

BY WAY OF FAREWELL: LOOKING BACK ON NINETEEN YEARS
OF EDITING AND PRODUCING *The PIKESTAFF FORUM*

by

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The present number of *The Pikestaff Forum* (#13) is the magazine's final issue. After nineteen years of editing and almost single-handedly producing the *Forum*, I feel that it's time to bring it to a graceful close; and in this my co-editor, Jim Scrimgeour, concurs. In our opinion, the magazine has achieved the goals we set for it at the time of its founding in August, 1977—an outcome which pleases us and justifies the enormous expenditures of time and energy that sustained magazine publishing entails. We have never wavered in our convictions that a free press (especially as represented by independent publishing) is crucial to the survival of democracy, and that a diverse, unfettered, and vigorous literature is fundamental to the health and vitality of societies and the cultures within them. We are happy that through publishing the *Forum* and participating in the small press community we have been able to act on our convictions and contribute to these important ends.

When Jim Scrimgeour and I founded Pikestaff Publications as a not-for-profit corporation in 1977, we saw it as a company which would publish two separate magazines, *The Pikestaff Forum* and *The Pikestaff Review*, and books, under the imprint of The Pikestaff Press. *The Pikestaff Review* (printed in a 6 x 9-inch book format) was expensive to produce; and after three issues, we terminated it, because its drain on our limited financial resources was curtailing our activities with both the *Forum* and the Press, which was attempting to issue a series of poetry chapbooks

From the outset, we decided to format the *Forum* as a newsprint tabloid on the model of the *American Poetry Review* (as it was in 1977) and *Poetry Now*. We felt that such a format would enable us to print more copies for the money expended (thus achieving a wider distribution and exposure for our contributors), guarantee (through a 32- to 40-page length) a larger number of works (and greater diversity) per issue, and (by virtue of

its large tabloid pages and double-page spread) invite exciting experiments in layout and design.

We feel we made a wise decision. Each issue had a press-run of 1,000 copies. Around 700 of these were distributed nationwide in a single bulk mailing, the remaining 300 copies being retained in inventory for single-copy sales, mail-orders, display at bookfairs and public readings. (Though the price of newsprint fluctuated over the 19-year period—with an upward drift—the cost to us for printing the **Forum** remained in the range of 35 to 45 cents a copy; by selling individual copies per mail order at \$2.00 (and later \$3.00), we were able to incorporate postage costs as *they* escalated and still have a bit left over to help finance the next issue.)

Expenses were for printing, postage, office supplies, and fees (post-office box rental, bulk rate mailing permit, annual corporate filing in Illinois, copyright registration). No salaries were paid; editorial work was all volunteer; and (for the last four issues) the English Department and Publications Unit at Illinois State University provided inkind contributions (office space, student help in computer fonting, advertising and promotion).

By and large, the financial support for **The Pikestaff Forum** came from subscriptions, sales, and out-of-pocket donations (we had two fund-raising drives, and a number of patrons came forth with 10- and 20-dollar contributions). Literary prizes from the Illinois Arts Council for works we had published provided additional resources, and on one occasion we received a small grant from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. However, we chose *as a policy* to avoid the grant-application process—because (1) we thought it a grave mistake for magazines to become dependent on grants for their survival, (2) we valued our independence and did not wish to encumber ourselves with the baggage and attached strings that accompanied many grants (including the need for reporting to the grantor and accounting for how the money was spent), and (3) we found the paperwork and competitiveness of the application process not only distasteful, but demeaning. The **Forum** did not contain paid advertising. We are pleased to report that as we come to the end of the **Forum's** run we still have enough money in the bank to pay for this final issue.

Distribution of the magazine was nationwide (with some copies going to foreign countries). Contributors received three free copies of the **Forum** in which their work appeared, and had the option of purchasing additional copies at a 50% discount. Copyright remained with the authors and artists. Poetry was listed in the **Index of American Periodical Verse**. While the bulk of subscribers were private individuals, there were also a number of public and private schools, and public and university libraries. We routinely

sent exchange copies to other magazines—both to introduce Pikestaff's beginning authors to other editors, and to participate in the networking vital to keeping all of us editors aware of developments in the small press literary community.

The tabloid format with 32 to 40 pages did allow us to publish a large number of people. In thirteen issues, we published the work of 444 writers, 17 photographers, 14 graphic artists, and (in our special feature devoted to them) 142 "young writers" (aged 7 through 17). The work, in other words, of 617 individuals (and this enumeration constitutes only the first time the person appears; many authors, photographers, and graphic artists made repeat appearances). In terms of our various "departmental categories", or genres, the accounting is as follows: in thirteen issues we published 645 poems, 107 works of prose fiction, 2 plays, 30 essays on literary topics, 43 book reviews, 37 photographs, 82 original drawings, and 52 editorial profiles written by editors of other magazines about *their* publications. A total of 998 items. Though translation was not a particular emphasis of the **Forum**, we did publish, in both poetry and prose, 24 works in translation from Spanish, Chinese, and French).

In founding the **Forum**, we hoped to provide launchpad exposure to new writers and to those who might have difficulty in getting a hearing. Our editorial taste was eclectic, subscribing to no particular "school" of poetry or fiction, and no dogmatic theoretical notion of what literature should be. What we looked for is summed up by our "Credo":

"We believe that good writing communicates intense, basic human experience which is conducive of change and growth, and that such communication, when achieved, is as plain and as pointed as a pikestaff."

In the various small press directories and "marketplace" guides in which we ran listings, we said the following:

"We invite submissions from established and non-established writers; traditional and experimental works are welcome. We look for writing that—

- is clear, concise, and to the point;
- contains vivid imagery and sufficient concrete detail;
- is grounded (whether fantasy or not) in lived human experience;
- presents memorable characters and situations;
- uses language in stimulating, fresh, and appealing ways;
- makes us feel, when we're done, that we've been somewhere, and glad that we made the journey.

We are not interested in—vague philosophical woolgathering;
inspirational uplift;
warmed-over Workshop pieces;
confessional self-pity or puffery;
self-indulgent first or second drafts;
journal-entries and notebook jottings;
private musings couched in private symbolism;
sterile intellectual word-games (no matter how clever);
five-finger exercises (no matter how “competent”).

We will not accept anything which we deem to be racist or sexist in its intent.”

We stated that our criteria for acceptance addressed such questions as these: “Is the piece effectively conceived and rendered? is it well-written? interesting? unusual? memorable? Does it lead us, as readers, outside of itself and into the world, or, perhaps deeper into ourselves for greater self-understanding? Do we feel that the piece has taken us anywhere? moved us? given fresh insight? Has it provided something to make it worth that portion of our life-time that we have spent with it?” We feel that writers have the obligation and duty to ask such questions of their work before they submit it to be considered for possible publication. As editors, we feel that we had the obligation and duty to ask the questions on behalf of our readers.

With these criteria guiding us, we accepted for publication a little less than 2% of what was submitted. Looking back over the thirteen issues, we feel that we maintained a consistently high level of excellence; and that the literary quality of the works speaks for itself.

Similarly, we took pains to present the selected works in an esthetically pleasing manner. The tabloid format, where each page had an image field 15 5/8 x 9 3/4 inches, provided us an opportunity to experiment with layout and design. With prose fiction, a columnar arrangement was necessary to make manageable the length of the reading-line. However, since poems (with their variable lengths, widths, and shapes) enjoyed great freedom of placement, it was possible to create with them—perhaps intermingled with interesting graphics—patterns and thematic groupings. Each page presented its own cognitive and visual problem(s) to solve, as did each double-page spread

Since we thought that our precursors using the tabloid format, ***American Poetry Review*** and ***Poetry Now***, were unimaginative, dull, and pedestrian in their design, Scrimgeour and I decided before setting to work

on the first issue that we would attempt to create in the **Forum** a magazine which could serve as a model of layout and design for other literary editors who wished to use the tabloid format.

Randall Blaser, a journalist friend who helped us lay out the first issue, taught us that design features should not call attention to themselves unless there is a good reason for them to do so; rather, they should simply serve their purpose of presenting and highlighting the content material in the most effective manner possible. Certainly they should not be so noticeable as to distract readers from the material being presented. Bad design, he said, immediately calls attention to itself; good design typically does not: it merely creates a pleasing and satisfying effect which facilitates the reader's engagement with the presented material, remaining itself "invisible" until consciously analyzed. Since most readers read for content and not to analyze features of design, they are not *consciously* aware of how things are being presented, but only that things are going smoothly to provide a pleasing experience.

We took this lesson to heart, and over several issues evolved a philosophy productive of layouts which (we felt) met Blaser's criteria for good design. Capitalizing on the opportunities the large pages offered, we strove for a clean, open look with as much white space as possible, avoiding crowding, and clutter, ambiguity and confusion, always restricting lines and boxes and other potential graphic distractions to a minimum. It was the *literature* we were showcasing, not the layout. To give the **Forum** a unique visual identity and to provide readers with a sense of continuity from issue to issue, we established certain recurrent features we consistently employed: a bold graphic image of our Pikestaff logo spanning the top of each double-page spread; page-numbers at the bottom center; editorial comment boxed and minimal; text fonting initially IBM-Selectric Prestige Elite, later 11-point New Century Schoolbook; authors' names in Times 18-point italic bold; titles in Times 12-point bold caps; department headings (REVIEWS, REFLEXIONS, etc.) always identical in appearance. And recurrent graphics: the two kings on the CONTENTS page; the pike frying the man; the smiling little warrior carrying his pike-staff into battle. We sought original drawings both for illustration and ornament, and the pre-printed clip art we used was unusual, exotic, modified, and assembled into unique collages. We feel that the **Forum** came out looking pretty good—able indeed to serve as a model for other tabloid editors.

From the start, we wanted **The Pikestaff Forum** to be a magazine "with a difference": one where everyone was welcome to submit, and all submitters were treated the same way—with courtesy, respect, and fairness

—no one had “an inside track” on having work accepted, and no one need fear rejection through prejudice or favoritism. For a piece to be accepted, both Scrimgeour and I had to concur. (Each of us had pieces rejected we very much liked because the other did not like them as well. The mutual agreement required for acceptance did serve to augment quality, and to counterbalance the quirks of editorial bias.) We resolved to answer every submission with a personal letter—not with a perfunctory acceptance note or a cold pre-printed rejection slip. When submissions were rejected, the letter would contain reasons for the decision and, frequently, suggestions for improving the work. As editors, we saw ourselves not merely as gatekeepers to the world of print, but as trained readers and critiquers with both an educational role in helping (yes, *helping*) our submitting colleagues to become the most effective writers they could be, and a literary/political role in bringing their best works (and only their best) before the public.

Scrimgeour and I wrote hundreds of these personal letters; and then sometime in the 1980’s, long after he had left Illinois for Connecticut, become Chair of the English Department at Western Connecticut State University and editor of ***The Connecticut Review***, the task eventually devolved upon me alone. He continued to participate in selecting which works would be accepted for publication and continued to share in policy decisions, but the initial reading of manuscripts, letter responses, book-keeping, tax returns, day to day operations, design, layout, pasteup, printing, sales, distribution, and fulfillment of subscriptions became my responsibility.

Responding to submitters with personal letters—many of them lengthy, with detailed critiques and suggestions—required an enormous expenditure of time and energy. I attempted to get responses out within three months of receipt of submission, but with everything else that I was doing in my life, this response time sometimes extended to as much as five months. For nearly twenty years there were always **The Boxes** full of manuscripts either to be read or responded to. Rarely, rarely did I ever catch up and clear the decks. (This isn’t a complaint, but merely a description of the way it was.) As I look at our files stuffed with thousands and thousands of onionskin copies of letters, I think this commitment did make the ***Forum*** a magazine “with a difference”. And, I hope, a useful one.

Was the commitment worth the expenditures it entailed? A question difficult to answer. I can’t speak for Scrimgeour; but for me, there were benefits: sharpening of my skills in close reading, critical judgment, and articulating concisely and clearly rather abstruse issues of logic, rhetoric, metaphoric imaging, and esthetics (which materially has improved my own

writing and self-editing); being able to engage in dialogue with a large number of interesting people in all parts of the nation (some of whom became my friends); a sense that I was doing something important by way of education and empowerment, of giving young and beginning writers encouragement and external validation, of doing my share to strengthen poetic sensibility and deepen people's understanding of the human condition and of community in changefull, difficult, and dangerous times. It gave me pleasure and a sense of political relevance and personal fulfillment to be an independent publisher participating in the small press movement and thus making a contribution uniquely mine to the cultural and political health of American society.

But if there were benefits, there were also significant costs: a loss of time that could have been spent in my own writing and other meaningful activities, including family life; a continuous state of stress occasioned by the never-ending flood of manuscripts to be read and responded to, and by the necessity of getting the next issue off the press and mailed because some contributors had been waiting perhaps as much as two years since their work had been accepted; the onerous necessity each year of filing corporate tax returns (a loathsome job).

Weighing the benefits and costs, I guess I'd have to say, Yes, it was worthwhile to undertake the writing of personal detailed responses. Only seven writers fired back angry or hostile replies accusing me of ignorance, stupidity, or worse for not understanding their poems or of arrogant impertinence or patronizing gall in offering them suggestions for improvement. On the other hand, I've received about forty letters thanking me for having taken the time and shown the consideration to write a personal letter; these typically express appreciation for my having made suggestions for improvement. Many of these people said that they had rarely if ever encountered such a response from an editor before. For them, at least, the Forum was a magazine "with a difference". And this tells me that we succeeded in yet another of our goals—a major one, which the personal letters were instrumental in achieving.

In 1991, however, I found myself overwhelmed by a variety of circumstances not related to publishing and, after fourteen weeks, I ceased writing the detailed personal responses. I printed up courteously-worded rejection slips which left ample room in the margins for short personal notes and began using these routinely. None of our old friends or new acquaintances complained.

The need Scrimgeour and I had for independence went beyond financial considerations (which I mentioned earlier). We desired the **Forum**

to be free-standing, utterly autonomous, and remote from institutional entanglements of any sort. We maintained this fierce go-it-aloneism until issue # 9 (which appeared in the Fall of 1988). I was still teaching in the English Department at Illinois State University, and the Department gave me access to a Macintosh SE computer for that issue and to a laser-printer for headings and authors' names. Subsequently, as the Department's Publications Unit and Center for Contemporary Literature were organized, and a variety of journals and book-publishing imprints were pulled under a single umbrella, the **Forum** joined these others to obtain "free" student help, computer fonting, laser-printing, promotion, display at book fairs, and office space. In exchange for these services, the English Department was able to list the **Forum** as one of the publications issuing from the department, and we agreed to run a thank-you note in each number acknowledging their support. Fiscally and editorially we remained independent. Minimal entanglements, we feel

We set out to be an inclusive magazine, welcoming all to submit who had something they wished to say. As a general rule, we did not run contributors' biographical notes since we were far more interested in authors' present works than in their résumés, previous publications, prizes and awards, where they lived, and whether they had children, spouses, cats or dogs. Although we didn't make a point of discovering anything about their ethnic, racial, religious, or political class-memberships, they frequently supplied us with such information, and we sometimes knew things about them from other sources. About many, however, we knew and still know very little.

We do know that we've published men, women, people of color (native and foreign)—African, Asiatic, Latino, Native American); young, old, middleaged; gay and straight, urban and rural; Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, animist, agnostic, and atheist. We've published the work of prisoners; photographic essays on Haiti and Honduras; in-depth essays on literary activities in France and Georgia (the former Soviet Socialist Republic). And: the work of 142 young people.

From the start, we were committed to the YOUNG WRITERS feature, which ran in every issue. We felt that the validity of children's perceptions should be affirmed, and their expression of those perceptions celebrated. In 1977, there were very few publications of national distribution which showcased the writing of children. Encouraging young people in their literary expression and bringing their work before adult readers seemed to us two of the really important things the **Forum** could do. As the years went by and increasing numbers of parents and teachers learned of the feature, more

and more young people submitted their work. As editors, we always found their submissions stimulating, and many adult readers have found YOUNG WRITERS to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of the magazine.

Two other regular features were THE FORUM, which provided space for anyone to speak out, sound off, express their views, or vent their spleen on matters of concern to contemporary literature, publishing, and the small-press scene, and EDITORS' PROFILES, which gave editors of other literary magazines and small presses an opportunity to explain in their own words "what they look for in submissions, their likes and dislikes, critical biases, editorial philosophies, and the special requirements of their magazines and presses." In nineteen years, we published 52 profiles, from magazines and presses encompassing a broad range of styles, concerns, and specialized interests. We always enjoyed learning how other editors viewed their task, and greatly appreciated their humor and good will.

In closing, I would like to express my thanks to the many people who have provided encouragement and material help in sustaining **The Pikestaff Forum**, those who submitted their work for consideration, those who purchased, read, and critiqued the magazine, and those who generously provided monetary and other types of support to the enterprise. A partial listing of the latter would include my co-editor Jim Scrimgeour and his wife Christine (who serves on the Pikestaff board of directors), my wife Marilyn, and my sons David and Allan, who contributed original artwork; Charles Harris, former Chair of the English Department at Illinois State University, and Ron Fortune, the current Chair; Associate Editors Jim Elledge, Curtis White, and James McGowan; Jean C. Lee, former Coordinator of the Publications Unit at ISU, and David Dean, the current Coordinator; Randall Blaser, my first instructor in layout and design; and student helpers Cami Lobb and Gail Gaboda. There are many, many others who could be mentioned, including the friends I made among the writers whose work crossed my desk. I will always cherish the warm sense of camaraderie I have experienced as editor of the **Forum**.

As editor, my biggest regret is the length of time it took to get individual issues out. We originally had hoped to publish two issues a year. This was never achieved until these last two (#s 12 and 13), both in 1996. Our format required a large number of acceptances in a variety of departments. Since our acceptance-rate was a little below 2% of submissions (in all categories), it took a long while to build an issue. After issue # 1, Scrimgeour moved to Connecticut, and layout, design, and production fell to me alone. Occasionally I had graduate students from Illinois State University to help with certain editorial duties—but on an

irregular basis, and with fairly rapid turnover as they continually moved on. When the writing of detailed response letters also became my nearly single-handed responsibility, production time for the issues lengthened even more. I'm sorry that contributors were forced to wait so long before seeing their work in print, and that subscribers had frequent occasion to wonder what had become of us. I wish it could have been otherwise. I wish to thank *all* of these people—contributors and subscribers—for their patience, good will, and loyalty during the **Forum's** run. I've learned much and think that it's been a good trip. I hope that readers of the **Forum** think so too.

All best,

Bob Sutherland