

GEOGRAPHY for WRITERS

BY LEE ZACHARIAS

“When I was seven I said to my mother, may I close my door? And she said, yes, but why do you want to close your door? And I said because I want to think. And when I was eleven, I said to my mother, may I lock my door? And she said yes, but why do you want to lock your door? And I said because I want to write.”—Dorothy West¹



1

“An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere,” Gustave Flaubert decreed.² But, if for the reader, the writer is at most a disembodied voice and the book a finished product, a world made whole, for the *writer* the writing is always also (whatever else it is or becomes) a physical act, and the rooms in which the act took place are as much a part of the book as wherever the work itself evokes. At writers’ conferences would-be writers often ask the professional writers where, when, and how they write, as if the answers might be secrets that can transform *would-be’s* into published authors; but there is another fascination with the rooms where writers write that is born of the essential contradiction of those spaces. These are the rooms writers enter in order to exit, places where writers both are and are not, the locus where the body sits – or stands or lies – while the mind explores other territory, an outer landscape that may bear no resemblance to the inner landscape of the writer’s creation, although stymied by the blank page, E.L. Doctorow recalls once typing a sentence about the house in which he sat that turned into the first sentence of *Ragtime*; and anyone desiring a tour of the rented houses where Vladimir Nabokov wrote during his two decades in America need look no farther than the pages of *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Invitation to a Beheading*. Richard Yates created the claustrophobic images of the suburbs that appear in *Revolutionary Road* sitting in a wellhouse that measured five by eight.

¹ Quoted in Jill Krementz, *The Writer’s Desk* (New York: Random House, 1996) 38; subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically.

² Francis Steegmuller, ed. and trans., *Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830–1857* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980) 173.

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