

TOWARD A NEW LITERACY

Dear Reader,

As I was describing *Rosebud*, recently, to a friend who had not yet read it, I was asked, "So, how is *Rosebud* different from other literary magazines?"

This got me to thinking about the mess literary magazines have been in since the days when I worked on my first small press literary magazine in 1966. The conventional wisdom has always been that short stories and poetry are not commercially viable. As a result, book publishers have been reluctant to publish serious literary efforts in these areas, and have failed to promote them when they did. Thus, the burden and potential reward of publishing short fiction and poetry has often fallen into the hands of subsidized university publishers (who on the whole have done a miserable job) and a few determined individuals who dip heavily into their own personal resources, financial and otherwise, to bring neglected writers and works to the attention of a slightly larger audience than they had enjoyed before.

As a freelancer for many years I found this situation daunting. A short news piece of mine, for say, National Public Radio, would find millions of listeners coast to coast -- but an experimental verse play that had taken years to write was experienced only by a few hundred people. Of course no one expects to earn a living at poetry and short fiction, and the way the culture is going, it will never be a road to fame and fortune either. Nevertheless, I know there are many fine writers out there whose lights are never seen. I see their manuscripts every week, more than even *Rosebud* could ever publish, work that deserves a greater audience than the shadows of a dark file cabinet.

Looking out at the market I find that the courageous little magazines who struggle to keep the fresh and independent spirit of American literature alive find themselves constantly at the brink of exhaustion and bankruptcy, while university publications publish work that is arch, bloodless, contrived, and often - simply bad.

Being bad of course, is part of the price of taking risks, and can even be invigorating and refreshing if it is done with imagination, but my feeling is that many "successful" literary magazines, having established a loyal following, take almost no risks at all, publishing work that has exactly the same tone and flavor over and over in order to maintain their established recipe for survival. As a matter of fact, "good work" has come to mean only work that takes no risks and strikes the "high tone" of the rest of the publication. The result is a plethora of literary publications that are more concerned with being taken seriously by their peers and other "literati" than with publishing serious work.

This is a hard facade to challenge. Some of *Rosebud's* competitors are magazines that project an aura of "exclusivity" (i.e., buy our magazine and maybe you can be one of "us"). They are filled with pet professors, National Endowment recipients, and prize winners whose works (sometimes good, sometimes not) are published because of who they are, not what they have written. Implicit seems to be the idea that the rest of us have nothing to say, and are not worth the investment in ink.

Of course, lots of us aren't very good. A river of bad work, written with serious and earnest intent, passes over my desk every day. At the same time, we receive more fine work than we can ever put in print, and it horrifies me to wonder what part of our literary heritage we lose daily, for all time. Even in the most humble submissions, I see a hunger for expression in language, the desire to push words out and pull them in. Even, ironically, on the internet these days, I see creative interaction in words blossoming in a way that the publishing culture has stultified.

In this energy is the seed of a new American voice struggling to articulate itself, and make itself heard in spite of all the proprietary claims upon its possession and stewardship. In this new American voice which I find in every envelope I open is a hunger for a literary culture which is neither exclusive nor simplistic, whose sophistication rises from what is written, not from those committees who render opinions as to what is good, and what is not. A voice which has a genuine chance to evolve and improve itself on the basis of hearing and being heard. A voice which will be equally cautious of adulation and venomous critiques. A literature based on the spiritual and literary principles of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. It is *Rosebud's* purpose to respond to this need.

Sincerely,



Roderick Clark
Editor