



Photo by Larry Brownstein

The Henry Miller Memorial Library in Big Sur welcomes new visitors as well as those who have lived in the area for years.

Finding a new state of mind at Big Sur

by M.L. FISCHER
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A QUICK TRIP

A tourist buying snacks at Big Sur's Glen Oaks store asked, "Is this Big Sur?" The logical answer was given: "Big Sur isn't a place, it's a state of mind." That answer was slightly more than metaphorical and slightly less than hyperbole. Big Sur, being more than just a magnificent expanse of coastal geography, has a vital, living quality to it.

Those who know and love it will tend to personify it. And if Big Sur can be personified, Henry Miller would be its voice.

In this land of artists and writers, Miller was a fitting example of both. His was the free spirit of a free and spirited land.

So if Big Sur has a heart, it must be the small piece of property dedicated to his memory: the Henry Miller Memorial Library.

A Miller fan since reading "Tropic of Cancer" in the 1960s, I had to stop at the rustic sign that I saw in the early '80s. For an afternoon, I had the rare opportunity to hear stories about Miller from one of his closest friends, Emil White, whose modest home doubled as the library.

Sitting on the porch under the shade of redwoods, I felt the presence of one of my literary idols, the man who turned me toward writing. Emil White is gone, and the library is in transition from a small part of the Big Sur Land Trust to an entity of its own.

While the old house looks much as it did when Miller lived there, it's about to see some modest improvements and additions. A room needs to be added to house the impressive Miller archival collection.

Under the directorship of Magnus Toren, the library has flourished while holding to Miller's creative vision.

Our literary greats are most often rebels and

iconoclasts. They are generally not on city councils or the chamber of commerce. Yet the home communities that often ignored or disparaged them during their lives tend to build static, lavish memorials to them posthumously.

Generally, the author's written words belie their memorials. The Miller Library is an exception.

The feeling that it's a creative work in progress hits you upon entering the gate. The lawn is strewn with large, imaginative sculptures. The piece titled "Y2K" is my favorite, in its parody of the computer age.

The guest book encourages the visitor to draw or pen a poem. A computer on the porch provides Internet access, with a note to please drop a donation in the adjacent box.

The perimeter of the front yard is framed by a painting of the Big Sur coastline.

The main room of the library features Henry Miller's work, alongside works by local and experimental writers, many of whom you are not likely to find in your neighborhood Borders.

Miller videos always seem to be playing in a side room, and you can browse or wander the grounds without paying an admission or taking some tour. The work of local artists carpet the walls.

Perhaps the most fitting memorial to Miller is the calendar of events. Many of the creative works presented at these events were written or composed after Miller's death, but any of his fans will quickly realize that Henry would have been delighted to be in the audience.

There are open poetry readings on Sundays at 3 p.m. Twice a month there are musical-drama-poetry performances, drawing not only from local talent, but from the world at large.

The West Coast Championship Poetry Slam is

held there on a weekend in July.

The annual Big Sur Experimental Music Festival was held in May. The music was both excellent and definitely experimental. The Big Sur Jazz Fest also took place in May.

The Big Sur Children's Writers Conference, Dec. 7-9, will be a workshop designed for published writers of children's fiction and non-fiction.

Each year, the library awards the Eric Barker Poetry Prize of \$300 to a creative writing student at Monterey Peninsula College.

Each winter, the library hosts a six-week art exhibit, giving 50 local artists an opportunity to show their work. Plus there is the ongoing sculpture display in the garden.

Lectures, tours and book signings occur at random intervals during the year, and the library is always available when a local group needs a place to meet and share ideas.

Even when there is no event taking place, I enjoy stopping by, chatting with the staff and other visitors, having a cup of coffee, sitting in the shade of a redwood, and perhaps discovering a "must have" book.

Sometimes, lost in a daydream, I think I hear Henry, loudly discussing a work of literature. The Miller Library is a great place to take in major weekend events, as well as a place to drop by during a lazy cruise down the coast.

Stop by with an open heart and a bit of curiosity, and you'll likely come away with a touch of creative inspiration.

The Henry Miller Memorial Library is on Highway 1, an eighth-mile past Nepenthe going south, on the left side of the road.

The Library is open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. For more information, call 667-2574.

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