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The Writer's Room

Posted by Edward Moran



It should come as no surprise that hotels have long been incubators of poetry and the arts. For 700 years, readers have been feasting on Chaucer's tales of pilgrims sauntering to Canterbury from the Tabard Inn in Southwark. More recently,

booklovers have been charmed by the exploits of Eloise at the Plaza and of Hemingway in the Ritz. Who doesn't get giddy thinking about the Round Table of New York wits at the Algonquin or the bohemians at the Chelsea? And then there's Eugene O'Neill's famous last words from his death bed in a Sheraton Hotel, "I knew it. I knew it. Born in a hotel room and died in a hotel room."

Since opening the Writer's Room in 2012, The Betsy Hotel has hosted over 300 authors, artists, and thought leaders in residence, with a focus on community outreach. The Betsy has been called one of the world's leading literary hotels by CNN and USA Today.

Hotels and writers seem destined for entanglement. Last year, the Miami Herald called The Betsy



Artists visiting The Betsy Hotel's Writer's Room are invited to work at the late poet Hyam Plutzik's desk. Also on the desk is a journal that has been signed by many artists who have visited since the room's opening in 2012, sharing comments about the rewards and struggles of the writing life, and their experience in the room.

"South Beach's improbable Algonquin on the Ocean" for its presentation of an alfresco Soap Box Poetry series in conjunction with the annual O, Miami Poetry Festival. "There's such rich language floating on the breeze outside the Betsy Hotel on Ocean Drive this month," wrote Lydia Martin in the *Herald*.

It is this symbiosis between hospitality and creativity that inspired The Betsy to nurture a vibrant arts sphere. In the short time since Jonathan Plutzik bought The Betsy, it has become a global destination for poets, novelists, playwrights, musicians, and thought leaders from every discipline. Deborah Briggs, Vice President for Philanthropy and Programs at The Betsy remarked, "Many Miami pre-war hotels had 'Writing Rooms' for travelers and guests. In a continuing effort to link past and present through the arts, The Betsy-South Beach opened a Writer's Room in spring 2012 during National Poetry Month." Since then, the hotel has welcomed more than 300 writers and other artists to spend up to a week working on creative projects. As part of their residency, they are asked to perform one community service – that may include public readings, workshops, or visits to educational institutions. Being a professional writer is a requirement [for a residency] and writers apply via the Writer's Room website at www.thebetsyhotel.com/culture/writers-room.

Past guests include two-time Poet Laureate Billy Collins, Poet Laureate W.S. Merwin, O, Miami Festival Founder Scott Cunningham, Recent Pulitzer Prize Winner Greg Pardlo, Founder and President of Ecco Press Daniel Halpern, and International Poets Elena Medel (Spain), Jan Wagner (Germany), and Chen Hove (Zimbabwe). Novelists include New York Times Best Seller Ben Mezrich and Amy Tan.

In 2012, the Writer's Room received a coveted Knight Foundation Arts Challenge Grant that provided a vote of confidence and additional resources to scale the project in ways that offered extra support to area writers. The Betsy is currently a finalist (for the second time) in the Arts Challenge Program, this time for *Escribe Aqui/Write Here*, a program created by The Betsy's Literary Programs Manager Pablo Cartaya and Pedro Medina (Editor of *Suburbano Ediciones*). *Suburbano Ediciones* champions Ibero-American Culture and proposes to make South Florida a destination for its study and appreciation.

Scott Cunningham, the founder of the O, Miami Poetry Festival, commented on The Betsy's role in facilitating cultural exchange, "I don't think its importance to Miami's cultural scene can be underestimated. Culture is made from exchanges, and the Writer's Room has made it possible for O,



Opening Day (April 1, 2012) in the Writer's Room at The Betsy – (L to R): Tom Healy, Les Standiford, Billy Collins, Melissa Broder (& husband), Scott Cunningham, Campbell McGrath.

Miami and many other organizations to bring artists to Miami Beach that otherwise would not have come." He further attests to the "multiplier effect" that the Writer's Room concept has spawned: "Each visit [by a writer-in-residence] becomes a nexus of programming. In our case, there's usually a reading in The Betsy's B Bar and a salon in the lobby, and each of these is an occasion for poets to see one another and socialize."

Campbell McGrath, who received a Macarthur Foundation "Genius Award," teaches creative writing at Florida International University (many local poets consider him the ad-hoc Poet Laureate of Florida) remembers being involved with the original discussions that led to the establishment of the Writer's Room in 2012. He says, "It's so extraordinary to have a hotel like The Betsy caring for writers, especially poets. When we put up our visiting writers from my university at The Betsy, they can hardly believe it. It has meant much to me personally, sure, but its real importance is the way it impresses those out-of-town visitors with the vibrancy of Miami's cultural life." McGrath was instrumental in bringing Jan Wagner, one of Germany's prominent poetic voices, to the Writer's Room, and appears every April at The Betsy in a signature reading called *Under the Influence* (which features McGrath and colleagues reading their own work, and that of artistic influencers).

One of the powerful side effects of the Writer's Room concept has been the many ways new relationships are forged just by having creative people rubbing shoulders with one another. Two years ago, the great American poet Gerald Stern, a National Book Award winner and Pulitzer Prize finalist, was meandering through the lobby of The Betsy looking for a poetry event when a tall, twenty-something young man offered to give him directions. When the younger of the two introduced himself as Zachary Hyam Plutzik, Stern repaid the favor by spontaneously reciting from memory two poems by Zachary's grandfather, the noted poet Hyam Plutzik (www.hyamplutzikpoetry.com) whose legacy is honored through The Betsy's robust arts programming. In fact, one of Hyam Plutzik's lines "Expect no more. This is happiness," has become the motto of the hotel, which places a poetry bookmark on every guest's pillow and offers a shelf of poetry books in every room.

In addition to hunkering down in the Writer's Room to develop their own projects in a restful ambience, The Betsy's resident artists typically participate in a variety of collaborative programs with many other creative partners throughout South Florida, such as the La Convivencia with Arts at St.



Poets Campbell McGrath, Dan Halpern, and Scott Cunningham at The Betsy's Annual Under the Influence reading during National Poetry Month. These artists are connected through the classroom with Halpern having been McGrath's Columbia Professor in the 1980s and Cunningham having studied at FIU with McGrath. (2013)

Johns, Teen LGBT Poetry Programs with Tigertail, Writers for Young Readers in conjunction with the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Exile Studies Programs at Florida International University, Piano Slam with the Dranoff 2 Piano Foundation, The Betsy's A Cappella Festival with the Adrienne Arsht Center, the Unity Coalition's Celebrate Orgullo, Community-based chamber music concerts with Miami Music Festival, VONA Voices with University of Miami's Department of Creative Writing, and Writers on the Bay with Florida International University's Creative Writing Program, and of course, O, Miami.



Celebrating Orgullo (Pride) at a salon co-sponsored by Unity Coalition (2014).

Caridad Moro-McCormick, born in Los Angeles to Cuban parents, recently stayed at the Writer's Room. After her visit, she wrote: "The silence and walks on the beach helped me to find inspiration. I had time to think and put my second poetry book, *Tortilleria*, in order. It's a sort of an analysis of what being gay in Cuban culture means, my childhood, the legalization of gay marriage." In June of this year, The Betsy also hosted a TransArt exhibition designed to spotlight "transgender talent, visions and possibilities."



The Betsy Hotel, 1440 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach, FL (2015). www.thebetsyhotel.com

As you can well imagine, there is no shortage of writers who would like to participate in the Writer's Room program. Below are a few comments from some of the talented participants.

Michael Hettich, Poet

Born in Brooklyn, Michael Hettich now lives in Miami. He has published more than a dozen books and chapbooks of poetry, and has collaborated with artists and musicians throughout Florida and nationally. He is the winner of three Florida Individual Artists Fellowships. His collection *Systems of Vanishing* won the 2013 Tampa Review Prize for Poetry. Of his participation in the Writer's Room program he writes: "The Betsy residency has been extremely productive for me – as well as being a restful, enjoyable, and an all-around good time. Everyone at the hotel treated me beautifully; in every way it was a lovely experience, a real gift."

Listen to poet Michael Hettich read his poem, [The Colorblind Man](#)

Brooke King, Poet

The Writer's Room has made a special effort to welcome soldier poets to Miami Beach. Brooke King, a recent Veteran, received her MFA degree in literary nonfiction from Sierra Nevada College last year, where she studied with noted soldier poet, Brian Turner. She considers herself a "war writer" and counts Hemingway and Günter Grass among major influences. She is currently working on a memoir about her own deployment into a war zone.

When King unlocked the door to the Writer's Room for her residency earlier this spring, she had modest goals: "To get a page done. And then another. And then another until I'm satisfied. To be in a space that is not my house. When I arrived in the room I just marveled at the books! I love the atmosphere." King has returned to The Betsy three times to work with local Veterans on their craft. In the words of Pablo Cartaya, who joined The Betsy's team as Knight Literary Manager in 2013, "Brooke brings heart to her poetry, and shares deeply of herself when she reads. We are made richer each time she joins our community, as she inspires others to use their own war experience to speak to life's larger issues."

Dwayne Betts, Poet

Dwayne Betts came to The Betsy as one of the program's first artists-in-residence — taking respite from his Radcliffe Institute Fellowship at Harvard University. While in town to do a series of readings in The

Betsy's B Bar, in partnership with University of Wynwood, he also agreed to do a workshop with high school students from the Arts and Minds Charter School in Coconut Grove. His poetry takes readers on a powerful journey from his days in a maximum-security prison to the halls of an Ivy League school — fueled by the power of words. Speaking to students transfixed by his message, he said, "While in prison, reading was what I needed to beat back all that noise and silence, those horrible silences. In the end, an ink pen was the only way to carve a voice out of the air and have others hear it."

After departing the Writer's Room residency in 2012, he wrote a quick note to Jonathan Plutzik, saying, "I've been reading your father's long poem *The Shepherd* and enjoying it. I've also read your father's preface to the book; in his words, 'There is no conspiracy against us, unless it is the conspiracy of indifference.' And I could quote other things, but the point is, it feels as if The Betsy is pushing back against the idea that the poet is irrelevant. I hope my poems last night have done this enterprise some justice, and I hope to continue to write in the legacy and shadows and spirit of men like your dad." ♦



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