

## Westword Column

### Back at the Writers Union AGM

I used to be a Writers Union AGM junkie. The Union was always able to provide some sort of travel subsidy (100% in the salad days) and, so, many of us non-Ontarians would make the trip east to take part in what was inarguably one of the most important forums in the Canadian writing and publishing world. Besides the Union members – Atwood! Munro! Berton! – there would be publishers on hand, Canada Council officers, and journalists. Those were the days when both the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe & Mail* sent Arts columnists to cover our proceedings. Besides the usual business – committee reports and budget debates – you could always count on something exciting happening *sub rosa*: furious caucusing to block a nomination, conspiratorial motion-amending, rumour-mongering about so-and-so's politics, and gleeful gossip on Sunday morning about who went back to whose room after the banquet and dance.

I stopped going to the AGMs in 2000: organization burn-out, I suppose, and a disappointment that, for all our historic importance, TWUC just wasn't attracting the new generation of writers. I wouldn't be surprised, I said to myself, if the next generation ignores us entirely and sets up its own org, much as TWUC had done while the Canadian Authors Association was still alive and kicking.

But, when I was asked to chair a panel at the 2005 AGM in Toronto, with the promise of a free banquet ticket (!) as well as the partial travel subsidy, I decided it was time for me to check in on my old stomping grounds.

It was a revelation. In 2000, the hope had been to boost our membership numbers to 1000; five years later, it's already 1500. *Some* of them much be younger than 45 – a Vancouver hipster, the debonair Billeh Nickerson, looked 30ish – although the number of AGM attendees is still overwhelmingly grey and wrinkly, clearly veterans of the cultural wars since the 1970s. And the range of activity to which TWUC – its members and staff – still commit ourselves is awe-inspiring.

It's at the business and plenary sessions – as opposed to the receptions and workshops – that you learn the nitty-gritty of Union work. Outgoing chair, Bill Freeman, reminded us in his report that, for all the federal government puts into supporting Canadian publishing (some \$55-60 million annually) and the CBC (about a billion), “a lot of our members are not doing well, financially,” because the royalty system of payment to writers, who are at the bottom of the industry heap, is simply inefficient in redistributing this money to the creators. (Compare this to the negotiated *fees* that writers earn in film and television work.)... New copyright legislation to be tabled in the House of Commons will put additional pressure on creators' capacity to earn a decent buck by recommending “major”

exemptions for educational institutions (read: they photocopy/download our stuff without payment). Librarians have successfully lobbied for the right to digitize and mail, free of charge, any material in their libraries: existing copyright licenses only cover paper copying. Of course there is public demand for this “service,” and as long as libraries don’t charge for it, they are reluctant in turn to pay copyright holders...

Some good news on the Chapters/Indigo front: they have “rationalized” their returns policy and lowered their order numbers, so that publishers, especially the smaller houses, aren’t bankrupted by all those unsold books Chapters/Indigo so blithely returns, never having intended to use them as anything other than wallpaper anyway. On the other hand, the mega-company is still an “erratic” purchaser of regional and gay/lesbian titles....Will Chapters/Indigo survive? In its wake, get ready not for the American mega-bookstore chains such as Borders and Barnes and Noble – our original fear back when Chapters started to wobble – but for Wal-Mart.

Apparently, at the 2004 AGM, there had been feisty talk of a TWUC “boycott” of Chapters/Indigo, to register our distress that our publishers are being asked to pay \$1000-\$3000 to book a reading or signing at the store, or to get a book featured in strategic locations (known as “selling real estate”). But members in 2005 were rethinking such militant behaviour – “this boycott will resemble the initial UN boycott of Iraq which did no harm to Saddam Hussein but which killed babies!” as one woman put it, to dramatic effect – in favour of “pressurizing” badly-behaved stores in the chain to be better examples of Can Lit fandom. There are markets across the country where Chapters/Indigo is the only retail outlet, and a boycott would be counterproductive (dead babies!).

Freelance writers who sell to the Canwest media conglomerate are being required to assign “all rights in all media throughout the universe in perpetuity” to Canwest, including all moral rights, and to sign away the right to be consulted on editorial changes to their work. The Canadian Association of Journalists, we heard, most of whose members work for Canwest, will not act on behalf of its freelance members “nor even invite us to a meeting.” On a more positive note, Heather Robertson reported that a tentative date of January 2006 has been set for the Supreme Court of Canada to hear *Robertson vs Thompson*, her class action suit, ongoing since 1996, to establish creators’ copyright ownership of material posted electronically.

The Writers Union’s role in the Creators’ Rights Alliance means writers are represented when governments and industries talk about copyright. The Union’s Foreign Affairs committee is collaborating with The Council of Canadian Studies and the Department of Foreign Affairs in an exciting initiative to host literary events at Canadian Studies conferences abroad.

And that's just the sexy stuff. The Union also carries on with due diligence the matter-of-fact business of bringing its publications up to date, for example, *Help Yourself to a Better Contract*, of providing free on-line study guides to Canadian-authored books on librarian and teacher listservs, of mediating disputes between members and publishers (TWUC now sends a report of the Grievance Committee's findings to the Canada Council just before the Council makes its decisions on block grants to publishers), and of organizing PD workshops across the country.

I managed to attend two panels, among several sets of workshops on offer (a real embarrassment of riches): "What's Hot, What's Not," a session with publishers; and "A Carnival of Commas," all about punctuation.

From the publishers (Cormorant, HarperCollins and McGilligan Books), I learned that "what's hot" very much depends on what you want to do as a publisher: market international best-sellers or literary fiction or politically-oriented nonfiction. Younger writers are coming up from DIY publishing and the zine world - "graphic novels are important to the current generation" - while at the bigger houses, "narrative nonfiction is the new fiction" and established writers are back, "which is good, since they know what they're doing." *Not* hot are: single-topic nonfiction (good-bye tomes about longitude, or salt, or cod), hockey books and anything to do with personal finance ("it's on the Internet").

Eighty per cent of books in Canada are bought by women; the Toronto Public Library buy women-authored Giller-nominated books in a ratio of ten to one to the male-authored titles; books aimed at men about feelings and sexuality are bought by women who read them for themselves. Book clubs - almost entirely women - are notoriously uninterested in nonfiction. A question from the audience: "What do you mean, that 'readers want to read books that publishers don't want to publish.'" Answers: "Marketing/Sales always has the last word....The truth is that nobody wants to publish a book they can't sell, when each book costs \$20,000-\$40,000 to produce in Canada. It's horrible to have to write out a royalty statement that says, 'Two copies sold.'...Chapters/Indigo *stock* books, they don't sell them....The big houses are chasing trends, the small and medium-sized publishers can take chances."

From the punctuation freaks - a very amusing assembly of novelist/columnist Russell Smith, crime writer Alison Gordon, editor/wunderkind Jennie Worden (five languages!), and publisher Doug Gibson - I learned that, if you care about spelling and punctuation, you may get attacked, as Smith has been by university linguists of all people, for being elitist and classist; that if you don't, you end up with howlers from even the Writers Union (in an email to members): "Canadians go to the poles...in an election who's issues effect you..." etc.

There was much collegial moaning and groaning in this session. It seems we all have to get used to the idea that the distinction between "lie" and "lay" is now lost

forever, that the *Globe&Mail* style-guide has no entry on effect/affect, that editors no longer get their knickers in a knot about split infinitives, and that the horrid non-sexist construction, "Everyone should bring their own lunch," is in fact canonical usage since the time of Skakespeare. On the other hand, do we really have to put up with "a Newfoundland novel in which gnarled old Newfie fishermen refer to each other as 'fishers'?"

The fact that this last question may or may not have been rhetorical is as good a marker as any that the Writers Union of Canada AGM still is doing what it has always done best: provided a place for writers to meet to talk about their obsessions, from copyright to commas. Maybe the Toronto media don't care about what we're up to anymore, but *we* do.

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