





Maison d'être: in "Swimming Pool," Charlotte Rampling plays a London crime author who finds the cure to writer's block at her editor's retreat in southern France.

Other People's Houses

SEEKING INSPIRATION AT W. S. MERWIN'S DESK,
KAREN MOLINE UNPACKS HER PEN.

I have always written in other people's houses: a flat in London, a cattle station in Australia, a ramshackle guesthouse in Izmir, Turkey. Determined not to be dependent on a laptop, I write longhand, my leaky lacquer fountain pen skidding over the grid in an easily portable Clairefontaine notebook. My rationale is simple: I need the disorientation of someone else's property, furniture, sheets and gewgaws to escape from mundane reality, to make it easier to inhabit my characters' imaginary worlds.

In early 1995, I needed to clear my head after ghostwriting a book for a ditsy dyslexic. So when I found a small advertisement in *The New York Observer* announcing a house for rent in the Lot, a decidedly un-boho department in southwest France, I grabbed the phone. When the woman who answered asked why I wanted the house for the summer, I explained that I was working on my novel, "Belladonna." "Oh," she said, "my husband is a writer. Bill Merwin."

"W. S. Merwin, the poet?" I was incredulous. "I'll take it."

Which explains how I came to stay in the Merwin *bastide*, nestled in a hamlet in the middle of nowhere, overlooking the lazy curves of the Dordogne River in the valley below. The stone cottage was unprepossessing, the barns dilapidated, the bathroom rustic and the flies ferocious. The pitter-patter of mouse feet was so relentless that I took to sleeping in the tiny guest room, which I nicknamed the Doghouse.

"Why do you call it that?" the caretaker asked, blanching.

"I don't know," I said. "It's such a little room, it just sounded right. Why?"

"Oh," she replied, "that's what Ted and Sylvia called it."

Back then, I didn't know that Merwin had written a marvelous book about this house and the surrounding area called "The Lost Upland." Or that Sylvia Plath had written the poem "Stars Over the Dordogne" after an abbreviated stay with Ted Hughes in the Doghouse. I didn't know that Merwin's ex-wife, Dido, had penned a vituperative essay about Sylvia (and that visit) included in Anne Stevenson's Plath biography, "Bitter Fame," or that Dido had a habit of inserting book reviews and letters into the reviewed books themselves, so that, decades later, I could sit in a remote house in France and read her correspondence with Robert Lowell.

I only knew that the house and grounds felt enchanted. The garden was ablaze with old roses. My many guests and I climbed nearby Templar ruins, stuffed ourselves with cabécou and cherries as fat as Ping-Pong balls and drank vats of plonk while waiting for the nightly parade of sheep in front of the house. The sheepdog yelped and nipped. The shepherd followed his flock — in his car. Then we watched the bats circle in the endless twilight and agreed that there was nothing more relaxing than sitting in someone else's garden, unfettered by the obligation to deadhead the roses.

In the afternoons I sent my guests off on expeditions to the pilgrimage site at Rocamadour so I could pretend to work. Merwin's book collection was so enticing that I spent hours on the terrace reading. After I devoured three volumes of E. Beresford Chancellor's "Lives of the Rakes," a key element of my plot suddenly fell into place. Thus the delightful Merwin house shaped not only my summer

but also the entire structure of my novel.

Other writers have had different experiences when trying to work elsewhere. "When I'm surrounded by my things, I can ignore them, but when I'm surrounded by other people's things, they take on a maddening presence," says the novelist Francine Prose, the author of "A Changed Man." "I feel guilty turning their pictures to the wall to get the job done." Katherine Russell Rich, on the other hand, is writing "Unspeakable," about her year in India learning Hindi. She stayed in the harem of a 16th-century royal mansion in Udaipur. "I've never written better," she says. "I felt as if my being hidden away helped me reach into the deeper part of my soul."

Like many enchantments, my French idyll ended too soon, and I was in no mood to write in New York. Soon I was working in a house belonging to my friend Tom Johnston, the political cartoonist, in the village of Cushendall, Northern Ireland. The house had a strange atmosphere that was perfectly inspiring for the disfigured eunuch narrator of "Belladonna." Every morning I'd take a dilatory walk down the hill to the village bakery for soda bread and scones. After several days of frowning at my accent, the taciturn clerk could stand it no longer.

"What exactly do ye think ye're doin' here?" she asked.

"I'm writing a novel in Tom's house," I replied.

"Oh," she said, her face relaxing into a warm smile. "Well, that's all right, then."

And it was. ■