



Cartoon Bullets:

WHOSE VERSE IS IT, ANYWAY?

BY RUTH LOPEZ

NOVEMBER 1997: THE MOST WIDELY DISTRIBUTED POET IN NEBRASKA

A

46

few days after The National Book Foundation held its black-tie fundraising dinner where the winners of the National Book Awards were announced, I went to Nebraska to observe an outreach program funded, in part, by the \$500 per plate dinner.

I had arrived in New York with vague plans to do a project involving literacy. I wanted to meet non-profit organizations that were doing something about it. The National Book Foundation got press attention once a year because of the awards but I wanted to see what they did the rest of the year. Plenty, as it turns out.

There are six educational outreach programs that involve taking National Book Award authors to “underserved communities across the country to talk about their lives, to make books more accessible, and to share and promote the pleasures of the written word,” as stated in the foundation literature. One of those programs, “American Voices” takes place on Native American reservations. I met up with Meg Kearney the program director and poet Donald Hall on the Santee Sioux Reservation in Nebraska. They had been in the area for several days and had already visited another reservation. The schedule was tight

for the next two days. Hall addressed tribal college students, Indian high school students, a mostly white elementary school in town and had a reading at the Verdigrée Public Library, a farming community proud of its Czech roots (there was a tray of home-baked *kolachkes* afterwards). The one evening we could have been free to dine together, we all ended up at the tribal college board meeting.

Living so close to Indian country in New Mexico, I could count on at least one predictable tension. A few of the Indian teachers wondered why there wasn't a visiting Indian writer. We also encountered seemingly uninterested students just happy to get out of the classroom for the morning and a white administrator who was just glad someone cared enough to come all the way out there.

Then Hall started to read his poems. He started to talk about his life and his work. A few years ago his wife, the poet Jane Kenyon, had died of cancer. Hall was still grieving. He was angry. Students raised their heads and listened. Hall talked about the family farm he had finally made his way back to. When he talked about the land, talked about love, talked about loss, he was saying things that everyone in that room could relate to. Here was the message: These are my stories, what are yours?

The shift in attitude in that room was palpable. Trust had entered and taken a seat. This kind of impact is not easily measured.

Most of the younger kids were quiet during the discussion but later a teacher came up to Hall and told him how much the students had opened up that afternoon. “They just couldn't stop talking,” he said.

One college student presented Hall with a sheaf of his poems. The student had never attended a workshop. Never met another poet. Later a teacher told me he was one of the faculty members who had been angry that a white author was coming. While he hoped the foundation would work on promoting Native American writers, he considered the visit by Hall a gift. He hoped we would come back and visit anytime. We were always welcome there.

The next day at a public elementary school in the nearby town of Niobrara, the kids gathered in the library to hear Hall read his poems and talk

47

about writing. As in every gathering, everyone received a book of Hall's poems. The publisher had sent along free copies of Hall's books and as Meg pulled another box out of the rental car trunk that morning, Hall seemed pretty happy. "I'm the most widely distributed poet in Nebraska," he said.

The students lined up to have the poet sign their books as the hall buzzer rang and teachers yelled out instructions to the kids to hurry up and go straight to their classrooms.

I stood in the back and talked to the principal.

"These kids don't know how important he is," the principal said, referring to Donald Hall. "Maybe one or two of them will make it to college and one day they see his name in a book and say 'Hey, he came to my school'." Then the principal added, "But if he isn't Michael Jordan, they just won't get it."

Whose responsibility is it to help change that?

APRIL 1998: SOMETHING LEFT HANGING IN THE AIR

At a panel discussion on publishing we have an old guard editor and a young editor, a marketing director, a literary agent and someone who has gone from trade to university press. It's a great idea in the abstract: we can real-

The work of artists and writers
remains suspect.

ly talk. About what? You know, stuff. But everyone is so cautious. I find myself having one of those "duh" revelations, like the one about literacy, when I realized it was all about money. The publishing world is even smaller than the world of journalism. There are working histories and personal/political dynamics—the unforeseen subtext—keeping the stories abridged. Eventually there is a polite standoff between the panelists and the audience of journalists.

Why were the promotional budgets for books so uneven? Why did they bother to publish good books and not promote them? Why weren't their publicists more informed about their books? vs. Why weren't we more creative about finding good literature? Why weren't we more skeptical when it came to reading press releases?

And then one very smart panelist eased the growing tension in the room by saying, more or less, that these problems didn't really involve *us*. *We*, all of us in that room, were a select group. *We* knew better. For a minute, I think we believed it.

MAY 1998: CULTURAL SLAM: ALLEN VS. JERRY

At the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Amsterdam Avenue in New York, fold-out chairs fill the place but it's the television screens that surprise me. Dozens of them spaced out on both sides of the aisle, projecting tiny versions of what is happening on the far-off stage. The evening is billed as "A Tribute to Allen Ginsberg," and more than 2,000 people have shown up to hear poets Pedro Pietri and Jayne Cortez and, of course, the grand dame of Naropa, Anne Waldman. They've come to hear Natalie Merchant and Philip Glass and The Fugs and countless speakers including an aged David Dellinger and a righteous Danny Schechter.

Patti Smith gets up with her band and starts to sing.

iBaby was a black sheep. Baby was a whore.

Baby got big and baby get bigger ...

Baby, baby, baby was a rock-and-roll nigger.î

By then a few hundred people are out of their chairs pushing towards the front. There is dancing in the aisles in the largest cathedral in the world.

iDo you like the world around you?

Are you ready to behave?

Hundreds of fists are in the air because, by virtue of one long-running sitcom calling it quits, this has become a defacto political evening.

Outside of society, they're waiting for me.

Outside of society, that's where I want to be.

For those attending this free event were really on the outside of society. Everyone else, so it seemed, was at home watching the last episode of *Seinfeld*.

That this evening coincided with the most hyped evening in television history was not lost on the organizers. There were jeers at the very mention of the sitcom and cheers for Allen the visionary, social activist and compassionate poet. Speakers raged on, praised Ginsberg, some sneered at *Seinfeld*, sneered at the media. Where were the reporters this evening? Where were the photographers, and the camera crews? They wanted to know.

But “the media,” as such, had blown its wad in that neighborhood earlier in the day where one block away television truck after television truck lined Broadway. There were students in the streets, making the Columbia University area feel, for a rare moment, just like a college town. No one was going downtown this evening. It was all happening at home. Enterprising merchants hung banners on their storefronts: “Goodbye Jerry, We’ll Miss You,” said one. You’d have thought someone important had died.

But they were there because the exterior of Tom’s Restaurant, an old-time grease joint, frequently projected in said show of which this monumental night would be the last, was located there and probably anyone dining in that restaurant had something important to say. Probably anyone walking down the street in front of the restaurant had something important to say. Lots of media trucks, lots of reporters, lots of lemmings.

There were rare moments during my stay in New York where I wished to be in a newsroom but this was one day I was especially pleased to

not be in one as countless entertainment/art sections tripped over themselves for their one collective day in the sun with the newsfront.

This isn’t an argument that journalists should have clogged Amsterdam Avenue instead. Rather, that one important cultural story getting lost in the blitz was how both events were happening at the same time. One block away from the Ginsberg tribute, albeit not a freshly dead poet, *Seinfeld* party-goers watched television en masse. I wanted to go up in a news helicopter and chase the mythical white Bronco.

These are my stories, what are yours?

But this wasn’t a crowd to stay serious in for long. Listed in the Ginsberg program under names of volunteers was one Jerry Seinfeld. An irreverent bunch had convened in the yippie spirit to honor their own. A man, a scruffy vision in tie-dye, danced up and down the aisle holding a tiny portable television. “Fuck you,” I heard him say, “I’m watching *Seinfeld*.”

JUNE 1998: A THEORY OVER COCKTAILS

I want to be known as the most brilliant man in America.

Prepared the way for Dharma in America

without mentioning Dharma.

Distributed monies to poor poets and nourished imaginative genius of the land ...

Ego Confession (1974) by Allen Ginsberg

The one thing I had noticed when it came to literacy and writers was that it was the poets who seemed to be the most involved in volunteer projects. I came to the conclusion that the reason was because poets knew most what it meant to

be marginalized. They had the hardest time getting published. They had to work harder than other writers to build an audience. But I wasn't going to be backing this up with statistics and footnotes. My research method was radically impressionistic. So I went to have cocktails with the painter Dorothea Tanning. In 1994, she had helped establish through the Academy of American Poets, the largest literary award in the United States—The Tanning Prize worth \$100,000.

As we sipped champagne, I told her my great thought. She listened politely. Thought maybe I had something.

But that wasn't why she established the prize.

"Poetry was all I read, it was all I cared about," she said.

AUGUST 1998: HOME AGAIN OR IS THIS WHAT WE CALL A MICROCOSM?

The owner of the newspaper has this friend, you see, and this friend has written a book. It's my first day back at work and I am told that I am suppose to do something "big" about it. There is no discussion about the book's merits—there can't possibly be because no one has seen the book. The merit here is privilege. This had happened before, once just months before my fellowship. I placed the book—prominently—in the donation pile for the public library. I am relieved when the book comes in (self-published on grieving) that I have a way to work with it where I don't feel compromised: I give it to features.

Then there is a poetry performance/installation at a local bar. The entrance fee is a poem. Some of the regulars are annoyed but most scribble something. And, as these arty things go, there is someone videotaping the event. A few days later a man is reported missing, last seen that evening at that bar and the family has posted signs all over town. It's a particularly sad situation—this lost man's brother was murdered the year before, the victim of a gay hate crime.

The artists go to the police with the videotape and the poems on their own initiative. A detective starts reading the poems, another is watching the videotape, freezing frames, snapping photographs. "Why did you order this

video?" the policeman asks the artist who tries to explain it wasn't something that was ordered.

When I am told this story I immediately see the Gordon Ball photograph of West Point cadets lined up at their desks reading Ginsberg's "Howl." One officer turns to the artist and says, apropos of nothing: "I suppose you should know his brother was found naked." Poetic details?

Art & commerce, art & commerce. Two words joined by an ampersand and looking like the name of a Soho or Santa Fe boutique wearing this year's irony. I roll those words around in my mind and next thing I know I'm playing a word association game. I can no longer think about art & commerce without certain other words jumping up and getting in line. Art & commerce & money & power & access & privilege & ad space & ad base & product. The theme goes from something I am suppose to be observing *out there*, and like a bad cartoon character's bullet aiming for Bugs, turns around and lands right back on my doorstep.

We've been clucking our tongues at chain bookstores and meanwhile the one big book review section in the nation hooks up on-line with one big B and not a word is heard.

At my newspaper, in a town with more than 250 art galleries, there is no art critic on staff. I live in the third largest "art market" in the U.S. and there is still this division in our culture where the work of artists and writers remains suspect.

Whose responsibility is it to help change that?