

Tuesday, October 27, 2009

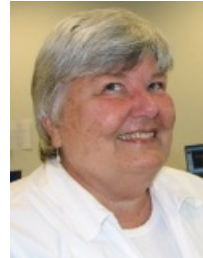
A Room of Her Own

By Mary Cox

This summer I had the wonderful experience of attending a writers' workshop with a four-year-old organization, A Room of Her Own – AROHO. I learned about the organization and the workshop from the list serve of NWP's Urban Sites Network. At first I was a little hesitant about the application process. I had to submit no more than ten double-spaced pages of text. I wanted to create a new piece for the application, but since it was right before card marking, there was not much time, so I chose two pieces I had written for publication in Company of Writers.

And I was accepted.

The retreat took place at the Ghost Ranch in Abiquiqui, New Mexico. This used to be a dude ranch in the forty's and fifty's, then was sold to the Presbyterian Church who used the ranch as a convention center. Georgia O'Keefe lived and painted on the ranch for many years. As soon as I arrived at the ranch, I could see how the ranch landscape was reflected in her work. The ranch sits in a canyon surrounded by red sandstone cliffs. The floor of the valley is green with alfalfa, watered by irrigation. The buildings: the corral bunkhouse, the office, small cabins, the dining hall, and a half mile up the road the Arts Building, just past the burro's pasture (do not pet-remember burro's bite), are rustic but comfortable. There is also a Zen rock garden and maze.



Mary Cox

The classrooms sit on the mesa above the ranch. This explained the correspondence I received encouraging me to bring a hat, water bottle, good hiking shoes, sunscreen, and a few other things that made me a little nervous. But after a couple of days, I became accustomed to the altitude and the climb although I have to admit I never made it up the hill without a stop to catch my breath. We met in a lovely room with fire place and a spectacular view.

Why all the descriptions of the Ranch? Because, like many writers, I became strongly influenced by my surroundings. Watching the dark thunder storms coming over the mountains, a sunrise, a sunset, or the clear night sky crowded with stars added deepness to my writing.

The program followed a tight schedule with breakfast at 7:30, two classes in the morning, workshops in the afternoon, and readings in the evening. Usually we finished at midnight because we also had "homework" from our workshops: writing to do and typing copies to share with our groups. It was a busy week, and one of the most satisfying I have ever experienced.

I took a class in flash fiction – stories in under 500 – 600 words. The nine of us worked with Pam Painter, a teacher and author from Boston. A thrilling experience. We practiced several types of stories – he/she stories, trip stories, one sentence stories all wonderful exercises and fun to write. Pam also shared with us a list of magazines that publish this type of writing.

I cannot talk about my experience without mentioning the people who attended. The title of the organization – A Room of Her Own – many will recognize as a title of a Virginia Woolf essay, which explains why this retreat is open only to women. And these women had stories to tell in fiction, memoir, and poetry. Everyone was open, supportive, helpful, friendly, and funny. We laughed and cried and shared together, creating lasting friendships. And how can I talk about these people and not mention Rita Dove, the guest author? I was familiar with her poetry because there were pieces in our anthologies, but her enthusiasm, her energy, her humor, and her advice to writers added an extra layer to the experience.

This was the first retreat I attended that did not involve teaching techniques along with the writing which, at first, was disconcerting. I wanted people to talk about their classrooms, but most of these women were writers by profession. This was a retreat about me and for me and only me, not my teaching profession. A liberating experience.

Because of the venue and the formation of one-on-one interviews with writers, the retreat must be limited to 60 or 70 people. But perhaps we could do a similar type of retreat as continuity for MBWP in the summer. If you are interested in AROHO or the next retreat in August of 2011, watch the list serve, and I will pass on the information. Below, I am including a poem I wrote on the last day I was at Ghost Ranch.

Ghost Ranch

The crows' calls echo off the cliff face across the valley,
Doubling their number.
They are shadowed against the striated walls
Of beige, and sand, and rose,
Freckled with the green of juniper and sage.
Below, the burros walk in a line as if tethered with imaginary ropes
And carrying packs for the trip down the Rio Grande Gorge,
Retired, but still living in the glory of the moment.
A wind makes little howls
As it dashes in and out of sand stone and rock.
Las brujas – the witches -- calling to their own.

A horse's neigh, a rooster's call, a dog's bark are caught on the wind,
Reminding us we are not alone.
The work of man is still being done here
In the face of God's beauty.

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SUMMARY

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