



KONRAD MARSHALL - THE POST STAR

Author Russell Banks works in a converted sugar shack in Keene (Essex County). Banks surrounds himself with music, beer and cigars as he handwrites his works.



MONTY CALVERT - THE POST STAR

Writer Lale Davidson works at her computer in an area she has devoted to writing in her one-bedroom Saratoga Springs apartment. Like many writers, Davidson is specific about what she needs in a creative space — a window to look out and an area free of clutter.



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Bibi Wein writes in her rustic cabin in Olmstedville.

Creating a place for creativity

Finding the right place to work has helped local writers

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Dostoyevsky wrote "The Little Hero" in a Siberian prison cell. Thoreau penned "Walden" during an isolated stretch in the wilderness. And Kerouac created "On the Road" while crashing at a friend's Manhattan apartment.

The studios where writers cloister themselves often tell the story of the stories they tell. The following is a look at four local writers and the specific places and spaces they choose to create:

Russell Banks, Keene

Far from the publishing houses of New York and the movie studios of Los Angeles, Russell Banks writes each day, holed up in an old converted maple sugar shack.

From the outside, set low in a clearing away from his house, high on a hill above town, surrounded by trees, facing a slim mountain stream, it looks like a hermit's lair.

Built in 1914, the exposed wooden ceiling beams and unfinished walls inside are almost golden, blached orange many years ago by the fumes and smoke of boiling syrup.

Treasured photos, degrees and framed awards line the walls, and his desk is neat. A Mexican Day of the Dead skeleton rests near one bookshelf, and there are buses, so many yellow buses -- an object central to perhaps his most famous book, "The Sweet Hereafter" -- sitting high on a shelf.

"This is what happens when I'm writing, I end up accumulating things," Banks said. "They act as totemic objects I guess, these funny, stupid things."

In the corner next to the buses is a large wooden case with glass doors, housing his collection of reference books, including a complete Oxford Dictionary.

Although a sleek computer sits on his desk, Banks handwrites all of his work first and transcribes it later. The most important piece of hardware in the room is actually Banks' stereo, on which he listens to a mix of jazz and classical music -- a few sonatas, a bit of Hoagy Carmichael, a Billie Holiday record here and

there, some Mozart.

He keeps no food around, just a box of Macanudo cigars from the Pipe and Book in nearby Lake Placid, and a fridge stocked with beer -- "rewards and addictions."

Addiction is a concept Banks' frequently explores in his work, so in this old orange shack, with ale and stogies at the ready, his muse is never far away.

Lale Davidson, Saratoga Springs

Lale Davidson remembers what Virginia Woolf said: that for women to be writers, they need an income and "a room of one's own."

An English professor at Adirondack Community College, the creator of the Writers Project lecture series, and the published author of numerous short stories and an opera, (although her novel was "rejected by the best") Davidson has the income.

But she falls short in Woolf's "room of her own" condition.

Davidson's writing space is a vestibule off the kitchen of her one-bedroom apartment, adjacent to her sleeping quarters, which she shares with her husband and her 4-year-old daughter, Tess.

"When you work full-time and you have a child, you have to write in the cracks," she said, holding Tess up on her hip, her long hair falling down to her shoulders, except for a central lock pulled back and braided along the column of her neck.

When Davidson sits down, she has a window in front of her and a window to her left, one facing a fence and the other a garage. But at least it's a view.

"I have to face a window when I write," she said, firmly putting her hands on the desk. "I have to. I need a place for my eye to travel."

Her working area is clean, although Davidson insists she is no neat freak.

"But I do like my area free of junk," she said. "Other places can be repositories for mail and toys, but not my desk."

Her desk barely has room for a Chinese prayer stone, a Hopi pot from New Mexico, and assorted pictures of her daughter. She has a porcelain vase filled with grouse, turkey, peacock and owl feathers.

Someone once told Davidson that large-leafed plants absorb negative energy. As a result, the branches of a gangly tea plant to the left of her desk have grown over time and now shade the entire area, obscuring a personalized Harry Orlyk painting of a lone sailor on a lake.

"Harry is a friend," Davidson said of the locally renowned painter. "We went camping one time on Taylor Pond, and he painted this canvas, painted us into it, learning to sail."

Davidson used to think that where a writer writes was really important, "but the reality is that you just have to write."

Bibi Wein, Olmstedville

Bibi Wein's cabin, off a back road in Olmstedville, is full of rustic charm.

From the stitched quilts as wall hangings, to the snowshoes perched over a granite fireplace, to the assorted antique chairs on the dominant crocheted wool rug, all of it could have been imagined before even entering the house.

Wein is currently promoting her newest book, "The Way Home," a Walden-esque meditation on nature that recently beat more than 1,000 manuscripts to win the Tupelo Prize for Literary Nonfiction, and before that she worked in television, churning out more than 500 scripts for "Another World," "General Hospital" and "World for Tomorrow."

These days, she sits in the same chair each morning, drinking coffee, looking through the window at the birds, writing in her journal, breathing in air already smoky from the pot-belly fireplace and her partner Bob Fisher's cigarettes. Her mouth stays slightly open when she smiles, as if she's ready to laugh, and when she does, the red hair symmetrically framing her face falls forward over her eyes.

Wein's studio is a shack sitting a short way up the hill from her cabin. She has no phone or computer there, but distractions are everywhere.

When Wein writes, mostly in summer, she sets up her favorite chair on an open deck overlooking Trout Brook, 20 yards away. There's no handrail; nothing but a desk, pen and paper separating her from the water, which floats by on the way south after gathering in the valleys near Hoffman Notch.

Inside her studio, a stained-glass window from a demolished Glens Falls church holds up the peak of the pitched roof, streaming light into the room that hints at the color in the forest outside. The shack is lit by lamps and decorated with framed flowers, and the pelvic bone of an unknown animal from New Mexico.

Her desk is littered with old copies of the New York Times and the New Yorker. And it shows in her prose, which drifts from poetic observation to mischievous city-girl humor.

In summer, she spends the afternoons swimming in the green waters below, or lying about reading a book, or hiking.

"In the city I frequently long for interruptions," she said. "Here, I can create my own."

David Pitkins, Salem

The author of several books on North Country ghosts, David Pitkins said the story of his writing space "has become a horror story itself."

Pitkins used to have a beautiful, self-contained space within his 1850s home in Salem, but the arrival of house guests has caused his working area to resemble a rummage sale.

Currently busy organizing the printing of a new ghost book, "Haunted Saratoga County" -- a reference guide to 125 ghost stories -- Pitkins is also working in pinches on a novel, though his writing space has shrunk to an 11-foot long counter in his bedroom.

But the old merchant's home, which on this day smells of maple cinnamon toast, is perfect for writing. Downstairs from his bedroom is the spot where he encountered a ghost one pitch black night.

"I walked through it, and felt a shuddering, like grabbing an electric wire," he said.

Cats wander in and out of his family's labyrinthine quarters. Each room seems to house any number of bureaus, trunks and corner shelves -- little research quarries lit by stained glass lamps.

On the stairs themselves sit half-empty paint cans, matching the half-painted walls, and Pitkins' wife Linda is busy gathering kids' clothes for a charity group she runs. Unfinished projects are everywhere amid the clutter.

To get to Pitkins' desk, which is temporarily consuming one side of his bedroom, you have to walk sideways, negotiating a path between boxes of books, notes and old cassette tapes -- his "fairly well-organized mess."

The writing area has all the standards -- computer, fax, filing cabinet. Post It's are placed so randomly

they look like they fell with the last of the autumn leaves. They're even stuck to the walls, which are wrapped in terracotta wallpaper patterned in pictures of children reading.

Then there's the sound system. Some of his best thinking is done when he absentmindedly listens to choral music. It distracts and occupies his mind so that his "other consciousness is free to explore."

"If I can have a mind listening to music, there's another mind that's free to roam," he said. "I know a person that has to take a shower, put on a white robe and meditate for half an hour before writing. Brendan Behan, an Irish poet from the 1960s, used to drink a bottle of whiskey. Some 18th-century writers needed opiates. I'm not advocating that, but people find their groove in the most marvelous ways."

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