

The BennZine Vortex

The Unofficial Mag of the MFA Writing Seminars

Editorial Goddess: Cathy McMullen Cartoonist Extraordinaire: Sharon Cook Gossip Monger: Margo Aragon

Dr. Coleman hosts sleepover for grads

By Pink Fuzzy Slippers

You know how it is at these residencies: we either receive half the information, or the wrong information, from one another. On Thursday I found out that not only were the graduates to have tea at President Coleman's house, but a sleepover, as well!

I'll admit, it's been more than 30 years since I've been invited to a sleep-over. The last one I recall, we curled our hair in pink rubber spoolies and then made prank calls to Father Coughlin at the church rectory: "Could you tell me what time midnight mass starts?"

What does one wear to a sleepover at a college president's house? Tailored pajamas? Nylon peignoir? To my ongoing shame, the pajamas I bought do not match. The top is different from the bottom. No problem for me while standing and flossing at the dormitory sink, but how will I look to President Coleman? She'll think me crass, lacking in refinement.

What kind of slumber party activities will we engage in? While I like the idea of prank calls, I'm not too keen on the Ouija Board or making fudge.

Inevitably, the talk will turn to boys and S-E-X (among the girls). I'll admit I'm nervous about this. Do I divulge too much

and risk being labeled "cheap" or do I say little and be considered a "prude"?

And, as with all slumber parties, there will be members who will not slumber. I'll be awake, smoking cigarettes (can we do this?), freezing bras, discussing the meaning of it all—and hair.

If I choose to sleep, will I be considered rude? You would think that people on the verge of obtaining an MFA would know more about the civilized world and its expectations!



Tom Wicker: It's all in the details

By Cathy McMullen

Rare is the newspaper journalist who doesn't dream of becoming a novelist. Not Tom Wicker. "I was writing fiction long before I was writing journalism," said Wicker, who lectured at Bennington's June residency.

Wicker retired from the New York Times in 1991, after a long and distinguished career as a reporter and columnist. "He has been a foot soldier in the service of truth, newspaper division, for nearly three decades," wrote Donald Morrison of Time magazine in 1978, who called his columns "pearls of persuasive good sense."

He is the author of eight novels and five works of nonfiction, including his acclaimed book on the Attica prison riots, *A Time to Die*. His most recent book, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream*, was published in 1991.

Though Wicker has a reputation as one of America's best journalists, he is not a romantic about the Fourth Estate. "I did journalism to make a living," he said. Still, his journalism and fiction writing inform each other, Wicker said.

"Journalism teaches you the import, the necessity, of gathering and selecting the right details," Wicker said. "The process of writing a journalistic story, really, is that of gathering and selecting the right detail—and it can't be detail that must be explained because you don't have room. So you learn to be selective and use the detail that best tells the story."

In that sense, the process of writing fiction is similar, Wicker said; the writer must also be adept at gathering and selecting the telling detail, the revealing anecdote.

As journalistic fashions change, fiction and journalism are becoming even more similar, Wicker said. "And I don't mean in the sense of journalists making things up, for all that many people are convinced that's exactly what we do. I mean that today's best journalism borrows techniques of fiction to tell a story. The old who-what-when-where-why format doesn't work any more; we get all that information from the tube. Today's best journalists use fictional techniques to back into a story."

Still, journalists today have lost much of the public's respect, said Wicker, who has written a book about the press in the 1970s. Not only did the tumultuous decades of the 60s and 70s erode Americans' trust in institutions—including journalism—but ushered in a time of journalistic excesses and irresponsibility, Wicker said.

Journalists and novelists share another thing in common, Wicker said: Both are often accused of being elitist.

"I am an elitist," Wicker said. "At least I hope I am. I don't ever pretend nor want to be one of the great masses of Americans, if that means burning churches, burning crosses, being easy prey for all manner of demagoguery. I want to be out of step with that America. If that makes me an elitist, I'm goddam proud of it."

MFA students help edit literary mags

Cathy McMullen, third-semester nonfiction student, is an associate editor of *Ascent*, the literary magazine edited by the late Dan Curley at the University of Illinois for more than 20 years. It's now edited by W. Scott Olsen, an English professor and writer at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Ascent seeks poetry, fiction and nonfiction pieces. Olsen's first issue comes out in September, with subsequent issues in winter and spring.

Subscriptions \$9 a year or \$4 per issue. The address for subscriptions, queries or sending manuscripts is :

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If Faulkner got 'workshopped'

Some of us, when reading *Go Down Moses* in preparation for Tom Wicker's lecture (yes, Liam, we ALL read it), couldn't help but entertain ourselves with a fantasy: What kind of comments might Faulkner have heard if he'd submitted 20 pages of the novel--sections of "Was" or "The Bear," perhaps-- for workshop?

"Four words: 'CONTRACT WITH THE READER.'"

"Who is this narrator? I want to know who this narrator is."

"You've got a serious POV problem here, Bill."

"Your games with paragraphing and punctuation are pretentious."

"There are four of five different stories here. Settle on one and work on developing it."

"Let's not forget that writing all boils down to THE SENTENCE. Let's take a few minutes to talk about how to write a sentence."

"Some strong imagery here-- evocative detail; telling anecdotes. But many sections and passages need tightening and clarification."

"Do you realize you're telling almost the same story here as in an earlier section?"

Quote de jour

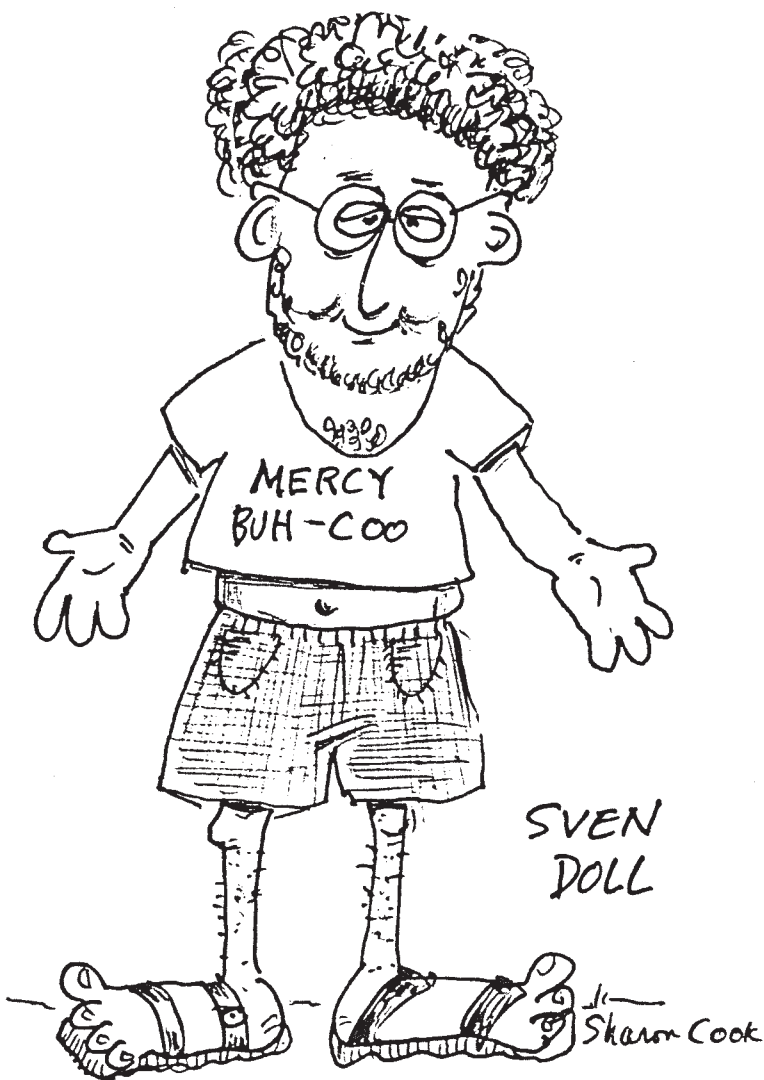
"Learn to trust your own judgment, learn inner independence, learn to trust that time will sort good from bad-- including your own bad." -- Doris Lessing

It's Svendali, the Birkertsian doll

A new marketing ploy was introduced on Friday at Sven Birkerts' reading. Margo Aragon and Sharon Cook risked their lives to obtain confidential information being developed by the unscrupulous manufacturer of Cabbage Patch Dolls. An anatomically-correct doll, "Svendali," bearing the likeness of our Svenster, will be hitting the shelves soon. For only \$59.95 you can own a replica of the man who has almost single-handedly taken on the "digerati" in their quest to log on and tune out.

Shocked and outraged by the discovery, The Svenster said, "Buh! " Translated, it means "That blasted doll looks like Henry Kissinger and I'm much better looking than that old stretch of bad road."

Of course, The Svenster would appreciate it much more if you buried your face in his book *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate Of Reading In An Electronic Age*. It would show your allegiance to The Cause.



SVEN DOLL

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Oh, the (fantastical) perks of a Bennington MFA

On the basis of his recently published story "How To Woo The Most Fabulous Woman In American And Keep Her," Jaime Winston Churchill Clarke has received a six figure plus advance for a book. Jaime credits the MFA program's new multi-media fact/fiction (faction) workshop for getting him started. Jaime has also been hired by Image Consultants International, a subsidiary of *Gentleman's Quarterly* and *Playboy*.

Sharon Cook has been awarded a \$500,000 fellowship in academic cartooning by the McGeorge Foundation. She'll travel the world drawing life-sized caricatures of faculty at various universities. She credits Liam Rector for "creating an open 'first amendment' environment in which I could thrive artistically."

Lythgoe says: Be there

Start your engines! The first reading of RPMs Chapbook will be held Thursday, at 7:00 p.m. at the Carriage Barn. Poet Mike Lythgoe (that motor head!) decided to get into the publishing thang. He threatened to reveal compromising photographs of his fellow MFA poets if they didn't submit their very best work to his new chapbook. Sharon Preiss said, "G'head. I'm from New York and I can kick your ass!" but sent in her poems anyway. Work by David Lehman, Deborah Gillespie, Beth Gylys, Stacey Harwood, Nicolette Mac Donald, Pamela Bailey Powers, and Stephen Sandy is also included.

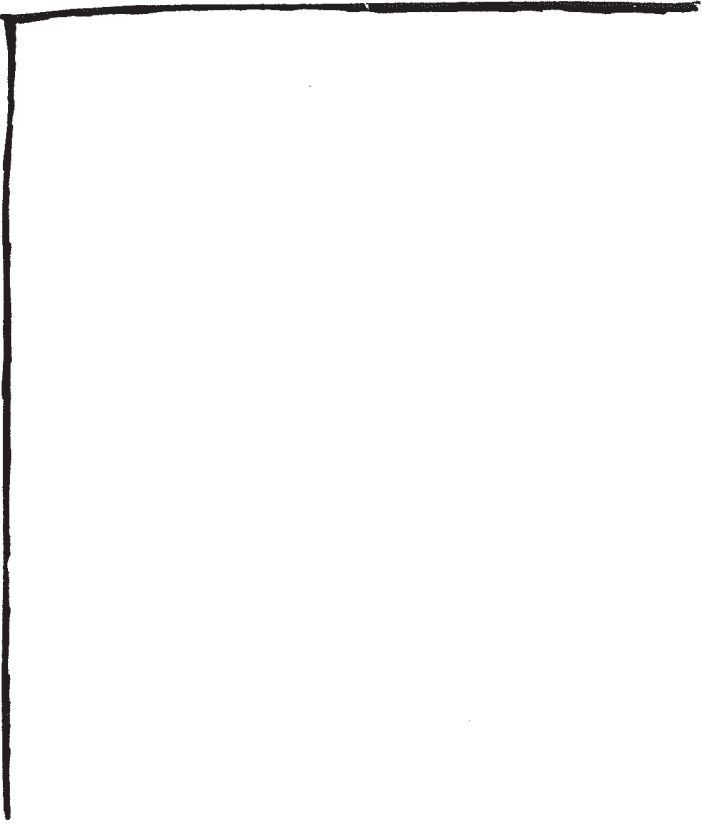
To the bookstore, go

One of Jaime Clarke's short stories is featured in *Chelsea* magazine. Dig deep and hand over five bucks for a copy at the Bennington Bookstore.

Eyes to the ground

Put your X-ray vision on and try to locate Deborah Gillespie's ring. It's a wide band of silver and gold. She's looked everywhere for it. If you find it, drop a note in her mailbox.

A Space of
One's Own ~



IF WORKSHOPS WERE "PACKAGED" LIKE SALSA:



MILD: FOR THE BEGINNER. GOES DOWN EASY.
NO SURPRISES, NOTHING THAT WILL KEEP YOU UP
AT NIGHT. FOR THE SENSITIVE PALATE.
FOR THOSE WHO CRY EASILY.



MEDIUM: YOU'RE READY FOR A LITTLE SPICE, A
LITTLE MORE SIZZLE. YOU MIGHT FLINCH, BUT
YOU WON'T RUN. STEP UP TO THE PLATE:
YOU CAN TAKE A LITTLE HEAT.



HOT: YOU'RE BREATHING FIRE! YOU'RE
SMOKING! YOU CAN GIVE AS GOOD AS YOU
GET. FEELING SCORCHED? BLAST THEM
WITH YOUR TONGUE OF FIRE. YOU'VE
GOT A CAST-IRON GUT!