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By the time the trip to the Everglades ended, the mid-March writers' seminar opened in Key West. The Smithsonian Institution reserves the best hotels and provides top speakers. Their offerings are irresistible. Every time a brochure hits the post box bearing their letterhead, the travel itch hits me full force.

A retired Cornell University professor of literature arranged the panels and the speakers. The poet laureate of the U.S. Richard Wilbur, opened the seminar by reading several of his poems.

"We don't have to write poetry for the President or the First Lady," he told us. "Penn Warren, my predecessor, took care of that matter by saying, 'be damned if I am going to write a poem about Ronald Reagan's horse.'"

His poetry sounded simpler than the verses in the fifth grade at Mertz. In those years, Miss Greengrass pushed Old English to country kids who struggled in current usage. It's hard to relate to an elegy to a farm-swept evening when you have to milk a cow before dark every day.

One morning's program featured a long-time editor of *Esquire* magazine. He was a grouchy old devil, just waiting for a chance to slash any or all questions with a tongue that worked, I suspect like he once wielded a blue pencil.

Sitting around the room were actresses and aspiring writers and poets. An IRS agent from the Washington office sat in the third row. I figured if the editor became too high-handed, we had her in reserve to help him regain his composure.

The program required a long reading list to prepare for the seminar. The theme was Key West writers and how much the island affected creative people: however, the subtopic was how much Ernest Hemingway influenced the pundits who followed him from the 1930s.

Mr. Hemingway wrote six of his best books in his Key West period. His home is close to the hotel and open to the public at six bucks a head.

The house takes in a lot of dough off the tourist traffic. The other big sideline is street-side offerings of descendants of the six-toed cats the writer fancied in his 11 years on the island. All outside the Hemingway house, toms and pussies lounge on porch chairs and in the cool shade of the veranda, unaware of their value to sidewalk vendors.

The cat business had been good in Key West once before. Part of the history of the Everglades tells of a farmer way back in the 1890s who sailed down to Key West to buy a load of cats to control the rats devouring his sugar cane.

He was able to load 400 cats on his boat, but the strain of the return voyage caused him to suffer a several emotional reversal. Where once he'd been a carefree planter, sailing with 400 seasick cats brought on a personality change that makes the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde sound like a rerun of last Saturday morning's TV shows.

Key West furnishes plenty of copy for storytellers and writers. Once Key West was the largest city in Florida. Big cigar factories rolled millions of stogies and supported a big workforce.

Piracy and salvagers acting as pirates spice the story. Rum runners from Cuba during Prohibition and illegal schemes and narcotic deals up until today enrich the flavor of Key West.

Writers and artists are drawn to the island. As the poet laureate noted, the disorder might be carrying parrots on their shoulders, but for sure are wearing earrings and bright bandannas for headpieces.

On any night, the sidewalks fill with boisterous college students, and vigorous locals may be carrying parrots on their shoulders, but for sure are wearing earrings and bright bandanas for headpieces.

Right the Smithsonians were in picking such a live wire place.