

SHARE THIS: [f](#) [t](#) [r](#) [p](#) [e](#)

## My One-Woman Bucket Drum Band

By [Michelle Nijhuis](#) on October 9, 2013 | [Leave a response](#)



Almost every morning of my freelance career, I've imagined myself leading a donkey train alone through the desert. "Time to head into the dunes," I'll say to my husband as I climb the stairs, double-strength black tea in hand.

Unlike most of my mental metaphors, I know where my donkey train came from. In the deliciously verbose novel *Mating* by Norman Rush, which I read just before I left my staff job in 2001, the heroine pursues her true love across the Kalahari, accompanied only by a couple of very patient donkeys. She says:

Anyone who thinks crossing the Kalahari by yourself is boring is deluded. It's like being self-employed in a marginal enterprise: there's always something you should be doing if your little business is going to survive. For example, you should always be lashing a stick around ahead of you through the thicker grass to warn snakes to get back ... Then you have to be careful not to walk directly under the tree limbs without looking keenly to see if there are mambas or boomslangs aloft. You also have to keep resetting your level of vigilance, because your forearm muscles, the extensors in particular, begin to burn, the lashing motion being one you're totally unaccustomed to.

The phrase "self-employed in a marginal enterprise" stuck with me, I suppose. And while I've had a lot of fun and seen some incredible things during my own decade-plus trudge across the Kalahari, a snake-beleaguered donkey train often seems like an all-too-apt metaphor for freelancing.

I've decided, though, that it's time for a change.

My metaphor might be partly tongue-in-cheek, but we writers know that metaphors make an impression, and mine is making me hot, footsore, and cranky. It doesn't capture the things that keep me in the business: the amazing variety of ideas on my desk — *pow!* — the adrenaline rush of a research trip — *boom!* — the joy of a story well told — *bam!* — and, perhaps best of all, the unpredictable and powerful connections with readers — *crash!* Ideas fizzle, pitches fail, interviews dead-end and checks and luggage get delayed, but there's always another beat, and it's that rhythm I listen for every morning.

So meet my new metaphor. Next time you see me in the street, dance along ... and then toss me some change, will ya?

Photo courtesy of Flickr user [Dicko2007](#). Creative Commons.

SHARE THIS: [f](#) [t](#) [r](#) [p](#) [e](#)

Posted in [SciLance Confidential](#) | Tagged [freelance](#), [freelancing](#), [metaphors](#), [Michelle Nijhuis](#), [sane](#) | [Leave a response](#)



### Michelle Nijhuis

Michelle Nijhuis' award-winning reporting on science and the environment appears in *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, and many other publications. A longtime contributing editor of *High Country News*, ... [MORE »](#)

MORE MICHELLE NIJHUIS: [Author Archive](#) • [Email](#) • [Website](#)

## Leave a Reply

Comment

Name \*

Email \*

Website

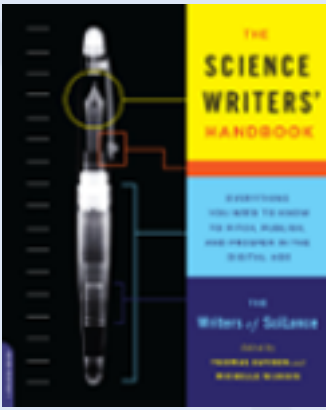
[« Previous](#)

[Next »](#)

35 AWARD-WINNING SCIENCE WRITERS.  
300 YEARS OF COMBINED EXPERIENCE.  
ONE INDISPENSABLE BOOK.

A truly comprehensive guide to the craft, culture & commerce of professional science writing

Get your copy:  
**AMAZON**  
**BARNES & NOBLE**  
**INDIEBOUND**



WANT MORE? CHECK OUT  
**THE SCIENCE WRITERS' ESSAY HANDBOOK**

How to Craft Compelling True Stories in Any Medium  
An E-book by Michelle Nijhuis  
Get your copy: **AMAZON**



Subscribe today & receive helpful science writing tips and updates delivered straight to your inbox!



NEW IN 2018! START INVESTIGATING!

There's never been a better time to ask tough questions. Introducing The Science Writers' Investigative Reporting Handbook by Liza Gross.



Get your copy [here](#).

## Categories

- [Ask SciLance](#)
- [Bookshelf](#)
- [Friday Snapshot](#)
- [General](#)
- [News You Can Use](#)
- [Q & A](#)
- [SciLance Confidential](#)
- [SciLance Events](#)
- [SciLance Hacks!](#)
- [SciLance Writing Labs](#)
- [Tribes Report](#)
- [Writing With Children](#)

## Recent Posts

- [Learning from the best](#)
- [Investigative science reporting is good for us all](#)
- [The science essay: Michelle Nijhuis](#)
- [What Is Science Journalism Worth? \(Part II\)](#)
- [What Is Science Journalism Worth? \(Part I\)](#)