What I Did at Summer Writers’ Camp

Readers’ Opinions

In the United States, the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H., and Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., are considered the gold standard. With its 32 cabin-studios in the woods, MacDowell is said to foster an eastern New England staid ethos, while Yaddo, on a 400-acre estate not far from the Saratoga racetrack, has a more urbane feel. Both provide rooms and board for 30 or so artists, including writers, visual artists, musicians and composers at all stages of their careers. They are accepted for residencies of up to two months a year based on a sample of their work and letters of recommendation, and attendance is free. (MacDowell and Yaddo, like most colonies, are nonprofit organizations that rely on private philanthropic largess.) They have limited phone and Internet access and don’t allow guests, children or pets; significant others can attend only if they’ve been applied and been accepted.

The novelist Jeffrey Eugenides worked on “Middlesex” at MacDowell. “The first day or two of course, you do the deep, you sleep and feel guilty,” he wrote in an e-mail message. “But then the solitude, the quiet, settles over you (especially in the woods) — and you get a lot done.” At MacDowell, attendees must get permission to visit one another’s studios. Jill Ciment, a writer who attended in the mid-1980’s, said she came to believe the rule existed “not because we interrupt creativity but because we find each other either seeping or crying.” Indeed, some find the solitude jarring. “It’s like adjusting to a new time zone,” the novelist Rosana Robison said. When she first arrived at MacDowell, she found “a kind of frozen horror,” the terror that could do what she was meant to be doing there. “With the absence of all the obstacles you’re used to, there’s a sort of existential terror. That can be alarming.”

Many writers say they like to bring work already under way. “I would never want to start a new project at a colony,” Alice Sebold, the author of “The Lovely Bones,” said via e-mail. “That would be too intimidating, as you are surrounded on all sides by other artists working. I find it best to be in the middle of a project with some issues to resolve.”

MacDowell attendees are wryly nostalgic about the bag lunch that’s delivered silently to the studio door each day; its arrival becomes a way to pace your progress or mark the passage of time. The day is “reduced to little things,” Chabon said. “Your lunch comes, maybe the hot water goes out in the shower, somebody sees a deer. These tiny incidents start to loom very large, even what’s in your sandwich,” he said. “Every so often we sound like a bunch of old people taking the water somewhere.” Sebold found it amusing that some complain of weight gain. “If there is one place you might be able to lose that level ofanity behind it in the middle of the woods covered by long underwear and barqie sweaters,” she said. “I do find those who come and try to use one of these places as a networking experience — sort of an N.Y.C. cocktail party but with duck boots — pretty hilarious.”

At Yaddo, the tenor varies with the seasons. In the summer heat it can become “like a Tennesse Williams play, where you just want to sit around and drink coldthins,” said A.A. Horne, who worked on her last three novels at Yaddo. “The summer build to a point in August at which it’s pretty social. Autumn is intensely beautiful. It gets much quieter and more reflective. I personally like the rainy season in May, when it’s raining and freezing cold and I get enormous amounts of work done.”

But we all know what else happens in a Tennessee Williams play, albeit offstage. There’s even a saying the sea is better at Yaddo but the work is better at MacDowell. But attendees report plenty of intrigue at both. The writer David Leavitt said he struck up an important friendship with Jill Ciment at MacDowell in 1986. “We met because we were the only people there who weren’t hard up,” he wrote. “For one thing, she spent most of her time working in her cabin. There was also another woman there, an experimental filmmaker, who wanted to keep us apart. This filmmaker hadn’t read my first novel — ‘The Virgin Suicides’ — but objected to its title. She and a few other women banded together, telling Karen that wasn’t to be trusted. This increased my appeal immeasurably, and we were married a year and a half later.”

Some writers have been known to spend months bopping from colony to colony. The novelist Elisa Schappell said she found the down-home Giroux Foundation, in Omahen, Wyo., bafflingly free of “that peculiar strain of male writer who seems to just bust from colony to colony like some 50’s-era Riviera playboy, reliant on the kindness of patrons and other’s plans.” In “MacDowell,” she said, “I would never want to start a new project at a colony.” Alice Sebold, the author of “The Lovely Bones,” said via e-mail. “That would be too intimidating, as you are surrounded on all sides by other artists working. I find it best to be in the middle of a project with some issues to resolve.”