LITERARY HOUSE lessons

7 creative takeaways from famous authors’ homes.

By Elizabeth Fishel
Edith Wharton’s The Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts
During a long, home-bound winter — and an even longer pandemic, sheltering in place — I’ve turned to the houses of my favorite authors to show me how to keep the creative home fires burning. Who better than these lifelong professional homebodies to take as guides? I’ve Sherlock Holmesed around these literary home bases, all but one now a museum open to the public, reading these authors’ rooms the way we read their beloved books.

Their houses are not just containers for day-to-day life but personal portraits and works of art. They’re also settings for infinite stories and dynamic places where dramas unfold and writers find inspiration after silence, solace after heartbreak, recovery after illness, and reinvention after shedding an old skin.

I’ve searched (metaphorically) behind their living-room cushions, poked through their bookshelves and collections, and explored their gardens to see how their private spaces inspired, sustained, and contained these writers’ gifts — and what they can teach the rest of us. Their cluttered or tidy desks, their choices of books and cherished objects, their views and vistas all provide clues to what they needed around them to do their best work — and what ideas we can steal to do ours.

Here are seven literary lessons I’ve gleaned from writers’ homes here and abroad.

Edith Wharton’s The Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts
Now open daily for guided or self-guided tours; edithwharton.org

LESSON LEARNED:
Find a creative practice that suits you.

EDITH WHARTON BUILT HER GRANDE DAME OF A HOUSE, THE Mount, at the turn of the last century in Lenox, Massachusetts, and lived there until 1911, when she resettled in Europe. She was conveniently able to afford this over-the-top fantasy that cost $100,000 ($3 million in today’s dollars) because of legacies from her mother, an uncle, and later the royalties from her successful books, like *The House of Mirth* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence*. But she started the house project when she was at a troubled crossroads: Almost 40, she was suffering from a bad marriage, poor health, and an estrangement from her mother, and a not yet realized literary gift.

She brick-by-bricked more confidence in herself as she made the many design choices for construction. The house came to be called an “autobiographical house” because every decision reflected her personality. There were her glorious, floor-to-ceiling book-shelved library, modeled after her father’s, where she maintained a desk (mostly for show, since she did her writing elsewhere), and the round table in the dining-room, good for conversation, where she hosted little dinner parties for no more than eight people.

But it was her sky-blue bedroom that most inspires me. There she wrote in bed every morning, rain or shine, guests or no, motivated or not, and let the pages drift to the floor for her secretary to type up. That dedication to her literary routine proved a magic wand to her writing life and her emotional health and can encourage the rest of us to discover and nurture our own daily creative practice — even if we have to do our own typing.
Henry James’ Lamb House in Rye, England
Open Friday through Tuesday;
nationaltrust.org.uk/lamb-house

LESSON LEARNED:
Stay connected.

At 55, Henry James was on a quest for a permanent home in a quiet spot when he found Lamb House, named for the architect, James Lamb, who built the house in 1722. James fell in love with the historic, square-brick Georgian house located 70 miles southeast of London and took out a 21-year lease in 1897. “I have lived into my little old house and garden so thoroughly,” the novelist wrote in his typically flowery style, “that they have become a kind of domiciliary skin that can’t be peeled off without pain.”

It was the Garden Room that first lured James to Lamb House and fired his imagination, and it was there that he worked on his last three major novels, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), mostly dictating them to his secretary.

Although a confirmed and lifelong bachelor who lived alone, James had a wide circle of friends and admirers, including Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, and H.G. Wells, who called their group “a ring of conspirators.” Part of James’ daily routine was devoted to corresponding with friends and his brother William: He wrote an astounding 10,000 letters in his lifetime.

Letter writing may be a dying art, but it’s one I’m now prompted to revive – or at least try my hand at lengthy, newsy, full-of-feeling emails. In these challenging times, it feels like we must seize all means necessary to stay in touch with our own ring of conspirators. And who knows when a letter sent or received might ignite or clarify an idea for a new story, article, or book?

Alex Haley’s Palmer House in Henning, Tennessee
Open Tuesday through Saturday,
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.;
alexhaley.org

LESSON LEARNED:
Witness the sights, sounds, smells, and life of your past.

Alex Haley’s life came full circle in the Henning, Tennessee, home built by his grandfather, Will Palmer: He arrived there in his mother’s arms at six weeks and was buried in the front yard at age 71 in 1992. He spent his first eight years and some summers afterward in the ten-room, powder blue, clapboard house that is now a museum honoring his life and works.

Most importantly, it was on the front porch in Henning where he first heard his grandmother tell the captivating stories of his distant ancestor, Kunta Kinte, who’d been kidnapped from West Africa and sold into slavery in Annapolis, Maryland. These stories planted the seed of curiosity about his family’s heritage, and decades later, he spent 12 years and traveled three continents tracking down his maternal family seven generations back.

The result was his blockbuster, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Roots: The Saga of An American Family*, published in 1976, that sparked a national trend for genealogical research still very much alive. In 1977, *Roots* became a mesmerizing miniseries, one of the most popular programs in TV history, and two years later, *Roots: The Next Generation* gripped audiences as well.

Haley’s career as a writer did not follow a traditional course: It began during his 20-year service in the Coast Guard. To alleviate the boredom during long sea voyages in the Pacific theater, he penned love letters for his shipmates to send their wives and girlfriends,
Cyrano De Bergerac-style. He also taught himself to write stories, but it would be eight years before even small magazines began publishing them.

When Haley retired from the service at the age of 37, he went all in as a freelance writer, first for Reader’s Digest and then for Playboy, where he established the famous interview series with such notables as Dr. Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali, and Malcolm X, from which came their historic collaboration on The Autobiography of Malcolm X. After its 1965 publication, Time magazine called it one of the 10 most important books of the 20th century.

Haley also owned a 157-acre farm in Clinton, Tennessee, where he entertained friends like Maya Angelou and Oprah Winfrey. After his death, it was sold to Marian Wright Edelman’s Children’s Defense Fund and still exists as a training and retreat center for youth workers.

But it was on the front porch of the humbler Palmer House where he first heard the family stories that set his path as a writer. As he advised generations to come, “Listen to the music of your history and witness the sights, sounds, smells, and life of your past.”
Fisher’s food writing turned her into a celebrity, bringing throngs of readers and welcome visitors. Sadly, her health began to deteriorate not long after she moved to Last House, and many of her final books had to be dictated. But despite her health issues, she remained more vibrant than not, writing, entertaining, being visited by friends and being surrounded by family, books, music, and the people she loved.

Above all, she kept her senses humming until her last breaths: checking out the restorative sight of the ancient oak tree outside her kitchen window, the tart smell of the bay laurels swaying in the nearby creek, the furry touch of her devoted cat, and the welcome clang from Bouverie’s Bell Tower, ringing in the cocktail hour.

Even as her horizon narrowed, her senses kept her world wide open and her essays lively. She produced 13 books in her 20-plus years at Last House, all of which contributed greatly to the genre of food writing. Her style reminds us that sensory detail enlivens any piece of prose.

**Lesson Learned:**
Collections delight and define us and inspire our stories.

**Gracious Greenway House – Where Agatha Christie and her second husband, distinguished archaeologist Max Mallowan, spent summers and holidays – is a creamy white Georgian house dating back to 1780 or so. It’s set on a high promontory, surrounded by leafy gardens and woods, overlooking the River Dart in Devon, England, and visible to all the boats ferrying by. Growing up in the nearby resort town of Torquay, Christie knew the house as a child and called it “the loveliest place in the world.” She and Mallowan would be seduced by Greenway’s charms for almost 40 years.

The author of 80 detective novels and 18 story collections, Christie has sold 2 billion copies in more than 100 languages, making her the most popular novelist of all time. She had a fierce work ethic, motivated, in part, by the need to earn money to feather her nests. “How much do I need to write to build a loggia?” she famously asked. When given the sum, she answered, “Then I’ll write to earn that!” In order to release a new mystery every Christmas, she finished each one in the summer and then read it to the family gathered in Greenway’s elegant drawing room.

Her family donated the house to Britain’s National Trust in 2000, and it was restored, preserved, and opened to the public in 2009. Today it looks as
if Agatha and Max have just popped out, their hats and walking sticks stashed in the front hall.

Greenway provided the setting for three of Christie’s Hercule Poirot mysteries: *Five Little Pigs* (1952), highlighting the battery by the river; *Ordeal By Innocence* (1958) featuring the ferry bell at the Greenway Quay; and *Dead Man’s Folly* (1956), in which the murder takes place in the scenic boathouse at the property’s edge. Quotes from the latter novel are embroidered on pillows plumped around the house.

But the most striking decorative note is the five generations’ worth of collections that leave no surface uncluttered – from the porcelain dell’Arte figurines from Christie’s grandmother that became a major theme in *The Mysterious Mr. Quin* to her mother’s china and furniture to her own collected artifacts from archaeological digs with her husband. Christie’s other collections include papier-mâché furniture, tiny Battersea boxes, and gleaming pocket watches that remind us that time was also a recurrent motif in many of her mysteries. There are also vials for homeopathic remedies from the writer’s World War I experience as a nurse – which may have fostered the poison-savviness deployed in her novels.

The house’s collections are like a curiosity cabinet of Christie’s mind and proved a rich vein of material she plumbed for her legendary productivity. For writers are hoarders of both the real and imaginary, and our prized collections of valuable and mundane things may turn into treasure troves for creative work.

ROBINSON JEFFERS WAS A RENOWNED POET OF THE NATURAL WORLD who was most famous in the 1920s and ’30s, and his Tor House, hand-built on a promontory in Carmel, California, reflects his harmony with nature and the stunning surroundings that inspired his poetry. The wildlife of the Big Sur/Carmel coast – the sea lions, wild boars, and herons – enthralled Jeffers. And he so identified with the swooping hawks that he called himself “Hawk.”

One of the few poets ever to grace a *Time* magazine cover, Jeffers still resonates today as a bard of conservation and environmentalism who predicted our current ecological crisis. Observed Dana Gioia, California’s 10th poet laureate, “He believed we have to coexist with nature and not dominate it.”

In 1916, after the birth of their twin sons, Garth and Donnan, Robinson and wife Una Jeffers bought land on Carmel Point with sweeping views of the crashing Pacific waves. Jeffers apprenticed himself to a local stonemason, and together, they built the cottage and called it Tor House; its name means craggy outcrop or lookout. Four years later, using boulders quarried from the nearby beach and stones friends
brought him from around the world, he built a four-story tower on the property entirely by himself. It took four years, and he named it Hawk Tower. He memorialized it in a poem: “I built it with my hands, I hung/Stones in the sky.” The two rocky, hand-hewn structures look like a setting for a fairy tale.

Jeffers kept his life in balance, working on poetry in the morning and building projects in the afternoon. With its quiet spaces for writing and thinking (and his wife’s Steinway baby grand), its literary quotes carved into the wooden beams (“Let the grandchildren eat the apples” is one of them), its English gardens blooming with foxglove and cineraria cared for by his wife, and its jaw-dropping, 360-degree views from the top of the Tower, Tor House is “a poem-like masterpiece,” as Stewart Brand, creator of The Whole Earth Catalogue, once pointed out. “It may express more direct intelligence per square inch than any other house in America.”

Living in tune with nature might have been easier on the undeveloped California Coast a hundred years ago than it is today. But take a page from the poet’s book and make time for a break from the computer screen to explore the outdoors, breathe deep, watch a bird soar, plant a garden, or build something by hand.

 Maya Angelou’s house in Winston-Salem, North Carolina
Now owned privately and not open to the public.

LESSON LEARNED:
Gather your community around your table.

AFTER DECADES OF CRISSCROSSING THIS COUNTRY and living in Ghana for years with her son, in 1981 at age 53, the iconic and influential writer Maya Angelou made a pivotal move back to the American South. She wanted to revisit and make peace with her difficult childhood in Stamps, Arkansas, and create a singular life of her own choosing as an unattached woman of a certain age. She took on a lifetime position teaching American Studies at Wake Forest University and put down roots for her third act, buying first one and then another home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She rejoiced at living where the Smokies and the Blue Ridge mountains came together and where rhododendrons grew 10 feet tall and azaleas spiked higher than she stood. The home grounded and inspired her until her death in 2014 at 86, when the property was sold to another owner.

Angelou painted the house a sunny yellow, added a bright red front door, and filled her home with birdcages, a wink to I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, the bestselling memoir that helped her buy the home. Later, at 64, she was invited to read a poem at Bill Clinton’s inauguration, becoming the first female and Black inaugural poet in history.

In her vibrant yellow house, she wrote several more books of her seven-volume autobiography and, artistically fearless, experimented with screenwriting, producing and directing films, music, and cookbooks.

Writing and cooking were Angelou’s two great loves, “just two different means of communication,” she called them. She was an accomplished chef who hosted a wide circle of friends around her table, most famously her devoted friend Oprah Winfrey. She dished out everything from Mixed-Up Tamale Pie to caramel cake and bread pudding, sharing the recipes in her two cookbooks, Hallelujah! The Welcome Table and Great Food, All Day Long.

Sustaining a long career is a delicate balancing act between solitude and company. Whether or not we’re cooking maestros as Angelou was, we can follow her lead and gather community around our table.

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