

Absurd in Lincoln -- *3rd bed*

Lincoln, Rhode Island -- home to the Lincoln Park dog track, the 17th-century Eleazer Arnold house, and the Lincoln Mall, among other attractions -- might seem a strange place to base an absurdist literary journal. But then again, why not? Given *3rd bed*'s tendency toward the quixotic, the unexpected, and the unexplained, Lincoln is as good a headquarters as any. The journal is housed in a converted 19th-century schoolhouse, which in a previous incarnation was a tavern, and doubles as living quarters for its editor.

The Lincoln-based periodical is one of thousands of "little magazines" in North America. The universe of literary journals includes such established publications as the *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and the *Threepenny Review*, successful newcomers like *McSweeney's*, and a raft of smaller print and online-only ventures, some of which exist for only a few issues before disappearing. Journals like *3rd bed* exist at the margins of a media culture that celebrates spectacle, celebrity, units sold, and profits grossed. As such, *3rd bed* and its editor, Vincent Standley, must confront problems common to small presses: maintaining financial solvency, developing and sustaining a readership without diluting artistic standards, and seeking excellence without fostering elitism. Another difficulty for the editors surely is existential: Why bother? Why publish a nonprofit magazine that relatively few people read or even understand?

3rd bed was founded in 1998 at Syracuse University. MFA graduates Standley, M.T. Anderson, and James Wagner, along with Syracuse writing program director Christopher Kennedy, decided to put together their vision of the ideal literary magazine — the kind of journal they would like to read and publish their work. When Wagner and Kennedy dropped out after the first issue, Standley and Anderson assumed their respective ongoing roles as editor and fiction editor.

Growing from a first issue with 73 pages and a gray cover, *3rd bed*'s ninth edition, published in late 2003, numbered 268 pages and featured a full color reproduction of a painting by Alexandre Lobanov. Lobanov (1926-2003), a deaf and dumb Soviet folk artist consigned to a mental institution for 50 years, produced detailed self-portraits, many of which depict him holding a rifle while standing against a backdrop of trees and birds. *3rd bed*, whose 10th issue is due in late June, is a handsome publication, the size and heft of a trade paperback, with an elegant front marred only slightly by a bar code (required by one of the magazine's distributors) at the bottom left. It's surprising that a low-budget journal (circulation 1500) can look this good.

While hardly mainstream, *3rd bed* is no longer underground, and it has become prominent enough that contributors include several heavyweights in the world of experimental writing. Robert Coover, the postmodern electronic writing guru at Brown University, Slovenian poet Tomaz Salamun (author of more than 30 widely translated volumes), short fiction author Diane Williams, and poet Michael Burkard have all published in the journal's pages. Standley used to have to personally put the magazine into readers' hands, but the journal is now available nationwide. The Brown University Bookstore is the largest single seller, but *3rd bed* also sells well at Quimby's in Chicago and Powell's in Portland, Oregon, and about half of its sales are in the New York area.

As *3rd bed* has expanded, its presence has grown beyond a twice-yearly publication schedule. In addition to its inventive Web presence — complete with pulsating type — the periodical has published three books, including two cult classics, Gary Lutz's *Stories In the Worst Way* (2002), and David Ohle's *Motorman* (2004), books that had gone out of print in hardcover and were reissued by *3rd bed* in paperback. Several *3rd bed* readings and performances have also been staged at AS220, the nonprofit arts space in downtown Providence.

Fiction editor M.T. Anderson is responsible for the name *3rd bed*, which, Standley says, represents, "a fuck you to Plato." The Greek philosopher posited three kinds of bed: the first is the ultimate as conceived by God — the bed in its transcendent or ideal form. The second is the bed as crafted by the carpenter; a useful imitation of the perfect bed. The third form, as depicted by the artist, is the lowest. Plato holds that such a representation of the bed is essentially corrupt, limited and unnecessary, and the artist little more than a liar. The first issue of *3rd bed* featured an epigraph quoting Plato on this notion of the hierarchy of beds, and followed it with quotations from Laurence Sterne's 1768 comic travelogue/novel *A Sentimental Journey*, and finally, from *Goldilocks*: "This bed's just right." This opening set the tone for the entire *3rd bed* enterprise: a journal with serious ambitions, although one leavened with humor and eccentricity.

3rd bed's six principals are a geographically dispersed group. Editor Vincent Standley, 37, grew up in Bellingham, Washington, 20 miles from the Canadian border. In addition to an MFA from Syracuse, and an undergraduate degree from the University of Washington, Standley has an MA from Boston University in editorial studies. He looks the part of the Pacific Northwest artist, sporting thrift store clothes and driving a white van to haul issues of *3rd bed*, as well two huge dogs, a Shepherd and Shepherd-Malamute mix. Standley, who is not paid for his *3rd bed* duties, supports himself by freelancing for the *Green Guide*, a health and environmental publication, and Barnes and Noble Publishing. One of his Barnes and Noble gigs involves writing 40-word captions for bird calendars.

Although he has little affinity for his suburban-rustic surroundings, Standley moved to Lincoln because he needed an affordable place that could accommodate his canines. He left his previous home in a dilapidated Central Falls mill building because of a lack of garbage pickup and heat after 5 p.m. Despite having lived in Lincoln for almost two years, Standley was unaware that he was only minutes from the Lincoln Park dog track until I informed him of such.

Ying to Standley's yang is Boston-based fiction editor M.T. Anderson. Standley and Anderson are in perfect agreement on the *3rd bed* aesthetic and mission, but differ on most else. According to Standley, Anderson was "the only guy in Los Angeles in tweed" during the latter's brief time in California, and "was so preppie he left Harvard to go to Cambridge [England]." I haven't myself seen Anderson, 35, but can say from a phone conversation that he is one of those rare individuals whose speech is like good writing — precise and elegant, rather than filled with banal "ya-knows," "likes," and other verbal fillers. Anderson, the author of several award winning children's and young adult books, including *Feed* (Walker Books 2003), a speculative novel for teens in which TVs and computers are implanted in people's brains, teaches in the MFA program in children's writing at Vermont College. Joining him in culling through fiction submissions is associate fiction editor Popahna "Poppy" Brandes, 32, the most recent addition to the *3rd bed* staff. A 2002 graduate of Brown's MFA program, Brandes is also an accomplished

cellist, an exponent of what she terms "chamber noir," who has played and recorded with a number of groups. Artist Tom Davis provides illustrations and reviews comix submissions.

The other half of the *3rd bed* masthead is in New York. Poetry editor Hermine Meinhard, a self-described "woman of a certain age," is author of the forthcoming book of verse, *Bright Turquoise Umbrella* (Tupelo Press, 2004). Meinhard is an administrator at Lincoln Center and teaches poetry in NYU's McGhee Division and at New York's Jewish Community Center. She was initially a contributor to *3rd bed* (issue 2), and was invited by Standley to become poetry editor. Meinhard subsequently recruited fellow New York poet Andrea Baker to share the load, the latter joining *3rd bed* as associate poetry editor for issue 5 in 2001. The final New York member of the editorial team is Web and art director Paul McRandle, 38, a writer and editor who has known Standley since middle school. Kirstin Fenn Chappell works with McRandle on web and cover designer.

3rd bed is hardly a Rhode Island institution. Not only are its editors scattered about the Northeast, but since the journal's inception in 1998, Standley and *3rd bed*'s official base has moved from Syracuse to Seattle, Boston, Central Falls, and finally, Lincoln. Standley is currently threatening to decamp to Canada (particularly if the current president is reelected), the West Coast, or Western Massachusetts, although odds are he will stay in New England in deference to Anderson, who recently purchased digs in Cambridge. Not surprisingly, an examination of *3rd bed* fails to uncover any discernible southern New England or Rhode Island influence, and Standley suggests that the *3rd bed* is in no way a regional publication. Anderson does note, however, that the rich experimental tradition of Brown's MFA program has been an important source of local contributors and readers.

3rd bed can variously be described as absurdist, experimental, and surrealist/dadaist. The problem with these labels, however, is that they arrive with so much baggage they end up obscuring the very thing they are meant to define. "Absurdism" is useful, but suggests frivolity and ridiculousness — something not to be taken seriously. "Surrealism" and "dadaism" properly evoke the collision of the unconscious and the dream state with "reality," yet seem locked as terms in the early part of the last century. Even "experimentalism," while conveying the idea of the new and untried, can seem strained, particularly since many literary "experiments" have been going on for almost a century. Fiction editor Anderson suggests another drawback to the term "experiment" — it has a manufactured laboratory quality to it, whereas literature is unpredictable and always evolving.

"It's not like a perfume where you perfect the scent through titration and then bottle it," he says. Therefore, all these terms, and none of them, quite describe *3rd bed*'s soup of fiction, verse, prose-poetry, drawings, comix, translations, and found and reclaimed scraps of literature and ephemera. The publication's content tends toward the eclectic, although certain predilections of the editors, including an interest in natural history and a soft spot for East Europeans, jut forth to a greater or lesser degree depending on the issue.

3rd bed was started, says Standley, as a reaction to realism, at least of the sort that was becoming dominant in the 1980s and early 1990s. Following a 1960s and 1970s wave of experimental and post-modern writers, including Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme, the 1980s, he suggests,

saw a reassertion of realism and the ascendancy of minimalists such as Raymond Carver. Standley, Anderson, and *3rd bed's* other founding editors, despairing of what they found to be a creeping conservatism in the small presses, decided to create a new journal in the tradition of *Grand Street* (www.grandstreet.com) and *Conjunctions* (www.conjunctions.com), two established publications open to non-traditional forms. While *3rd bed* was developed in opposition to the realistic aesthetic, Standley now says, "I see the journal now in a more positive way, as expanding the modes of realism." Anderson similarly backs off from declaring *3rd bed* as "anti-realism," suggesting instead, "[The magazine]" exists to provide a venue for writing that is doing something else."

One of the paradoxes of realism is that there is nothing more artificial than trying to capture "real life" on the page. Huge amounts of reality (a word, Vladimir Nabokov suggested, that should always appear in quotation marks) must be left out, and all kind of devices employed, so that events appear to follow logically from one another, and characters behave in what appear to be typical and consistent ways. *3rd bed* eschews this approach, essentially arguing that literature cannot and should not mirror slippery and subjective "reality." Anderson suggests that in realistic fiction, "There is the assumption that the world we live in makes sense. In the writing we are going for, you feel that none of this makes sense." As opposed to minimalist writing, *3rd bed* favors what might be termed intense, saturated prose, or, "Writing that takes nothing for granted" says Anderson. Poetry editor Meinhard also argues in favor of exploring experience in a non-realistic way, as well as verse that "Pushes language to some sort of extreme."

An issue of *3rd bed* starts, even before the table of contents and masthead, with a series of unexplained found pieces. These are cultural artifacts that Standley has dug up, the literary equivalent of discarded soda cans, cigarette packs or hubcaps being taken by a visual artist and converted into an assemblage or installation.

Issue 9, for example, presents reproductions of two letters (with postmarked envelopes from 1962) that, given their sloppy scrawl, appear to have been written by a seven-year-old. There's an e-mail exchange between a Japanese and an American professor, debating the naming of a biochemical computer program "ASH" or "CASH," and the associations of these words with death and greed. Also included is a 1755 letter from Samuel Johnson to the fourth Earl of Chesterfield; and finally, e-mail from a Web site devoted to guns, suggesting an exchange of links with *3rd bed*. These pieces provide a suitably off-kilter opening to the journal, offering what Standley suggests is a trace or a whisper of a possible orientation or direction for the issue. The rest of the magazine is composed of prose, poetry, mixes thereof, and various other unclassifiable elements.

The fiction in *3rd bed* is unlike the predominantly realist prose that appears in publications like the *New Yorker*. Those looking for a story in which a character (a teacher, say), exists in a recognizable and defined setting (a classroom, a suburban house, a motel room), faces a conflict (with himself, a spouse, a student), and then comes to, if not a resolution, at least an epiphany or moment of change, will be put off by *3rd bed's* approach. As Standley puts it, "A completely disappointing ending is really appealing to us." And so too, it appears, is a confusing and unclear opening, and a middle that takes a strange turn and appears to erase the promise of the story's beginning, if such a thing could have been divined in the first place. Characters in *3rd bed* stories

are sometimes unidentifiable, and a voice, an interior monologue, or set of elliptical observations may constitute the entire piece. *3rd bed*'s poetry, like its fiction (assuming these two can be separated), is rarely referential and is equally challenging. Poetry editor Meinhard suggests that the journal's poems tend to be language-based and lyrical, "More like music than reading a newspaper."

The following excerpts from issue 9 provide an indication of the *3rd bed* aesthetic. "Junk Stuff" by Marceline Crawley begins,

All of them were swarthy-chop busy in the bumble, then at once:

"Ouch" they say,

"I am not the social bee."

So they live in the swamp for a month, and that takes care of it.

David Rossmann's story, "The Parkers," opening paragraph is, Dappled shadows move over us and then the sun glares again. The streets are named for trees. It's a Sunday in September. There's a gleaming minivan, a red subcompact something, a light truck, a silver import, and a wide rusty wagon. There's a sport utility vehicle, a sport utility vehicle, and another sport utility vehicle.

While all of *3rd bed*'s entries are more or less weird, the journal does not sing in just one note, and associate fiction editor Brandes suggests, "The pieces run from varying degrees of expected and unexpected." *3rd bed* may not be publishing slick genre fiction in which everything is spelled out, but it's not peddling nonsense, nor are all of the pieces difficult to understand.

3rd bed's audience is difficult to pin down. Initially, Standley had assumed that most of *3rd bed*'s readers were writers themselves, probably in their twenties, and likely MFA students. Now he's not so sure, and notes that readings have attracted crowds of people in their forties and fifties, as well as those in their twenties. "I don't think you can locate the demographic age-wise," he says. "It's more a cross-generation aesthetic."

In addition to being a journal of the experimental and the absurd, offering dense nonlinear stories and poems that come missing certain parts, *3rd bed* can also be described as a post-modern meta journal. Much of the work that appears in the publication is keenly aware of its own construction and is writing that serves as a commentary on writing. *3rd bed* interrogates what "good writing" means, and flipping through the journal, one can't help asking, Is this literature? Which leads to the further question, What is literature? To this end, issue 9 features all kinds of odds and ends, including an ostensibly non-fiction piece by Kathryn Rantala titled, "Johnny Hendrickson and the La Brea Tar Pits" consisting of paragraphs about the La Brea Tar Pits, motor oil, Norwegian oil production, bees, UPC codes, ZIP codes, and Norwegian Fjord horses, among other things. Graphs and charts are included and each component is quite straightforward, although sometimes obscure, such as the table presenting, "The Division of Colors in % of Registered Nordfjordhest Stallions." The author makes no connection between the piece's elements, leaving the reader to puzzle through the pastiche and divine their own significance from it. Other selections in issue 9 include a visual representation of sound waves, and a one word "short story inspired by actual events," whose one word is "foreclosure."

Literary journals don't so much compete amongst themselves as they battle a wider literary culture (and beyond that an even wider junk media culture) that favors the author as celebrity (or even worse the celebrity as author), the book as movie, and literature as a product to be marketed, consumed and disposed of. *3rd bed* has survived and grown in this arena by dint of Standley's relentless efforts to get the journal into as many hands as possible while containing costs, a struggle familiar to all independent literary magazines.

Lately, Standley has focused increasingly on networking, in part by serving as a panelist at the Associated Writing Programs conference in Chicago in March. Over time *3rd bed* has expanded its reach with the evolution of its Web site, a more elegant design for the print edition, and national distribution. This latter is a key point — it's difficult to sell a journal if it is not in bookstores. Currently, Small Press Distribution, a Berkeley-based nonprofit, and Ingram, a national behemoth, distribute the magazine. Having been burned by less reputable outfits in the past, Standley regards these deals as absolutely crucial to the magazine's continued existence.

3rd bed is constantly in search of funding and its editor struggles to get each issue published. Beyond the money from sales of the magazine (1100 of every 1500 issues are actually sold), Standley relies on loans and odd cash contributions. He recently sent a mass e-mail to all of *3rd bed*'s subscribers, supporters, and contributors asking for donations so that issue 10 could be produced. "For two months I had this low-grade vertigo that went away when the funding for this issue was finally resolved," he says. *3rd bed*, a 501(c)3 not-for-profit corporation, is unlike many literary journals in that it is not affiliated with a university creative writing program. Standley suggests that without some kind of institutional support, or a grant from a body such as the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, the journal is likely unsustainable. A *3rd bed* board is currently being formed, and Standley hopes that this body will enable the journal to obtain the necessary ongoing financial support.

Financial difficulties aside, one sign of *3rd bed*'s success is that it publishes more "name" authors than it used to, leading to what might be called a beneficial or vicious cycle, depending how you look at it. The publication of well-known authors attracts new readers, as well as other high-profile contributors, increasing the magazine's recognition, thereby attracting further "names" and so on. We're not talking about Philip Roth and Toni Morrison, but such prominent experimental writers as Robert Coover, Tomaz Salamun, Diane Williams, and Michael Burkard, among others. This issue of "name" writers is a touchy one for Standley. When I asked him about prominent authors who had appeared in *3rd bed*'s pages, he became agitated and uncomfortable (and asked that I write that he was agitated and uncomfortable, which I have). He then rattled off a few names but concluded, "We publish unpublished writers."

Standley recognizes the dilemma inherent when an ostensibly experimental journal becomes an organ open only to established writers, even if these are people who fly below the mainstream radar. How can you get at the margins of the culture if all your contributors are flush with book contracts, prestigious teaching appointments, and literary awards? Standley well recognizes that if an experimental literary journal wants to stay that way, it needs to be open to new voices. This is not to say that well-established writers don't have an important part to play. In addition to the quality of their work and the prestige they bring, Standley sees writers such as Coover and Williams as reference points for younger and less well-known writers, showing them that

experimental/absurdist/surrealist writing is part of the culture and has a place in the ongoing conversation about what constitutes literature.

3rd bed has managed to handle its modest success well. In any given issue, a few of its contributors are big names (at least within experimental writing), but most are writers without book contracts who publish principally in small literary journals, and a few are finding their work in print for the first time. As a general rule, *3rd bed* contributors are people writing not for the money (contributors are unpaid), or the fame, but the sheer sport and pleasure of the thing.

Literary journals also have a peculiar problem — they generally have many would-be contributors and relatively few readers, meaning that the editors spend a great deal of time reading and responding to submissions, even though the magazine's revenues are modest to say the least. *3rd bed* receives about 100 print and electronic manuscripts monthly, and publishes only two issues a year. Most submissions are rejected, in many cases because they do not fall within the bounds of the journal's editorial scope — gritty confessional realism is just not *3rd bed*'s bag. Most of the material that does make it in, "Simply transcends the slush pile in some way," says associate fiction editor Brandes.

Standley prides himself on *3rd bed*'s uncompromising stand. Since its inception, the magazine has remained consistent in its particular and peculiar vision, and Standley has no intention of changing or diluting the magazine to make it more palatable to a wider audience. This brings up another touchy subject for Standley: Is *3rd bed* inaccessible, even elitist? Standley and Brandes don't like the question, and find the whole matter problematic if it assumes that "accessibility" and "readability" aren't loaded terms. Standley cites William Faulkner as a notoriously difficult, dense, and at times impenetrable writer, yet one who occupies a central place in American and 20th-century literature. And the same might be said for much of Joyce, Woolf, and more recently, Pynchon. Standley suggests that in order to be a good reader, "It takes a commitment to not know what's going on." He argues that one of the functions of *3rd bed* is to take the unusual, the absurd, and the difficult and give it a venue, thereby conferring some authority and legitimacy on it by virtue of publication.

Standley and Brandes are quick to point out that *3rd bed* is not publishing writing that is obtuse or obscure simply as bitter medicine for dull-minded realists, nor are they doing it just because they can. "We're not trying to put stuff out there that is impossible," says Brandes, and Standley stresses that *3rd bed* is not a prank, nor is it camp.

If anything, the *3rd bed* editors see the journal as a means of stretching the bounds of what literature is capable, "of expanding the modes of realism" as Standley puts it. And they have had some success. While a copy of *3rd bed* might not be on every nightstand, the journal definitely has a following. Still, regardless of their efforts, Standley and his fellow editors recognize a certain ceiling on how many copies of *3rd bed* they can ever hope to circulate. Absurdist or experimental literary journals remain a niche within the subculture of little magazines, a situation not likely to change anytime soon.

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