

at the Norman Mailer Writers Colony

Tracy Strauss
A Writer's Journey

I just returned from a week at the Norman Mailer Writers Colony, in Provincetown, Ma., where I received a scholarship to work with seven writers, under the direction of Kaylie Jones, in memoir. I first studied with Kaylie Jones (daughter of From Here to Eternity's James Jones) last summer when I was accepted on scholarship to the Southampton Writers Conference's memoir workshop with Frank McCourt, who, just two weeks before the workshop, grew gravely ill, and died. Kaylie replaced him as my teacher. This summer, I could not pass up the opportunity to work with her again, on my second memoir, *Hannah Grace*, about healing from PTSD through my relationship with a cat (<http://thehannahgracebook.wordpress.com>).



STRAUSS AND FELLOW FELINE RESIDENT OF THE COLONY

Arriving at the Norman Mailer Home on Commercial Street, I was awed by the view of the Massachusetts shoreline. The workshop took place inside the home, where we met for four hours every morning, sharing and critiquing our writing as the tide went out, and in.

Unlike the Southampton Writers Conference or the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, which I attended in 2008, each attendee at the Norman Mailer Writers Colony is fully-funded, aside from a \$225 administrative fee. Housing is generous – I was placed in my own fully-equipped condo near the beach, where I found *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* and a thesaurus on the bookshelf, and where the kitchen cabinets were populated with pots and pans, tea and Progresso soup. Attendees are on their own for most meals, and with a stove, oven, refrigerator, plus supplies, eating in is a budget-conscious option.

Interestingly, my condo was the only one with a cat-flap on the door and, beginning my first afternoon in residence, a cat appeared there, meowing. When I left my condo to eat dinner with fellow writers, he circled my feet and rubbed up against my legs. Throughout the week, the cat visited me often – given that I was writing a book about my relationship with a cat, I considered him my talisman.

Staff members Guy Wolf and Jessica Zlotnicki helped us get acquainted with Norman Mailer's legacy with a tour of the house, including his writing room, located in the attic, which, with its slanted ceiling, small windows, and cramped, rudimentary space, reminded me of my attic apartment in Cambridge, except that I don't have a plethora of books about Hitler on my shelves or a Bellevue sign to remind me not to stab my spouse. The house was open for us to write in at our leisure.

The Colony loaned us bicycles to explore Provincetown, which I did on sunny afternoons, riding out to the Tidal Flats, where the "Life Seen and Unseen" theme became my (writer's) journey, where I walked, and walked, and walked across rocks and water, unable to see my destination, but was compelled to continue onward. I listened to the call of Sandpipers

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

and traversed steep boulders, flat slabs, rough and smooth rocks, which tested my footing. I thought about ways to surmount the obstacles I faced in writing my book, then went back to the Norman Mailer House to work.

Time to write is priority at the Colony. I spent many afternoons penning my chapters, and completing writing exercises assigned to fuel our creative process. The week ended with a luncheon held at the Norman Mailer House to commemorate our week's work. We were also invited to a gallery opening in town. As we said our goodbyes, we vowed to keep in touch and support each other as we complete our books and work to publish them. I know we will.