Writers find BR a good place to live and write

BY ROD DREHER
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It predict that working artists and writers will revert to the vacated places. In fact, they're already turning up in ordinary homes and ordinary streets long since abandoned by the Hemingways and Agees.

Where would you rather be if you were Rodger Kamenetz now and alive and well, stumbling around Greenwich Village boozing James Agee now and alive and well, James Agee now and alive and well and waiting, sitting on the front porch of a house in a summer evening in Knoxville? Or in the South? Or in North Dakota, they don't even talk. They don't in the Northeast. In North Dakota, they don't even talk.

For novelist Moira Crone, there's no question. She and her husband, poet Rodger Kamenetz, are living Percy's prophecy. Crone and Kamenetz moved to Baton Rouge from Cambridge, Mass., in 1981 to take positions as the English faculty at LSU.

"There are people who really do feel sorry for us living here," Crone says, claiming that Baton Rouge and the South is usually assumed to a problem of politics rather than on the East Coast, she says. "There's a way of talking in New York is not as good as the one here."

People make an effort to be entertaining in conversation. They don't in the Northeast. In North Dakota, they don't even talk.

"There are real troubles, but people here are a lot more upbeat to be around than on the East Coast," she says. "There's a way of talking in New York that thrives on putting people down, complaining about everything. You've supposed to show enthusiasm for anything."
The calm of life here lured scriptwriter Rick Blackwood from the West Coast this summer to take a job teaching his craft to LSU students. "I spend my time here being a writer, not a dealmaker running around doing the Hollywood thing," he says. "I've written more since I've been here the last three months than I did in the previous year." It's no secret that the LSU English Department is the main hinge of local literary activity, as it has been since the days when Robert Penn Warren, Cleon Morris, and others made an international reputation for the school with The Southern Review. Novelist Vance Bourjaily, director of the university's creative writing program, credits the department for fostering a community of writers and literary critics.

"Production begets production. People meeting and discussing their writing together begets the same thing," he says. "In the English Department, for example, there's a high-powered group of relatively young, young critical writers who see each other constantly. I imagine there is a lot of cross-fertilization going on there," he says. "They have what they need here, and they're making LSU a reputation as a national center for criticism. They thrive on close contact."

Bourjaily says the allure of New Orleans has attracted bright, creative students into the graduate-level creative writing program. He says students in the program keep themselves entertained by holding readings of each others' work, as well as partying together.

The Bayou bar on Chimes Street, immortalized by Andrei Codrescu in "sex, lies, and videocassette," serves as a gathering place for some creative writing students, particularly those taught by Andrei Codrescu, who goes there with students after Wednesday evening classes.

Writers also gather at Highland Coffees, a new coffee shop down the street from The Bayou.

Crone tells about the time men from the English Department gave a reading at the coffee shop on what it was to be a man. Some of their female colleagues showed up -- dressed as men.

"It was really fun," Crone says. "It became something more than just a reading. That kind of thing takes spontaneously."

Yet some Baton Rouge writers don't consider themselves part of a literary scene. Beth Dubus Michel, for example, has lived here since 1968 and is fully immersed in the general community. The author of four historical novels finds in those non-literary contacts a source of inspiration for her books.

"For my contemporary novels, it's helpful to live here because Baton Rouge, being a composite of an older Southern town and a 20th century industrial town, brings in different people. Almost any kind of character you'd want to put in a novel can be found here," she says.

Michel, now at work on her eighth novel, describes herself as "not your typical writer."

"I've got a New York agent. I've got a long list of publications. But I'm not really a writer's writer. I don't hang out with writers. I'm just a normal person who loves to write," she says.

Betsy Wing, whose first fictional work, "Look Out for Hydrophobia," has just hit local bookstores. She echoes Michel's sentiments.

"I find my life in Baton Rouge more concentrated on writing than anywhere else I've ever lived," says Wing, who moved here six years ago from Ohio. "I also think it's a community as full of variety as South Louisiana's. It's a real stimulant. If you stay alert, you can find lot's of material down here."

Most writers interviewed for this article, though, say that Baton Rouge itself hasn't manifested itself in their writing, though some foresee that happening. David Madden, LSU's writer-in-residence, says he could have written the books he's written in Baton Rouge just as well anywhere.

"I don't live in a town. I live in my imagination. It doesn't matter where I am," Madden says. "All writers -- I think Graham Greene said this -- get all the experience they need to become a writer by the time they're nine years old. All the rest is details."

Madden, who has lived here for 20 years, says he was lured to Louisiana by reading Percy's "The Moviegoer" and Warren's "All the King's Men." That, and the prospect of starting a creative writing program at LSU.

"It's ridiculous. Madden says, to say that any place is a good or bad place to write." Madden says.

"Writers who live in New York, where you think there are all these great places to go, all go out to the same places every night," he says. "I bet every writer in this town goes to the same restaurant all the time."

Madden calls the roster of well-known writers who at some point made Baton Rouge their home -- Robert Penn Warren, Robert Lowell, Katherine Anne Porter, to name some -- "kind of amazing."

Though he still teaches part time at LSU, Madden says he's one of the few local authors who makes a living mainly from writing. He prefers to socialize with other writers one-on-one, shunning the group scene. Madden says he's never bored here, that "I never want to get the hell out of Baton Rouge."

Those who do make periodic getaways. One of the nicest things about living in a city as inexpensive as Baton Rouge, say Kamenetz and Cron, is that they have enough money to travel. They've spent summers in Paris and Jerusalem, Kamenetz returned this summer from India, where he had an audience with the Dalai Lama.

"The advantage of living in Baton Rouge is you can have a gracious way of life. If you stay alert, you can stay in touch with what goes on nationally," Kamenetz says. He says keeping up with the national writing scene is necessary to keep from "suffocating from provincialism."

Ironically, Cron says that cosmopolitan New Yorkers suffer from the worst provincialism, and the insularity of writers living there likely makes their fiction suffer.

"The East Coast is full of literary, publishing and media people so drawn up in their business that they'll never get around to having children, or doing things that 'normal' people do. That skews their worldview," Cron says. "If you're going to live a full life, you have to do it in a medium-sized city these days.

Cron says the growth of small regional presses is making it easier for writers who don't live in major metropolitan areas to get published. Houses like the Algonquin Press of Chapel Hill, N.C., are giving talented writers an outlet for work rejected by the New York publishing houses. Cron says New York publishers often have a narrow idea of what fiction, particularly Southern fiction, is supposed to be.

"I guess you can say Chapel Hill is a place where people have retreated to from New York and California. That's like a little bubble there that's growing and growing, and it's having an effect on New York," she says.