

NICKEL IN THE MACHINE

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The Betsy Hotel



By Gemma Sieff

The porch of the Betsy Hotel, a slender silhouette on the main drag of Miami's South Beach, is flanked by wicker chairs well positioned for watching the slow rollerbladers, slower Rolls-Royces, and Jessica Rabbits flaunt their curves on Ocean Drive. The hotel's Writer's Room, which has been hosting distinguished poets, playwrights, novelists, musicians, and visual artists since 2012, is snug and uncluttered (a suite might abet procrastination). The first room on the ground floor, it is more bungalow than aerie, conjuring Hemingway in Kansas City—as a cub reporter he sometimes slept in a towel-cushioned bathtub at the Muehlebach Hotel—getting closer to Key West. Writers and nice hotels have long been simpatico—Oscar Wilde was arrested at the Cadogan in London, Truman Capote claimed to have been born at the Hotel Monteleone in New Orleans (technically untrue, though it accommodated him *in utero*), and Tennessee Williams loved New York's Hotel Elysée so much he checked out in a casket. The Betsy sits squarely in this tradition but is enhanced by personal history: the poet Hyam Plutzik (1911–1962), author of *Apples from Shinar* and *Horatio* (a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1961), was the hotelier's father.

The Betsy designates the space a respite for writers in Miami, and means it both ways: a writer who's just visiting (such as the novelist Richard Ford) as well as the writer who resides nearby (the poet and musician Oscar Fuentes). The room's bookshelves hold an eclectic and ambitious mix of titles: poetry by Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, C. K. Williams, Hayden Carruth, and Galway Kinnell; Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*, translated by W. H. Auden and acquired in a book swap; *Rattapalax*, a journal of international writing; Harold Robbins's vintage page-turner *The Betsy*. The artist and writer Donald Daedalus, who stayed for a week this past February, is bookish in new-media ways. He was comparing analog and digital archival processes ("analog is tables of contents, card catalogues, and a locked library door; digital is cloud storage and corrupt data; moisture is a problem for both") for one project and e-publishing a 700-page collection of essays about walkways for another. "I'm interested in non-linear texts," he told me, "book forms other than the codex."

Gemma Sieff is a writer and editor based in New York.

Photos by Sarah K. Moody