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To grasp the concept of the Midwest Writing Center's new Spectra poetry-reading series, we might start with the 1916 book of the same name. In its preface, Anne Knish explained that the "Spectric" school "speaks ... of that process of diffraction by which are disarticulated the several colored and other rays of which light is composed. It indicates our feeling that the theme of a poem is to be regarded as a prism, upon which the colorless white light of infinite existence falls and is broken up into glowing, beautiful, and intelligible hues."

Before you flee this article, understand that *Spectra* was a satiric hoax created by Arthur Davison Ficke (a Davenport native writing as Knish) and Witter Bynner (writing as Emanuel Morgan). The pair gleefully mocked the abstruse pretensions of modern free verse, but several prominent poets – including Edgar Lee Masters and William Carlos Williams – actually embraced the work, not recognizing its intent.

Poetry

magazine Editor Harriet Monroe accepted a handful of Spectric works before the hoax was revealed by Bynner.

Although the poems were mostly nonsense, they were compellingly playful. One opens: "Her soul was freckled / Like the bald head / Of a jaundiced Jewish banker." It concludes: "This demonstrates the futility of thinking." One of the most charming starts: "If I were only dafter / I might be making hymns / To the liquor of your laughter / And the lacquer of your limbs."

And they were occasionally incisive. In one about "my little house of glass," Knish wrote: "Sometimes I'm terribly tempted / To throw the stones myself."

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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To show how this relates to the new poetry-reading series (which begins September 15), allow me to note that one of the first two featured writers, Adam Fell, closes his poem “Summer Lovin Torture Party” with these oddly familiar lines: “I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh lord. / I’ve been waiting for this moment all my life.”

And in live settings, Fell might let a certain Phil Collins recording or the audience finish that piece for him.

All of which means to highlight that the Spectra series explicitly aims to defy the clichés that many associate with poetry readings: cold, academic, impenetrable, and unwelcoming.

“We’re serious about our poems, and we’re serious about our craft, but if it wasn’t fun, I don’t think most of us would be doing it,” said Midwest Writing Center Executive Director Ryan Collins, who is spearheading Spectra. “If we weren’t trying to make it somehow fun and engaging, or at least fun in a musical sense – the musicality of language, the musicality of ideas – ... I don’t think we’d be writing poems.”

Collins said his goal is to offer “challenging work that’s both complex and really accessible, and funny, and really moving, and sort of covers a lot of terrain. ... I wanted to give these people a place to read in the Quad Cities.”

He added that he hopes to foster a “loose” vibe: “I’m trying to not have what people expect from a poetry reading What we’re trying to do ... is make it a little more casual, make it a little more like going to see a band play.”

On the Spectra name, Collins said he’s terrible at titling things. But it sounded like he recognized that “Spectra” is a perfect fit for both what he’s trying to accomplish with the series

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and where it's located. "I wanted to have something that sounded cool and intriguing and striking, but I also wanted to have something that had some local relevance or significance," he said. "The Spectra hoax is something that not a lot of people, even in the wider poetic community, know about, but it is a really fascinating part of our literary history here in the Quad Cities."

This fall, Spectra will feature three readings at Rozz-Tox, and Collins said he hopes to do the series twice each year. The opening event features Fell and Matthew Guenette, both based in Madison, Wisconsin. Each Spectra evening, he said, will include two Midwestern poets joined by three or four local writers who will present their work round-robin style.

Collins praised the "great physicality to his [Fell's] poetry, just an amazing use of language." Even though "Summer Lovin Torture Party" ends with what can be read as a joke (complete with double entendre), it considers youthful sexual experimentation as a universal experience that might be inconsequential fooling around, or a source of profound shame, or the climax of young lives ruled by hormones. "You don't see Phil Collins coming," Ryan Collins said.



As for Guenette, his most recent book is *American Busboy*, which delivers precisely what its title promises. Collins called the work "really funny, but also really poignant," and it will likely resonate with anybody who's worked for low wages in the food industry. As you might imagine, it's not exactly polite poetry, commingling mundane but absurd episodes from work and life, serious existential meditations, and a certain blunt rage.

And if, at this point, you still find yourself skeptical that a poetry reading won't be tedious and staid, I'll leave you with this excerpt from one of Guenette's *American Busboy* poems: "I never met a mascot that I / didn't want to punch / in the face."

The Spectra poetry-reading series begins on Saturday, September 15, with featured poets Adam Fell and Matthew Guenette. The free event begins at 8 p.m. and will be held at Rozz-Tox (2108 Third Avenue in Rock Island; RozzTox.com).

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Other scheduled events in the series include M. Bartley Seigel and Daniela Olszewska on Wednesday, October 10, and Blueberry Morningsnow and Daniel Khalastchi on Saturday, November 3. Both events are also at Rozz-Tox and begin at 8 p.m.