

'Poetry here, hot off the press!'



and slit it down the belly for
our better inspection
until where skin was crawling
only anger and an itch
remain:
only a terror of what might
be forgotten
in the pressure of a crowded
room
or in a solitary recognition
prove unknown.

American poets can be ordered into

true believers in the saving powers
of poetry. Their greatest need is to be
heard.

Whether poetry written at the bot-
tom of the pyramid is better or worse
than poetry written at higher loca-
tions is not the point. (Of course it's
worse—most of it.) The point is that
true poets anywhere share an attitude
toward their calling that was summed
up concisely by William Carlos Wil-
liams when he wrote, "The poem
alone focuses the world."

two poets to every block," Entrekin
told me. "Now there must be six or
seven."

In all, about 50 poets have be-
longed to the Berkeley Poets Coopera-
tive at one time or another. There are
now 14 members. Attrition is usually
due to members moving away, but
other members have been lost because
of strongly felt disagreements. The
group's first crisis came when politi-
cally active members urged that work

co-ops in the country, of which four
publish mostly poetry. (The other pub-
lishes novels.) The four are Alicejames
Books, in Cambridge, Mass.; the In-
wood Press Collective, in New York
City; the Minnesota Writers Coopera-
tive Publishing House, in St. Peter,
Minn., and the Berkeley Poets Coopera-
tive, whose legal title is Berkeley Poets
Workshop & Press Inc. There are in
fact two others, both offshoots of the
Berkeley group—U.S.I, in Princeton,
N. J., and the Kelsey Street Press, in



Selling Berkeley Poets Cooperative/9, the current issue of the group's magazine: Co-op member Bruce Hawkins and some of his customers.

a pyramid, of which the apex is oc-
cupied by two or three dozen people
whose names are generally recog-
nized as belonging to living poets:
Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, Howard
Nemerov, Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley
Kunitz, Karl Shapiro, Richard Wilbur,
Gary Snyder, John Ashbery, Denise
Levertov, James Dickey, and so on.
These are the mandarins, certified by
such prizes as the Pulitzer and the
National Book Award. With some no-
table exceptions, they are in their 50's
and 60's and teach English at dis-
tinguished universities.

In the middle ranks of the pyramid
are poets who have been recognized
by virtue of publication in hard covers
or in magazines—all the way from
The New Yorker and Atlantic Monthly
to Clear Creek, Ironwood and From
the Belly of the Shark. A directory of
recognized poets published in 1975
under the auspices of the National
Endowment for the Arts listed some
1,500 American poets whose work has
appeared in print in these magazines.

If this were all, there would be
more practicing blacksmiths in the
United States than poets. This is not
the case. The greatest number of poets
are found at the bottom of the pyra-
mid, where they generally go unre-
garded. My guess is that somewhere
between one in 100 and one in 1,000
Americans write poetry. These poets—
half a million of them, perhaps—are

A half-million Americans write poetry,
but not much of it gets published. Now poets
are banding together to peddle
their work on the streets and in coffee shops

Over the years, I have run into poets
in some unlikely places. San Quentin
Prison, in the years when I was teach-
ing there, was a veritable hotbed of
poets, whose work ranged in texture
from doggerel to accomplished imita-
tions of Robert W. Service. Later, on
Vancouver Island, I got into a wheel-
house conversation with the skipper of
the Lady Rose, which carries passen-
gers and cargo to the tiny communi-
ties along the Albern Inlet and Bark-
ley Sound. Dick McMinn turned out to
be a poet, publishing locally under a
pseudonym. Now I make my home in
a town of about 1,000 on the rocky
coast north of San Francisco where
poetry readings are a not uncommon
form of social intercourse. My sense
that, out here on the Coast, at least,
the ratio of poets to the general popu-
lation is increasing was confirmed by
Charles Entrekin, one of the founders
of the Poets Co-op. "When I came to
Berkeley there seemed to be at least

be judged more for its political than
its poetic merits. More recently, three
feminist members charged the others
with not sufficiently recognizing their
needs as women. They seceded to form
their own cooperative. Joined by two
other women poets, they now publish
their own work on a press bought by
one of their husbands.

At bottom, a poetry co-op is a device
for getting a poet's work published.
The publication of poetry being a
notoriously uneconomic enterprise, the
laws of the marketplace apply even
less perfectly than they do in the other
branches of literature. Unless a young
poet is extraordinarily gifted or lucky
or has an influential patron, he/she is
hard put to it to find an audience out-
side of the smallest of the little
magazines or the despised vanity
presses. The cooperative is an honor-
able alternative.

A survey made by Coda magazine
a few months ago turned up five book

Berkeley, the product of the feminist
secession.

Each of these cooperatives has its
own anatomy. Some will publish work
by members only, and some will pub-
lish any appropriate manuscript of
merit. Some require an investment of
money and some require time and
energy. Some survive on sales and
some stay alive by the grace of God
and public agencies such as the Na-
tional Endowment for the Arts. Mem-
bership requirements vary; at the
Berkeley Poets Co-op, one becomes
eligible when a poem is accepted for
publication.

The magazine is published in an
edition of 2,000 to 2,500 copies, on a
budget of \$1,400. Chapbooks have a
smaller press run—about 1,000—and
a budget of \$600. The author of the
chapbook gets half the proceeds after
the initial investment has been paid
off. When the book has sold out, as
they all have to date, the author can
expect to have about \$400 in hand.
This isn't exactly what Rod McKuen
gets from a book, but it's better than
a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.

In the past seven years, according
to a recent accounting, the Poets Co-
op published 13,550 magazine copies
and books—and sold them all. Of this
number, 11,950 were sold directly by
members, either in the streets, at
readings or elsewhere. Of the rest,
1,000 were sold in bookstores such as
Moe's and Cody's, both Berkeley in-

By Kenneth Lamott

As we walk along
Shattuck Avenue in
the early afternoon,
my companion, a
poet named Bruce
Hawkins, extends a
copy of a paper-
back called Berke-
ley Poets Cooperative/9 toward the
people we meet. Most of them won't
look directly at us and shake their
heads or mumble something as they
hurry past. If they show a flicker of
interest, Hawkins asks quietly, "Poets
Co-op?" After watching his technique
for a while, I do the same with one of
the books I'm carrying. We walk
through a coffee shop called Smokey
Joe's and another called Oleg's, dis-
playing our books at the tables. No
sales.

On the sidewalk again, Hawkins
looks distressed. He tells me he usually
sells a couple of books by this point
on his route. He's afraid we're over-
powering prospective customers by
our double presence. "Besides," he
says, looking me over critically, "you
don't look poor enough." Hawkins
himself is in his late 30's, sturdily
built, with long blond hair and a beard
and mustache. He wears a checked
shirt, well-faded jeans, work boots and
a day pack full of books.

Hawkins suggests that while one of
us goes into a restaurant, the other
stay outside and work the street. We
take turns. Hawkins makes his first
sale, and then another, but I have no
luck. Then, while I'm waiting on the
sidewalk for him, a heavysset dark
woman of 35 or so approaches. She's
frowning and looks distracted. Des-
perately, I display the paperback to
her. To my extreme surprise, she stops.
"What is it?" she asks.

"The Berkeley Poets Co-op," I say.
"A magazine."

She takes the book and leafs
through it. It's in quality-paperback
format, with a reddish brown cover.
There are 96 pages, mostly poetry, but
some short fiction too.

"How much?" the woman asks.
"A dollar fifty," I tell her.
"I'll take it," she replies. "I just got
locked out of my office, and I can use
something to read while I'm waiting."

As I count out her change, I'm re-
minded of Hawkins's advice that you
shouldn't try to preselect your cus-
tomers. You never know.

Hawkins describes himself as the
closest thing to a street person in the
Berkeley Poets Cooperative, which is
both the name of the magazine and
of the group that publishes it (about
once a year)—the oldest and most
successful poetry cooperative in the
country. Having dropped out of school

and ended up on welfare, he was sent
by a welfare worker (who happened to
be a poet himself) to the Poets Co-op.
He is now the author of one of the
five "chapbooks" the co-op has pub-
lished. (The chapbook—a word allied
to "chapman," or peddler — contains
the work of a single poet.)

*The joyous way a long string
of words will glide in
your ear
and vanish if you let it go,
across the path, open and
shut—
to control it schools have
been built
great universities constructed:
to step on a tail with
explanation,
hold up a writhing prize*

*Kenneth Lamott is a writer (of prose)
who confesses he hasn't written any
verse since college.*

stitutions; 450 were sold by a national distributor (Book-people), and 150 went to subscribers (mainly libraries). Books are beginning to show up in drugstores, record stores and other such outlets. Whether by accident or design, one of these stores displayed the co-op's magazine on a rack of pornography. It sold out.

Last year, for the first time, the Poets Co-op received enough grant money—\$2,700—to supply the principal working capital for the publication of an edition of the magazine and three chap-books. All but about \$1,000 of the \$3,450 in expenses has been earned back from sales, and the remainder is expected to be eventually liquidated.

The economic history of the Berkeley Poets Co-op makes one rule of marketing clear: If you want to sell poetry, you'd better get out and do it yourself.

□

Although the success of the Berkeley Poets Cooperative can be attributed to their discovery of an audience through direct marketing, there is something else too. While talking to some key members of the co-op, it strikes me that they have achieved the subtle balance between compatibility and tension that a group needs to stay productive.

I meet them at the home of Ted Fleischman and Lucille Day (they are married but she prefers to use her maiden name). We sit in the living room of their small house in Oakland. The people there are Entrekin, his wife, Maggie, who does many of the graphics, Bruce Boston, and the Fleischmans.

Entrekin, who teaches writing in a community college and freelances computer work, is tall, 34 and with a blond beard, and has been described to me as the patriarch of the co-op. He is always called Charles, not Chuck or Charley, which may or may not be significant. An Alabamian who graduated from the state university there, Entrekin recently earned an M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Montana. His native accent is subdued, but his origins work their way out in his poetry.

*And you remember the
funny talk of poontang
in barber shops before
the hunt begins,
the talk of the remorse-
less chicken thief,
the hungry coon sought
after in the night
out beyond the china-
berry tree, the mimosa
and crepe myrtle, out be-
yond even the dogwood.*

The co-op really began with four or five poets sitting around a table in Entrekin's house, silently reading copies of each other's work. Then, copies sometimes being in short supply, they read their work aloud.

"Once we started sharing poetry, it turned out to be quite a collection," Entrekin says. "Somebody said, why don't we publish? One of the guys knew a gypsy printer who said he'd do it for \$1.69. The magazine began to attract other writers, and we realized that what we were doing was forming a co-op."

The group will soon get its widest audience to date, when posters bearing poems by Entrekin and Betty Coon, another member, are displayed in the stations and on the trains of the Bay Area's rapid-transit system. They were two of the four winners of a contest sponsored by the Oakland City Council to put poetry in public places.

□

With brown eyes and uninhibited black curly hair, Ted Fleischman, who is one of the co-op founders, looks the way a romantic poet is supposed to. He is actually a refugee from physics, in which he took a master's degree at the University of Chicago. ("I found I didn't like physicists. There's something missing in their personalities. I wanted the gestalt of physics but not the little pieces.") He has been teaching as a substitute in the public schools, and hopes for a full-time assignment next year. He will also, for the first time, draw a modest amount as business manager of the Poets Co-op.

*"Fortunate am I,"
I say to myself and,
"Quiet," or . . .
"Work," or . . .
"Get out of here,"
to the ears of the faces
of
everybody else's children,
then send them into the
office with
exit visas.*

*Their stomachs gurgle on
the way
passing Mr. Hansen's room
and my stomach gurgles
too.*

*I don't expect anyone will
give me my exit visa.*

*I think my soul is boil-
ing away.
I feel it lifting on the
wings
of a thousand moths,
their beady eyes pouring
down like hail.*

□

Bruce Boston, who is also
(Continued on Page 34)



The serious mood of a Berkeley Poets Co-op workshop is reflected in the faces, left to right, of Belden Johnson, Maggie and Charles Entrekina and Betty Coon, as Lucille Day reads her poetry.

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from Chicago, is in his early 30's. He has a master's degree in economics and met Entrekina when they were both working as computer analysts for Pacific Telephone, but currently he devotes himself to writing poetry and science fiction, and is trying to get along on \$300 a month—some of it from sales, at 3 cents a word, of his fiction. "I don't do much in the way of recreation," he says. He wrote the co-op's latest chapbook, a collection of short pieces of fiction titled "Jackbird."

*hambon raft, glass water
reeds
the river grows wider
with my growing arms,
which test the changing
current and reach
from the riversource
to the fresh salt sea
which speaks with water*

□

Lucy Day is a doctoral candidate in zoology, a willowy young woman with wide eyes and a dazzling smile. "It's a bunch of baloney about two cultures," she says. "The creative experience is central to both."

*The frog embryos spin,
a million tiny skaters
in bright sacs. Soon
nerves will web their
bodies,
spreading like fine mesh
through muscles and skin.
First, the neural folds
must fuse. Crest cells
edging a moon-bald field
reach with hulbous arms;
flowing inward, they inch
toward each other.*

And when they finally

*meet,
welding together, cell by
cell,
there is no explanation:
somehow, they know who
they are.
I can almost hear them
yammering in strange
tongues.*

□

When the workshop begins at 8:30 on a Wednesday night, there are only about a dozen of us in the Entrekina's living room in a neighborhood of modest homes west of the campus. We sit on the couch, on chairs and on the floor. Coffee and cookies are in the kitchen.

Sitting next to me on the couch is a buxom, dark-haired girl who tells me she comes from Marblehead, Mass., and that she works in San Francisco as a security guard in an insurance office. In her lap she holds a thick file folder of poems.

The buxom girl reads a poem, and then Ted Fleischman reads a revised version of a poem the group has heard before. Somebody asks him to read the original version. We all agree that the first draft was better than the second. Fleischman looks distressed, and then smiles.

Betty Coon, a tall woman wearing a sweater and jeans and dark-rimmed glasses, reads a new poem, "Cousin Delvina."

*At twelve
you taught me how to
shake my ass.
In that one room cabin
you lived in
we turned the record
player up high
and felt the floor bounce*

*as we learned to dance
"fast."
Not that I ever mastered
that speed.*

*I went to college
and learned French.
You stayed in a small
town
living on credit.*

*On Saturday night
the Indians got drunk on
Thunderbird
and the locals roared
down Main
in V-8 trucks.
Tourists passed through
in campers
with their coolers well-
stocked.
You lived with hunger
and the hard cash
of blond hair and good
legs.*

*At seventeen you were
married.
In four years you had
three kids;
in five years you were
dead,
beaten to death by a
drunk.*

A bald man in his 30's says, a little diffidently, "I don't want you to feel put down, because I really liked it, but it seemed forced. It seemed like a poem in a forced way."

"I'm not feeling put down," Betty Coon says. "It didn't seem forced to me."

"I liked it," Entrekina says.

"Charles liked it, so it worked for him," the bald man says. "I'm still bothered by something about it. Would you please read it again?"

Betty Coon reads the poem again.

"You used some clichés in

The New York Times

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Originally published August 29, 1976



Production conference: Berkeley Co-op members (left to right) Betsy Heubner, Maggie Entrekin, Bruce Hawkins, Charles Entrekin and Bruce Boston go over a magazine layout at the printer's.

the middle I didn't like," the bald man says. "On Saturday night/the Indians got drunk on Thunderbird.' That's really a cliché, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Betty Coon asks.

Entrekin says something I don't catch, and there is a groan, and somebody says, "Oh, Charles, don't give us that academic bull!" Everybody laughs.

A bearded young man sitting cross-legged on the cover of a radiator says, "I think you're in real danger of having some loose and disorganized minds destroy your poem completely." There is more laughter, and we go on to the next poem.

During the discussion of "Cousin Delvina," my attention has been caught by a spectacled young man sitting in the corner across from me. He seems to be listening furiously, but he says nothing. I have the impression he's holding down a full head of steam, and I'm puzzled why he doesn't let some of it out.

More people arrive and sit on the floor. A jug of wine appears and some of us go out to the kitchen, rinse out our coffee cups, and fill them with wine. The bald man reads from a bound, inch-thick manuscript, fragments from a work in progress, he tells us, prose rather than verse. A girl reads, in a rather agitated manner, a poem about rock climbing. She sighs when she is through and says, "I seem to be getting more nervous rather than less nervous about reading." The

man in the corner still has said nothing. He is attentive, nothing escapes him, he glowers.

By 11 o'clock, all but two or three of the people in the room have read. Entrekin says, "I guess that's all for tonight."

The young man in the corner speaks up for the first time. "I'd like to read a poem," he says. His strong New York accent falls harshly on the ear here in Berkeley. "It's several pages long," he says. "Is that all right?" Entrekin assures him it's O.K.

The young man reads his poem. The imagery is of McDonald's golden arches and baseball parks and the streets of Eastern cities. When he is through, he is so tense that he looks enraged. We tell him we like the poem, it comes off all right, it's probably the most successful poem read during the evening.

The bearded man on the radiator says, "May I ask a favor? Would you please submit that to the magazine?"

The poet nods, says, "Yeah. O.K. Thanks."

He looks spent.

□

My second hour with Bruce Hawkins is our best. He sells five more issues of the co-op magazine and I sell four. One of mine goes to a bald man in a pizza parlor who, after turning me down on my first pass, calls me back just as I'm going out the door. (That was a sweet sale.) I sell another to a middle-aged man on Telegraph Avenue, the main drag

of the campus community and its hangers-on, the Hare Krishnas and other crazies, where I share a sidewalk with a vendor of handmade jewelry.

I'm thrown out of a cafeteria by the cashier, a long-haired young woman who follows me back along the row of tables, at last saying, "We'd appreciate it if you didn't do that in here."

When I tell Hawkins about it, he laughs. "She always throws me out," he says, "and she's not always polite. I get thrown out of other places, too. Sometimes I walk the streets for an hour with a frozen face."

The high point comes as we're walking up Durant toward the university art gallery. Somebody calls, "Hey, wait!" A bearded man pursues us. "I've been looking for you," he says. He buys the magazine and asks about the workshop. Hawkins writes the Entrekins' address inside the book. We take off again, feeling good.

I make a sale to a pleasant-looking woman who's reading an astrology book while she eats ice cream in a sidewalk cafe. She asks my sign, and we chat for a couple of minutes. My guess is she bought the Poets Co-op because she was lonely.

In the garden of the art museum I make my last sale to a man with a British accent. He offers me a dollar. We haggle for a while and then split the difference at a buck and a quarter. ■