

Readings can launch us into the sudden miracles of literature

From the raunchy Rex to the austere Harbourfront

by Michelle Hammer

Where can you spend an interesting evening in Toronto without spending mega-bucks?

This winter, I cruised the literary reading scene on a low budget, sampling three different venues, the raunchy Rex, the Bohemian Embassy and the austere Harbourfront. I found that magic moments with an author can launch us into the sudden miracles of literature.

Poetry isn't dead. It's alive and well at the Rex, a bar on Queen Street West, where once a month on a Monday night owner Bob Ross and emcee Sahara Spraklinn present an evening of music and poetry. If you live on the wild side of life and like a beer with your art, come to the Rex.

Crad Kilodney, a self-published author, is setting up background music for his reading, oblivious to the noise around him. Emcee Sahara is warming up the audience:

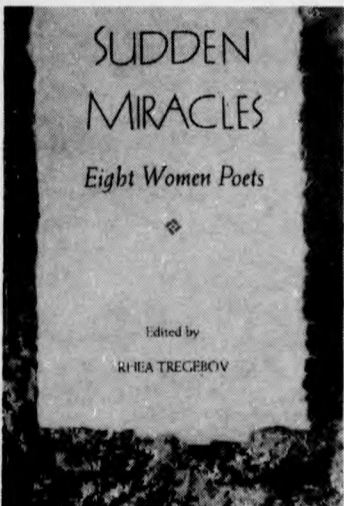
"Crad, what is your love status?" "It's private," he grumbles.

Sahara doesn't give up: "Who wants to know what his love status is?"

Sahara's outfit is flamboyant: a tight black skirt slit at the sides showing black panties, and a revealing bra under a leopard jacket — is this the latest in obligatory Queen Street attire?

When Kilodney reads, his face contorts, his voice spewing city by-laws. He rambles on. Beer jugs circulate among a happy, talking audience. Someone yells: "Shut up!"

He doesn't. There is a background music of city noises: bicycles, cars. The music begins to sound better than the poem. It ends. Hands clap. Sahara is back on stage, spouting the F-word. Someone in the audience responds.



READINGS

Looking for something exciting and inexpensive to do? Have you ever considered a literary reading?

"You want to come up and say it on the stage?" she dares him. He walks slowly up and says it into the microphone. The F-word. The audience cheers loudly. He fades away.

Sahara to the audience, while waiting for the next reader: "Are you men wearing any underwear?"

It reminds me of a Saturday night at the Winter Garden, where Sandra Shamas started her one-woman show with a pair of men's underwear on the stage. Could this be a new trend emerging in Toronto?

Sahara calls Georgio de Chico to the stage: "Get your Italian ass over here."

I like his poems about men and women. The fellow at the next table wants to know: "Are you being polite, or did you really like it?"

The next reader is an angry young poet, and again the F-word is dished up. She screams. She moans. The audience cheers. When she tells us, between lines, that she needs a drink, a beer appears at her side. There is something raw and open in her poems, life hurting to the bone, a heart bleeding on the stage.

As she walks off, she is given a five dollar bill, the standard wage for Monday night readers.

The midnight crowd is lively when Karl Jirgens, publisher and editor of *Rampike* and professor at the University of Toronto, reads a short story about sneakers, an iceberg and a child's fantasy about a gigantic penis. It becomes extremely difficult to listen as some people get rowdy.

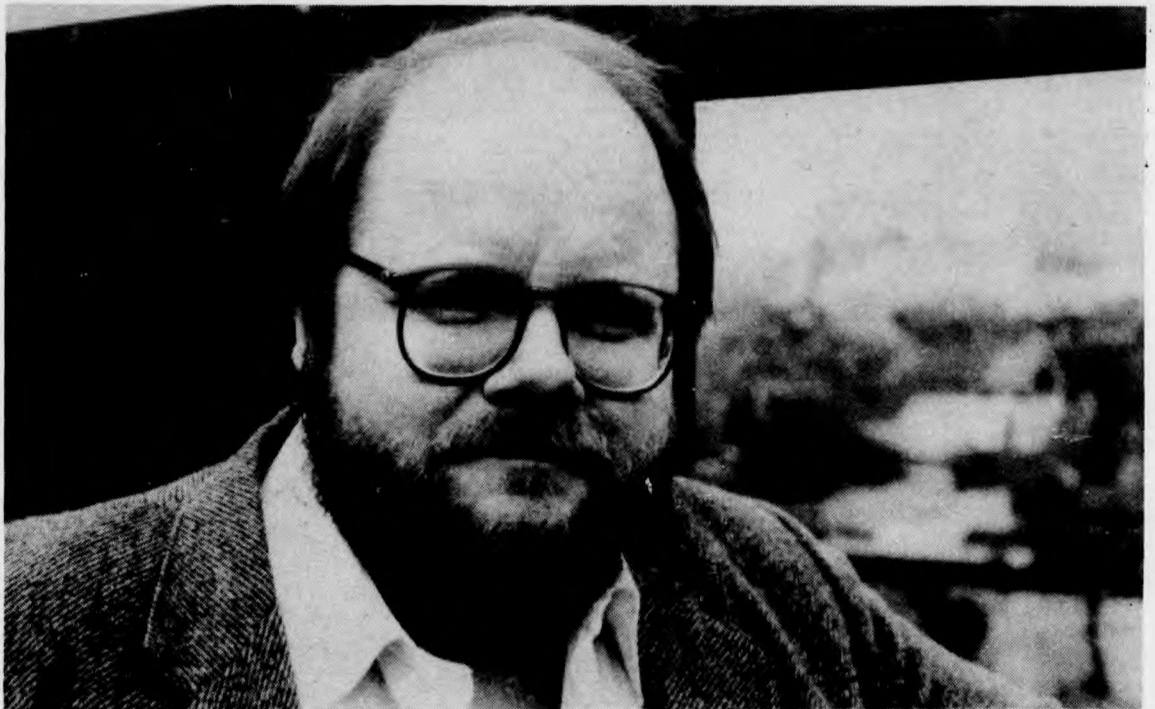
At the table next to me, the guy who liked Kilodney drops inert on the table while his girlfriend goes out for a pizza. When she comes back with a large slice, she opens a Loblaw's plastic bag containing potato chips. "Can I have some?" someone beside her asks; a stranger, but she doesn't mind. She says yes.

I remember the chat I had with Jirgens just before the reading at the Rex. He talked about the different places he had read, and the benefits reading has for writers: "It's a good way to get an instant reaction, because it sometimes takes as much as six months to a year to get a critical response."

"I played some really nice venues like Harbourfront. You get completely different reactions, but, if your writing is good, that's what really matters. Unless they are really drunk... a drunken audience (is) really hard to read to."

VENUES

The Rex: 194 Queen Street West, 598-2475. No cover charge.
The Bohemian Embassy: 318 Queen Street West, 586-9911. Monday night readings: open set (anyone can read!); Thursday night readings: \$5 cover.
Harbourfront Reading Series: Brigantine Room, York Quay Centre, 235 Queens Quay West, 973-4760. Annual membership: \$40.



Greg Gatenby took over the Bohemian Embassy's literary readings when they moved to Harbourfront; since then, his events have boasted an unprecedented number of internationally renowned authors. If the seriousness of Harbourfront scares you, the Rex offers a raunchy atmosphere for such readings, with the Bohemian Embassy falling somewhere between the two.

You can say that again!

Thursday night. I walk up narrow steps that take me to the Bohemian Embassy at Queen and Spadina. I find myself in a cafe setting — and stop to buy a ticket.

There is an entrance fee of \$5.

"Do you have \$5?" asks white-haired Don Cullen, one of the original owners.

"What if I don't?"

"There have been a few, you know, people with good stories that didn't pay."

I don't have a good story, so I dish out a \$5 note. I pass on the deserts, but get a cup of coffee.

The Bohemian Embassy is the archetypal 1960s coffee house. This is where Margaret Atwood gave her first poetry reading. There was an attempt to bring its reading series to Harbourfront, Greg Gatenby took over and the rest is history. In 1991, Cullen resurrected the Bohemian Embassy, with Anita Keller as literary programmer.

Tonight, black-clad with dangling jewelry, Keller introduces the evening as "a mini-feast of Canadian authors."

She introduces Rhea Tregebov, editor of *Sudden Miracles*, a book of eight woman poets, three of whom are to read tonight. She talks about how the book came into being.

First poet: Roo Borson.

In the casual atmosphere of the Bohemian Embassy, the poet is allowed to explore with the audience the "why" behind each poem. Sometimes it seems like a gathering of old friends.

Roo tells us she wrote "Stone Orchard" when she lived in Timothy Findley's country home. A minute later, she adds that Findley was away, and she goes on about taking care of

his 33 cats. What emerges with each poem is how she experiences the world we enter, feel with her, then leave.

Susan Glickman is next. Different personality, different approach to poetry. She captivates us with the poem "Henry Moore's Sheep." It is a challenge to read, but she illustrates it with her hands so we can see and hear it at the same time.

"sheep sheep

lamb/sheep

sheep

sheep/lamb

sheep/lamb
Henry's notebook records
the holy families
of the fields."

I get a sense of Glickman that is encapsulated in the introduction to her poems in the book: "I don't consider myself 'grown.' To envision oneself as finished is a failure of imagination."

"Individual poems may end but poetry does not. Poetry is a form of discovery which both observes and participates in the process of becoming. But why poetry? Because we don't just want to walk, we want to dance!"

Glickman leads us in a dance while reading; her dance becomes ours, if only for a few precious moments.

Anne Michaels is the last, because she gets nervous reading her work. Her shy smile and soft eyes are deceiving; her strength comes forth as soon as she starts reading. We go way beyond her fragile, elegant looks into a miracle of words. I admit being in a trance, hypnotized, while the words roll like music.

Tuesday night at Harbourfront. I have come to hear Michael Frayn, an English writer, playwright and journalist who has been quoted in *The Star* as saying: "I don't actually like reading. I don't read very well."

My curiosity is aroused.

The respectable looking audience is very attentive. The evening starts interview-style with former *Star* critic Robert Crew and Frayn around a coffee table, unusual for the formal reading series.

They weave in and out of Michael's days as a reporter for the London newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Observer* in an easy-going manner.

At one time, he was having difficulties interviewing people. Con-

fronting Allan Edmonds, a reporter and friend, he got this advice: "You can make up the quotes, unless you talk to a bishop."

The audience laughs.

The moral of the story: as he learned to make up fictitious characters and fictitious quotes, he changed from reporting to fiction.

Surprise. Frayn will read a short story. The audience, warming up to him, cheers.

He starts with an anecdote: before coming to North America on this tour, he was interviewed by the CBC in an unstaffed booth in London. He thought it was a strange and spooky experience, being alone in the booth, when he looked outside and saw the light go on in a flat and a young woman undressing.

"It is something that happens in movies or novels, and it's never ever happened to me in my life, before or since. In normal circumstances, being a polite, well brought up boy, I would have turned and looked away, but there was nothing else to look at."

"It was extremely hard —" audience roars — "to turn my eyes away, and extremely difficult to talk about post-structuralism. And I thought that while I was here, I should go to the CBC and ask if it had been recorded and what was coming out in Toronto while the interview was taking place, because I don't have the faintest idea."

There was more laughter.

The voice lifts the words off the page, intimately engaging the reader in the experience. A simple event such as a blackout at dinner is turned into a riveting mystery in the hands of a skilled story-teller.

It opens a door into the world of a writer.

The godfather of the Harbourfront reading series, Greg Gatenby, was quoted as saying: "Going to a reading is on a par with going to the opera, or ballet, or theatre."

Only cheaper. For a mere \$40 a year, you can attend Harbourfront's weekly readings with known and soon-to-be known writers.

Gatenby is direct. He is witty. In 1975, he took over the reading series and made it into what Robertson Davies calls "the most successful reading series in the English speaking world."

Gatenby, once called the Johnny Appleseed of books, sums it up: "To do the job, you have to be Messianic, you have to make people see the excitement."

That he does.

Writer Nino Ricci gives the other side of readings

I heard Nino Ricci for the first time at Harbourfront before he won the Governor General's Award. I had the opportunity to ask him a few questions after his reading to a large, enthusiastic York audience on a cold February afternoon. I wanted to know what he thought of literary readings.

Michelle Hammer: Are literary readings beneficial for the writer or the audience?

Nino Ricci: Both. For instance, at the Harbourfront readings, I have been exposed to a lot of writers I would never otherwise have picked up. I get a snatch of the

writing, some sense of what they are about. I always found it useful to go to the readings to see the living writer, to believe there was a real person behind these works.

Does the reading help the writer?

Yes. Some enjoy them, they have a sense of performance. It's the only time as a writer that you get an immediate audience reaction. So much time is spent writing alone, with such a distance between what you do and someone's reaction to it, that it's nice to have a sense of people out there listening.