

EDITORIAL

Blood and Thunder

By Kwame Dawes

Blood and Thunder letters are one of the few indicators to us that students are reading the paper. During the early part of this academic year we were very concerned that we were unable to fill the allocated half page for Blood and Thunder letters. We went through some self appraisal, trying to decide whether we were failing to address issues that related directly to students. The dearth lasted for about three weeks. Finally the letters started to come in when the Student Union/Social Club issue erupted. This was "enhanced" by the controversial personal letter that we inadvertently published; and all of this writing seemed to awake the obviously dormant anti-gay sector into producing their missives.

Is it unreasonable to feel pleased when letters come in to the paper or are we merely moved by a very cosmetic feature of the newspaper business? An important *Brunswickan* critic stated clearly and correctly that we are primarily a newspaper. All other material that is published remains secondary to the fundamental purpose of presenting news to the students. Opinions, letters, distractions, poems, etc. are all important but they don't make the paper. We are a news organ. At the basis of this assertion should be the realization that as long as we are covering important news stories about politics, social life, current events, sports and entertainment on this campus, we are in fact doing our job. We entertain opinions and letters because they represent an important part of the news process. They introduce the element of critique - the factor of the reader reacting to the news.

However, letters and opinions have a more fundamental role in a student paper. The newspaper remains one of the few organs of the student body that reaches such a large cross-section of the populace. It is one of the few ways in which students can openly express their ideas without the scrutiny of professors and teachers. It certainly gives students a chance to delve into ideas that may have no direct bearing on their own academic disciplines. It enacts the important drama of students taking a vested interest in affairs that concern the university where they spend most of their day.

However, opinion columns and letters are difficult to monitor on a university campus because there is often an unavoidable impression among students that the paper is primarily an organ for them to express their views since they pay so much money to see it published. Thus, many groups and societies feel they have a right to space in the paper regardless of whether the material is not what one would regard as normal newspaper fare. Needless to say, they are wrong. The newspaper is exactly that: a newspaper. That is what their funds are allocated for. Despite this fact, they do have every right to demand access to the paper as readers. The paper also has the responsibility to be relevant to students. Finally, the paper must give them a chance to express their views on things that affect them.

So we welcome the letters. However, the letters themselves will be subject to a certain series of criteria. The obvious one is the length, but it gets even more complex. Sometimes letters that have nothing to do with issues dealt with in the paper arrive. Thank you notes, messages to thieves, and letters about international politics are examples of letters we have received that fall into this category. Do we publish such material? We do. We argue that these letters represent the opinions of people in the university community and since we are essentially a community newspaper we should run letters of this nature. However, if we feel that some letters would be best suited for other sections of the paper like the Classifieds, Up and Coming or News, we advise the letter writers as such. Letters that are obviously offensive and clearly that denigrate people because of personal differences, differences of race, sex, and sexual preferences, and letters that are obviously libellous are even more difficult to handle. We seek to avoid utterly offensive material but there is often a fine line to draw when one must decide whether the letter in question contains an opinion that is germane to the larger argument that is ensuing in the paper. However, we often approach the writers and ask them to reconsider publication when we find the material utterly offensive. The letters that express strong anti-gay views sometimes fall into this category. There is a peculiar difficulty here because while we acknowledge that the material may be offensive we have to accede that many of the opinions stated here represent the strongly held views of some of our readers. In the first place we allow some of the material to be published with the hope that others will contribute to the debate and show up the facile nature of some of the writing. We concede, though, that there is a point at which material will just not be published as we acknowledge that there will be letters that would do more damage than good for our readers.

We discourage non-constructive letters but find it very difficult to bar them completely. Similarly, we have no policy about editing letters except when expletives are used and it becomes necessary to make use of dashes to indicate certain words. We have, on many occasions been tempted to stop letters that have been dealing with an issue for far too long. We find this to be difficult so we establish a priority scale. Material that is dealing with newer issues or shedding fresh light on an old issue will get space priority over material that is merely rehashing the same opinions that have been said again and again.

We remain locked in the notion that letters to the editor are crucial indicators of how interested students are in their paper. Thus, we encourage readers to continue to write in to the *Brunswickan*. We are grateful to the many who have written letters to the editor thus far this year and we hope you will continue to do so. I anticipate that the views expressed in this editorial will spur many a writer to respond through a letter. The fact is, we are constantly learning how to handle this volatile organ called the campus newspaper.

The Brunswickan

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