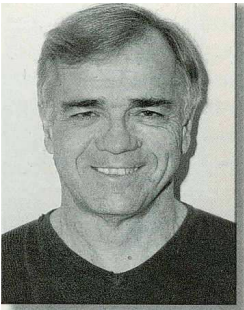


19 & COUNTING

by Larry Bridwell



This is my nineteenth consecutive seminar; I attend in the same spirit as those who go to church every week, not knowing what will be said during the sermon, but knowing it will be good for my soul. The seminar that surprised me the most was the one devoted to Elizabeth Bishop. I did I know who she was, but I learned that the Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz from Mexico wanted to honor the person he considered to be the finest 20th century poet in the English language, and he delivered an eloquent keynote address.

That evening, the newly restored lobby of the Jose Marti Theatre sparkled with Latin sounds: the Cuban Key West community was excited to be in the presence of a great Spanish-language writer. That seminar included Bishop's biographers and the poet, James Merrill, who in an exquisite tribute, managed to respect Bishop's sense of privacy, while still making the most gentle of allusions to her personal life. The multifaceted nature of the seminar was demonstrated at the Red Barn Theater by a splendid dramatic portrayal of Bishop's Key West life. During the last year, there has been a renaissance in appreciation of Elizabeth Bishop; but thirteen years ago, the Key West Literary Seminar did it best.

These seminars have serendipitously introduced me to great literature and writers. Two of the finest books I have read are the biographies of Emerson and Thoreau written by Robert D. Richardson who has attended several Key West Seminars. The casual Key West parties, teas, and trolley rides provide several opportunities for fascinating conversations with the invited writers. For example, Octavio Paz and I discussed for fifteen minutes the NAFTA Treaty that he, in contrast to most of his friends, had supported.

Of the many speakers I have heard, two individuals stand out not for their talent or fame, but for their humanity. During the Children's Literature Seminar, attendee after attendee wanted to speak with Judy Blume; and I admiringly watched how she graciously responded to dozens of individuals at the rooftop terrace of the La Concha Hotel. Also noteworthy was the author of *Catch 22*, Joseph Heller, who had served during World War II on air bombers. For many years, I have been intrigued by the reasoning for dropping the atomic bomb on I Hiroshima. During one of the panel discussions, I asked Heller his opinion about that event. His reply, "It was wrong, but Truman had no choice," was a splendid example of the many spontaneous insights that emanate from the paradise of The Key West Literary Seminar.