can also be seen to be very difficult. Where do you think the balance might lie between these two things for the person experiencing them?
5. What evidence of community spirit and *solidarność* (solidarity) do we observe in the expat world? Is it different to the kind of spirit that Jay encounters amongst the Polish people that she meets on her travels?
6. What is it about Jay's personality that helps her to experience 'the real Poland'?
7. Are there ways that Jay finds the expat and diplomatic experience as much a foreign country as Poland?
8. In describing why she decides to turn down the job, Jay says, *I'd decided that I wouldn't take the job. It didn't resolve the problem of how I felt about not working. But something told me going back to work wouldn't solve that problem either.* (p. 149) Why do you think Jay struggles so much with the *idea* of not working?



9. Other characters ask the author 'So what are the Polish people like?' and Jay tries to answer them. Do you think it is possible to draw conclusions about national traits, or to describe a 'typical Pole' or a 'typical Australian'?
10. How might our views or perceptions of our own national identities be challenged or changed when we travel?
11. *And if you looked at it like that, then I think Tom and I did both learn Polish. In our own ways.* (p. 295) Do you think that Tom also has an understanding a 'real' Poland after his three years there?
12. Towards the end of the book, Jay observes that for her, the process of being in Poland has increasingly become one in which she *silenced* (p. 269). What do you think she means by this?
13. In an earlier scene, Jay joins other pilgrims in prayer to the Black Madonna: *Pray for us. Pray for us.* (p. 189) In what ways is she like the other pilgrims who are there? In what ways is she different?
14. In what ways do you think the three years in Poland changes the relationship between husband and wife?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

At what stage did you decide you were going to write this memoir?

I've always processed new experiences through writing about them – I'm a compulsive diarist, and as soon as we arrived in Poland I started writing Facebook notes about my observations, thoughts and reflections. By the end of my time in Poland I knew there was a story in there that I wanted to tell, about my experiences, and the things I'd learned – although I knew if it was going to be worth devoting time to, it would have to be more than just a collection of travel stories and interesting experiences. I voiced some thoughts about a story about a group of expat women whose 'lives on paper' were a lot more interesting than they were in real life to a friend of mine, and asked her what she thought. To paraphrase, she said it seemed like a winner. And so, I started to write it.

How difficult was it to condense three years into a single volume? How did you decide what to leave out and what to put in?

Very very hard! At first I just wrote about *everything* – everywhere I went, everyone I met, everything I did. Overall I generated a huge amount of material – easily more than twice the final manuscript. I wondered at some points if I was really writing multiple books – a funny diplomatic tell-all, and a different book about Poland; it felt like there were multiple stories I could have told, and I wasn't always quite sure how – or whether – they were going to come together. But as time went on, some of the stories seemed more like distractions, and some I found I just couldn't write convincingly, hard as I tried. Towards the end, I would write something and let it sit for a while – if it improved the overall manuscript I'd leave it in, if not then I'd delete it again. Other storylines and subplots fell away, and what's left is what you see.

Would you say that your three years in Poland changed you – and, if so, in what way?

So much, and in ways I never would have expected. I came away with a deep and abiding respect for the country and its people – not to mention a comprehensive grasp of Slavic grammar! I wouldn't have been surprised by any of that, necessarily, but I never expected to develop not just a fondness for such a foreign place, but a *loyalty* to it – despite travelling and living in a lot of other places, I'd never experienced this before. I guess I'd never been anywhere like Poland. Poland also made me see things about Australia I hadn't seen before – some good things, like how open we are to new ideas and influences and people, but also a certain complacency and a tendency to take things for granted. Living in Poland has made me less patient for these negative things when I see them here now.

The thing that changed most has been my relationships. Not only with my husband – although that took a whole book to tell. With everyone I know, and everyone I meet now. I see, now, that doesn't matter where you are, only who you're with – and that everyone could be a new good friend, if you give them a chance. And no matter where you go, it's the people you meet that will shape your experiences, and who you'll miss. As a

result, I feel much more connected now to the people around me, to the moment I'm in, than I did before, because I'm not thinking about other places I could be.

I'd also never been rich before! Or at least, got to know people who were truly rich. Turns out, they weren't very happy. Everyone says, 'Well, if it were me, I'd be rich *and* happy.' Thing is, privilege does not seem to sit well with gratitude. I'll settle for contentment – and being grateful for it.

How is writing a memoir similar to and different from other kinds of writing – both fiction and non-fiction?

Certainly, it has elements of both. It needs to be factually accurate in terms of things that can be easily checked – not because you are aiming to be a 'source of truth' (as is non-fiction) but because if you say something is somewhere that it isn't, or that something means something in Polish when it doesn't – it then I think it puts doubt in your reader's mind. Why should you believe them?

But of course, as soon as you leave something out, you have fictionalised the story. And because a lot of life is just not that interesting, a lot does need to be left out. It needs to be, in order to take the reader where you hope they'll go with you. And there are obviously other elements of fiction, in terms of characters, dialogue, finding the story arc and so on, which need to go beyond just description of 'what happened' to be interesting to read.

I had to learn a lot about these techniques to really write *Vodka and Apple Juice*. By the end of writing it, I probably understood how much more I still need to learn about them!

What difference has it made to your sense of yourself as a writer to have won the City of Fremantle T.A.G. Hungerford Award?

When people would ask me how the book was coming along, I'd always say, 'Well, it won't win any literary awards.' And then it did! I had had so many manuscript rejections that I sent it off with no expectation at all – to have the publishing contract at all was a wonderful validation that all the work and effort had been worth it. To have it come this way, though, through an award that is so wrapped up with my home, Fremantle, was really special. I think, really, anything else still hasn't sunk in!



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