

Literary Magazine Debuts with Challenging Works

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 26 November 2002 18:00

The ambition of *Buffalo Carp* can be seen on its copyright page: “Buffalo Carp is a national literary magazine published by Quad City Arts.” That’s a tall order. While it’s not difficult to attract entries from around the country, the challenge of a national focus – as opposed to showcasing local or regional writers – is drawing the quality necessary to make a splash in the literary community.

Buffalo Carp arrived earlier this month, with an attractive cover painted by local artist Catherine Jones-Davies. At less than 60 pages, it’s more slender than I expected. And because so much of the content is poetry – nearly 70 percent of the works – those pages fly by pretty quickly.

Yet there’s no denying that the work in *Buffalo Carp* is adult, challenging, provocative, and sophisticated. Editor-in-Chief Leslie Thompson and the three senior editors – Stephen G. Bloom (narrative nonfiction), Robert Hellenga (fiction), and Beth Roberts (poetry) – have taken their jobs seriously, and it’s great to see a publication that doesn’t pander. Sex, death, and sadness permeate the volume, and few of the pieces are safe or easy.

Buffalo Carp features 22 works by 20 writers from across the country – from Washington state to Florida. One writer, Dick Stahl, comes from the Quad Cities area, and two scribes are represented by two poems apiece. A prize of \$500 was awarded for one work in each of the three categories.

The fiction entries in *Buffalo Carp* are generally strong – accessible, tight, and compelling. Brian Ames’ “Effect of Sunlight in Fog” imagines the weight of future bloodshed on Claude Monet. It starts simply – “Monet has determined to kill the prime minister” – and dreamily incorporates both history and art that have yet to be created, juxtaposing them: “[H]e wants to convey the idea that the fog permeates every space clear down to the sheltered clefts with its thick, overpowering masque. But even as he clings to these more contented colors, he knows it will not keep the ice pick from Trotsky’s skull in Mexico City.”

Stephanie Dickinson’s “Black Lamb” vividly describes the world of a trucker through the eyes of a young woman: “His eyes were chunks of blue ice. He grinned and dimples cut his cheeks. Dimples made any face pretty. His was old, maybe thirty.”

Because the pieces aren’t labeled, it’s unclear whether two prose pieces are fiction or nonfiction. Depending on what they are, there might be only one work of narrative nonfiction in *Buffalo Carp*

. Carol L. Skolnick’s “First Kisses & Near Misses” won the prize in that category, suggesting a dearth of entries. The essay is by no means bad, but its exploration of awkward adolescent fumbling and budding sexuality is obvious, and it suffers in comparison to much of the rest of the work in *Buffalo Carp*

The poetry is dense and frequently oblique, requiring close reading and not necessarily revealing itself without work. It’s also more hit-and-miss for me. The opening poem “We Can’t Know the End” is elliptical but sharp, effectively evoking a haunted and cursed town, but

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“Clinton, His Last Year in Office” feels all wrong, trying to cast a spell of loneliness on the former president but without seeming to understand him.

“Leonardo’s Flying Machines,” “Two Verbs Left,” and “The Suicides” are polished and hard like gemstones, and while that’s meant as a compliment, those characteristics can also make the poems seem impenetrable. Stahl’s “Calling the Street Police” is the most precious in the volume – rivaled by the prize-winning “Deceitful Beyond All Cure” – but its cleverness rescues it from being too cute.

Certainly, a collection as diverse as the first issue of *Buffalo Carp* is going to be a mixed bag for most people, and what readers like will depend at least to some degree on taste. But the journal has made a strong and promising debut, full of meaty work.

Buffalo Carp is available from Quad City Arts for \$10. The deadline for submissions to the second edition of the literary magazine is May 31. For more information, e-mail (lthompson@quadcityarts.com).