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AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS

# MONOGRAPHS

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## THE MINNESOTA MODEL Reaching New Audiences with Literature

by Carolyn Parkhurst

### When I Was a Poet I Wrote a Poem

*I wrote a poem  
when I was a poet.  
The poem I wrote seemed  
like it would jump like waves.  
Or else it would be very calm  
and be a sandy beach.  
I liked this poem  
because when I started writing,  
the poem would glow  
like the sun.  
When I write, I get warm.  
This poem is like a warm beach.*

by Katie Wold, Grade 2,  
from *Rooftop Jailbirds:  
Selected Works*, COMPAS  
Writers & Artists in the  
Schools Program

In April 1996, during National Poetry Month, the Ketchikan Arts and Humanities Council in Alaska sponsored a project called "One Poem a Day Won't Kill You." Each day of that month, a member of the community read a poem of his or her choice over public radio airwaves. Ketchikan poet Phoebe Newman, who coordinated the project, chose readers representing a wide variety of ages, backgrounds and (consequently) poetic tastes.

The goal of the project was to make poetry accessible to as large a segment of the community as possible. The project's name uses humor to tap into some common apprehensions about literature and literary programming — that literature is somehow more academic than other arts, that it's stuffy, more demanding, harder to understand, less rewarding. People who might attend an outdoor concert or a craft fair may still shy away from picking up a book of poetry or attending a reading out of a fear that they will feel out of place. Yet literature offers unique opportunities for reaching large audiences with minimal resources and ground-work. The Ketchikan project was a success: each day of the month, a listening audience of 27,000 people heard a new poem read by a member of the community, and each and every one of them made it out alive.

As this project demonstrates, literature can be an effective tool for bringing art to new segments of the community. This issue of *Monographs* will examine the ways in which community arts organizations can make use of literary programming to reach new audiences. The emergence of literary activity in the Twin Cities — Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn. — serves as a useful model; in this community, literary organizations and local arts agencies have worked together to elevate literature to a visible, public art form, and have, in a relatively short period of time, created a thriving literary community that continues to bring literature to new and varied audiences.

### “AN OPERA OUT OF AN APARTMENT”: THE BENEFITS OF LITERATURE

Literature is in many ways a solitary art form. From the time we learn to read, our experience of literature is private and intimate, author to reader, one on one. Perhaps for this reason literature has often been overlooked as a resource for community development in arts programming. Literature’s potential impact within a community is harder to gauge than the potential impact of other art forms: the audience reached by a book of fiction or poetry cannot be easily measured by counting auditorium seats and ticket stubs. And since a book is not a one-time event, it may continue to reach new audiences long after it first appears.

Despite these idiosyncrasies, literature can be a uniquely useful tool for local arts agencies for a number of reasons:

- ★ **READING AND WRITING ALREADY HOLD A SIGNIFICANT PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES.** Reading and writing are among the first things we learn in school, and we continue to do both every day. At the most basic levels, telling and listening to stories occupies much of our time, giving us pleasure without requiring us to learn any special skills.
- ★ **LITERARY PROGRAMMING REQUIRES FEW RESOURCES AND, AS A RESULT, CAN BE ESTABLISHED QUICKLY, CHEAPLY AND EFFECTIVELY.** You don’t need rehearsal spaces, costumes or art supplies to tell a story. Allan Kornblum, founder of Coffee House Press, points out the difference between what is needed to create literature and what is needed to create other kinds of art. He says, “You can’t do an opera out of an apartment, but you can write a novel or run a small press.”
- ★ **LITERATURE IS UNIQUELY SUITED TO ADDRESS CERTAIN COMMUNITY-BASED CONCERNS, SUCH AS LITERACY.** Literacy shares an essential link with literature, since learning to read and appreciating literature go hand in hand. Sheila Murphy, a program officer at the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund who once directed the Writers & Artists in the Schools program at the St. Paul-based local arts agency Community Programs in the Arts (COMPAS), says, “When literature is presented as a thing of value, and the pleasures of reading and

writing are made obvious,” students develop the “muscles” for reading and writing. When local arts agencies (LAAs) sponsor literary projects, this raises awareness of literature within the community, presenting it as a thing of value and creating an opening for a potential partnership between LAAs and local schools and literacy organizations.

- ★ **WRITING IS, BY NATURE, A PRIVATE AND POWERFUL FORM OF SELF-EXPRESSION.** While most literary programming attempts to change reading and writing from private activities to public ones, the private nature of these acts can actually be an asset in some cases. For example, journal writing workshops in battered women’s shelters, which help the women learn to use writing as a tool for healing.
- ★ **LITERARY PROGRAMS ARE OFTEN ABLE TO REACH GROUPS THAT PROGRAMS IN THE OTHER ARTS CAN’T.** Another program that COMPAS has run in the past, Literary Post, demonstrates the value of literature in reaching older Americans who may not otherwise be reached: those in rural areas, with limited transportation, or with disabilities. The participants wrote stories, memoirs and poems that they sent through the mail to professional writers who responded with suggestions, writing assignments and encouragement. The therapeutic nature of literature, that it allows people to work together when they are not physically together — even the very fact that literature, as an art form, can be sent through the mail — all contributed to the success of the project.

### THE MINNESOTA MODEL: THE EMERGENCE OF A LITERARY COMMUNITY

In the Twin Cities, literature holds a strong presence; according to the National Endowment for the Arts, Minnesota contains the second largest concentration of nonprofit literary activity in the country (New York ranks first).

But this literary pervasiveness emerged relatively recently. When The Hungry Mind bookstore opened in 1970, “I didn’t know what ‘literary community’ meant,” says owner David Unowsky. At the time, a number of colleges and universities in the area provided an audience that was receptive to literature, but there was little organized effort to bring together writers and readers. Since then, the Twin Cities have seen

a dramatic increase in all aspects of literary activity, including publishers, presenters, service organizations and readers. The rapid emergence of such a vital literary center provides a useful model for other communities seeking to integrate literary programming into their arts agendas.

By all accounts, the Twin Cities of the 1970s was an ideal climate for literary development. The literature departments at the local colleges and universities had been attracting noted writers since the post-World War II years. Local support of the arts had traditionally been high: in Minnesota, frequent arts attendance was twice the national average. Against this backdrop, a variety of literary organizations and activities began to take shape:

- ★ **WRITERS' SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS:** During the 70s, individual writers living in the area began to organize informally into writers' groups. A number of independent bookstores opened, providing a place for writers to meet and give readings. One of these stores, Rusoff Books, became the jumping-off point for one of the area's most important literary resources, The Loft. Started in the actual loft of the bookstore, this service organization still sponsors public readings as well as a writers-in-residence series, a mentor series and other support services for young writers.
- ★ **LITERARY PROGRAMMING BY LOCAL ARTS AGENCIES:** In 1969, COMPAS began its Poets in the Schools program, one of the first in the country. Later, other genres and art forms were added, and the name was changed to Writers & Artists in the Schools. COMPAS has continued to introduce literary programs to the community, including the Literary Post program for elder Minnesotans and journal-writing workshops for survivors of domestic violence, as well as the Itasca Hospice Healing Dreams project for those involved in the grieving process.
- ★ **LITERARY PRESENTERS:** The Minnesota Center for Book Arts, an 8,600-square-foot space with a paper mill, book binding facilities and printing presses, as well as a library, archive and reading room, was founded in 1983 by Jim Sitter. In addition to access to the paper mill and other machines that would not otherwise be available

to writers and the public, the center sponsors lectures and exhibitions on all stages of literary creation and book production, runs classes and workshops and offers fellowships to writers.

- ★ **DISTRIBUTORS:** The small press distribution company Bookslinger began in 1979, providing the valuable service of distributing small press titles to bookstores and libraries across the country. Later, in the mid 1980s, Bookslinger spawned its successor organization, Consortium, now the largest distributor of literary small presses in America.
- ★ **SMALL PRESSES:** Of the six small presses in the Twin Cities — Graywolf Press, Coffee House Press, Milkweed Editions, New Rivers Press, Holy Cow Press (actually located in nearby Duluth, but still very much a part of the Twin Cities literary community) and The Hungry Mind Press — four were founded in the last 15 years or moved to Minneapolis-St. Paul from other areas of the country.

#### MAKING THE MODEL POSSIBLE: FUNDING AND BOARD STRUCTURES

During this period of literary explosion, however, the funding of literary organizations fell far behind the funding of other art forms. Because literature can be produced on a smaller scale than other arts — Kornblum's "opera out of an apartment" analogy — literary organizations had not learned to reach out to the community for support, a necessary move for art forms requiring larger-scale resources. Few literary organizations had board structures in place like other cultural organizations did, so their efforts at financial planning and stabilization often fell short.

Funding for literature has been limited by a misunderstanding of the precarious place small presses hold in the world of publishing. Arts agencies often provide support for individual writers, but may assume that, if published, the manuscript will be picked up by one of the larger publishing companies. But Davis points out the flaw in this view, explaining that no one would use the existence of Broadway as a reason for not funding community theater, and community publishing needs similar support. Small presses have often been expected to survive on their sales alone, just as large publishing companies do.

The presses themselves have contributed to their murky position; many of those involved in literary

#### Untitled

*Here is my  
little brother  
taking out all the  
matchbox cars.  
Here is my  
dad cleaning  
dinosaur bones  
Here I am sitting on  
the steps thinking  
about the sun.*

by Matthew Wildung,  
Grade 1, from *Rooftop  
Jailbirds: Selected Works*,  
COMPAS Writers & Artists  
in the Schools Program

publishing at first resisted incorporating their presses as nonprofit corporations. Kornblum feels this reluctance was partly due to the “anti-establishment” background of many people involved in literature at the time; Sam Grabarski, former executive director of the Minnesota State Arts Board, suggests that small press operators were unwilling to give up the profits they were making from letterpress work, which in many cases provided the money necessary to continue publishing. With urging from Davis, Grabarski, Sitter and other advisors, however, the Twin Cities’ presses began to give up their for-profit status.

The encouragement of those publisher Emilie Buchwald calls “enlightened funders” has been crucial to the continued literary growth of the Twin Cities. Many people working within literary organizations found that funders at private Minnesota foundations like The Jerome Foundation and Dayton Hudson were willing to work with them to help them understand the process of getting money. Kornblum praises the creative approach taken by Minnesota’s foundations, which he describes as equal parts license and challenge. Through site visits and continuing discussion about each organization’s plans for future development, the funders are able to make suggestions to help the organization to grow, without excessive interference.

As a part of the process of becoming a nonprofit corporation, the Twin Cities’ literary organizations formed governance boards modeled on the pioneering efforts of the Minnesota Center for Book Arts. The structure of these boards has proved crucial in the continuing growth of the organizations. As separate from the organizations’ staff, who execute the day-to-day management, the boards have a strong community base: individual writers and others from the for-profit literary world, lawyers, politicians, business people and entrepreneurs.

Bringing together such a group is not easy, and requires organizations to look beyond their traditional base of supporters. By including members who care about literature but are not otherwise involved in it, each board provides a broad spectrum of skills and expertise for the nonprofit to draw upon. According to Kornblum, the formula for constructing a well-balanced board is that each member must supply either “work, wealth or wisdom” — and presumably, the best board members supply some of each.

All of these factors created a backdrop of literary activity and culture, and local arts agencies have been able to set up a broad spectrum of projects that use literature to reach new audiences.

**“ABOUT A HUNDRED SONGBIRDS SAYING YOUR NAME”: THE RESULTS OF LITERARY PROGRAMMING**

COMPAS’ success stems, in part, from the fact that the organization has successfully identified groups in the community who might be reached particularly well by literary projects. Once the potential audience is identified, programs are created that both meet the specific needs of the targeted group and utilize literature to its best advantage. The following is an overview of some of the literary projects (both short-term and long-term) that COMPAS, as the local arts service agency, has implemented in the period of the Twin Cities’ literary growth.

Through the **Writers & Artists in the Schools Program**, COMPAS offers week-long residencies by writers, visual artists and performing artists. During a residency, a visiting writer runs workshops for up to 12 classrooms, including a core group of two classes, with whom the writer works every day during the week. Writers in the program offer students the opportunity to explore many different areas of creative writing: fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, journals, play writing, essays and memoir. By encouraging students to create their own work, the program transforms literature from a subject of study to a living art, and the schoolchildren come to see literature as an accessible force in their lives.

In addition to classroom work, residencies also include staff development opportunities for teachers and a community event to celebrate the arts activities of the residency. One of the program’s most important results is the bonds it creates between teachers and professional artists; visiting writers share their ideas and techniques for the teaching of writing, so that the benefits of the residency stretch far beyond the length of the week. Each year, COMPAS publishes an anthology of student writing and sponsors a public reading, which allows students the excitement of seeing their work in print, as well as the opportunity to present it publicly to the community.

**Literary Post**, discontinued due to lack of funding, used the innovative structure of a mail-order writing workshop to meet the needs of audiences who might not be able to attend a more conventional writing workshop. Based on the premise that the arts provide a way to record views and experiences, the program focused on elder Minnesotans, those over the age of 60, who learned the value of recording a lifetime of stories, memories and thoughts while interacting with and getting feedback from professional writers. Since older people tend to have a lot of stories to tell, writing affords a uniquely private and effective means of self-expression. Participants explored childhood memories, first loves and lost friends through their stories, poems and memoirs. COMPAS compiled these creations and published an anthology for the participants, who could experience additional satisfaction and validation from seeing their work in print.

**A Journal — A Beginning**, published last year, is a guided journal for survivors of domestic violence and abuse. By its nature, a journal is a particularly effective tool for battered women; as the introduction explains: “As survivors, a journal can be a place to search for clarity in our lives, a place for healing from our pain, and a place for letting go of our secrets.” The publication, comprised of mostly-blank colored pages headed by short writing assignments (written in English and Spanish), such as “Beginning every sentence with *I am at my best when...* write five or six examples of events or circumstances that make you feel at your best.” This journal has been used by COMPAS in workshops at battered women’s shelters, but its usefulness extends over a much longer period of time. Moreover, shelter employees can use the journal as a guide to run their own workshops.

In 1993, COMPAS joined with the **Itasca Hospice Healing Dreams Project** to find a way to use literature to ease the grieving process. A writer and a visual artist spoke to a number of people experiencing grief — students from hospice-sponsored grief groups within the schools, hospice staff and volunteers and members of the community at large — and recorded their dreams about the loved ones they had lost. As with *A Journal — A Beginning*, the therapeutic nature of writing was a benefit to the project; many people found that the act of putting their dreams into words

*The silence now on Iron Horse Prairie  
is mine.*

*Not yours.*

*Those scattered bone bits*

*Sift each season*

*Deeper into the soil.*

*Fragile fragments like*

*Eggshell lie mute*

*While sun and snow and soil*

*Take back what is theirs,*

*Soundlessly.*

*Except for the wind*

*And sighing grass*

*And about a*

*hundred songbirds*

*Saying your name.*

from “Being There”  
by Betty J. Benner,  
*With a Voice of Singing:  
An Anthology of Writing  
by Elder Minnesotans,*  
COMPAS Literary  
Post Program

and then seeing those words on paper furthered the process of healing.

Programming like this raises literature out of the solitary and attempts to make it into something public, something that anyone might enjoy and learn from. These projects succeed because they recognize the unique benefits of literature, and they match innovative literary programs with audiences from the community who may not be easily reached by other art forms. These projects succeed because they attempt to make literature a part of life.

**“A NATURAL ECOLOGY OF READERS  
AND WRITERS”: THE BASICS OF  
LITERARY PROGRAMMING**

In many ways, the Minnesota model cannot be replicated. A number of factors that facilitated the emergence of the literary community in Minneapolis and St. Paul — the number of colleges and universities in the area, a local predisposition for arts attendance, a high concentration of individual writers and an early recognition of the power of locally prominent and engaged boards — were unique to the Twin Cities. Still, as Sheila Murphy points out, “Every community has its

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own natural ecology of readers and writers," such as librarians, booksellers, teachers, writers and editors, who might support and participate in literary activity. Murphy says, "In any community, a coalition of people could come together to say 'we value reading and writing, and we value what literature can do at every stage of life.'"

A few helpful strategies for establishing a literary program:

- ★ **TREAT LITERATURE LIKE ANY OTHER ART.** The potential impact of a literary project may be more difficult to quantify than that of a concert series, for example, but once all of the factors have been taken into account, it will become apparent that both projects meet different, but equally important, needs within the community.
- ★ **IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO FUND INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS; IT IS IMPORTANT TO FUND THE WHOLE CYCLE OF LITERARY PRODUCTION.** This includes the creation of new literary works by individual writers; publication by small presses, which act as a means of support for writers, as well as the development of an outlet to release literature to the larger community; and community outreach through literary programming, which raises public awareness of the potential power of literature to entertain, provide fulfillment and effect change.
- ★ **LOOK AT LITERATURE AS A LIVING ART, NOT JUST A SOLITARY ACTIVITY.** When people are made aware that they themselves (and not just some "real" writer sitting alone in a room somewhere) are capable of creating literature, then literature becomes for them a public art, something they can participate in, like sculpture in a park. This democratization of literature is an essential part of bringing literature to the community.
- ★ **FOLLOW THE FORMULAS FOR SUCCESSFUL BOARD STRUCTURES.** Building a strong community base in the governing body of a literary organization introduces a wide variety of expertise and suggestions for how best to meet the community's needs.
- ★ **RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING TOGETHER WITH OTHER LITERARY GROUPS.** Find a natural ecology of readers and writers

and take advantage of the literary resources that already exist within the community. David Unowsky says that in building a literary community in the Twin Cities, a key factor for success was that "nobody was building their own empire — we realized we could do all this together."

- ★ **IDENTIFY AND BRING TOGETHER GROUPS IN THE COMMUNITY THAT MIGHT BE PARTICULARLY REACHED BY LITERATURE.** Of course, anyone can benefit from literary programming, but in designing a balanced program, it is important to combine projects that benefit the community at large with projects for specific groups underserved by other arts programming. Be creative — which of those groups might benefit from working directly with one another? What community concerns can be addressed through literature more than by any other art form?
- ★ **USE LITERARY PROGRAMMING AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO TRAIN OTHERS HOW TO BETTER TEACH CREATIVE WRITING IN THE FUTURE.** As COMPAS has done in its work with teachers and shelter employees, use the opportunity to ensure that literature will remain a part of the participants' daily lives long after the project is over.

*The best part of literary programming is that you can get so much from so little.* Though they require little in terms of equipment, supplies or space, literary programs offer their participants a great gift: the opportunity to find their own voices and the structure to deepen their understanding of themselves. As a result, literary programming creates an atmosphere in which those fundamental acts of reading and writing are valued as an integral part of life.

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