The Toronto Small Press Book Fair '87
Ken Norris concludes The Little Magazine, Toronto 1923-80 to date the definitive history of alternative literary publishing - with a discussion of The Front - 'The ultimate aim of the little magazine is literary revolution, a call to a new order. If it succeeds, the old establishment is put aside and a new beginning is made; if nothing else, a few voices are heard saying something that was not said before. In its editorial intentions, The Front shares much with magazines that preceded it: the hope of forming a front against the accepted literary norms of the day.'

As with most of the magazines included in Norris's survey The Front is now history; however, its editor, Jim Smith, has emerged as not only one of Toronto's finest political poets but also one of its most committed activists. Smith's current vehicle is The Front Press; in association with the Artists and Writers Action Committee, he is publishing a series of chapbooks, issued monthly and available by subscription. Twelve pages in length, xeroxed and saddle-stitched, each book will feature the work of a different Toronto poet. Yet what makes this venture truly unique is that all revenue from the series will be donated to the Ministry of Culture in Nicaragua and the Enrique Lihn Writing Project in Chile. This is the only of its kind in Canada in which the "literary revolution" posited by Norris is changing its direction.

The Front Press was one of more than 40 book and magazine publishers exhibited at the Toronto Small Press Book Fair this past May. For eight hours amid the cacophony of local sound poets and jazz musicians, the Toronto literary crowd crowded the Little College pub to hawk the most unusual assortment of literary wares ever assembled in this city. Organizers Stuart Ross and Nicholas Power sought inclusiveness: established, small press, student, independent, and marginalized publications were bartered alongside the ephemeral alternative journals. Stuart Ross, broadsheets and objects d'art more characteristic of the small press movement. Thus, with visions, typeset, perfect-bound and celebrating 15 years of publications, sat a few feet from the student journal staff packaged in a cardboard box, its poems, stories and essays printed on looseleaf, pamphlets, dories and microlith. Publisher Jeppson's Curd Hill Press featured an odd assortment of poetic ephemera, reproduced by every means imaginable on everything from scrap paper to postcards; at the next table, the Sublimator - Canada's only lesbian and gay male press - displayed an extensive line of books, finely produced in a more conventional format. However, while varying greatly in form, content and purpose, each of the presses has a common concern - distribution. While a few bookstores in Toronto stock small press publications, their numbers are decreasing; the large chain stores, for the most part, do not carry small press magazines. This was the situation which, in 1984, alternative writers Stuart Ross and Nicholas Power, publishers of Proper Tales and Geometrics Press respectively, at a meeting at the Scadding Court Community Centre on the last Sunday of each month, meet the Presses shared a varied selection of alternative publications. Contributors to each press gave brief readings; however, the emphasis was on sales, distribution and networking. A table could be rented for $10 or shared for $5; admission was free. Attendance varied with the Heavy events of various sporting events but was generally high. I attended half a dozen of these events throughout 1985 and 1986, and across magazines I have seen few dates have not encountered since. As to their effectiveness for grass-roots networking, I can only attest to my own experience: flagging my chapbooks at poetry readings, I have even seen few dates have not encountered since. As to their effectiveness for grass-roots networking, I can only attest to my own experience: flagging my chapbooks at poetry readings, I have even seen few dates have not encountered since. As to their effectiveness for grass-roots networking, I can only attest to my own experience: flagging my chapbooks at poetry readings, I have even seen few dates have not encountered since. 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writers have had a lasting impact on the course of Canadian literature. In 1987, The Shit, edited by Norman Chochrane and D.M. Gray, appeared on the tradition. Yet, where Taw was nearly concerned with pure poets, The Shit instead included Anarchist, irreverent and - as its name implies - willing to shock, each issue is a declaration of war on all that is mediocre, hypocritical and compliant in Canadian writing and society at large. Publishing manifestos, tirades and editorials, The Shit also features an expanding group of poets, prose writers and artists who might otherwise go unpublished, as well as well-known writers with work for which no other outlet exists. Perhaps one of the greatest magazines ever produced, The Shit continues to challenge the prevailing hegemony of excremental culture.

Equally engaged and engaging is Rampike. Whereas government support - with its concomitant restrictions on the size of magazines and format - has caused the stagnation of so many literary journals, editor Karl Jirgens has continued to print work that forces the reader to question what he or she is looking at. Funded by the federal and provincial governments, published in a somewhat phallic, 1970s vertical format, glossy and perfect-bound, Rampike distort the conventions of genre, language and content. Past issues have featured Laurie Anderson, John Giorno and Jacques Derrida, as well as such innovative and committed Canadian writers as Rosemary Sullivan and Nicole Brossard. And, with a growing international reputation, Jirgens usually sells out each print run of this prestigious publication.

Defiantly postmodern, Rampike might just be directing the course of the indie magazine into the third millennium. While such magazines foment the "literary revolution," the small critical journals do much to question and shape the direction of the ongoing cultural discourse. Edited by Stuart Rose, Mondo Hankamanga is devoted exclusively to reviewing small press books and magazines. Compact and cheery-produced, it appears with a remarkable regularity (the first number was published in 1983, the fifth earlier this year); nonetheless, Mondo Hankamanga is the only journal in Canada to address itself in this crucial task. While what does not restrict itself to small press publications, it is, and has been, committed to an anomaly in literary publishing. A tabloid, what is printed six times a year, with 10,000 copies distributed in bookstores and libraries throughout North America. Periodicals without controlled circulation are ineligible for federal funding; to date, editors Kevin Connolly and Jason Sherman have relied on revenue from advertising, subscriptions, as well as a small Explorations grant, yet have still managed to get each issue out for two years. Like Mondo Hankamanga, what publishes essays, interviews and letters, as well as book and magazine reviews (what also publishes fiction, poetry and drama). Both are controversial and iconoclastic in the best tradition of the indie magazine, challenging rather than indulging their respective readers. As well, both journals regularly contribute to the renewed discussion of the relationship between politics and literature - an issue noticeably absent from small press publications in Toronto since the 1980s. The second issue of what explored the issue of "arts and politics," while a recent number (March 1987) contained a powerful interview with Brian Fawcett throughout have appeared many similarly engaged commentaries and reviews. And the occasional columns in Mondo Hankamanga by poet and activist Chris Faires continue to challenge the complacency of all writers.

All the magazines mentioned have one feature in common: their editors are male. This situation is clearly evident to the women who have come together over the years to produce Firedawn. A Feminist Quarterly. As Makeda Silvera notes in her introduction to Firedawn - an anthology of poetry, prose and art celebrating Firedawn's first eight years of publication - "Historically, peoples not of the dominant culture have not had active participation in, or access to, arts journals, whereas these have been part of the dominant culture or have emerged from the small presses." Yet, in speaking of those not of the dominant culture, Silvera implies not only women in general but women of colour, working class and Native women and lesbians. It is Firedawn's attempt to be inclusive, and the struggles, controversies and self-criticism that have resulted from this attempt that make Firedawn the intelligent, engaged and diverse journal it has become. Published by a collective (with occasional guest editors), Firedawn includes reviews and essays covering a wide range of topics and issues, as well as poetry and fiction free of any formal constraints. Given the status of women within the dominat culture, the survival and success of a journal like Firedawn points in a necessary direction to the further politicization of literary publishing to come. As Robin Bellisky Endres writes in 'Why I Left The Left to Write': "The women's movement, with its focus on the integration of the personal and social, paved the way for the reintegration, on a higher level, of art and politics, the goal of which is personal and social transformation."

Admittedly, my discussion of these few magazines has been partisan in tone and intent. It would likely be fitting to close with some vague pronouncement about the future of literary publishing in Toronto. The reader, happy that the small press is alive and well, stifies a satisfied yawn. Instead, I will conclude with an appeal: subscribe to one or all of these magazines. If you don't like those I've mentioned, bookstores such as Leters, SCM and This Ain't the Rosedale Library carry others. If they make you angry, write a letter to contribute to the magazines yourself.

Journals discussed:
Two issues a year for $30.

Push-Machinery, 551a Crawford Street, Toronto M6E 3J9.
Query as to subscription rates.

Industrial Sabotage, Curved Hive Press, 729 Queen Street East, Toronto MAM 3H1.
Published irregularly, prices vary.
pay what you can.

The Shit, Martin Garth Press, 510 Front Street West, Third Floor, Toronto M5V 1B8.
Query as to subscription rates.

Rampike, 95 Rivercrest Road, Toronto M6S 4H7.
Two issues a year for $12.

Mondo Hankamanga, Proper Tales Press, Box 789, Station F, Toronto May 2NY.
Six issues for $6.

what, Box 358, Station J, Toronto M4Y 1B8.
Six issues a year for $6.

Firedawn, Box 279, Station B, Toronto MRT 2W2.
Four issues a year for $12.


4 Firedawn, p.20.

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