

The Derelict Narrative: An Account of In/Words by David Emery

University
is high school
after the dumb kids
and the poor kids
are asked to leave the room
and those who are left
(like me)
can whine
how rich we are
how white we are

- Jeff Blackman, "University" (**In/Words** Volume 5.4, March 2006)

That derelict must have seen us through the window. A lot of people saw us through that window. They made goofy faces as they passed, or just stared, mouths agape, trying to read our lips or the expressions on our faces. Your eyes would dart to these people as they walked by during the readings. It was something new to look at, something moving behind all that standing stillness. He must have seen us through the window and wandered into the Avant-Garde out of curiosity. His fevered words about Jesus came quickly. Pete Gibbon and I let him go about five minutes before sidling onstage. It was the only time we'd ever cut anyone off. That was our very first show. I've been to my share of open mics since, and I've certainly heard rants that were more unintelligible. He'd walked right past the sign-in sheet and just grabbed the microphone. What was his name?

There have been a few nice pieces about In/Words popping up lately, and they've mentioned a lot of names. For the moment, let's assume you aren't among the people these articles are spunking. Maybe you just started at Carleton University or just moved to Ottawa. You like to write and you don't know anything at all about communities, and you think maybe you'd like someone to publish your stuff. Man, I've been there. I found out about In/Words in my third undergraduate year, way back in 2004. Here are three names that don't get bandied about all that much: Claudia Sicondolfo, Carlie Hopper and Mandy McIlveen. These ladies were on the In/Words editorial team circa Year 4 of the mag's tenure and were gracious enough to publish a short story I sent in.

It was an amazing feeling. Seeing your stuff in print hits you like a drug, to tax a familiar simile. Every writer has that moment when they look at the thing they've written for a solid minute, basking in the sensation that now that it's out there, anyone has the potential to see it, connect with it, understand it. Twenty blocks away from where you're sitting right now, someone may have a copy of your latest piece on the table in front of them, and they're crying or laughing their heads off over what you have to say. That's a big deal. And boy, if you're a Carleton student,

you drift around those concrete tunnels like you own the place when In/Words' editors see fit to put your little black words against a big white background. I know I did.

In 2005 I took a Canadian poetry course taught by Collett Tracey and didn't open my mouth until the final class, when I was obliged to deliver a presentation on Robert Kroetsch. Collett's class required the strategic placement of footsteps across a minefield of thought, fiery explosions of opinionated delivery exploding one after the other. It made me want to clutch my helmet and suck my thumb. If you're thinking about taking her class, do so. It's terrifying and wonderful. Collett is enamoured and personally tied with Canadian modernism, Contact Press, poets like Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster and all of that really great writing that came out of Montreal during the Quiet Revolution, and her passion for it is infectious.

She's also In/Words' editor-in-chief. After that class, tongue finally untied, I approached her about helping out with the mag. That summer she assembled a group of nine or so to meet at Mike's Place, Carleton's campus bar (the one the grad students hang out in to talk existential detritus over roti; not Oliver's, although Pete, Nick Culhane and I did unwisely stray into Oliver's one night like kittens onto a busy freeway). We all sat around a table, pitching great big ideas. Over the next few weeks the numbers dwindled as the reality of responsibility sunk in. Pete, Nick, Mandy and I stuck around to form the In/Words editorial team, Year 5.

We wanted In/Words to change its relationships with its writers early on. We were going to devote ourselves to providing feedback, even for pieces we didn't accept. After a while the amount of submissions we were receiving made it impossible. The website was made more of a priority. We wanted to publish as much as we could. It helped that a lot of the work coming in was decent enough, or at least according to our sensibilities. Pete and Nick and Mandy were easy people to argue with. Collett always brought us around to the point of it all: writing changes everything. Best to put it out there.

The garish pastel yellow Volume 5.1 was printed at the Staples Business Depot on Bank Street. I think we went in for 750 copies. We also did 50 chapbooks for our open-mic-centred "Out/Words" series, an idea that came up early on but fizzled shortly thereafter. Our lives were later made much easier by the folks at Carleton's Graphic Services. Money, of course, was a necessity. I remember heading to the CUSA office with Nick and Pete and pleading our financial case under aggressive ultraviolet lights. The funding started flowing freely enough to allow us sizable runs. Soon we were carting wagonloads of issues across campus to Collett's office on the 19th floor of Dunton Tower.

The issues didn't look fantastic, but they served their purpose. In/Words has always struggled with its production quality, and many discussions have been had about its format and publication frequency. The two go hand in hand. There's only so much money, and printing in colour was expensive. Ad revenue was out altogether. The

main thing was getting the content out. Having the money and volume we did made us freer with distribution. We talked a lot about the best locations to drop copies – in coffee shops, bars, local bookstores, often beneath the notice of the staffs of these places. Keeping the campus racks stocked became second nature. All we were after was the chance that someone would pick up an issue and be interested enough to pay attention to what we were doing.

Running In/Words was all about baby steps into something bigger. It was focusing on the next thing that would get the name out, and having enough copies wrapped in rubber bands when it came time to get it there. One time Pete and I took an overnight bus to Toronto to claim space at a small press fair. It was still dark when we arrived. Bleary eyed, we hooked up with Nick and killed time eating breakfast burritos at the Eaton's Centre McDonald's. The venue was above Sneaky Dee's at College and Bathurst. Steve Zytveld from Dusty Owl ended up being our tablemate, and he showed us a thing or two about salesmanship and presentation. If you've ever seen Steve in action (and you should – hi Steve!), you'd understand why putting out a mag just because you can isn't enough to make people give a shit, no matter how free the thing is.

Between our distribution efforts and Collett's energy, the mag began to take on a life of its own. That was the year people like Jeff Blackman, Melissa Upfold, Cameron Anstee, Gary Robinson, Ben Ladoceur, Justin Million, Mark Sokolowski and Rachael Simpson started submitting. A lot of these people went on to serve as editors of In/Words and form several of its offshoots. Others like Ian O. Graham, Aaron Clark, Stewart Joyce and Jeremy Hanson-Finger either became devoted contributors or were already. I was a huge fan of Dave Bennett's work. Names, names. Lisa Xing and Kate Maxfield and Jenn Huzera and Stephanie Coffey belong in there too. And Natalee Blagden. And on and on.

We loved their output immensely, to the point where we wanted to meet them and talk with them. We were merciless with our open mic invitations. The last Thursday of every month, we would lug a rudimentary amp and microphone setup into the Avant-Garde Bar and listen as hard as we could, something people in their early to mid-20s can find a great challenge. It helped that we were continually surprising each other, in person and in print.

The idea for the Avant-Garde Bar readings came up at our first meeting. I'd met owner and Russian emigrant Alex Yugin earlier through Esther Splett, one of my favourite writers Ottawa's produced in the last 10 years. Esther was looking for a venue to put on a show, and it took Alex all of two seconds to say, "Shoor, shoor." The thing about Ottawa and venues is that there are always these little pockets becoming available or wanting to try out new things. Back then, if all else failed, 200 people would pack themselves into a tiny living room in some Centretown apartment to watch some obscure band that had driven a shitty van up from Massachusetts or whatever. Alex was clearly the man. Make that the мужчина.

The crowds ran the gamut in size, five people one month, a full house the next, usually dependent on whether the readings fell during exam weeks. I remember those early moments at the bar well, after the machinery was readied, waiting for that first hour to tick by, the editors licking powdered cheese off their fingers, sipping at Baltika or absinthe, being assaulted by Alex's weird Euro music videos, wondering what kind of turnout we'd get. Sometimes people not there for the reading would pack the back of the bar and drown out our tiny amplifier. One night Jeff tore into them, calling them "suits" and screaming NDP endorsements before the microphone made its way back into Cameron's timid hands. In between sets we'd huddle together outside and smoke furiously.

I felt sick to my stomach after those shows were over, like I'd been pushed unceremoniously from a carnival ride and left buzzing, buzzing. I'd often go home and write. It was the only way to calm myself down. Inspiration came fast and furious from that foot-high stage, sometimes in odd packages. One night Kyrie Kristmanson strolled in wearing that funny little hat of hers, and proceeded to knock everybody flat with her singing voice. Sometimes you couldn't believe you got to be in the same room with a person, even if before that night you'd had no idea who they were.

Our busiest reading, and I imagine the busiest in the mag's history thus far, occurred on November 23, 2005. A few weeks earlier In/Words had been contacted by Rich "Buck 65" Terfry's management team, who were aiming to put on a series of free spoken word shows they called "The Rough House Symposium." They'd come across the website and wanted our thoughts on potential venues. In/Words offered its services as a presenter. The next few weeks were spent posterizing and promoting and getting the necessary gear in place. In Volume 5.2, we published the lyrics to four of Terfry's songs. The Avant-Garde was filled that night to the point of illegality. You couldn't turn around. Rich did his thing for an hour and everyone went home satisfied as hell.

It's impossible for me to overstate how much that show meant to me. The entire thing came together out of freak happenstance. It wasn't as though Rich was pounding on our door to be published. He was a Juno Award-winning songwriter signed to a major record label. In addition to being an opportunity to meet someone I idolized, it allowed In/Words to associate with something different and to reach a larger audience. Things didn't change immediately after the Terfry show, but I think we had a better sense of the momentum of what we were doing.

I was fascinated by Ottawa's arts community. The city's slam poetry scene was enormous. There was so much going on, but people seemed overly content to stick with their own open mics and shows. I was influenced early on by people like Scott Birdwise, Christopher Rohde and others who started the Judges/Juries/Executioners collective. Every few months those guys would put on a multidisciplinary art show, usually out of SAW Gallery, that included live music performances and artwork and spoken word. Blending the art scenes made

complete sense to me because it meant that something brand new could be created. And I knew from watching other people's efforts that there was a right way and a wrong way to do it. As great as some of the shows and output were, there was also a whole lot of flailing and starving for context and tossing shit at the wall. During a reading I did at one of the early Nomad Gallery shows, someone took the stage behind me and had his head shaved, no doubt before reinserting it into his rear end.

I put together a few art shows with a good friend and talented artist, Kathryn Jette. In planning one show I asked nine writers to submit pieces on the last songs they'd want to listen to before dying. The result was a chapbook published through In/Words entitled "Last Tracks." We did a live reading of the book at the Arts Court Theatre on Daly, during which we all stood in a semicircle and took turns as instrumental clips from the songs played over our heads. At another show, members from above/ground, Bywords, Dusty Owl, In/Words and the Puritan's editorial teams were culled together for a mini symposium on Ottawa's small press publishing scene. I wish we'd taken that farther somehow. There will always be more ideas than time.

I think on some level all of the editors wanted to spring In/Words out of Carleton and find it a respectable job. It's not easy to break new ground in any kind of community. Communities come with already established rules and relationships. They come with hierarchies that are fortified by attitudes and tastes and capital-V Visions. The people in these communities can't help themselves. They like to be comfortable. They know where their watering holes are. They get pissed if you accidentally knock their bikes over. But there are also a ton of helpful and friendly people in Ottawa who were very encouraging. In addition to Steve, Catherine McDonald-Zytveld and Kathryn Hunt at Dusty Owl, Amanda Earl at Bywords has been an amazing help to young poets in the city, and the bywords.ca calendar remains an indispensable resource for keeping on top of upcoming literary and other art events. rob mclennan runs the SPAN-O small press fair, which is the single best event in Ottawa for zines and indie publications to raise their attraction signs.

My role at In/Words was probably more of an organizer than a writer, or even an editor. I was big into the design of the issues, getting the shows established and keeping the website updated. Publishing stories and chapbooks was fun, but looking back at the material I wrote, it's clear I needed someone to edit the shit out of it. We should have been more critical of each other. Rejection is a necessary evil in a community. You want to feel accepted and to be accepting, but you also want to better your writing. In/Words did start putting on regular writing circles before long. Brian Johnson and Suzy Waldman ran early incarnations back when the mag was still trying to figure out how to merge with Carleton's English Literature Society. When there's no rejection in a community, smart writers get the sneaking suspicion that the people around them aren't really considering their material. And never knowing whether your stuff is affective is far worse than finding out that it's terrible.

Popularizing In/Words as a viable source of writing talent has always been a struggle. It may always be the lit community's kicking and screaming toddler. To be so is bred in its editors and most of its writers, who spend hours upon hours in English classes learning about What We Know So Far before retiring to their dorm rooms and banging out jagged lines of poetry and prose until 2 in the morning in attempts to seal the deal on the Canadian identity and other affairs once and for all. Many In/Words contributors, to say nothing of its editors, are exhausted and hungry and drunk, so, so drunk. It's a miracle they're keeping their fingers on the keys.

I'm pretty far into this thing and haven't really dished any dirt. There were heated arguments, but I never witnessed any fistfights. Justin has a funny story about relieving himself in a hallway at the Les Suites Hotel across from the Avant-Garde after getting wrecked. There was that party at Mark's place where his muscle-bound roommate brandished a knife and ordered everyone to clear out. One time Pete, Amanda Besserer and I went to the Chapters I used to work at to meet Margaret Atwood. We were hosting a reading that night and invited her out. Her response: "Don't tell anyone I'm here."

Sometimes I wish I'd been able to sign on a year later. When Year 6 started, I continued in a design and layout capacity, but by then I had graduated from Carleton and started working full time and moved on to other projects and wasn't going to campus nearly as much. The team grew in size and commitment, and certain names I've already mentioned comprised the mag's first all-star editor lineup. By the time people like Leah Mol, Jenna Jarvis, Jesslyn Delia Smith, Dave Currie, Bardia Sinaee, Rotem Yaniv and others were taking no prisoners in the basement of the Clocktower Brew Pub, I'd moseyed off to the west coast. Cameron started Apt. 9 Press. Jeremy started Dragnet. Pete started Conduit Canada. We're all still plugging away, in one way or another.

In/Words has been getting a bit of attention lately because it's produced some terrific writers. What matters most for a small mag, whatever its type, is the quality of the writing. There are a billion literary mags, and reading them all is beyond the scope and interest of the average reader and importantly the average writer. Changing technology has made that especially true. Communities are great for distilling the voices of the people around you from all of the noise. Another essential ingredient is promotion. The only way you get people to read the writing is to show it to them. You promote by building a reputation and never, ever stopping. Social media has become In/Words' best friend. For all its great, not-so-great and downright weird ideas, I'd like to think the mag's reputation is one of acceptance and an unparalleled drive to put words in people's faces.

Back to the uninitiated. If you've made it this far without being bored to tears by this laundry list of names and places you've never heard of, take this away: Canada needs young writers. Holy shit, does it ever need young writers. Young editors, too, and young people in general to burn convention to the ground, or at least reshape it. This will always be In/Words' greatest asset, hands down. The In/Words crew is a

bunch of little punks, and always will be, and they want to recruit you for their new world order. Send them your manifesto and they'll point you toward the microphone.

Collectives are sexy, aren't they? Although we're drawn to the romantic ideals they suggest, I think most people and especially modern day Canadians tend to regard them with skepticism. But these are the ideals that are hammered into heads behind university walls, voiced in too-important conversations shoved along by rookie smokers' coughs, ricocheting off the textures of shabby overcoats and punctuated by the sound of a closing O-Train door. Carleton has a de facto collective, one that's ever changing and ever willing to explore new ideas. Hopefully its members will continue to freeze their asses off on a downtown Ottawa street in the middle of January between sets for the good of the nation's words. And to give the derelicts a fair shot.

*David Emery lives in Vancouver, but still visits Ottawa once or twice a year for old time's sake. He is the publisher and editor of *The Steel Chisel*, launching March 13 at www.thesteelchisel.ca and bringing the total literary mag count to a billion and one.*