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Modest Proposals -- a Dispatch from the NBCC Independent Press Panel

Newspapers may be eating their young when they cut or kill book sections, but then again, the young are already disappearing in droves, aren't they? The question has probably been under-addressed in the National Book Critics Circle's Campaign to Save Book Reviews, but the underlying demographic truth was evident in a panel held last night, jointly sponsored by the NBCC and the New York Center for Independent Publishing.

WHAT IS THIS SITE?

Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the NBCC Board of Directors (see list of bloggers below).

WHAT IS THE NBCC?

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On the panel, moderated by NBCC president John Freeman, were: Dan Simon, publisher of Seven Stories Press; Sarah McNally, co-owner of McNally-Robinson Booksellers; Hannah Tinti, author of *Animal Crackers* and editor of *One Story*; M.A. Orthofer, managing editor of the web-based *The Complete Review*; and Tim W. Brown, a freelance reviewer who is a frequent contributor to *Rain Taxi* and an NYCIP executive committee member.

The panel circled the general topic of independent publishers and the diminishing newspaper space devoted to book reviews. Dan Simon commented that at best, there can be a "wonderful electricity" surrounding a book that begins with reviews, yet added the caveat that reviews also "carry less weight" than they used to. Picking up from there, Sarah McNally observed that websites tend to drive the younger book-buyers to her store, and while she expressed concerns about the effect on our national literature of diminishment of reviews in print, the fact is that on an individual basis, some inspired reviews sell books, but that many reviews seem to have no perceptible effect. Hannah Tinti observed that cutbacks in regional print reviews might have the greatest deleterious effect on emerging writers, who depend on notice more heavily than do established writers. Tim Brown noted that while his early work was reviewed in the largest newspaper sections, he wonders whether that would be the case today. Michael Orthofer, most interested in the possibilities of the Internet for access to multiple sources of information regarding books, and for interconnectivity, said

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it should not be seen as a replacement for print but a complement.

As ameliorative efforts, the suggestions were many. Brown called for proactivity on the part of reviewers to call attention to work that deserves it, and said there exists a “sick symbiosis” between a highly dysfunctional industry (trade publishing) and a declining art form (reviewing). Speaking of working the cracks in the façade, he touted alternative publications and said independent publishers “have to be highly imaginative to get the word out” about their work. Simon, alluding to the hurdles faced by smaller presses, said it was important to understand the interconnectedness of the parts: that independent reviewers and independent publishers and independent bookstores were part of a community of the like-minded, with shared interests. McNally reported that she will not purchase paperback books without review quotations on their back covers, for without those, the books don’t sell. Tinti called for “as much book reviewing as possible,” whatever the venue. A couple panelists cited the loss of the “accidental” reader as part of the likely fallout of cutbacks in regional book sections.

The influence of book prizes was discussed briefly, McNally noting that the Man Booker is the prize that seemed to call attention to books most strongly. In the question period, the tight window of timing reviews to publication dates was debated, mostly as a drawback, and the lack of vibrancy in the writing to be found in book sections was commented on by several attendees.

--Art Winslow

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