

LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

MAGAZINES

Mainstream to the mudstream

By STUART ROSS

Literary magazines, or 'small mags,' are the sign of healthy literary activity. But how can something so healthy be so bad for you? A quick glance through the small mag shelves shows you that **anything** can get published **somewhere**. Hopefully, though, some great, or at least nifty, stuff will rise majestically through the glut of sludge.

The range of these magazines is incredible, as can be seen from the titles alone—**Poetry** at one end of the spectrum and **Jukebox Terrorists With Typewriters** at the other. Some claim to represent the mainstream of contemporary poetry and fiction and some revel in their obscurity, proud of their readership of eight (excluding the editor's mother).

In the small sampling that follows, I have tried to be as positive as possible. I'm examining the mainstream as well as the mudstream, and the first rule is: most of it stinks. But much of the excitement of reading through litzines lies in the spirit of the thing—intentions do play a part in the reader's enjoyment. An elegantly produced volume that flashes its 'big names' like flaccid genitals, or that claims to be the saviour of the literary world, puts me off with its grating pretentiousness. It's boring. I'd rather watch **Charles In Charge** reruns. But a grotty, little photocopied 'zine, filled with frighteningly uneven work, will often have a real feeling of sincerity and adventure, and I sympathize and enjoy.

The terrifying triumvirate of the Canadian mainstream have all put out recent issues with something to recommend them. The new **Poetry Toronto**, usually filled with homey, boring poems and very useful literary calendars and 'market' info, this month (Nov. '87) contains a featured selection by Toronto poet Jim Smith. As publi-

sher/editor Maria Jacobs points out in Smith's contributor note, he has slammed **PTO** in other publications, embarrassed at past appearances in the mag. So, although Smith is true slime for submitting his stuff for 'feature consideration,' his poems, selections from his in-progress **Imaginary Life of Leonel Rugama** manuscript, are the best thing to have appeared in **PTO** since the George Miller 'tribute' about eight years ago. Another oddity in this issue is James Deahl's group review of 10 recent poetry chapbooks. In the introductory ramble, Deahl writes, "Few have done more for the chapbook in Canada than Sheila Martindale of South Western Ontario Poetry. Martindale has been grinding out chapbooks for a decade. It is fitting that four of the ten reviews that follow are of SWOP titles." Strange then that the four SWOP reviews are all pans. The poems are "slight, superficial," "do not get the job done," "not poetry at all [but] a collection of philosophical musings in short lines," and "very average." It's a relief to see Deahl slam them, but one wonders if the stammering preamble was an editor's apologetic insert.

Cross-Canada Writer's Quarterly (edited by Ted Plantos) always seems to have scores of little articles that only skim the surface of their subjects. The new issue, Vol. 9, Nos. 3/4, is a semi-exception. Half this issue is devoted to "experimental poetry in Canada," and half to "Arts Funding & The Canadian Literary Writer." The poetry section contains a bunch of often interesting, but overly personal squibs about visual, sound, experimental, and 'computer' poetry. Best is jwcurry's overview of contemporary visual poetry in Toronto, and various of the visual and other 'experimental' poems laced through this section of the mag. The section on funding bored me to tears, but I guess it was informative and

'outspoken' if you're into that sort of thing. **CCWQ** also reviews fiction and poetry. These reviews are a notch above the **Toronto Star's** small press 'reviews,' but tend to be overly generous. Toronto poet Shaunt Basmajian's Chapbooks Reviews column is always interesting, but far too often unreliable.

The once-leadenly boring **Poetry Canada Review** has been steadily improving over the last few years, especially under the editorship of Bev Daurio. The Fall '87 issue is, as always, chock full o' poems, reviews, columns and little pictures of the columnists to help you decide whether or not you agree with them. This tabloid tends to jam as much as possible onto each page, which, in the case of the poems, becomes something of an assault. The poetry in here numbed me, but I'm sure if I could have held my concentration there would have been some stuff to recommend. An interesting new regular feature is bpNichol's 'grOnk piggyback series,' in which bp gets a whole page with which to inflict his concrete aesthetics on the mainstream. Unfortunately, this issue's Penn Kemp feature doesn't work for me at all. There are piles of reviews in **PCR**, and though the quality is pretty hit-and-miss, the section must be praised for its sheer volume and regularity. You'll have better luck with the columns and interviews: David Donnell's "The U.S." makes me bristle, but he's always interesting and thought-provoking; Peter Robinson's column on the U.K. leans towards the established Faber & Faber-types, but he is articulate, sharp-eyed, and can make rhyming stuff sound worth looking for; Libby Scheier's piece on "Writing and Gender" is one of the highlights here—a fairly comprehensive overview of women in Canadian

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Casto takes charge

By BLAIR COSGROVE

This year, Professor Robert Clayton Casto replaced Matthew Corrigan as co-ordinator of York's Creative Writing Programme. In this position, Casto juggles the bureaucracy of three departments: Humanities, Arts and Fine Arts. "I'm really enjoying it. It's a balancing act and I try to be one step ahead," he said.

York's Creative Writing programme was established in 1975 and is becoming very well-known. The faculty includes respected and influential writers such as, Don Coles, Frank Davey, Don Summerhayes, Matthew Corrigan, Susan Swan and bpNichol. "There is a need to bring more full-time faculty aboard and this is still being negotiated," according to Casto. He also feels that more female full-time professors would enhance the programme.

Casto has been teaching English at York for 17 years. He specializes in the English Romantics: Blake through Keats; but he is especially interested in creative writing. Casto considers himself a "drop of blood" writer. His first book of poetry, **A Strange and Fitful Land**, was published in the States in the '60s. **The Arrivals** was published in 1980. Now he is writing steadily to complete a new book, with a working title "Random Surface."

According to Casto, "the mistake of young poets is thinking that a poem is about something," who is inspired by interesting words, phrases and rhythms—not pre-organized messages; "Each poem should be stylistically different. Every piece should be an experiment."

Casto writes poetry in which traditional metrical patterns are mixed with free verse. A sense of musical rhythm is apparent in much of his work. This is not surprising since Casto has been playing piano for years and began composing and writing short stories before discovering his talent for poetry.

Casto studied English at Yale University and completed a thesis in Spanish music of the late 15th century at Columbia. He received a Masters in Arts and a Masters in Fine Arts at the University of Iowa and was awarded a fellowship to Oxford, where he did his thesis on the poet Shelley. His favourite writers are Gerard Manley Hopkins, W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens.

Casto moved from the States to Toronto in 1970 when he accepted a teaching position at York. He is now a Canadian citizen. "The hardest thing about teaching Creative Writing is dealing with the egos," Casto says. "But this year my class is marvelous," he added, "They [his students] are sensitive, intelligent and hard-working."

Each year, the Creative Writing Programme, under the patronage of the President, offers prizes in four categories, totaling \$1000.00. This year, the poetry judge is Suzanne Collins and the prose judge is Matthew Corrigan. Screenwriting submissions will be judged by Vaclav Taborsky, and Judith Rudakoff is in charge of playwriting. The competition is open to all York undergraduates. Entries are due Jan. 5, 1988, and further details are available from the programme office, Vanier 236.

REVIEW

Miami window to 3rd World

Joan Didion
MIAMI

By MARK KEMP

In 1961 an invasion force embarked from Miami, Florida on the fiasco that would be remembered as the "Bay of Pigs." The American financed and trained army of Cuban exiles didn't imagine at the time that they would spend the next 26 years clinging to their betrayed hope of regaining their homeland, the island just 90 miles from Miami. In 1980, the "Mariel Boatlift" brought another 125,000 exiles to a city which today is 60% Hispanic, most of these Cuban. Spanish has become more than a second language in Miami, and some of the city's most important citizens, including the mayor, are Cuban-born. Yet a mutual distrust and lack of understanding continues to distance the two groups, while the rest of North America seems little concerned with the volatility of this "city open to the convulsions of the Third World," as Joan Didion puts it in her new book, **Miami**.

Hardly the glamorous pastel and neon

southern capital of fashion and rock music portrayed in the television show "Miami Vice," this city has become a hotbed of racial tension. Third World political intrigue, and crime, including the highest rate of assassinations in the U.S.—and, with them, probably the heaviest concentration of CIA agents.

Journalist, essayist, literary critic and novelist Joan Didion has for three decades dissected the American way of life. Her 1982 study of communism vs. democracy, Latin American style, **Salvador**, is in this new book moved closer to home—to a large US city some call "Havana North." The revolution is not forgotten in Miami, and any Cubans who do forget are ostracized from the community of exile, or eliminated more permanently with car-bombs or automatic rifles. It is a community where, after Castro, JFK is the most detested man, the man who promised a free Cuba and then papered over the whole liberation plan. "The guys they [the Americans] call 'Cuban terrorists' are the guys they trained," one exile bitterly tells Didion, referring to the Bay of Pigs invasion force.

As with her other journalistic writing and her novels, Didion creates in **Miami** a strong impression of place, time, emotional atmosphere, and humanity. The weight of names, statistics and incidental observa-

tions (newspaper articles, advertisements, quotes from government reports) with which Didion loads this volume almost overwhelms the reader. This is not an entertaining book of the curl-up-in-an-armchair sort, except perhaps for those who thrive on fierce political journalism.

There is, nevertheless, humour of a subtly ironic kind sprinkled throughout the book. Didion is well-known for her scrupulously sardonic wit, but in **Miami** you have to look for it, in the juxtaposition of the trivial and the powerful, and in what at first glance appears to be her dubious choice of detail. Real estate ads stressing security features such as bullet-proof windows, or drawbridges that form the sole access to classy suburbs built on artificial islands; the framed letter of congratulation from Ronald Reagan to a Miami radio station for its services to the Cuban community (but which in reality is owned by one of the most infamous "Cuban terrorists"); these are the grim ironies that Didion dwells on. And, as readers of her other works know, Didion's command of language is deft and ruthless. The book is filled with colour, and vivid phrasings. In **Miami** Didion breaks down our misconceptions of Miami as a sun and fun boomtown, and erects in its place a picture of the besieged and divided city it really is.

YORK PUBLISHING CALENDAR

Eat Me, Literally Vol 2. No. 2, 25 pp. The special "Short Works" is available for \$1.25 at the York Bookstore. Submit to 1310 Vanier Residence. Editors: Tim Archer, John Barbisan, Glen Gustafson, pmdsheridan.

Existere Vol 8. No. 2, 20 pp. Available at 121, 136 or 132 Vanier, and at the Bookstore. Copies are \$1. Submit to Existere, c/o Vanier College Council, 121 Vanier. Editors: Janet Broomhead, njk and Dave Lomax.

Yak Magazine Vol 2. No. 1, 56 pp. If you haven't got your free copy yet, Yak will be available next week in the Bookstore for \$1. Submit to: 104C Winters, or 257 Concord Ave., Toronto, M6H 2P4. Editors: Sarah Cooper, Michael Redhill.