

INTRODUCTION

WHAT MAKES A LANDSCAPE MAGNETIC? For centuries, writers have drawn inspiration from the Hudson River and its surroundings. John Burroughs, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Herman Melville, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Edith Wharton all lived and worked in the region immortalized by the Hudson River School of painters.

River of Words is a group portrait of seventy-six contemporary authors who populate these storied hills—close enough to New York City to meet an editor for lunch, but a world away, filled with rambling Victorian farmhouses, Dutch barns, and Revolution-era stone houses. This book’s subtitle should rightly be “Portraits of *Some* Hudson Valley Writers,” since no book of any length, let alone one this modest, could begin to include the hundreds of talented writers who call this place home.

Artists of all genres gather in groups: think of Hollywood actors or Nashville musicians. Manhattan is publishing’s company town, and the phrase “New York author” is firmly entrenched in the zeitgeist. But writing is essentially a solitary pursuit, whose practitioners may benefit from a certain meditative distance. In the breathtaking landscapes and quirky small towns up the river, working writers can find an artistic getaway that isn’t *too* far away.

The colleges and universities lining both banks of the river—Sarah Lawrence, Vassar, Bard, Marist, Siena, SUNY Albany, and SUNY New Paltz—create literary hubs; so, too, do Albany’s New York State Writers Institute, The Hudson Valley Writers’ Center and Slapering Hol Press of Sleepy Hollow, the region’s strong network of

independent booksellers, and the book festivals held annually in Albany, Millbrook, Spencertown, and Woodstock. It's a rich, lively mix, and fitting even a taste of it into one book is a daunting proposition.

First, we needed some definitions. Where does "the Hudson Valley" begin and end? The river flows 315 miles, from Lake Tear of the Clouds in the Adirondacks to the tip of Battery Park. The lower Hudson is an estuary, with tidal influences as far north as the junction of the Mohawk River at Troy; its Lenape name, Muhhakantuck, means "the river that flows both ways." This offered a natural northern boundary; we chose a man-made one, the Tappan Zee Bridge, to the south.

We also needed to define "Hudson Valley writer." Would we include only those authors who write *about* the region, or anyone who lives and works in it? What about second-homers, weekenders, and summer people? Expatriates with local roots? Would we limit ourselves to authors of books, or include those who write plays, screenplays, graphic novels, and songs? In the end, we decided to be as inclusive as possible—the Hudson Valley is that kind of place.

Many of the author profiles and photographs published here first appeared in the pages of *Chronogram* magazine; grateful thanks to editor Brian Mahoney, creative director David Perry, and publisher Jason Stern for giving this project their blessings. Many more were created exclusively for this book. I travel light (legal pad and Bic pen) and Jennifer May travels heavy, toting suitcases full of camera equipment. We made forays by Subaru wagon in all four seasons, traversing unpaved mountain roads, rambling through farmland, and visiting riverfront cities. We met writers at home, in favorite cafes, on college campuses, at historic estates, in parks—even, in the case of river crusader Pete Seeger, at a roadside peace vigil. We crossed the Hudson on seven different bridges—Castleton-on-Hudson, Rip Van Winkle, Kingston-Rhinecliff, FDR Mid-Hudson, Hamilton Fish Newburgh-Beacon, Bear Mountain, and Tappan Zee—and the vistas were stunning from every one.

In all, we logged thousands of miles. But that was just part of the treat of creating this book. The real joy was the thousands of pages we read, guided not by the

oddly Australian tones of Jen's GPS, but by the masterful voices of our chosen writers. Our backup list, dozens long to begin with, swelled to over two hundred names as we continued to read and do interviews. Every writer we spoke to knew many more; their recommendations were impassioned and quite overwhelming.

Perhaps this is what makes the Hudson Valley so magnetic to writers. It isn't the breathtaking scenery, the peace and quiet, or the proximity to New York City's publishing axis. It's all these, of course, but above and beyond that, the lure is community. We are proud to be part of this generous literary landscape, and to offer this tasting sampler from the laden banks of the River of Words.

—NINA SHENGOLD AND JENNIFER MAY
October 2009

