

# THE LITERARY LIFE

## IN SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

Long a cultural hot spot, the city offers lectures, discussions, workshops and a writers' contest during its annual Writers' Conference held later this month

BY JIM JOHNSTON  
The News

San Miguel de Allende has long had a reputation as a haven for visual artists. Since the 1950s, when Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros worked there, it has attracted professional and amateur painters, sculptors and printmakers to the classes and workshops frequently held here.

Walk down one of its cobbled streets and you're likely to find someone sketching a local woman selling calla lilies or working on a watercolor of a colonial church.

But for the past few years, the literary arts have begun to dominate the cultural scene of San Miguel de Allende. From literary "wannabees" to best-selling authors, more and more writers are drawn to San Miguel for its combination of tranquility and cultural stimuli.

Noticing this trend, Jody Feagan and other local writers decided to start The Writers' Conference in San Miguel, which is now in its fourth year. The conference brings together top authors, editors and literary agents.

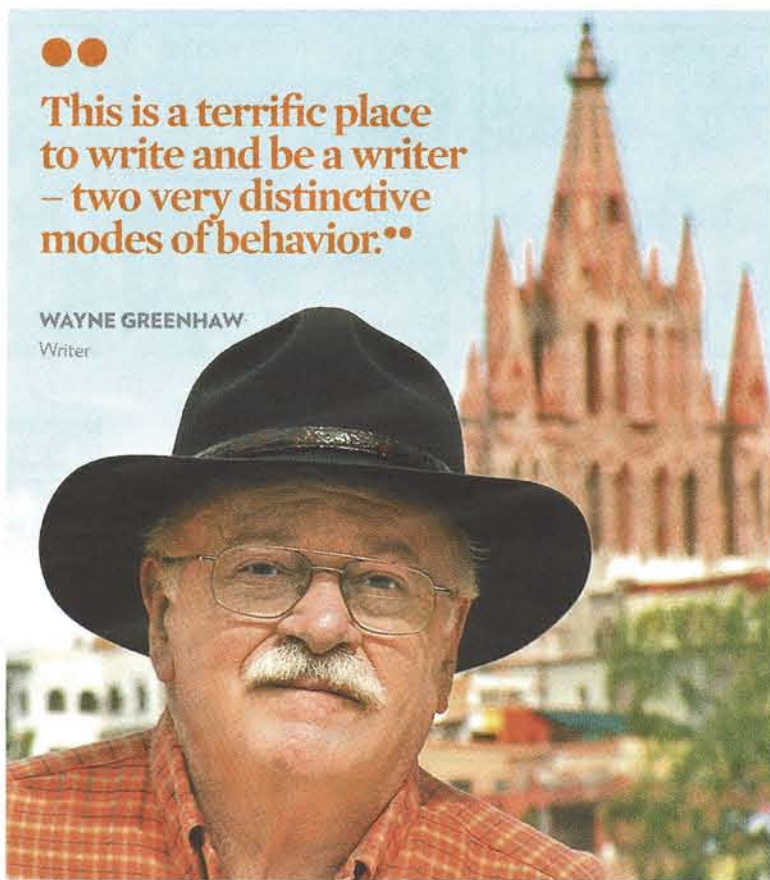
This year's conference, held from Feb. 20 to 24, will feature writers Erica Jong, Todd Gitlin and Josephine Humphreys. In addition to lectures and panel discussions, there will be 15 to 20 workshops and a writing contest.

"I'm especially excited about the Teen Writers' Workshops, which has had overwhelming response. Diana Hutts Aston and I came up with the idea to sponsor Mexican teens for writing workshops. This year we're providing 30 full scholarships," Feagan said.

"We feel strongly that good writing skills are fundamental to future success. I was fortunate to have a teacher in high school who inspired me, and now I want to pass that inspiration along."

●● **This is a terrific place to write and be a writer – two very distinctive modes of behavior.**

WAYNE GREENHAW  
Writer



Writer and San Miguel resident Wayne Greenhaw

PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM JOHNSTON

### MORE INFO

Take advantage of an opportunity to improve your creative writing.

- The Writers' Conference will be held at Hotel Real de Minas, located on Calle Ancha de San Antonio, Col. Centro, San Miguel de Allende.
- For more information and to register, go to [www.sanmiguelworkshops.com](http://www.sanmiguelworkshops.com).

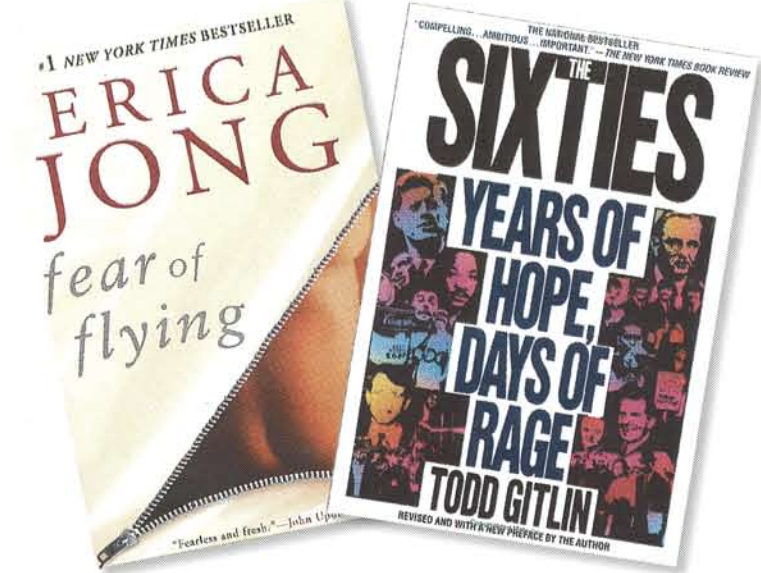
#### A RICH LITERARY ENVIRONMENT

Although they often choose to work in seclusion, some writers in San Miguel are famous enough to attract attention.

The ghost of beat poet Neal Cassady haunts the place (he died on the railroad tracks just outside of town). Pulitzer Prize-winner W.D. Snodgrass wrote poetry here. Contemporary

authors and poets such as Beverly Donofrio, Sandra Gulland, Tony Cohan, Joe Persico, Gary Jennings, Vance Packard, Lynette Seator and Diana Hutts Aston (whose most recent book was read by U.S. President Barack Obama on a visit to a second-grade classroom) call San Miguel home.

Elisa Bernick is one author who turned her experience living in San



Miguel directly into a book, "The Family Sabbatical Handbook: The Budget Guide To Living Abroad With Your Family."

"There's a raw, authentic edge to San Miguel. It gives me a perspective and clarity about my own culture that I wouldn't get working back in the States," she said. "It definitely affects my writing. And no matter how bad your work goes or how frustrating the reviews of your latest novel, there's always a rooftop, a café or some comfortable place to watch another beautiful Mexican sunset."

Wayne Greenhaw, author of 21 books, divides his time between San Miguel and Montgomery, Alabama. He first came to San Miguel in 1958 to study writing at the Instituto Allende.

"At that time a lot of people who called themselves writers hung out in the old Cucaracha Bar on the jardín, where Banamex is today," he recalled. "Several had published a story or two, one wrote a pulp western. Generally, however, they talked and drank. This is a terrific place to write and to be a writer – two very distinctive modes of behavior."

Writing is a solitary activity, so Wayne likes to get together with local writers to talk about their work.

"Mostly I'm in my tiny 'oficina' (office) overlooking the town. It's a glorious sight that alerts my senses and impels me to work, work, work. But there are many professional writers here and I take advantage of that. It's easy to find mutual support."

#### MANY CONFERENCE PRECURSORS

Writers' groups have become a vital part of the San Miguel literary scene. One of the oldest groups here is PEN International, active for almost thirty years. "We present an annual series of lectures by noted authors, and have managed to raise a considerable amount of money over the years to help them with their work protecting freedom of expression," Lucina Kathman, a founding member of the San Miguel PEN Center, said.

San Miguel PEN will be celebrating its 30th anniversary in July of this year with a weekend of activities planned for July 24 and 25.

Another writing event unique to San Miguel is Poetry Week, which

sisters Jennifer Clement and Barbara Sibley began in 1997. Every January, renowned poets and eager students journey to San Miguel for a week of workshops, readings and lectures. Poets such as Paul Muldoon, W.S. Merwin and Natalia Toledo have participated in past events.

"We wanted to create an environment where Mexican, British and American poets could come together and develop ties between worlds that often seem to know little about one another," said Jennifer. "Classes are held every morning. In the evenings the poets give readings of their work. The last night the students read their own poetry, an event which is open to the public."

A newcomer, the San Miguel Authors' Sala, is one of the most active literary groups in town. Over the past four years it has held presentations for the works of more than 200 authors, including some big names such as John Berendt, Rebecca Walker, Sena Naslund and Tom Robbins. It has its own bookstore and has produced an anthology of local authors as well.

Founder and director Susan Page is author of four books about relationships that have sold more than a million copies worldwide.

"There's definitely a heightened energy around writing and reading here these days," she told me. "All that was needed was someone to organize and focus it. Five years ago I put a small article in the local paper announcing a meeting of writers. Twenty-eight people showed up! And many of them volunteered for jobs. None of this would be happening without the efforts of our volunteers."

Literary inspiration is in the air here. San Miguel's weekly newspaper, Atención, has a Literature and Books section brimming with upcoming events. The local bookstore, El Tecolote, keeps expanding and stocking more and more titles.

As local artist Mayer Shacter put it, "In the States, I used to suffer from seasonal depression. In San Miguel, I suffer from chronic exuberance! The artistic and literary atmosphere here fuels my creativity as no other place ever has."