

COMMENTARY

So you want to be a writer?

BY LESLIE LINSLEY
Citizen Columnist

Everyone dreams of being a writer at one time or another. Now that the island is quieter and perhaps you have a little down time, you might want to consider trying your hand at writing. Writing is one of the few activities that you can do by yourself without any expensive tools that you don't already own, like a computer. And here's the best bit of advice you will ever get: just write. Write your name a hundred times if you can't think of anything to say. Something will come to you.

When I was in college, I had a wonderful writing teacher who made us allocate an exact time for writing every day. We had to bring in the results even if it was gibberish. I did this and never stopped, not for a single day since. Writing is like a muscle. If you don't use it, you lose it. And the next thing that teacher told us was, "you have to get over falling in love with your words." Once an amateur writer puts words on paper, editing out words is like throwing away family photographs. You really have to write and then pick up a hatchet.

A good first project is a journal. You don't have to be a writer to write down your thoughts for posterity. Many people enjoy keeping notes when they travel. They remark about meals they've had in favorite restaurants, or their impression of a place. Keeping a journal is fun and interesting to read back over once time has passed. It's a way to relive an experience from a different perspective with the distance of time.

Everyone records their experiences with pictures on their phones, but keeping a journal is different. It is anything the writer wants it to be. A journal is just for you. It's like a grown-up diary. My literary agent just sent me a journal with a theme for putting down thoughts you might want to tell a special person, but not really-just to get it out for your own satisfaction. I kind of like that idea.

A blank page can be rather daunting for a professional writer, let alone an amateur. So here's an idea to get you started. Make your first entry about your arrival when you first came to Key West and your first impression of the island and go from there. Who was the first person you met or talked to? Build on that idea. Develop the characters you met, or perhaps still know.

Travel is a perfect subject for a journal. Things often happen by accident. Keeping a journal can help solve problems. A journal can be a healing experience.

I used to love overhearing and writing down bits of conversations. Then I'd make up the background of the people who said them. For an aspiring fiction writer, this is a great way to create your characters. For me it's just a hobby.

Press a flower in your journal. Then write about it, where you found it, what you were doing. Write a letter you don't plan to send. I'm

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OUTDOOR-CENTRIC LIVING



ROB O'NEAL/The Citizen

The pool and deck are seen through shuttered doors at 2803 Seidenberg. The pool, patio and mature garden fit nicely into a section of the wrap-around porches.

Your house says a lot more about you than you think

BY BARBARA BOWERS
Citizen Columnist

Your house says a lot more about you than your preference for contemporary or maybe Victorian architecture. Consider your political affiliation, which, according to a study in the journal Political Psychology, finds conservatives are likely to be tidy and organized, with lots of sports equipment, cleaning supplies and American flags hanging around the house, while liberals tend toward clutter and lots of books, music, maps and colors.

Did it even occur to you that traditional décor or a green front door might broadcast ideologies that differ from homeowners with open-floor plans and blue front doors?

An article by Michelle Crouch in the April issue of Readers' Digest doesn't address the majority white or natural wood doors found in Key West, but it outlines 13 things that houses reveal about those living inside. And well, I don't want to even touch on houses that reveal "how often you're intimate," "how lonely you are" or if "you're an anxious ... Type A personality."

This presidential election year is already over-the-top personal, so without having to further blast divisiveness from front doorsteps, I'd like to focus on some common ground — an edge of public household exposure that showcases similarities among most everyone here: Outdoor-centric living; the year-round indoor/outdoor lifestyle that is nothing less than a birthright for Conchs, and for all the rest of us outsiders, pervasive by choice and frequently these days, by structural redesign.

To this end, some islanders live outdoors more than others. Their homes have been altered or in many cases, feature add-ons of covered but wall-less outdoor spaces — living rooms, kitchens and bars, for instance. Outdoor showers. I've seen a few semi-en-

closed water closets attached to house proper, as well as the municipal sewer system; this in spite of the density that comes to mind when I think of Key West.

Every square inch of Old Town is filled with old Conch houses and thick tropical vegetation masquerading as privacy fences. In this closed-gate town everything from politics to parties shapes up under a canopy of lush greenery. Behind each of these fences is a private garden where the business of living marches on somewhat publicly. When roosters are the final party going in the wee morning hours, it's so quiet it's hard to miss what your neighbor is having for his al fresco 6 a.m. breakfast. A one-martini lunch by the pool is common place, followed that evening by a robust round of smoke that fills your garden from the fire-breathing grill built in 1881.

If you're among the lucky, your neighbor is among the households with state-of-the-art, fully functioning, fully venting outdoor kitchens — and there are many in the Conch Republic that feature stainless steel Bosch stoves,



MIKE HENTZ/The Citizen

A garden of rare palms designed by Andre Joris surrounds the formal outdoor dining room and pool at 217 Olivia St.

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Photo courtesy of Barry Fitzgerald

Living room and three openings face the garden at 56 Key Haven. Contemporary furniture sits on a diagonal to mimic the Terracotta tile's diagonal pattern.

336 Duval St., Key West
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MIKE HENTZ/The Citizen

The pool and ocean view are spectacular as seen from the porch at this home on Shark Key.

Outdoor

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microwaves and TVs, for that matter, which make another big statement about willingness to share.

Communal neighborhood living is resplendent with all-day and all-night conversation (and music) around swimming pools, where sizes and shapes probably reveal much about whom you are, too: Round or oval equals open mindedness, free-form equals permissiveness, square pools are favored by nerds? To date, I haven't found any survey that confirms the above, but I suspect it's out there on the internet, supplementing information about the number and width of steps dipping into your pool, which clearly define your parenting skills.

Plant selection and outdoor lighting, though relevant to outdoor-centric living, also fall into my no-go zone: Who knows, or wants to know? Why Brazilian mastwood trees or sapodillas native to the Yucatan peninsula grow next door, gobbling up entire sidewalks, rooting their ways into your house's foundation and spitting fruit into your swimming pool.

But there is no denying your neighbor doesn't want to know who you are, when she plants coral vines and Rangoon creeper — seri-



Bikes are parked on the walkway at 1109 Margaret St.

ously aggressive plants — along the six-foot-high fence between you.

I'm still trying to wrap my mind around what artificial grass says about a homeowner; and lights along pathways could say yours is an all-welcoming abode, those that shine up into trees could mean you're afraid of the dark. Then again, you could be a voyeur peeking out from your unlit window.

On most properties, there is probably no accounting for what lawn art like water features, fountains, Christmas lights in July and caged birds on porches says about you. I used to think plastic flamingoes stuck in front yards represented the exotic nature of Florida homeowners, but in Key West such

garden displays usually poke fun at old icons, whether they be liberal or conservative.

I do think, though, that houses sporting tree-carved dolphins, Haitian ironworks, and bicycles strapped to balconies are simply remarkable; as much outsider eccentricities of the people who live there as they are expressions of all-inclusive values.

Barbara Bowers is a Key West Realtor and host of a radio talk show about owning and maintaining property in the Florida Keys. To suggest a home to be featured in the Keys Homes section, send an email to barbara@bbowers.com. Homes listed for sale may not be considered.

Linsley

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a sucker for little lined notebooks. Just rackig it open and sliding my hand down the smooth page makes me want to take up my pen. I really miss handwritten letters. I save thank you notes when I get one. Island decorator Michael Pelkey still sends handwritten notes in a beautiful florid script. I've saved them all. Like so many, I spend most of my day at the computer. I communicate electronically. But I love the feeling I get when faced with a brand new notebook. I am especially gratified when I pick up an old journal and read what I was doing on a particular day a year ago, five

years ago, etc. It's akin to finding old photo albums in your attic.

A journal is like a benchmark for achievements, growth, problem solving. It can also be a way to work through problems and difficult situations when there isn't a significant other to help, or your significant other is part of the problem.

We record happy events in journals. It's a place to put down random thoughts, passing observations, descriptions, poems, phrases from a book you're reading, notes about whatever is on your mind at that very moment. I often paste a picture from a magazine or catalog of something I want to remind myself to get or of a style of decorating or fashion or haircut I'm attracted to. Years later I often wonder what was the matter

with me!! I notate an idea that hasn't fully blossomed that I want to flush out. Potential book and article titles are also noted. I'm reminded of one title about yard sales for a future, yet unwritten article I want to call, "You Should Have Been Here Ten Minutes Ago!"

Keeping a journal is fun, self-gratifying, purging, revealing, humorous, even embarrassing. Give it a try this summer.

Leslie Linsley has written more than 50 books on crafts, decorating and home style. She resides on Nantucket, Massachusetts, with her husband, photographer Jon Aron. Her latest book is "Key West, a Tropical Lifestyle" (Monacelli Press). Her email address is leslie@leslielinsley.com.

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