

Marketing a writing talent against the odds

by Alec Bruce

While the world may love lovers, writers get the respect. Especially if they're successful. A writer's words can have more impact than the most powerful bomb. But anyone who tries writing for money will tell you it's an agonizing business. Even a seasoned writer asks himself after every completed page, "How good is this? Can I sell it?"

In theory, editors are always looking for good stuff to print, but if your manuscript gets dumped on an editor's desk along with ten others just before deadline, don't be surprised if it is back in your hands within a week. The rejection may have little to do with the quality of your prose. The factors that determine whether or not a writer gets published are both legion and changeable. Each new work means a fresh battle against the odds of publication.

The situation then is not pleasant for promising scribes, and it helps explain why there are so many closet writers in the world. The Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia says this doesn't have to be the case. According to President Jim Lotz, "People don't know the market they're writing to. Some people don't define their goals. We aim to articulate the concerns of Nova Scotian writers at all stages in their careers."

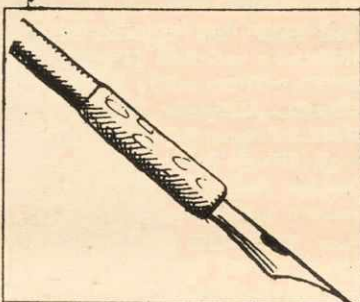
Tucked away in a corner of the Halifax office of the provincial cul-

tural federations, the Writers' Federation exudes an aura of anonymity. The atmosphere is appropriate. Of the 535 members paying an annual fee of \$12.00, only 86 actually qualify to sit as professional writers on the council board. The rest are hobbyists mostly, like the clergyman who's certain he'll write the great Canadian novel just as soon as he finds a publisher willing to advance him a year's expense money. Or the housewife from Cumberland County, who's convinced her 8-year-old son is the next Lord Byron. She's having trouble finding a suitable market for his work. People with dreams — but with no means to realize them — make up most of the membership. According to Mr. Lotz, "Anyone who chooses to be a writer takes a risk, but sympathetic editors are in very short supply down here. There have been some superb pieces written here, but you couldn't get a best-selling author to publish in Nova Scotia."

Everything from the rules of membership to the powers of the governing bodies reflects the Federation's devotion to the unknown writer. For example, to become a member, you need only prove you are a practicing writer. This amounts to showing the council you have been published. It doesn't matter if you write full time or part time, or how often or in which publications your work appears. What

does matter is that you practice your craft. If you want to help run the daily operation, then admission into the executive branch of the council is essential. But, even here, the outstanding qualification is not literary accomplishment but dedication and organizational talent. All 535 members pay the same fees, have access to the same services, have suffrage during elections, and may attend annual meetings.

Not only in its composition but



also in its aims, the Writers' Federation works for the unknown writer. Everything is geared to make the market accessible, to sustain the connection between the writer and his source of income. The central office is open five days a week, and its information on markets, literary events, seminars and workshops is free. A willing staff provides expert advice on everything from manuscript design to copyright law. The annual general meeting usually

occurs in June, and it allows members from different parts of the province to trade notes on markets and experiences. But the most important event of the year is probably the Literary Salon. Every fall, the Federation brings together members, publishers and editors to discuss writing trends, what sells and what doesn't, and options for the unemployed writer.

But the Federation is not just a resource center. It seeks to encourage interest and talent from all over Nova Scotia. It does this through several support services. One of the most effective is the Writer-In-Community program. More or less evenly distributed through Nova Scotia are writers, appointed as regional representatives of the Federation, who are available to chat about anything having to do with writing. The Federation also helps the beginning writer with its Manuscript Reading Service. Most unpublished writers lack confidence, and the Federation tries to treat this with objective and professional criticism of members' work. According to Mr. Lotz, "Quality control is one of our primary aims. Through meetings, workshops, seminars, criticism and other services we hope to inform and educate local writers."

Competitions are among the most visible and lucrative services offered to members. Every spring, the Federation accepts manuscripts

in all categories of writing and judges them. Awards are made at the general meeting. Perhaps the most prestigious prize the Federation offers is the Evelyn Richardson award for outstanding non-fiction. The winner gets a hefty trophy and a tidy \$500.00.

The Writer's Federation assumes all writers are equal. It's therefore tempting to shrug it off as just another friendly society. After all, you can't equate good and bad writing. But this isn't the kind of equality the Federation promotes. It addresses the inequities external to all writers, such as the unequal distribution of markets and incentives. In the words of Jim Lotz, "It sets the writer into his own community so that he can see that he is a part of a larger artistic community. As it is now, it is very much a matter of who you know in the business. Agents are scarce in Nova Scotia."

Such successful writers as Silver Donald Cameron, Spider Robinson and Farley Mowat no longer need to worry about where to sell their stuff. But they know what it's like for a novice to have the Writer's Federation to turn to: they're all members in good standing.

(Alec Bruce, a new Gazette staff writer, worked with the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia over the summer.)

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