

## ISTHMUS | The Daily Page

### Laugh, cry, shout: Madison poetry readings get 'gloriously messy'

by Rosemary Zurlo-Cuva  
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In the fall of 2009, some poets were concerned about the lack of contemporary poetry at the Wisconsin Book Festival. They addressed the omission by putting together a reading of their own. Mainly current and former fellows from the UW creative writing program, they invited friends and favorite local poets, and because it was nearly Halloween, they called the reading Monsters of Poetry. When over 100 people showed up, it dawned on them that they had a monster of a new poetry reading series on their hands.

"We try to upend the stereotype of poetry readings being dusty, moth-eaten affairs," says Adam Fell, one of the founders of Monsters, now a senior lecturer in the Edgewood College English department. He explains that at their readings, people get to "laugh, cry, shout, have a beer or a glass of wine. It can be a night out. It can get a little gloriously messy."

Fell is proud that the Monsters of Poetry readings, usually held at the Project Lodge, have attracted audiences not only from Madison's arts and academic communities, as one might expect, but also from the community at large.

Fell and his compatriots are not alone. Quietly and without a lot of fanfare — these are poets we're talking about here — Madison has become a hotspot for the thrills of live and performance poetry. Pretty much every genre is represented in readings offered by Madison's large community of talented poets and spoken-word artists, some nationally recognized. Poets are also invited in from all over the state and the country.

Poets gave up long ago on the hope that still drives many novelists: that a big publisher's advance might rescue them from their day jobs. For decades now, poets have been bringing their art to the public more in the way of indie musicians, by creating performance events at which they can also sell their books or chapbooks — a sort of poet's equivalent of CDs and concert T-shirts. Except, of course, that the poetry readings themselves are almost always free.

Madison can claim boasting rights as a city with a history of poetry appreciation. It became one of the first in the nation to name a poet laureate when first-term mayor Paul Soglin appointed John Tuschen in 1977. The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets held its first conference at the Memorial Union in 1950, and ever since, its publications, contests, conferences and readings have been glue that holds a good part of the poetry community together.

The UW English department's creative writing program has also been a nexus for the development of poets and new reading series. Its highly regarded fellowship program brings promising students to UW from all over the country, and its MFA program is ranked third nationally by *Poets & Writers Magazine*.

Here's a sampling of places where verse lovers can get their freak on.

**Among the longest-running of Madison's live poetry** events is the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets' **Annual Poetry Marathon**. The 2012 marathon, held at Olbrich Gardens last May, was the 20th. It featured three hours of verse read by poets from all over the state, including Wisconsin poet laureate Bruce Dethlefsen, Madison poets laureate Sarah Busse and Wendy Vardaman, and former Madison poet laureate Andrea Musher. Expect this well-attended event to continue with changing lineups each spring for years to come.

Also sponsored by the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets is a yearly **Winter Festival of Poets**, a series hosted for 10 years by Ron Czerwien at his store, Avol's Books, where it ran Sunday afternoons from January through March. Avol's also hosts open-mike readings on Sunday afternoons at other times of the year. Avol's has merged with A Room of One's Own bookstore; the new storefront at 315 W. Gorham St. opened July 24. The change means Czerwien isn't sure what the next venue for the Winter Festival will be, but we can expect the series to continue.

This summer, Czerwien joins with poet Gay Davidson-Zielske to start a new series of featured readings and open mikes. **Cheap Reads** takes place at 2 on Sunday afternoons at the Fountain, 122 State St. Davidson-Zielske is one of

the organizers of Madison's seminal Cheap at Any Price readings and open mikes, which were held at venues such as Café Montmartre in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She says the lineup of Cheap Reads events is "still fluid, but along with scheduled events, there will be some audience involvement with poetry games and poetry improv to keep things lively."

A Room of One's Own has been an important venue for Madison poets over the years. The go-to place for local poets to read from their newly published works, it is also home to the crowded, raucous **Love & Lust** readings, organized in 1994 by local poets Andrea Potos and Rhonda Lee, and held each February near Valentine's Day. Love & Lust highlights local poets at their bawdy or romantic best, with original music by the Madison-based a cappella trio Ancestra.

To experience high-energy vocal poetry, check out **Urban Spoken Word** every third Saturday of the month at 7 p.m., upstairs at Genna's, 105 W. Main St. Creative director Caitlin McGahan says that the atmosphere is welcoming to new poets and regulars alike, and that the open mikes encompass many styles, with a "warm and very diverse crowd." Urban Spoken Word also sponsors slams, sending winners to compete nationally.

**First Wave**, the spoken-word and hip-hop learning community for incoming UW students, has created national buzz since it was inaugurated in 2007 by UW's Office of Multicultural Arts Initiatives. Regular public events include **Just Bust**, which are monthly open mikes at the UW Red Gym, every first Friday of the month during the academic year. Sign-up is at 8:30 p.m., with the show beginning at 9 p.m. In March, OMAI sponsors the **Line Breaks Festival** at Overture Center.

The **Felix** reading series has been around for nearly 10 years, offering a showcase for new writing, particularly poetry published and promoted by independent presses and small magazines. Named for the late local poet Felix Pollak, the series was, until this year, funded by the Friends of the UW-Madison Library, with readings held mainly at Memorial Library. Now the series is more closely affiliated with the UW English department, and this fall, Felix co-curator Lisa Hollenbach plans to continue promoting "new writing and small press publishing, while also including a greater emphasis on experimentation in the literary arts."

**Perhaps the most experimental live poetry series** is known as **\_\_\_\_-Shaped**. Organized in 2010 by English doctoral student Lewis Freedman with writer/actor/musician Andy Gricevich, it provides a forum for experimental poetry. Each reading has its own shape, so to speak. For example, the June 2012 event was called the Speed Greek-Shaped Reading.

"Madison wasn't a stop for a lot of national poets," says Freedman. With impressive ambition, he and Gricevich have organized a reading a month for over two years. They bring in experimental poets from all over the country, often combining them with local artists like Matthew Stolte, a visual poet known for his language collages. New readings are announced through social media and usually take place at Avol's or the Project Lodge, 817 E. Johnson St.

Vicente Lopez Abad, a graduate student in the UW's Spanish department, observes that "there aren't enough venues where the contact between Spanish and English culture is explored." He writes in both languages, and his interest in this linguistic crossroads spurred him to organize a series of **Bilingual Poetry Readings** at the Cardinal Bar, 418 E. Wilson St. The events combine appearances by invited guest readers and an open mike in which readers share work in both English and Spanish. Lopez Abad plans to continue organizing the bilingual readings once a semester for as long as he is in Madison.

The newly launched **Bridge Poetry Series** hopes to establish a connection between town and gown poets all over the state, highlighting ekphrastic poetry, or poetry about works of arts. The events are held at the Chazen Museum of Art. Poets are invited to create new work inspired by art objects in the museum's temporary exhibitions. The inaugural reading, held in May, saw 11 poets, diverse in style, age and ethnicity, who had written in response to the exhibit *Spark and Flame: 50 Years of Art Glass at the University of Wisconsin-Madison*. Organizers Susan Elbe, Jesse Lee Kercheval, Sarah Parrell and Katrin Talbot, in collaboration with the Chazen, plan twice yearly readings.

And that brings us back to **Monsters of Poetry**, which has gone through its own changes. Last spring, it said goodbye to two of its cofounders, Kevin Gonzalez and Lauren Shapiro, who are leaving Madison for job opportunities on the East Coast. Adam Fell, with Matt Guenette and Christopher Mohar, will continue the series this fall, and have already lined up an impressive list of local and regional poets for readings at the Project Lodge on Sept. 7, Oct. 12, Nov. 9 and Dec. 7.

"Poetry," says Fell, "is not some corpse waiting to be dissected, crumbling to dust, or to be talked about in hushed past tense. It is the brightest, most burning of living things, and we thought we could give it a forum in Madison."

***Coming up***

**Cheap Reads**

*Poetry open mike, with Ron Czerwein, The Fountain, Sunday, Aug. 5, 2 pm*

**Urban Spoken Word**

*Genna's Lounge, Saturday, Aug. 18, 7 pm*

**Monsters of Poetry**

*Readings by Traci Brimhall, Cynthia Marie Hoffman, Dan Rosenberg and Eduardo C. Corral. Project Lodge, Friday, Sept. 7, 7:30 pm*