

The BennZine Gortex



*A Periodic Newsletter of the Bennington College M.A./M.F.A. Writing Program
Student Life Committee * Vol. II No. 3 * January 12, 1995*

College Prez Gives Uplifting Talk *Reflects Optimistic Outlook Despite Financial Obstacles*

BENNINGTON -- College President Elizabeth Coleman Wednesday addressed the MFA Writing students, exalting the academic and artistic history of Bennington College and forecasting an optimistic future for the school, but she openly conceded that Bennington was still running at a deficit and sought to raise \$20 million in the next three to five years to become "an absolutely superb college."

In a widely-attended talk at the Barn, the President re-assured students that the financially plagued College was pulling away from its budgetary woes and rekindling its "intense engagement with literature" and "the power of ideas."

"Right now," she said, "the world knows about the drama and the scandal and the screaming and the yelling. That is setting the stage. But nobody is saying that Bennington isn't important. It's unimaginable that anybody would say that this place is not important."

Coleman referred frequently to the academic integrity,

"energy" and "character" of Bennington in her hour-long talk. She said foundation support for the College was "spectacular" and that Bennington was "batting a thousand" in its efforts to secure donations and bequests. To date, she said the college had

raised more than \$5 million toward its fundraising goal.

Students largely registered happiness and a sense of renewed security after the President's speech.

"Frankly," said fiction writer Tim Wooten, "I'm very heartened. I feel better than I did before."

First semester student Nicolette Macdonald said she felt "more at ease" after hearing the President's talk. "I think it's not so much what she said, it's how she was," Nicolette said.

Indeed, most students echoed feelings of security and comfort in the President's style, noting that she seemed straightforward, honest and factual in her address.

While the President's message was uplifting and optimistic, it was by no means evidence of Bennington's economic recovery. She conceded that fundraising efforts might move at a slower pace now after securing the initial \$5 million. And she also

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On Jan of the Vulture

Students react favorably to Coleman address

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pointed out that endowments would not independently put the college in the black, noting that bolstering undergraduate admissions was still considered the chief marketing aim for Bennington.

"Enrollments have been declining for five years. Financial aid, meanwhile, is soaring -- almost double," Coleman explained. "So what you have is less students, none of whom can afford what you're doing."

During her talk, the President referred back to the history of Bennington, founded in 1932, and the cadre of great writers and teachers who spent time here. She reminisced glowingly about her first impressions of the campus, which she came to head after leaving the New School for Social Research.

"The very last thing I came to Bennington to do was to fix it," she said. But she said she found herself called upon to remake the College and to capitalize on the "palpable energy" of the place, the "life" and "intensity" of the campus, which consumed her, adding, "it's like liquor."

Coleman came under intense fire in a number of widely published accounts of Bennington's controversial decision last year to abolish tenure, discharge faculty members and restructure its academic and interdisciplinary format. She defended those charges gracefully in Wednesday's speech but did not offer any factual specifics.

"There are very different views of what's happening here, even among students," she said. "But there's no question that the vitality of Bennington is going to triumph. We are in business, and

we intend to stay in business."

She also deflected some of the earlier criticism aimed at her by asserting that the decisions concerning tenure and faculty dismissals were "corporate decisions" made by the Board of Trustees, together with her.

"The idea that these decisions were made by Liz Coleman individually is not true," she said.

Still, the controversy has not disappeared. Criticism lingers in a wide variety of forums -- ranging from graffiti in lavatories to letters by faculty members appearing in the local newspaper, the Bennington Banner. One such letter, written by fired-and-reinstated faculty member Neil L. Rappaport, was published in Wednesday's Banner, detailing his version of the campus controversy.

Said Liam Rector: "Reality is a staircase going neither up nor down." Liam reiterated the optimistic comments and aspirations for the College which he made in a speech to MFA students on August 10, 1994 in the same location where the President spoke Wednesday. In that speech, given during the height of the controversy in the middle of the summer 1994 residency, Liam said the College President had taken an initiative which few Presidents attempted to do, and that the MFA program, for one, would remain "robust" (see related story on page 4).

After her speech, President Coleman attended a buffet-style dinner she sponsored for MFA students in the center dining room at Commons. Students remained largely at ease and content with her explanations and her outlook, although some, such

as first semester student Chuck Bock, refused to comment and declined to give any reaction whatsoever. Tamara Hollins, a third-semester student, said she simply wasn't concerned about it anymore. "I think we'll pull through."

And Carole Merritt, who jokingly responded to Coleman's talk at first, ultimately confided that she had "a feeling of confidence and commitment and integrity."

John Hirsch too stated that he was re-assured. "I thought it was positive," he said after
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Student Life Committee

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TIMOTHY WOOTEN

Ideas and Issues

COLETTE GUREN

Gossip

BOB HORNBUCKLE

Treasurer

WENDY BUTTON

Alcohol and Spirits

MARK S. GURALNICK

Parties, Music and Newsletter

The BennZine Vortex

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*Newsletter Office
(Franklin - Room 2)*

Poets publish anthology of verse

Calling it *b.*, they tout it as future literary magazine

BENNINGTON -- A team of poets enrolled in the MFA Writing Program have published the first edition of what may be the premier version of a Bennington literary review.

Simply titled "*b.*" and composed on a student's computer before the winter residency began, the new literary review includes 16 poems spanning 19 pages.

The review, scheduled to be published once each residency, features the poetry of Deborah Gillespie, Ruth Farmer, Sharon L. Preiss, Betty Kronskey, Tamara Collins, Carole Malone, Kristin W. Lee, Tom Rechten, Judy Mandt, and Victor Cruz.

"It shows a lot of vision," said faculty member Maria Flook, who saw the fledgling journal late Monday when it was first publicly circulated. Others echoed the positive response. "It's exciting to see this new poetry," said Gail Hathaway."

Declared Sheila Wall: "I love all of it."

The idea for "*b.*" was conceived during the Spring 1994 residency and spearheaded by second semester poets Kristin W. Lee, Carol Malone and Tom Rechten, who serve as the review's board of editors. Faculty member David Lehman serves as the "advisory editor."

Kristin Lee said the review sought to feature "everybody's work" and was not limiting itself to poetry alone.

"We'll consider anything that's submitted," said Carol Malone. "We will not discriminate."

The premier issue of the anthology came together during and after the summer 1994 residency and was then

paginated and printed on Kristin Lee's desktop Macintosh computer at her home in Connecticut. The collection uses a 5.5 by 8.5-inch format, common among chapbooks, monographs and similar such publications.

The review also spotlights a collaborative poem entitled "Fine Lines" jointly authored by Victor Cruz, Ruth Farmer, Deborah Gillespie, Kristin W. Lee, David Lehman, Carol Malone, Judy Mandt and Tom Rechten. The poem, known to Carol Malone as "our orgy poem," is the product of a workshop exercise undertaken last summer under the direction of Stephen Sandy and David Lehman.

Larger review in the works

While "*b.*" made its debut on campus this week, discussions were unfolding for a more formal widely-circulated literary review which would also solicit

contributions from outside the campus. Student Life Committee members have been discussing the prospects of launching a Bennington literary review that would like to feature guest contributions from noteworthy area writers such as John Irving and Jamaica Kincaid.

While plans for such a literary review remain largely undecided at this point, Committee members Wednesday met with "*b.*" editors and with Tree Swenson to discuss joining hands in the production of an ongoing literary review. In particular, third-semester fiction writers Maudy Benz and Colette Guren have expressed interest in combining their efforts with "*b.*" editors to publish an increasingly sophisticated and more widely-circulated publication.

At Wednesday's special meeting, rough plans were put forth to continue publishing the review as a biannual project and to solicit faculty submissions for upcoming issues.

"It was a very good beginning," said Maudy Benz, hailing the efforts of the "*b.*" editors in dispatching their first issue. "It was very equitable and well-done."

But she and other students posed important questions about how to staff the publication, whether it should remain an ongoing MFA program publication or reach for national circulation, and whether the College or any other source would possibly subsidize it.

The core group will re-convene on Friday at 5 p.m. at the cafe, to resume discussions, select editors and lay the groundwork for the joint project.



Coleman speech

-Continued from page 2-
the address.

While conceding that Bennington was now a "crazy mix of the God-awful and the exhilarating," the President succeeded in persuading most students that negative publicity in the New York Times and trade publications would pass and that the College would once again emerge as a superior and popular liberal arts school.

"In a sense," she said, "the media have helped Bennington." She alluded to the chance to explore academic opportunities and to search for innovative marketing plans to recruit more new undergraduate students.

In fact, discussions about how to market Bennington to prospective undergraduates have included such possibilities as a three-year bachelor's degree -- which Coleman did not seem to support -- and a four-year master's degree.

She said the College was continuing its search for grants and endowments and continuing to explore marketing opportunities. She openly welcomed suggestions.

The President seemed to confirm references about the College's forthright decision to tackle its administrative and budgetary problems head on -- which had been made earlier by Liam Rector and others.

"This College really faced every hard question," she said. "It did it. It did it! My God, it did it!" And then after a pause, "Holy mackerel."

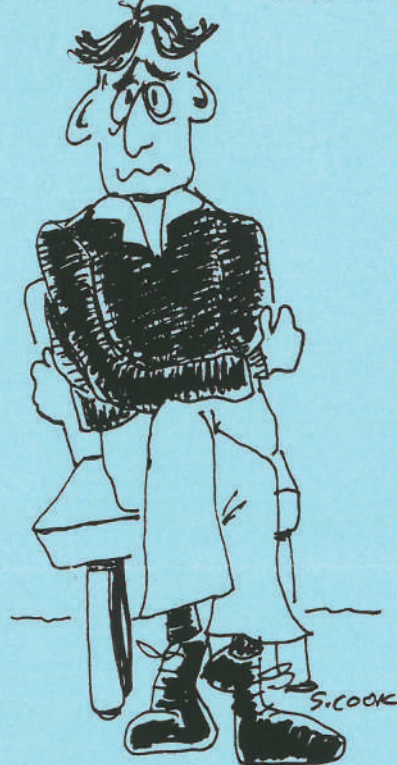
BUT HOW SECURE IS THE WRITING PROGRAM?

The MFA Writing Program, previously dubbed "the crown jewel of the College" by Liam Rector, is still not financially profitable, the program director said.

Following President Coleman's address to students Wednesday, Liam Rector conceded that the MFA Program was not yet a profit-generating enterprise, but that situation would improve in the next few years. "By the end of the third year it will make money," Liam said, "but right now, it's not making money yet."

Liam said the MFA program remained healthy and was expected to become more financially secure as enrollments swell to 80 students. But because of the costs associated with starting the program and taking it through its evolutionary stages, it has not yet been a money-maker for the College, he said.

FOLLOWING A READING,
AN ADVENTUROUS MFA
STUDENT DISCOVERS THAT
SUPPOSITORIES ARE LESS
EFFECTIVE WHEN INTRODUCED
DURING A VERMONT WINTER.



A missive from the South

Second semester student Charlotte Coe Lemann, who is on leave of absence this semester, has written to the BennZine Vortex from her home in New Orleans, La. to convey her warm wishes to her fellow students during this January residency.

In a letter received from Charlotte on Wednesday, it was reported that an "eleventh-hour" medical problem kept her out of the program this winter, but she said she plans to be back on her feet and among us for the June 1995 residency.

Charlotte can be reached at 5432 Chestnut Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70115.

First Big Party Tomorrow Night

Bennington's graduate writing students are scheduled to jam the cafe tomorrow night in the first dance party of the winter 1995 residency.

Mixed drinks and hors d'oeuvres will be available to party-goers, beginning at 9 p.m. following the performance of Celtic Thunder at Martha Hill studio. The party will be held at the upstairs cafe, where daily happy hours are held, according to the Student Life Committee.

Wine, beer and other snacks will also be available at the party,

according to Wendy Button, director of alcohol and spirits for the Student Life Committee.

Students attending the party will be charged \$5 at the door to defray costs, according to Student Life Committee Treasurer Robert Hornbuckle.

"It's an opportunity to let it all hang out," said Mark S. Guralnick, Student Life music coordinator. "It's a chance to relieve those literary tensions that have been building all week."

Guralnick said he welcomed students to bring their tapes and

compact discs to the party but noted that he would likely relinquish the DJ duties to other musically-obsessed students.

Friday's party is the first of two scheduled parties during this residency. The second party is slated for Monday night at 9 p.m. According to Assistant Program Director Priscilla Hodgkins, it is possible to hire a band or a professional discjockey, or to get specialty foods if students wish to have them. Anybody with suggestions should contact the Student Life Committee.



Travel Partners

Colette Guren is arranging for a limo/car to the Albany Airport, leaving Bennington between 7 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 17, 1995. Anyone interested in catching this ride should contact Colette or leave a note at Stokes, Room 10, by Saturday.

Deborah Gillespie is also interested in sharing a ride to the Albany Airport on Tuesday morning. She can be found at Swan, Room 15.

Quotes of the week.....

"I think large hands on a woman are attractive,"
---Bob Shacochis in his Tuesday workshop.

"Forgive me for snorting. I always snort when I'm getting into it" -- Jill McCorkle in the Tuesday workshop with Bob Shacochis.

"I cannot whinny" -- admitted by Bob Shacochis in his Sunday workshop.

"I couldn't decide whether to make the character fart in the bathtub, or just pee..." -- Priscilla Hodgkins in the Shacochis/McCorkle workshop.

Colette Guren to Liam Rector: "Should I bring you your book to sign, or should I have Sven sign it for you?" -- said in the Barn on Wednesday.

"Elizabeth Coleman is the Tina Brown of college presidents." -- Sharon Cook, following the President's address to students on Wednesday.

"But what about Patricia Highsmith?" -- David Lehman at the end of the Sue Miller lecture series on Wednesday.

"Don't rise to a level of contortedness...Just sit down and and go typee, typee, typee!" -- taken out of context from Katha Pollitt's talk on Monday.

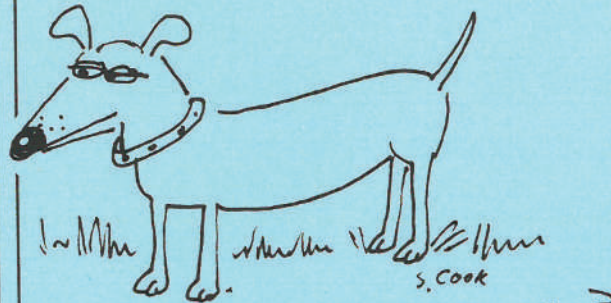
"Gashhound! Hey, that sounds pretty good when it's amplified." -- Maria Flook, marvelling at the sound of her favorite word when she heard it louder than she anticipated over the microphone at her reading Tuesday night..

"That's a common opinion," -- roughly how Katha Pollitt responded to Bob Hornbuckle's assessment of one of her lecture points.

Happy Birthday Paul.....

Message to Paul Alexander Koenke in Texas:
Hey Paul, we know you miss your mom, Cynthia Koenke, but she told us that it's your eighth birthday today. Happy Birthday, Paul, from all of us here at Bennington....and from your mom too!

ASK MARIA :



DACSHOUND OR GASHHOUND?

Benn Listening

By E. Hem-in-Haw

WORKSHOP/SEMINAR BLUES

Why write as if life were a
binary phenomena when, in fact,
your poem, this self-referential
pomposification, makes my jaw go slack
when I'd hoped to be knocked
right out of the ballpark,
or at least grounded by your intentional
nostalgia . And

furthermore

I don't quite buy the line
break here,

my dear,

so nice try but no

po

ta

toe.

Announcing the midpoint

At shortly after noon Wednesday, Bennington's third-semester writing students crossed the midpoint in the MFA program. Indeed, as of Wednesday afternoon, the first class of MFA students began the second half of their graduate program here at Bennington.

Columnists from the dark side

A sampling of the great journalism that arrived in our mailbag

SUE MILLER'S GRANDMA DON'T TAKE NO LIP

Sue Miller's grandmother kicked some Shakespearean butt today when she forced the daytime drama actors to take their naps. While they dreamed their Mid-Winter's Night visions, she collected their scripts, swords and affected attitudes. It was a big bundle and she zapped it like a Chekovian ending. As the writhing collection smouldered, Grandmother roused the dullards and sent them back to Boston, saing, "Thank God, that's over!"

THE LOW-MINDED

We were sitting around the campfire the other evening when Maria "I should listen to NPR" Flook held forth -- "It really disturbs me that bad art gets so much attention." We wanted to say, "Get real, Maria. Life is bad art. That's why there's so much of it." Still, we didn't want to upset Maria. She's a very sexy person. What with her trendy pearls, leggings with skirts, and waterproof boots, she is starting an unsettling trend of faculty dressing better than students. Tree "She who will not be ignored" Swenson had the look too, with her "Don't mess with Me" black sweater skirt, and accessories. We are also slightly jealous of her black shoulder bag and attache

The only sign of style among the students we witnessed occurred when the winter sun exposed itself for a few moments. Suddenly, very cool sunglasses appeared on earnest faces. These writers allowed

themselves an additional gesture -- a toss of the head -- that said, "Yes."

We are encouraged. "Go Girl!"

SVEN BIRKERT'S NEW MANTRA -- BUHI

Sven Birkerts, recently named Visionary Seer by Utne Reader, has begun accepting members into his new cult -- Word Warriors. Everywhere, fearful techno-phobes have echoed his battle cry, "First, smash all the computers!" In his latest book of essays, Sven describes a bold new world where people use pens until the ink runs dry and pencils are worn down to the nubbins.

TUSHMAN BLUES

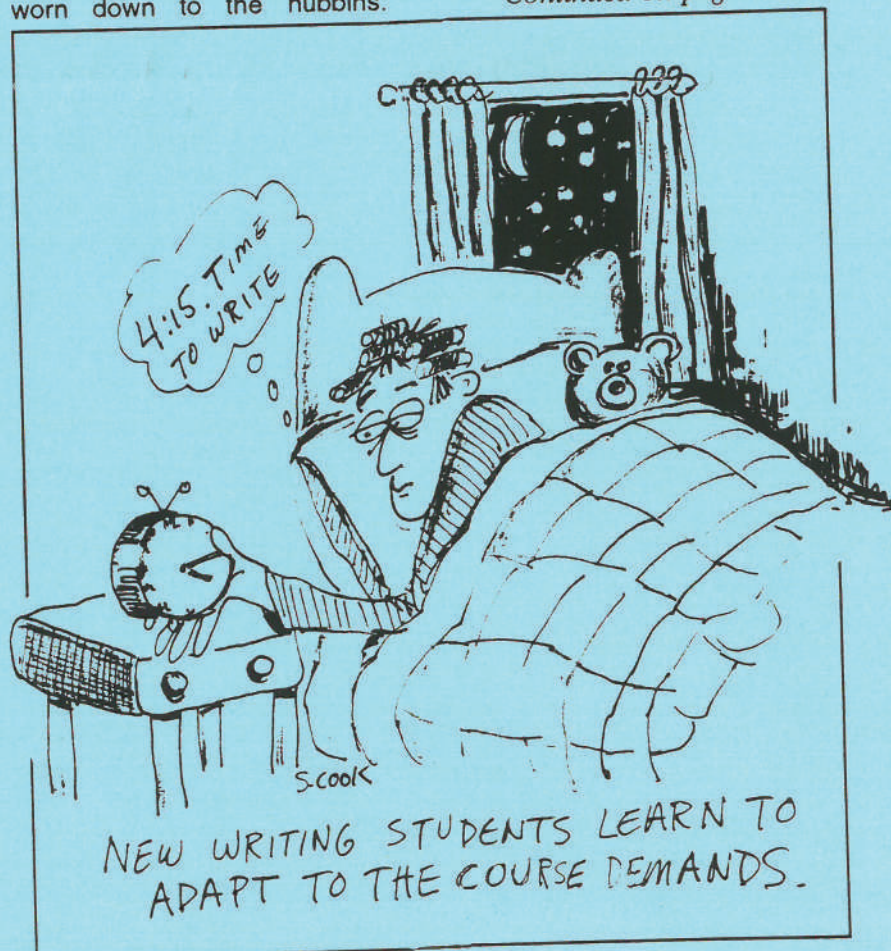
Writing student Constant Kvetcher has expressed dismay and remorse over the fact that Tushman (a/k/a Tushman) Hall has been inoperative during this residency. She says:

"I know I've complained in the past, (albeit in an endearing manner) but I never expected the lecture hall to be completely out of use.

"After all, it does have a lot going for it. It is spacious, it is dark, allowing for restful repose and relaxed rumination."

Tushman, in retrospect, is looking better to her expecially when compared to the stuffy

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Let Me Help

by Ernestine Hem-in-Haw

Dear Miss Hem-in-Haw,

After those evening readings, I never know what to say to the author. Help me, dear lady!

Signed,
Fear of Fawning

Dear F. of F.,

What an excellent question! Miss H-in-H always advises sincerity: "I (enjoyed, loved, slept through) your (poems, story, essay)." Avoid nervous remarks like:

1. I haven't laughed this hard since Erma Bombeck's last column.
2. Your (poem, story, essay) made me feel so bah-ma-fah-bah.
3. Gee, you write like Hemingway's long lost illegitimate brother....
4. I just love the way you've done your hair!
5. So have you had personal experiences with anal suppositories?
6. Was that a poem or prose? Are you sure?

Affectionately,
Miss Hem-in-Haw

Changing address?

If you're moving, changing your address or telephone number, please notify the MFA office as soon as possible. Timely notification will ensure that you get all mailings between the end of this residency and the commencement of the next one, according to Priscilla Hodgkins, assistant program director.

Next BennZine Vortex

The final issue of the BennZine Vortex to be published during the Winter 1995 Residency will hit the streets either Sunday or Monday. Be sure to submit your requests for travel partners and limo-sharing arrangements no later than Saturday. Please also submit your E-mail address if you'd like to be listed in a master-list of on-line participants.

Columns from the dark side

Tushman Blues....

-Continued from page 7-

crowded Barn lecture hall.

"What I objected to is sitting in the same place, all day, for hours on end (no buns intended). I was hoping we could alternate the Barn lecture hall and Tushman, too." She adds, "What can be nicer than, at the end of a long day of lectures, to be supine on Tushman's solid benches and allow the evening reading to waft over one's restive mind and aching body."

Kvetcher has taken her complaints to the appropriate source: Sven Birkerts. "It is no surprise that his name, in Hindu, means 'receptive one.' He said he would present it to the proper authority, and when I mentioned that he was the proper authority, he said, 'Is that so?'"

We are certain that Sven Birkerts will find a solution to this problem. Kvetcher says, "I was told in the beginning of this residency that Sven can fix anything: from a blocked toilet to a case of writer's block."

To which he would probably reply, in his inimitable fashion, "buh."

Pow-wow plan may prevent problems

I've had an opportunity to talk to many of the newcomers and I can identify with their anxieties since it wasn't too long ago that I had the same fears. Generally, they want to know how the course gets done. They want to know if they will be eliminating sleep from their schedules or separating from family members to reduce the burden at home.

These new students have full-time jobs so they must learn to develop new strategies, new work habits. They would like to get together, informally, or during a structured time (if that exists in our schedule) to talk to some of the veterans and learn some survival skills.

Is anyone interested in a practical pow-wow, where we can exchange our experiences as well as offer encouragement?