

July 9, 2004

## JOURNEYS; 36 Hours | Iowa City

By BETSY RUBINER

SOME of the most talented writers in America have made their way to Iowa City, drawn by the University of Iowa's renowned Iowa Writers' Workshop. John Cheever, Philip Roth and Robert Lowell dropped by to teach; John Irving, Bharati Mukherjee and Margaret Walker first came to learn. Many come away professing lasting affection for this city of bursting bookstores, leafy old neighborhoods and friendly shopkeepers, set amid rolling Iowa farmland and where nearly half the 63,000 residents are students. Not all the cafe conversation is literary -- U.I. turns out the usual mix of professionals from engineers to dentists. And when writer's block strikes, you can usually find somebody at the next table to talk Big Ten football. BETSY RUBINER

Friday

4:30 p.m.

### 1) Walk the Literary Walk

Words by 49 writers with Iowa ties -- including Tennessee Williams, who got his B.A. in English at the university in 1938 -- adorn bronze panels set into the sidewalk of the Iowa Avenue Literary Walk between Clinton and Gilbert Streets. Among the other writers represented on the walk, which is in the downtown shopping district east of the campus, are Raymond Carver, Flannery O'Connor, Jane Smiley and Kurt Vonnegut, all of whom spent time at the Writers' Workshop. Among several excerpts that speak of Iowa itself is this quotation from "Shoeless Joe" by W. P. Kinsella: "Three years ago at dusk on a spring evening, when the sky was a robin's-egg blue and the wind as soft as a day-old chick, I was sitting on the verandah of my farm home in eastern Iowa when a voice very clearly said to me, 'If you build it, he will come.' "

5:30 p.m.

### 2) Talk the Literary Talk

If you can't remember the title of a new novel or poetry collection, Prairie Lights Books (15 South Dubuque Street, 319-337-2681) is the place to find it. A local hangout for writers and readers, Prairie Lights is known for its knowledgeable staff and authors' readings broadcast live in Iowa from the store on public radio. There's a cafe on the top floor; books about Iowa, including a \$2.50 Literary Walk guide are in the main floor selection; and well-chosen children's books inhabit the basement.

7 p.m.

### 3) Sushi and Greg Brown

In a city that's much closer to the Mississippi River than it is to any ocean, the seafood is wonderfully fresh at the Takanami Restaurant (217 Iowa Avenue, 319-351-5125), where tropical fish swim in a tank between the blond-wood sushi bar and a coolly contemporary dining room. Sample the maki sushi, in varieties averaging \$6, and follow with the Hawaiian Big-Eye Tuna (\$24) or Kobe-style beef (\$29) -- from Montana, not Japan. After dinner, walk to the Mill (120 East Burlington Street, 319-351-9529), a mainstay for live folk acoustic and roots performance since 1962. It plays host to nationally known musicians with Iowa roots like the singer-songwriter Greg Brown and the blues-rock guitarist Bo

Ramsey. Dave Rogers, above, performed recently.

## Saturday

9 a.m.

### 4) Breakfast Served Anytime

A favorite stop for candidates before the Iowa presidential caucuses, the Hamburg Inn No. 2 (214 North Linn Street, 319-337-5512) serves hearty, nothing-fancy food (omelets, burgers, a pie-milkshake combo called a pie shake) in a bustling atmosphere that has changed little since the 1950's. Last winter, Howard Dean won the Burg's possibly first-in-the-nation coffee-bean caucus (a voter drops a bean into one of several jars labeled with candidates' names). Dennis Kucinich was second; John Kerry, third.

11 a.m.

### 5) Stores in Small Boxes

In the face of competition from malls on Interstate 80, downtown Iowa City has cornered the market on local color and distinctive shops. Check them out on and around the Pedestrian Mall bordered north and south by Washington and Burlington Streets, west and east by Clinton and Linn Streets. Stop at the Iowa Artisans Gallery (207 East Washington Street, 319-351-8686) which sells wood furnishings, jewelry and prints by Midwest artists. Akar Gallery (4 South Linn Street, 319-351-1227) specializes in contemporary ceramics. Pick up deli food at the New Pioneer Co-op (22 South Van Buren Street, 319-338-9441), and take it to City Park, on the Iowa River, a great place to picnic and people-watch.

2 p.m.

### 6) At the Pentacrest

Follow the City Park trail south along the river's west bank past the university's fine arts campus. Stop at the University of Iowa Museum of Art (150 North Riverside Drive, 319-335-1727), which has an outstanding African art collection and modern art including work by Grant Wood, who joined the faculty in 1934, four years after painting "American Gothic." It's free and open noon to 5 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. Cross the river on a footbridge and walk up the hill to the university's oldest section, the Pentacrest. It is dominated by the golden dome of the Old Capitol, a Greek Revival building where territorial and state lawmakers met from 1842 until 1857, when the capital moved to Des Moines. Nearby Macbride Hall has a natural history museum full of stuffed mammals and birds (319-335-0480; open 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Saturday and 12:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. Sunday, admission free).

5 p.m.

### 7) Chorizo on the Highway

In the pretty town of Mount Vernon, about 20 miles north of Iowa City, Lincoln Cafe (117 First Street, 319-895-4041) sits on the Lincoln Highway, America's first transcontinental auto route. It lures out-of-towners with its creative dinner specials that are listed on a chalkboard near a tiny kitchen. Among the selections offered one evening this spring by the chef, Matt Steigerwald, were rainbow trout with oyster mushrooms and tomato confit, fingerling potatoes and Spanish chorizo escabeche (\$24) and pan-roasted quail with organic sage grits, pickled shrimp salad, grilled asparagus and Tabasco oil (\$21). Because the dining room fills early and reservations are limited to large parties, call ahead to get on the waiting list. The cafe has no license to sell alcohol, but you can bring your own wine. Buy it next door at the Chameleon's Pub & Grub or bring it from John's Grocery back in Iowa City (401 East Market Street, 319-337-2183). After dinner, stroll up the hill to Cornell College, where students take just one course at a time for three and a half weeks. And yes, the founder was a distant cousin of the founder of Cornell University. (Cornell the college,

begun in 1853, is a dozen years older than Cornell the university.)

## Sunday

9:30 a.m.

### 8) Herky on Parade

As you drive downtown to pick up picnic fare -- sandwiches, artisan bread, pastries -- at the Bread Garden Bakery & Cafe (224 South Clinton Street, 319-354-4246), look for life-size sculptures of Herky the Hawk, the Iowa Hawkeye mascot. Seventy-five Herkys in goofy guises (Marilyn MonHerky, Elvis Herky) are scattered around this football-crazy town through November to mark the 75th anniversary of the 70,397-seat Kinnick Stadium -- named for Nile Kinnick, the Iowa running back who won the Heisman Trophy in 1939 and died in a Navy training flight in 1943.

10 a.m.

### 9) Sea Floor, High and Dry

A devastating flood in 1993 gave Iowa the Devonian Fossil Gorge (at the end of Prairie du Chien Road, 319-338-3543) near the Coralville Lake and Dam, a popular recreation area. Floodwater surged above the dam's emergency spillway and washed away 15 feet of soil at the base, exposing a Devonian sea floor full of fossils, some 375 million years old. An entry plaza offers Flood and Fossil Facts 101 and a free brochure explaining what you'll see at the numbered markers dotting the gorge.

## THE BASICS

### Visiting Iowa City

The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids, about 20 miles north of Iowa City, is served by American, United, American Trans Air and Northwest. Cars can be rented at the airport.

The Sheraton Iowa City (210 South Dubuque Street, 319-337-4058), on the Pedestrian Mall, has 234 rooms for about \$149 on weekends.

For an up-close taste of campus life and river views, try the Iowa House Hotel (121 Iowa Memorial Union, 319-335-3513) a recently renovated 103-room hotel in the student union. Rooms and suites are \$75 to \$180 a night on weekends, with higher prices on football weekends.

A favorite with visiting writers, the Bostick Guest House (115 North Gilbert Street, 319-354-2453) was Iowa City's original town hall. Its four suites are \$89 to \$129, and there are 17 guest suites in three neighboring houses.

Among bed and breakfasts, the Brown Street Inn (430 Brown Street, 319-338-0435), a 1913 Dutch Colonial-style house, has five rooms and one suite; rates are \$59 to \$99.