



Robinson Jeffers' poems may last as long as his famed Tor House and Hawk Tower, which he hand-built using Carmel-area boulders.

Photo: The Pat Hathaway Collection/CAViews.com

A WAY WITH WORDS

Mining Writing Gold in Monterey County

BY TOM BENTLEY • PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE PAT HATHAWAY COLLECTION



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Henry Miller's exuberant, rambling prose was well mated to the extravagant beauties (and colorful eccentrics) of 1940s Big Sur.

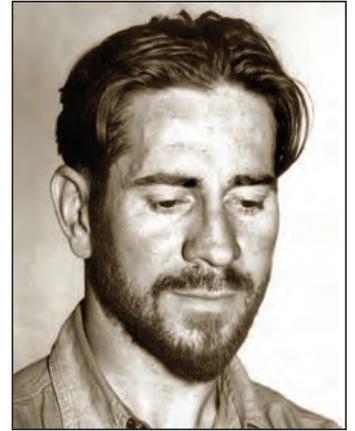
Doc Ricketts plunged his curious hands into its waters, Jack Kerouac trekked in its forested hills and Robinson Jeffers built a tall tower out of its stones. Writers have made their way to Monterey County for well over 100 years. Painters preceded them, trying to catch that impossibly beautiful blend of land and light here, enlivened by a soul of its own. Artists of every stripe followed, but writers, whether here for a season or generation, have tried to paint that soul stuff onto a canvas of words.

It took a natural disaster to shuffle the first phalanx of writers here:

San Francisco's 1906 quake sent a cluster of artists, writers and bohemians from their destroyed homes to tents and cabins in Carmel-by-the-Sea. Among those early scribblers was the poet Jeffers, whose hand-built Tor House and Hawk Tower are popular for tours today. Jack London, Sinclair Lewis and Ambrose Bierce numbered among the early writers frequenting George Sterling's Carmel artist's colony. But long preceding them was Robert Louis Stevenson, who may have used his 19th-century admiration of stunning Point Lobos as a model for "Treasure Island."



Poet George Sterling founded an artist's colony in Carmel in 1905 that welcomed many writers and creators.



John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts' 1930s partnership in pranks and prose produced happy hijinks and lasting works.

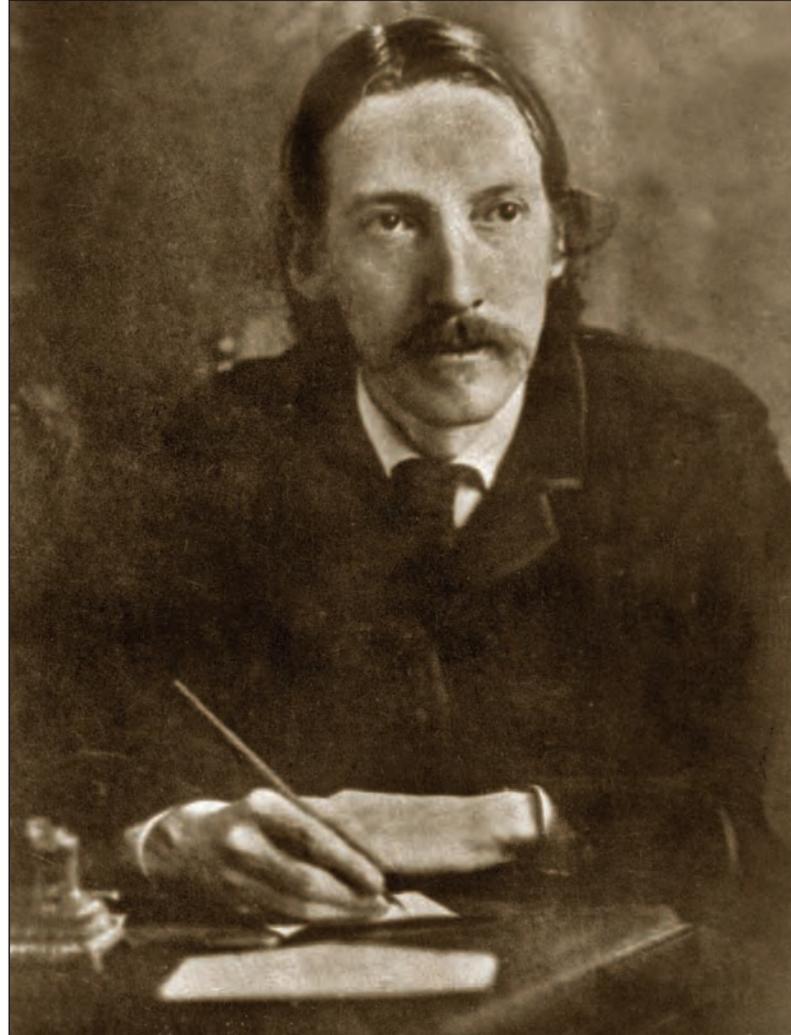
STEINBECK SEES THE DOC

The uncanny grace of the coast's charms continued to pull word workers long after the bonds of that initial artist's colony loosened. The immortal John Steinbeck was living in Pacific Grove in 1930 when he met Edward "Doc" Ricketts, the marine biologist who introduced the writer to the curiosities of the sea. He also soaked Steinbeck in the rollicking tide-pool of area bars and fisheries, and characters who plied their time in both, fresh fodder for works like "Tortilla Flat" and "Cannery Row."

In the mid-'40s, Henry Miller took up residence in Big Sur, where he stayed nearly 20 years. His colorful account of those days, "Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch," is a song to the sweetness of the Big Sur life. Miller's style, a great gallop of words, is fully unreined in the book, which discusses—among a thousand and one things—other writers and artists then in the area. The Henry Miller Library in Big Sur, with its odd sculpture garden, performance space and funky air of welcome, is a good reflection on the eccentric, contrary and generous man.

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Around 1961, Jack Kerouac stayed in a Bixby Canyon cabin owned by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, where he tramped around the woods, doing some drinking and some dreaming. The novel that came out of that idyll, "Big Sur," is not one of his best, but it does have some lyrical writing about the area, and besotted scribbling about a writer consumed by booze, a mirroring of Kerouac's actual life.



Left: Jack Kerouac combined the beauties of Bixby Canyon and the bottle for his novel, “Big Sur.” Right: The sparkling coves, wondrously gnarled trees and multi-hued ocean vistas of Point Lobos were thought to be an inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson’s, “Treasure Island.”

MODERN LETTERS

More contemporary writers, like Robert Heinlein, Beverly Cleary and Eric Schlosser have made their way in and around the Monterey Peninsula. And directly or indirectly, those environs have touched their words. Whatever the length of their sojourns here, the beauty of the land, the easy access to a sense of contemplation, and the incomparable coast were all catalysts for the kind of fertile thought siftings that writers require.

And would-be or on-the-way writers have a place here too. Contemporary writers can come here for multi-day writing workshops and conferences, such as the Monterey Writer Retreat, which dubs itself “A Writer Retreat for Aspiring Authors, Fiction Writers, and Memoirists With Work In Progress.” Or if you’re interested in personalized one-on-one workshops and classes with a

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single writer, which includes a stay at a cottage in The Vagabond’s House Inn, consider the Carmel Writer’s Retreat.

Catamaran is a handsome literary arts magazine published out of Santa Cruz, and the Catamaran Writing Conference is held at the splendid

Stevenson School in Pebble Beach. Offerings—which range from fiction, nonfiction and poetry workshops to agents and publishing issues—are deep and juicy.

And if you’re intrigued by the thought of mulling over deep writerly concerns in the green gorgeousness of Big Sur, you could do worse than attend *The Sun* magazine’s retreat at the stunning Esalen Institute, where the fine magazine’s editors will be exploring and celebrating personal writing.

Seems like the rich resources of the Monterey Peninsula will be providing succulent writing fodder for another century to come.