

## The Ocean State Review makes its debut

Letters

By **TIM LEHNERT** Providence Phoenix November 2, 2011

Nick-a-Nee's bar was the venue for the recent launch of *The Ocean State Review*, the University of Rhode Island's new literary journal. It was, actually, a dark and stormy night, suitable for curling up at home with a book. Instead, a standing-room crowd listened to seven of the writers published in the journal's debut issue read from their work.

Memoirist, poet, and short story writer Richard Hoffman kicked off the proceedings with the cleverly turned "Husband," a poem about a plumber's expert retrieval of a lost ring. Providence poet Kate Schapira read from her "Suture Sutras": "Or a cut in the skin is one state among many prices we pay for government."

A nod, perhaps, to the Occupy Providence crowd down the road.

*The Ocean State Review* is the brainchild of URI professor and poet Peter Covino, who looked on approvingly from a seat at the bar. Fiction writer Max Winter, one of the journal's editors, and an adjunct professor of creative writing and literature at URI, served as the evening's emcee.

I spoke with Winter. He acknowledged it is a tough climate for literary journals, but said he is bullish on the local scene. "For a really small state," he said, "Rhode Island seems to have a disproportionate number of writers."

And in an era where many journals are Internet-only publications, Winter affirmed *OSR*'s commitment to print. He compared the book, as a word delivery mechanism, to the fork as a means of getting food to the mouth: basically unmatched.

On this night, though, even the fork wasn't necessary.

Just a mouth and a mike, standing before jukeboxes, a wood stove, and an animated Jameson Irish Whiskey sign. It was enough to keep the crowd quiet during the readings — the only distraction being the occasional drone of the HVAC.

Poet Kevin McLellan cut a memorable figure as, slightly crouched, he extended his arms in front of his body, clutching his manuscript. He also worked in a little blue — the "P" word leaping out from one of his poems.



There were a couple of stories to go with the poems, too: Aaron Tillman's burst of Jewish-themed comic realism "Nobody's God," and Wayne Cresser's "Blazes," about a failure to connect among two suburban men.

But oceanographer-turned-novelist Padma Venkatraman stole the show with her reading of a short piece on the importance of writing — even as she apologized for her delivery. "I have an excuse," she said. "I'm an oceanographer; I'm not even supposed to be here!"

The crowd, though, was with her. This was a group with faith in the literary, however long the odds.

Guitarist Steve Carroll, a member of the band Sound Over Sea, played some tunes of his own before the reading and during the intermission. But the Providence singer-songwriter also slipped in a slow-tempo version of an '80s classic: Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'."