

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLEN ROSAOL, CHARLES WALTON IV

## A Writer's Town

*Key West's literary cachet remains as strong as it was in Ernest Hemingway's day.*

**T**he written word in Key West is as revered as the descendants of Hemingway's six-toed cat.

"Papa" Hemingway and a host of other literary luminaries, including Tennessee Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, and Shel Silverstein, once called the island home. Robert Frost spent 15 winters in Key West too. Today, this 2- x 4-mile paradise claims more writers per capita than any other U.S. city.

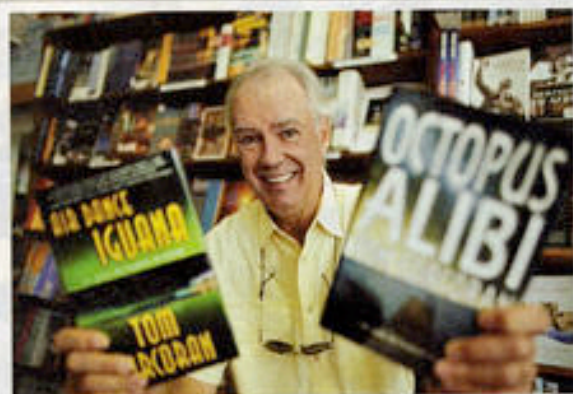
On this tiny dot of land, literary creation flows as freely as the ocean—and as readily as happy hour refreshments. Jimmy Buffett forever defined the island's "wasted away again" reputation with his anthem "Margaritaville." But more than a "frozen concoction" fuels the muse in this idyllic spot.

"Key West has this reputation of being a party town, but there is a whole other side to it," says Marshall Smith, owner of Key West Island Bookstore. "It's generally a literate town. If you just look at the number of authors who live or have lived here, it's quite impressive."

We asked some of them to riff on the island's mystique and mysterious hold.

### Tom Corcoran

An Ohio native, the novelist's introduction to Key West came from the Navy. After he concluded his service, he returned to the tiny town where real people are real characters and almost everyone prefers bikes over cars.



**TOP:** Before Tom Corcoran's literary success, he pedaled a three-wheeled bike through town, hawking tacos. **ABOVE:** At a Key West bookstore, Tom promotes his mysteries about a photographer who lives on the island.

"There was a year in the 1970s that I didn't own a car," Tom recalls. His live-for-the-moment lifestyle included riding a bike around the island, selling tacos. Tennessee Williams, a customer, nicknamed him Taco Tom. Later, after Tom developed an eye and career as a photographer, he was hired to photograph Williams in the playwright's Key West studio. ▶



Tom first met Jimmy Buffett while bartending at the island's Chart Room Bar. The friendship stuck. Tom shot seven of the singer's album covers and cowrote "Fins" and "Cuban Crime of Passion." He recently completed a book about his friend, *Jimmy Buffett—The Key West Years*.

When he began writing fiction, the novelist aimed to make the island one of his characters. "I wanted to bring the Key West that I know and revere onto the pages," he explains.

Although Tom lives in Lakeland now, he often visits Key West, soaking up the island's milieu.

#### David and Lynn Kaufelt

David A. Kaufelt immerses himself in the pleasures of Key West while composing. "If it's nice enough, I will write outside by the pool," he says. He and wife Lynn moved from New York City after vacationing here for years.

"We loved the architecture and the poinciana trees—a riot of red," recalls

Lynn. "It was a lazy kind of place with a great mix of people."

David founded the Key West Literary Seminar, which marked its 25th anniversary this year. Lynn now serves as president of the event, which always sells out. Two sessions are planned for January 2008. She also serves on The Studios of Key West board, a new nonprofit artist colony. Among other things, the organization provides studios to writers and artists at affordable rates.

#### Rosalind Brackenbury

"When I fly in and see this little dot and think about all that's going on here—it seems like such an unlikely place for so much to be happening," says Rosalind of Key West.

"All kinds of people want to live here because it is a very generous writing community, spectacularly uncompetitive," says Rosalind, a British native and author of 11 novels and poetry and short story collections.

#### Cricket Desmarais

A respite from urban life and a love for nature drew Cricket from New York City to Key West. She first

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Among the island's literati: David and Lynn Kaufelt. He writes novels; she presides over the Key West Literary Seminar and supports local arts efforts.



crewed day charters to the reef, and then earned her captain's license. "Now in the summer," she explains, "I charter myself out to different outfits," traveling to other countries. But, she adds, "As much as I love the water, it doesn't afford me much time to pursue my art."

In addition to dance and theater, Cricket creates poetry; works on a novel; writes for a Keys-wide newspaper; and edits *the secret of salt: an indigenous journal*, founded and pub-

lished by friend Kim Narenkivicius.

"Writing is such a solitary act. Being part of the Key West community is a nice counterbalance to that," says Cricket. "People who gravitate here are open-minded and somewhat eccentric with a general appreciation for individuality and the creative process."

Or, as she and Kim write in their literary journal: "The Florida Keys are a unique place...home to artists, writers, healers...fishermen, sailors, dreamers. We arrive by land, by sky, and by sea,



Cricket Desmarais enjoys the "honest, physical work" of captaining boats. When she's ashore, the close-knit Key West community nurtures her artistic side.

and whether our drift here brings us to stay for the weekend, for a year, or for a lifetime, we are never the same for the experience."

With such a poetic promise, it's small wonder that writers continue to surrender to the tantalizing ebb and flow of Key West.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON


## Paradise for Writers and Readers

Here's a sampling of literary events and places in town.

- **Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition:** [www.shortstorycompetition.com](http://www.shortstorycompetition.com)
- **Key West Literary Seminar:** [www.keywestliteraryseminar.org](http://www.keywestliteraryseminar.org)
- **Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum:** [www.hemingwayhome.com](http://www.hemingwayhome.com)
- **The Studios of Key West:** [www.tskw.org](http://www.tskw.org)
- ***the secret of salt: an indigenous journal:*** [www.thesecretofsalt.com](http://www.thesecretofsalt.com) or (305) 296-4763

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