

A Magazine of Paragraphs

East Providence-based ¶ enjoyed a long run, mixing literary appeal with an old press

The literary journal *Paragraph* was the ultimate little magazine.

Small enough to fit in a shirt pocket, *Paragraph* was composed of free standing paragraphs of 200 words or less, each occupying a single page. Only 400 copies of each 38-page issue were published, and every cover was individually printed on a 1940 letterpress, an antiquated technology in which moveable type is set letter by letter. The magazine's actual title is ¶, the typesetter's notation for paragraph.

Paragraph wasn't splashy, and it didn't have a huge circulation, but it was in the vanguard of the very short prose fiction genre. The magazine stopped publishing in 2005 after a 20-year run, a considerable period for an independent literary journal, many of which last only a few issues.

Poet Karen Donovan and her husband, Walker Rumble, established the magazine in 1985 when they were living in Western Massachusetts and working for the now-defunct *New England Monthly*. "The idea," says Rumble, a freelance writer specializing in the history of printing and books, "was to take the paragraph, and like *Poetry* magazine, call it that." "There wasn't anything out there at the time like it," adds Donovan, who now works for a small Providence public relations firm.

The journal was born of the couple's desire to elevate the sidebar, the short take, and the distilled observation to the realm of literature. "I felt that people were writing books that ought to be essays," says the genial, if curmudgeonly, Rumble. The magazine was initiated with little publicity, but before long, "we experienced this swell of paragraphs," says Donovan. *Paragraph* also caught the attention of *Harper's Magazine*, which excerpted one of ¶'s paragraphs in 1986, as well as National Public Radio, whose Robert Siegel interviewed Rumble that same year.

Paragraph was an early exponent of what has come to be known as "flash fiction," "micro fiction," "sudden fiction," or the "short short." Such "stories" are typically 500 words or fewer, and are characterized by compressed elliptical prose. Some have a plot or clear narrative thread, but others are more impressionistic or surrealistic. In the last decade or so, there has been an explosion in the popularity of the genre, particularly in literary journals. *Paragraph*, whose entries were fewer than 200 words, was a vehicle for what one might call the "extreme" short, and it often blurred the distinction between poetry and prose.

The journal was part of Rumble and Donovan's Oat City Press, which combined literary and artistic endeavor with the basic craft of printing. As such, it followed the path of Rhode Island industries, like jewelry making, which combine craft, manual labor, and ornamentation. *Paragraph* was also a true DIY effort in that it was not underwritten by any institution.

After 25 issues, the couple stopped publishing their journal 18 months ago, "it was time," says Donovan, 50. "We'd done what we wanted to do." Rumble, 68, adds that he is now more

interested in the history of printing than in the prose poetry that was coming to dominate *Paragraph*'s pages.

The profusion of outlets featuring the “short short” and its various permutations was another factor in Donovan and Rumble’s decision to pull the plug on *Paragraph*. (www.oatcity.com, the Web site for the journal and the couple’s Oat City Press, remains active, and some back issues are still available.) Micro fiction has become a staple of literary journals, and there are several devoted solely to it, including Salem, Massachusetts-based *Quick Fiction*.

THE PRESS OF A BYGONE ERA

Rumble, originally from Iowa City, received a Ph.D. in American history from the University of Maryland. He then taught there, at the University of Bridgeport (in its “pre-Moonie days” he notes), and, for a year, at Pakistan’s University of Islamabad. Rumble ultimately left academia, although not exactly by choice. “In the business world they call it getting fired,” he says. He blames “cultural factors of the ’60s and ’70s,” notably substance abuse. “The world,” Rumble says, “became very fucking complex.”

In the 1980s, Rumble was working as a typesetter at *New England Monthly* in Haydenville, Massachusetts, when he met Donovan, a copy editor at the magazine. They discussed starting a journal of their own devoted to the prose short take. The first issue came out in 1985, when the two were still in Haydenville.

They subsequently lived elsewhere in western Massachusetts, and then spent time in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (where Rumble studied classic letterpress printing at the University of Alabama). After marrying in 1992, the couple moved to Rhode Island, settling in Riverside. This was a homecoming of sorts for Donovan, who grew up in Barrington.

Donovan says she has always made her living in the areas of publishing, editing, and writing. She received an MFA from the University of Massachusetts in 1989, and won UMass’s Juniper Prize in 1998, for her book of poetry *Fugitive Red* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). In addition to her day job in PR, she continues to publish in poetry journals, and is currently shopping another poetry collection for publication.

Ten feet from the couple’s house, a small but comfortable cottage on the water near Bullock Cove, is Rumble’s printing shed, where a 1940 letterpress was used to print *Paragraph*’s covers. Each issue had a different colored cover, but was otherwise the same: the ¶ symbol framed by a border with “A Magazine of Paragraphs” appearing below it, and the issue number.

The press was also used for various publications appearing under the Oat City Press imprint: chapbooks (short books issued in very limited numbers) and broadsides (single page publications). A number of the chapbooks, typically 20 or 32 page books of poetry, were illustrated by Donovan.

In addition to putting out short books by sundry poets, pamphleteers, and short fiction writers, Rumble also produced two series of broadsides profiling printers of the 1870s and 1880s. These sheets were like large baseball cards, and featured a picture of the printer, as well as “printing

tournament data,” and biographical notes.

One of Rumble’s favorite Oat City Press projects was his own 1996 *Carnage: A Gilded Age Birdbook*. Reflecting his interest in obscure reference materials and manuals, the chapbook is based on an actual Victorian-era bird book. Rumble says it represented “an opportunity to piss off both hunters and environmentalists,” noting that the source material comes from a time “when you blazed away at birds and then studied them later.” It is for such arcane projects that Rumble and Donovan’s skills as writers, editors, and printers proved essential -- it seems unlikely anyone else would publish such a volume.

The projects published by Oat City (and other small manual press outfits) appeal to a niche market of bibliophiles and printing connoisseurs who shun the mass produced in favor of books produced by hand.

Rumble’s printing workshop is no showroom, and the window sills of the utilitarian room are lined with used paper coffee cups. To illustrate the letterpress’s operation, Rumble moved a garbage bag of such cups that sat on the machine, muttering about a project devoted to the cups that he hopes to put together one day. The type for the final cover of *Paragraph* still sat in the press almost 18 months after the magazine’s demise.

Rumble and Donovan acquired the press, a Vandercook 317, from a Woonsocket printing company in 1994. Letterpresses are a throwback to printing’s manual age -- a raised surface is set, inked, and then paper or other media imprinted with the image.

To create the *Paragraph* covers, Rumble would arrange the metal letters by hand, ink them, insert paper, and then roll the press back and forth. He’d then repeat the final three steps in the process 399 more times. Even more labor intensive was producing the chapbooks and broadsides. “Setting the type is an act of sheer drudgery,” says Rumble. “The fun part is the finished product.”

Rumble compares setting type to completing a marathon, in that runners typically enjoy finishing a race much more than actually running it. While letterpresses have not been used since the 1960s, Rumble relishes the hands-on aspect. “High tech pre-press stuff didn’t interest me,” he says, explaining why he got out of the commercial printing trade.

AWAY FROM THE NUMBERS

There are hundreds of literary journals in North America, but aside from a handful of biggies like the *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and the *Three Penny Review* (each of which have circulations of fewer than 10,000 copies) they are rarely sold in bookstores, nor have most people even heard of them. *Paragraph*, which did make its way into some stores, was fairly typical of independent non-institutionally affiliated journals in its small circulation, in-kind payment to contributors (two copies of the issue in which the work appeared), and shoestring budget.

“We had a lot of the production ability ourselves,” says Donovan. This reliance on in-house expertise, along with the magazine’s small size and lack of photos or color stock, allowed *Paragraph* to avoid hitting the financial wall that affects so many small magazines.

Paragraph did little in the way of publicity; with its contributors and readers generally finding it as opposed to being reached by ads or other marketing efforts. “We decided early on that it had to pay for itself,” says Rumble, who adds that occasionally a given issue’s publication was delayed so that receipts could come into line with outlays.

Paragraph had a simple editorial process. Rumble and Donovan personally reviewed each of the 200-to-300 submissions that they received for each issue. “She took a bunch, and I took a bunch,” says Rumble. “Those seemingly good ones became the working pile.” Once the issue’s paragraphs were arrived at (by a process of “argument, advocacy, and agreement”), Donovan copy edited, while Rumble readied the journal for press and printed the covers. There was no board, no grants, and no institutional or corporate underwriters. *Paragraph* was therefore unburdened by having to be accountable to anything or anyone other than its creators’ editorial vision.

Paragraph had a few “name” contributors who, while not likely to turn up on Oprah’s Book Club, had authored a number of books and were possessed of some standing in the field. These included Los Angeles poet Wanda Coleman, poet and novelist Diane Glancy, and Arab-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye. “Most of our submissions were from serious writers with serious ambitions,” says Rumble. But there was also room for newcomers. “Once we got a submission written by hand in gold ink,” Donovan says. “We used it.”

Paragraph’s contributors included college students, stay-at-home mothers, and “head cases.” “One in particular, sent us more than 100 submissions,” says Rumble. “The guy was certifiable, but every once in a while he’d write something terrific.” *Paragraph* published writers from not only the US and Canada, but also the UK, China, Japan, Germany, Denmark, Bulgaria, Mexico, and New Zealand. (Long before I ever spoke with Donovan and Rumble, a short paragraph of mine, on whether the equestrian competition dressage should be an Olympic event, appeared in the Winter 2002 issue.)

“This was a miscellaneous journal,” says Rumble of *Paragraph*. “The people who sent us stuff were miscellaneous. Hell, we were miscellaneous.”

Rumble, who is approaching 70, says he rejects Fitzgerald’s adage that “There are no second acts in American history,” noting that he is on at least his third. An academic historian prior to becoming a printer, he now writes on the history of books and printing for academic and popular publications including *American Heritage* and *New England Quarterly*.

He is currently at work on a piece on the 1920s literary journal *S4N* that will appear “in the paragraph form” in the *Massachusetts Review*. Rumble is also the author of the *Swifts: Printers in the Age of Typesetting Races* (University of Virginia Press, 2003). The book chronicles the elite of the last generation of manual typesetters, a hard-bitten group who would compete in tournaments to see who could set type the fastest. In the 1880s, at the height of these competitions, machines took over and these master tradesmen became obsolete.

The final *Paragraph* has been written, however, and Rumble and Donovan have boxed up sundry materials related to the magazine for Brown’s Hay Library, which will archive them. The

last *Paragraph* (#25) includes an index to all of the magazine's contributors over the years. "Instead of petering out like some literary journals," notes Donovan, "we finished." The introduction to the last issue concludes, "So the work is done. Time to invent something else."

This article originally appeared under a different title in the [Providence Phoenix](#) February 23, 2007.