

A Poetry Newsletter, Chicago

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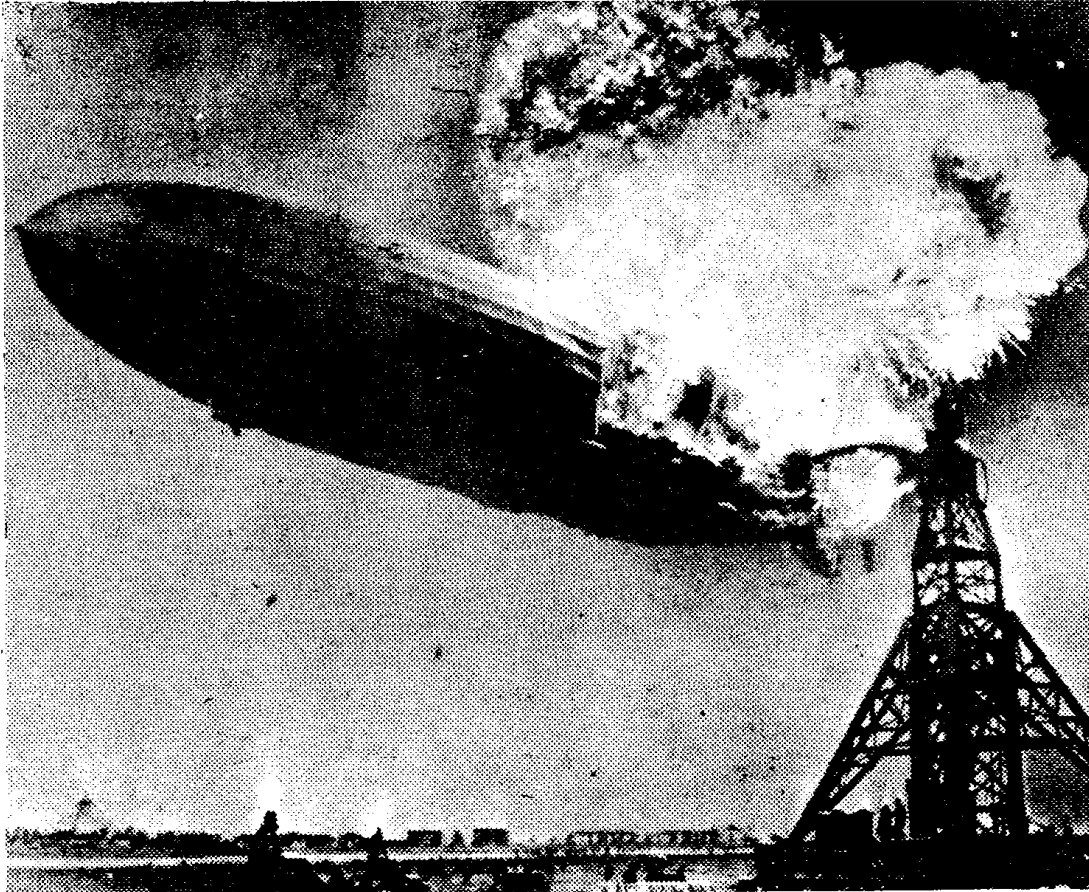
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WHAT THE MARKET WILL BEAR

In the April Letter eX, I counted no less than three items regarding the Green Mill's reading series. I've been there and read a few times myself, and so I have experienced the hoopla surrounding the events sponsored there, "wherein poets are judged by their politics...the number of expletives not deleted, the outrageousness of their rap and romp and rump." Faced with such negative responses elicited by the Uptown Poetry Slam, I have to ask myself: Why does this series rattle so many poets' chains?

It's all too tempting to answer this questions by naming two emotions popularly associated with poets: Jealously and Personal Antagonism. I think there's a deeper reason, however. The real reason why these three individuals published pieces clubbing the Green Mill has more to do with what Sally Flanagan ironically calls the sponsors' "heightened tastes," or what Lorri Jackson calls "The Word as Pure Spectacle." Regardless of the conflicts these individuals have had with the sponsor of the Poetry Slam, Marc Smith, I think I can read through their personal resentments, add my own thoughts, and come up with this conclusion: the Green Mill is more interested in selling drinks than presenting quality poetry.

There, I've said it. I also could add that Jackson, et al., intimate that all the histrionics performed on the Green Mill's stage should be dismissed as poets over-compensating for having written second-rate poetry. Indeed, there is merit in this argument that the Poetry Slam is not exactly quality-conscious. I, for one, have heard quite a few poems there which might as well have been burned as read.

Yet, amongst the dozens of poems that needed torching, there were always four or five which made sitting through the evening worthwhile. For this reason alone, I feel we should welcome any reading series into town, no matter what questionable things happen on-stage. Otherwise, we could lapse into the same parochialism, the "underground" that "stays self-contained and of course self-congratulatory" which Ms. Jackson claims of the Poetry Slam.

Whatever the quality of work presented at the Green Mill, I know what to expect; I take it at face value. A more vexing question concerns what accounts for the usually decent-sized crowds I've seen there. Why are people turning out at "a reading series that sponsors clowns, jugglers, Poetry Slams, etc.?"

The easiest answer I can come up with to that question is that the audience has fun, pure and simple. It's fun to watch a combination poet and stand-up comic read/crack Mother-in-Law poems/jokes. I haven't witnessed

clowns or jugglers as Ms. Flanagan evidently has, but having seen them at rodeos and street fairs, I know that they are fun to watch, too. And, of course, it's fun to drink beer and holler and clap no matter if you're watching poetry, listening to a blues band or watching a Cubs game.

They key to such goings-on lies more in an observation of a writer-friend of mine, a novelist and so presumably above all the factionalism surrounding the issue. He calls the crowd up at the Green Mill "the Rambo Poets." After a chuckle or two, think about the implications of his statement. Think back to all the controversy relating to the Rambo character. The media analysis who I read correctly denounced Hollywood for its revisionist stance toward the Vietnam War. What bothered them more, though, was how millions of Americans sucked up Rambo's bashing of the Third World. I don't mean to say my friend implied the Poetry Slam's politics are suspect; rather, he was alluding to how the series panders to its audience. And that assertion begs the following question: Who is the audience at the Green Mill?

Well, about ten on any given Sunday night are poets who are there to get up and read during the open mike segment. You can then add three or four more who are the featured readers of the evening. Finally, when throwing in an additional four who partake of the slam segment, you get a total of something like eighteen poets. You can also count ten or more would-be writers, cops or insurance salesmen who tell you they've written tons of poems but don't dare to send them out to magazines or read them in public. That leaves a remaining couple dozen who apparently are regular people who happen to appreciate poetry.

Simple observation roughly establishes the demographics of who attends poetry events at the Green Mill. It is equally easy to say what the audience is not, however: readers of poetry. If all the people who regularly show up at the Poetry Slam bought Tomorrow Magazine, the magazine I edit and publish, then my partner and I just might break even instead of losing money on every issue. I'm certain other editors of small press publications around Chicago would say about the same thing.

I'm too conscientious in soliciting quality material and too egotistical in believing in my own abilities as editor to think that Tomorrow is not a decent magazine. Nor do I believe that any of the various magazines around town, which range in price from \$2 to \$7, are too expensive for an audience like the Poetry Slam's. After all,

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people spend two bucks to get in the door, and then another ten or twenty on drinks. It seems, therefore, that a very conscious choice is made by the spectator to listen to poems being read rather than reading them for him or herself. Which is just as well, because a majority of the poems, if published in a magazine, would dissolve right off the page on account of having no lasting value. The Green Mill's owner, Dave Jemilo, understands the connection; he knows how to draw patrons into his bar: give the people what they want, appeal to the lowest common denominator, add gimmickry to the poetry.

In short, when I look at the audience at the Green Mill, I see a group with an attention span longer than that of people who stay home and watch James Bond movies on the ABC Sunday Night Movie, but shorter than that required to sit down and read an issue of TriQuarterly.

Who in Chicago, then, reads poetry? Well, those people who many making the scene dismiss as "academics" read, by one estimate, upwards of sixty books a year, although not necessarily all poetry. There is no question; the "traditional wine, cheese and academic crowd" to which David Hernandez refers can indeed get a little stiff. But the best reading I've ever seen happened to be given by the academic poet's poet, Stanley Kunitz, who I saw read at the University of Idaho in 1984. He didn't have a band backing him; nor did he show slides, dance, or, like Hernandez, look down Roscoe Street and list everything he saw there. Rather, there was a sense that his stream of words flowed forth from the source of Western Literature and out of his mouth, where they then carried me off, lulling me into a weird reverie. The force of this old man's still-sharp intellect coupled with his poetic inventiveness, that is, words and words alone, are what affected me.

It seems that poets and audience alike need to reassess their respective views toward poetry so as to make that "tenuous distinction between avant-garde and avant-garbage" which Miriam Sola so pointedly describes. The Green Mill poets have admittedly nailed down half that equation posited by Aristotle: poetry should please. The other half remains, however--poetry should teach as well as please.

~~I'm not about to suggest that~~ poets learn Greek and Latin and bury themselves in classicism, but I think one author they would do well to read is Horace. His notion of *limae labor* expresses the need for hard work when composing poetry--the constant writing and revising that is a poet's greatest curse as well as his or her greatest achievement. Revision is an essential activity regardless of the poet's persuasion or subject matter. I think many poets forget that poetry is written down and meant to be read in books and magazines as well as read aloud. It is not enough to simply dash off a poem, get together with a guitarist and set it to music, and then present it at the next week's open mike. Only after a poet can get his or her work to sing and dance of its own accord should he or she contemplate adding music and choreography--and these only judiciously in order not to overpower the words.

Likewise, the audience for poetry needs to do a certain amount of self-educating. If Chicagoans' interest in poetry is genuine, then they should have no qualms picking up collections of poems and reading them (and I mean books by someone heavier than Charles Bukowski or, sorry, Ms. Jackson, Henry Rollins). Please don't misunderstand me; I think that it's great that a reading series like the Green Mill's has excited interest in poetry and has garnered a following. Let this following now become readers of poetry. Only then can good taste in poetry be developed.

This heightened taste consequently would create in at least some of the audience a need to seek out a reading given by poets who have themselves done their homework and who have anticipated a demand for first-rate poetry. If nothing else, a more pluralist outlook in Chicago's poetry community would emerge, and the "varied and eclectic selection of spoken word performances and publications," which Ms. Jackson rightly praises, would be instituted. Better still, perhaps there wouldn't be any more Uptown braggadoccio that theirs is the only show in town.

by Tim Brown