

STEVE HEILIG

Big Sur's Best Ambassador: An Appreciation of Henry Miller's *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*

“Henry Miller has little importance in New York, but on the west coast, where he lives, he is taken for a genius.”

—Simone de Beauvoir, 1953

Re-reading the favorite books of one's youth can be dangerous, or at least disappointing. They rarely measure up to the image and influence they had upon first encounter. That has too often been my sad experience, at least. But Henry Miller has been a happy exception.

Back in the 1970s, I drove hundreds of miles to Big Sur as soon as I had a driver's license and a car. Drawn there by the books of Miller, Richard Brautigan, and Jack Kerouac, I was not disappointed, even though many years too late for any kind of “scene”. Miller had moved to Los Angeles; the other writers I'd read were also gone and even the short-lived “hippie” flourishing there had degenerated into something less than groovy (Although there was still a sign on the door of one local eatery reading “NO HIPPIES”).

But I loved Big Sur, and visited whenever I could, camping and hiking all over the beaches and hills and in my old VW van. I recall watching the glow of the huge Marblecone fire in 1977 and riding my bike to the giant landslide that shut the highway for months in 1983. Some good friends had a house on Pfeiffer Ridge and I freeloaded there whenever I could as well. I have many good memories lodged all over Big Sur and quite a few fuzzy ones as well. I still wish it was permitted, or at least easy, to sneak in to the hot tubs at Esalen in the middle of the night. But one can still walk out to the beach at Andrew Molera park and surf one of the most scenic waves on earth, or contract horrible poison oak rashes in many beautiful canyons, or walk out onto Bixby Bridge and look down upon the little beach where Jack Kerouac suffered his delirium tremens and Allen Ginsberg soared on acid all the way to Asia and back.

I kept reading whatever I could about the place as well, from literature and poetry to natural history. My initial infatuation with authors like Kerouac faded as the adolescent romantic image of alcoholic paranoid meltdowns faded. The first book I read set in this magical place, Brautigan's *Confederate General from Big Sur*, still elicits smiles. I collected what I could find about the region, and even rented and watched the mostly laughable early 1960s Elizabeth Taylor film *The Sandpiper* only because it was set and filmed in Big Sur. On the other extreme of quality, some of Robinson Jeffers' poetry set on this coast is undeniably timeless.

But Miller's 1957 book *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* remains for me the ultimate Big Sur book. From the black and white cover, featuring a fine sweeping photo looking south on the coast with some of Bosch's fantasmagorical figures—playing in Paradise, superimposed on a meadow over the sea—through Miller's historical overview of the region through his own history there, it is one of his more compelling reads. It enticed me to then dig into some of his other classics like the "Tropics" books, *Black Spring*, and others. I then read a couple of books about him, including the biographies by Jay Martin and Erica Jong.

I eventually came to think that Big Sur may have saved Miller's life; and thus the elegiac, grateful-to-be-alive tenor of his "Big Sur". Before his arrival there he, at least according to the books, was in constant struggle—with women, money, his muse, poverty, his own psyche. He seemed to be protesting too much about how "happy" he was in those earlier decades, like one trying to convince himself of his own joy in life. For all the artistic clamor of his famed earlier work, it seemed that happiness, or at least some sort of peace of mind, eluded him.

But then, already well into middle age, he found Big Sur, and that fulfillment he had sought for and preached of. And he wrote about it with a new sense of joy, of forgetting himself as much as possible and finding the appreciation of life, day by day, that so many of his own favorite writers and sages had spoken of. The frankly sexual salaciousness in some of this work that made him famous and infamous—and which made a girlfriend of mine blush and say "Oh my, Henry!" as she read *Sexus* in our Big Sur campsite—gave way to a more nuanced appreciation of life.

Miller admitted from whence his new appreciation of life arose: "It was here in Big Sur that I first learned to say 'Amen,'" he wrote. "Here I will find peace. Here I shall find the strength to do the work I was made to do."

As for the evidence that he did so, it is in his book, which you should read yourself: "In the Beginning" starts with a tone between geology and mysticism; "Who lived here first? Troglodytes perhaps. The Indian came late. Very late." Miller came later and paid \$5 per month for his first "hovel" at Anderson Creek, while "my earnings were just about sufficient to keep a goat alive." Later his previous work started to sell and allowed him to live more comfortably among the trees and cliffs and sun and fog, with his third wife Lepska and their children in "The first real home I have ever known". His words here shift between describing the awesome natural surroundings, introducing his small circle of friends and neighbors, and ruminations upon the outside world and, yes, the meaning of life as he saw it (a concluding extended tale of a difficult visitor, Conrad Moricand, has always struck me as a tacked-on addendum; others find it their favorite part of the book).

Writing in the wake of horrible war, he assessed "politics" and observed "You now that two lascivious monkeys at the zoo, two monkeys picking fleas off one another's backside, are doing just as good a job." More broadly, "Life is making new demands upon us. The cosmic cataclysms which ancient man had to face have given

way to moral cataclysms.” And: The great hoax which we are perpetuating every day of our lives is that we are making life easier, more comfortable, more enjoyable, more profitable. We are doing just the contrary... One ugly word covers it all: waste.”

Thus, like Thoreau at his pond or Miller’s distant neighbor and contemporary Jeffers, Miller was able to see more clearly from his point of beautiful geographic isolation. But Miller remained much less stern than Jeffers and more humanly engaged than Thoreau, having a different kind of genius and temperament. He mixed the prosaic with the profound, with humor throughout, as when he and Emil White sit at a table just off the highway in front of what is now the library and cultural center named for Miller and a tourist pulls up, “Throwing a half dollar on the table, the man ordered coffee and sandwiches; he took it for granted that we were running a roadside café.”

Now you can indeed get coffee at that same spot, oftentimes at least; each time I drink some, I do so in Miller’s honor. He finished his *Big Sur* book in 1956, and lived in Big Sur itself until 1962, leaving just as a generational tidal wave washed upon the west coast and beyond, one partly of his making. Younger writers and many others would become ‘beat’, politicized, sexualized, psychedelized in ways undreamt before—at least for a time, until a relapse into greed, materialism, and fear recurred. We’re living amid that now, which makes reading books like Miller’s all the more important. Meanwhile, and for a long time to come, the spirit of Henry Miller chuckles among the cliffs, looking out at “sea and sky unending.”