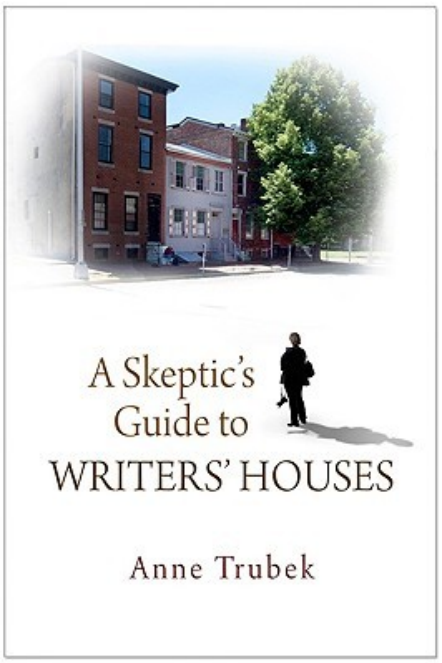

A Skeptic's Guide to Writers' Houses

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There are many ways to show our devotion to an author besides reading his or her works. Graves make for popular pilgrimage sites, but far more popular are writers' house museums. What is it we hope to accomplish by trekking to the home of a dead author? We may go in search of the point of inspiration, eager to stand on the very spot where our favorite literary characters first came to life--and find ourselves instead in the house where the author himself was conceived, or where she drew her last breath. Perhaps it is a place through which our writer passed only briefly, or maybe it really was a longtime home--now thoroughly remade as a decorator's show-house.

In *A Skeptic's Guide to Writers' Houses* Anne Trubek takes a vexed, often funny, and always thoughtful tour of a goodly number of house museums across the nation. In Key West she visits the shamelessly ersatz shrine to a hard-living Ernest Hemingway, while meditating on his lost Cuban farm and the sterile Idaho house in which he committed suicide. In Hannibal, Missouri, she walks the fuzzy line between fact and fiction, as she visits the home of the young Samuel Clemens--and the purported haunts of Tom Sawyer, Becky Thatcher, and Injun' Joe. She hits literary pay-dirt in Concord, Massachusetts, the nineteenth-century mecca that gave home to Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau--and yet could not accommodate a surprisingly complex Louisa May Alcott. She takes us along the trail of residences that Edgar Allan Poe left behind in the wake of his many failures and to the burned-out shell of a California house with which Jack London staked his claim on posterity. In Dayton, Ohio, a charismatic guide brings Paul Laurence Dunbar to compelling life for those few visitors willing to listen; in Cleveland, Trubek finds a moving remembrance of Charles Chesnutt in a house that no longer stands.

Why is it that we visit writers' houses? Although admittedly skeptical about the stories these buildings tell us about their former inhabitants, Anne Trubek carries us along as she falls at least a little bit in love with each stop on her itinerary and finds in each some truth about literature, history, and contemporary America.

A Skeptic's Guide to Writers' Houses Details

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Craig Amason says

Perhaps this book should have been titled The Pessimist's Guide to Writers' Houses. As a director of a writer's house (Andalusia, Home of Flannery O'Connor), it would be easy to have a knee-jerk reaction to this book and spew obscenities at Trubek, but I will resist. Honestly, she makes some very good, although painful, observations about literary landmarks and the failed attempts to preserve and maintain them. She has a tendency to make it a little too personal at times, perhaps so the reader can appreciate that the author's jaundiced eye could be attributable to her own circumstances at the time she was visiting a particular writer's house (nasty divorce, single-motherness, financial woes, sore toes, etc.). We also get the vague feeling that Trubek may be a person who would rather be making a living as a writer and teaching on the side, rather than the other way around -- her commentary on the past lives of writers and the struggles to maintain their "places" then and now could reflect her own professional frustrations. But in the final two chapters, Trubek does drive home some very good points, mainly that a great writer's work should be her or his primary legacy, and not some fake manuscripts (typewriter replica in our case)on a period desk (a simple table in our case -- a little embarrassing, I admit). I think Trubek doesn't quite understand the effect that these "places" have on some readers and devoted fans. In fact, she implies that most visitors to writers' homes will be disappointed by what they find. I can only respond by saying that I hope that isn't the case at Andalusia.

Diane Barnes says

An interesting book, in that I learned a lot about some of the authors and their houses. For instance, Hemingway's home in Ketchum, Idaho where he committed suicide still has the box of bullets on display in the room where it happened. A little morbid maybe, but fascinating. On the other hand, the author seemed to be looking for something she never really found in her tour of these public homes, which is why the author's fans seek them out them in the first place. Her critique of the guides in these homes sometimes bordered on ridicule. Interesting reading for a few nights.

Barbara says

Thank you Anne, and thank you Goodreads, for sending this book to me as a First Reads prize!!

This is one of the most fun and interesting books I have ever read. I love biographies (especially on writers) and in this book I got to read many mini-biographies on many writers, including Walt Whitman, Louisa May Alcott, Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, and a handful of others.

Anne Trubek takes us on a tour to house museums of American writers, and she does so in such a smart, funny, and very thoughtful way. I love the way this book is written. Ms. Trubek really takes the reader along with her to each of the different towns, from Camden, New Jersey to Glen Ellen, California (and many, many other American towns), and shares so many personal thoughts and feelings with us, in addition to many absolutely hilarious descriptions.

I could not stop laughing at Ms. Trubek's hilarious prose devoted to some of the items on display in the gift shop at Hemingway's Key West house. And at Mark Twain's house museum in Hannibal, Missouri, we are told that there is a statue of Twain, in a different pose, in each of the rooms of the house. In the bedroom, in addition to the Mark Twain statue, there is a flat Plexiglas "cutout" figure of a boy from behind, facing the window. This is supposed to be Tom Sawyer, waving to Huck Finn. I can't do any justice to all of the fun descriptions that Anne Trubek shares in this book, so I would really recommend that you read it -- there really is something for everyone in here!

I learned so much from this book. I now know so much more about each of the writers whose homes were visited, and, in fact, I even discovered some writers I was not familiar with, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt. In addition, I found out that there are TWO Tom Wolfe's!! (YES, I am one of those people who thought that the Tom Wolfe who wrote The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test was the same Tom Wolfe whose name was once mentioned as a "great," along with Faulkner and Fitzgerald.)

In addition to Anne Trubek's great sense of humor, I loved her fantastic insights on literature. Some wonderful thoughts and wisdom on reading and writing are scattered throughout this book. On page 103, Ms. Trubek opens the chapter on Jack London State Park with the following words: "That reading is a form of escape is a truism. We escape, retreat, surrender into books. They offer us a home away from home (especially when home is unwanted); they grant us immersion." There is no doubt that A Skeptic's Guide to Writers' Houses was a wonderful escape for me.

Sara says

I enjoyed this. Raises some interesting questions about how we remember author's and why their houses matter, or don't.

Kristi says

This is my second timing reading this book, and I must admit I enjoyed it more this time than the first time I read it. While I was intrigued by the skeptical stance, during my first read I was turned off by the author's jaded and condescending personae. Although I disagree with Trubek's conclusions, after reading this book a second time, I can better appreciate the questions she raises about meaning, authenticity, and historical memory. However, I think it is fallacious to conclude that writers' homes are dead and meaningless, or that the only connection to an author is through the written word. With all due respect, this assertion smacks of a certain academic formalism, which is as constructed as the house museum paradigm that Trubek criticizes. It also completely disregards the field of material culture. This book is best categorized as a memoir, narrating the author's personal journey to understand house museums; it chronicles her experience of place and the meanings she found in her exploration.

Joy Lanzendorfer says

This book made me question why someone would want to spend time visiting writer's houses when she

dislikes them so much. It seems like a pointless exercise, especially since I never quite understood Trubek's argument against the houses in the first place. They remind her of death and the houses don't make any money? You can't find the writers or their work in the house the same way you can in their books, and therefore the houses are useless? Frankly, Trubek's "skepticism" seems wrapped in snobbishness--she uses the word "middlebrow" three times in the first 20 pages and repeatedly stresses how she is a serious reader and other people are not. On top of that, she seemed to have a juvenile fear of slipping into sentimentalism, as if she's afraid that the very act of visiting writer sites will illicit an emotional reaction in her that she can't control.

Or maybe Trubek just lacks a sense of humor. I've been to many of the sites she visits, and in many cases she seems to miss the point or is angered by things that are just not that serious. There's a loftiness and self-righteousness in her prose that makes you wish she would open up a bit and relax. That said, this book is still an entertaining read just because the subject is so fascinating and Trubek has done thorough research. If she had acknowledged her biases and explored them more honestly, I would have enjoyed the book more.

John says

I got this one on impulse off my library's New Books shelf, but was hooked by the end of the first chapter (Walt Whitman). The entries are quite different in tone, some of which is accounted for by Ms. Trubek's own personal life at the time - for instance, if she seems a bit grouchy about Hannibal, MO, she was dealing with a sick kid at the time. A kudo to her for letting the reader know.

The book succeeds in giving continuity to the central question: is there some "essence" of the writer to be captured at these sites? If not, are we fetishizing (for lack of a better term) the structures for the connection? Do we go as the closest possible way to "visit" the person ... or to (retroactively) gawk at the celebrity?

Here I must admit that I had not read most of these authors, so approached the book as part of the travel narrative genre, which worked fine, too. Although, by the end I appreciated the literary aspect as well.

Bottom line: if you think you might like it, you will. Definitely recommended!

Dan says

I once visited Anne Trubek's house. It wasn't the house she lives in now. And I didn't get past the front porch, because I was just delivering Chinese food. That house comes up a few times in this book, not always in a happy light.

There are a lot of philosophical/critical tangles that come up in Skeptic's Guide that make it difficult to classify. Trubek writes from a personal perspective and in some ways it's a memoir. She writes as an English professor, so it is not short on literary criticism and even some lit theory. It's a travel narrative. On top of all of that, it tackles some museum theory as well. The travel narrative and memoir serve to propel the book forward for the reader and keep it from dwelling exclusively on the larger philosophical issues that are the "business" of the book. Reading is the most solipsistic activity I can think of- the reader reads alone and the action happens entirely inside the reader's head. In a Roland Barthes based world this activity is exclusively

between the reader and the text- the author of the text is irrelevant. But to Trubek (and I totally agree), the author is not dead, but always on the other side of that text. With a portal directly into the mind of the author available for free from you local library, what draws us to visit an author's house/museum? How does this bring us closer to the author? Does the authenticity matter? Is that the desk that Melville wrote at? A reproduction? An antique from the same era? Does it even matter?

A Skeptic's Guide is a smart, fun read- provided that you don't think the terms "fun" and "Barthes" are mutually exclusive.

Sue says

First let me say that I came by this book through the Goodreads First Reads program and I'm glad I did.

Trubek takes herself (and us) on a journey around the United States to visit the "homes" of several American authors. Her initial feelings about this whole project are obvious in her words and the underlying cynicism about the meaning of these homes -- what they meant in the lives of the authors they represent and to the tourists who visit. But along the way the tenor of her narrative changes as does her feeling about the whole task she has set for herself. Instead of meaningless places she has begun to see history and signs of past life, reasons for readers of the present to enjoy visiting. The book is a growth experience and encompasses much soul searching about literature and meaning.

Reading the book becomes a joy as we also discover what the author discovers and can decide whether we will someday follow her footsteps. She has provided a list of authors homes in the U.S. should one wish to give it a try.

Matt says

This is a weird little book, and in the same way that Trubek's book explores the economics of literary tradition, this book tells us something about University Presses. Like Writers Homes, I think UPs are in kind of a weird spot, existing between the remit to publish books for small audiences (or maybe a small circle of writers) and the occasional opportunity to make a little money. That this book caught my attention means that it is one of the latter. But it's still a book from the UP, written by an academic, and it does have kind of a complicated thesis, one that isn't just curmudgeonly skeptical, but academically and rigorously so, like the ecclesiastical version of a skeptic.

I'm not sure that as a book it totally works-- to me, at least, it never goes deep enough into the way these houses really shape reputations, and if they don't, then the houses seem far enough away from the real conversation about these writers to not really matter. It's true that the houses are interesting as a product of some version of literary fame, but the connections Trudek draws between them don't quite come together as a compelling anything for me. On the non-academic, non-argumentative side, I don't think Trudek comes through with enough love for those houses to satisfy readers, either, though there are patches that are pretty likeable. It falls just short of connecting with what I take to be its two core audiences.

That said, it's far from being a bad book, just an uneven one. The shift to the explicitly personal that happens rather shockingly in the London essay is interesting and reminded me of a similar gambit in Tom Bissel's

Extra Lives and was an interesting example of the personal essay. Other sections, like the one on Charles Chesnutt, captivated me because I like the writer himself. It's an odd little book, and I'm not quite sure what to do with it. I'm glad to have read it, but when I was, I didn't often feel powerfully compelled to finish it-- it was more a function of inertia than hunger.

Djrmel says

Do not underestimate the importance of the word "skeptic" in the title of this book. Ms. Trubek makes it very clear from the beginning of this book that she doesn't understand why a dead author's fans enjoy visiting their homes that have been turned into shrines. I would suggest, however, that the word "guide" in the title be replaced with "journey", because that is what happens here. Do not be tempted to skip around the chapters to see what she has to say about Hemmingway's Idaho home before reading about her visit to Louisa Mae Alcott's Orchard House. This is not a guide book, but a narrative about how a literary academic discovers there is something to visiting the past, even if it's a completely falsified past as in the case of Twain's Hannibal, Missouri. Her comments in the first chapters may seem harsh and snarky, especially if you're someone who does like to see where *your favorite author goes here* lived and wrote, but don't stop reading. Eventually, she comes around to the realization that, just as there is more than one way to tell a story, there is more than one way to "looooooooove" literature. As the reader goes along with her on that discovery, they'll also get some interesting trivia and a visitor's hints about the places she visits.

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christina says

A more academic Sarah Vowell investigates two of my favorite subjects - writers and historic houses - in this short but shrewd book. I thoroughly enjoyed the author's unvarnished and slightly cranky opinions and the observations and connections she makes. It's like taking a field trip with your favorite literature professor. I hope that she goes on to write bigger books.

Mizloo says

Thoughtful, introspective and individual, this is a quick read on an odd subject. Somewhat rambling (which I enjoyed) and definitely opinionated, the author (PhD in English Lit) takes one publicly open writer's house at time, summarizes each author's work/life, describes her own experience at each house and comments on the individuality of the houses as well as the former residents.

There is a lot of somewhat professorial subtext, about such nuances as the class, race, gender, situation and current standing of the writers, some commentary on whether the ambiance of the house suits the reality of the author's character. Here I found the Louisa May Alcott commentary about feminism engaging, and Jack London's commitment to subsistence farming astonishing.

Late chapters about Charles Chestnut, Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar, were particularly enlightening - I'm a reader not a lit prof.

Overall - a good read. Smart, sometimes funny, a bit acerbic and nicely grounded in fact.

Jill says

First, a big thank you to the Goodreads FirstReads program and to author Anne Trubek, who graciously sent me an autographed copy of this most enchanting book.

I am, perhaps, an ideal reader for A Skeptic's Guide. I'm a passionate reader with an advanced degree in English Literature and have actually visited many of the homes she focuses on in her book, including Jack London's, Ernest Hemingway's. and, of course, what she calls "The Concord Pilgrimage" – Edith Wharton's, Herman Melville's, and Louisa May Alcott's.

The question she poses is why did I – or for that matter, any reader – tour these house museums? Anne answers, "There is something curious and ultimately insatiable about visiting a dead writer's home. It has something to do with pilgrimage, the hushed aura of sacredness; it has something to do with history; one life preserved. It has something to do with loss, and objects as compensation for loss. And it has something to do with the way literature works, with the longing created by the fact that words separate writers from readers yet create an ineluctable intimacy between the two…"

Whew! She's got THAT right. And then she adds, "They (the homes) are teases; they ignite and continually frustrate our desire to fuse the material with the immaterial, the writer with the reader."

Some, of course, do it better than others. Mark Twain's Hannibal is one that does NOT get it right; "Hannibal is not a postcard of iconic American sweetness, not a Rockwell painting." The "snugness and smugness" of the town reveal nothing about Samuel Clemons, who had a delicious sense of irony. Nor is it possible to find Walt Whitman in Camden, an old, forgotten house in a depressing, urban blighted town.

Anne Trubek fares better in Concord: "over two hundred published writers call this small town home." And she totally connects with Paul Laurence Dunbar's house in Dayton, Ohio – "full of the longing that I am seeking in these small museums."

Overall, Anne finds some truth in each about literature, history, urban blight, and today's America…even if she doesn't always find connection with the author. There are times when I felt she verved from her stated mission, focusing more on the history of the writer instead of the writer's homes, or when she arrived with preconceived conclusions about the house. All in all, though, Anne brings an indefatigable curiosity, a sense of humor, and a researcher's skill to her undertaking.

Ellen says

I have some vacation planning to do...
