Literature from Niagara Falls

Gregory Betts, editor of PRECIPICe, Canada's leading literary journal talks about his life as an editor.

AHMEDE HUSSAIN

What are the ideas behind your journal?

St. Catharines is located between Canada's largest city, Toronto, and one of North America's top tourist destinations, Niagara Falls. We are located in the most fertile and productive wine region of the country, just at the lip of an 800 kilometre ridge called the Niagara Escarpment (over which the Niagara River falls). PRECIPICe is published by Brock University, which sits atop the same escarpment, looking down over the city and the network of rivers, valleys, and creeks below. Traditionally, travellers have moved back and forth between Toronto and Niagara Falls without paying much attention to the region in between. In recent years, however, the wine has improved dramatically and there is a sense that St. Catharines is becoming a centre in its own right. People from outside are starting to stop and discover the area. At the same time, the area has increasingly more to offer. The magazine, and its history, reflects this transition. Previous incarnations of PRECIPICe were focussed on local writers, and on the local community. My co-editor Adam Dickinson and I have remade the magazine so that it is more connected to the national and international literary conversation. There have been two issues so far, with a third just about to be released. We have had remarkable success in publishing great new work by established and emerging authors from across Canada and the United States. There's some really great work going on, and we're delighted to be a part of it.



Gregory Betts

While making an editorial decision what do you look for in a submission?

We get a lot of submissions from writers all around the world. This might surprise some people, but the thing we pay the least attention to is the cover letter. We are trying to unravel the Catch-22 of publishing: you don't get into our magazine by having already gotten into other magazines. Every piece is numbered and evaluated by our editorial board, which includes a diverse range of tastes. We all, however, look for an exceptionally high degree of linguistic competence coupled with new conceptual approaches to form and subject matter in both poetry and short fiction. "Competence" doesn't need to mean that our authors must use proper, grammatical English competence comes from the Latin word for "coincidence" and "agreement." We are looking for works in which the language matches (or coincides, or agrees with) the subject of the particular work. We publish a high amount of experimental texts including some that have no conventional language at all. We are always on the lookout for works in which the language and the ideas coincide in a revealing, even uncanny way.

How important do you think it is for a writer to know her audience/reader?

There are a lot of presumptions built into that question. Can an author ever know their audience? Should an author presume to know enough about their audience to customise the work in order to suit them? There are no easy answers to questions of that sort. When we use language to express particular ideas, the relationship between the writer and the audience must be carefully proscribed. But linguistic expressiveness is only one of the many different options available to an author. Some writing has no expressive qualities at all, but is more interested in being itself a beautiful object. For instance, the great Canadian