

BILJANA OBRADOVIC

Writers' works deserve notice

The "Academy Awards" were wonderful, and I was there. No, not the Oscars, but the 25th anniversary of the annual Conference of the Associated Writing Programs at Norfolk, Va.

The three days of mingling with literary celebrities was similar to Monday's Oscar presentation from Hollywood, except the conference lacked tuxedos, evening gowns and golden statues to be handed to the deserving artists for their hard labors.

At the conference, the atmosphere was much more relaxed and candid, and writers were swarmed by colleagues and fans asking for autographed books, as if they were Hollywood stars.

This is the second year I have gone to the conference, and this time I felt more relaxed and more at home among all those incredible American writers. But I still wonder why the conference isn't more elaborate or more formal.

Why weren't thousands of photographers lined up to take a picture of such greats as the wild, white-haired Robert Bly as he walked from table to table at the book fair, talking to the exhibitors, buying a book here and there, or in the evening when he boogied along to the old and new tunes with people half his age?

Why weren't there any cameramen to witness the ailing Donald Hall and the tribute made to him by his peers: Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell, Louis Simpson, his wife Jane Kenyon (also a poet), Gregory Orr and Liam Recker? The staged reading of Hall's works by William Patrick, with music performed by Old Dominion University's Wind Ensemble, was pretty close to the numbers performed at the Oscars.

The conference couldn't have cost as much as one Oscar statuette, but was worth a great deal more to many of us who respect the hard work and



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the great art of writers.

This is the case in many countries where the majority of citizens understand and respect the high value of this art, which will never die and has existed since the first human being decided to write his or her thoughts down in script form. Unfortunately, this is obviously the country where Hollywood rules the arts and gets more money for it.

This is the country where actors and movie producers rarely support other arts, whose practitioners are paid much less and struggle for attention from the public. Only occasionally will a work like Norman McLean's "A River Runs Through It" be made into a movie.

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But the National Endowment for the Arts wishes to reduce its funding to writers. The NEA continues to limit rights of creative writers and artists to express themselves in this free, democratic society, thus limiting the expansion and invention of new ideas.

On the last day of the conference someone said Ross Perot was at our hotel, so like any other curious observer, I stood to shake his hand and chat with him. I was surprised that he was so nice. I told him who I was and where I was from, Yugoslavia, and he said he was very glad I was here and not there. He said he couldn't detect an accent from me. He asked me if I was attending the writers' conference. He also asked if I could sing and said my tone and voice were beautiful.

I told Ross I wrote poetry. He said he wished he could have someone like me to coach him with his speeches and his diction. Then he shook my hand again, just as I was about to accept his offer for a couple million dollars, which I could give to the starving poets who write so beautifully and enunciate what life is really about.

Ross, you don't need any charts, you need good writers. These writers would better help their people understand this country, its culture and themselves, not limit their education or the value of American English. Unfortunately, today, English is reduced to computer language, not the creative human experience that stands out of the norm and craves to be different and unique.

Obradovic is a graduate student in creative writing-poetry and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

TODD BURGER

Exclusive club accepts plain folks

I don't want to brag, but I must. I belong to a club.

With my Sam's Club membership card, I have authorization to enter the new Sam's Wholesale Store on North 27th Street, which postures itself as a "members only" joint. It says so on the outside of the building.

I haven't quite decided if the member bit is just a gimmick, but it seems pretty close to one. Nevertheless, I can smugly take out my blue I.D. card and proclaim, "I belong!"

At least it's something, and perhaps it's better than a country club, where one has to carry golf clubs and pretenses around to fit in properly.

I can walk in Sam's place and not even have to worry about a strict dress code, as long as I am prepared to buy some products.

The rarefied feeling of membership is now within reach of the masses. What a concept.

Even a working stiff can feel like he belongs. Modesty and thriftiness are now in fashion.

Perhaps there should be a country song about this place, this clubby atmosphere for the humble folks. I can almost hear the words to it now. But I'll spare you from my lyrics.

Still, Sam's Club doesn't let a newly initiated member get too big a head.

Greeters are posted at the door. I guess they're supposed to confirm that one is indeed a member. And worse, on the way out, the greeters— or perhaps they are benign guards— check out a member's receipt against his cargo to make sure he hasn't stolen anything.

It would be hard to duplicate that warm, secure feeling of belonging to a place that doesn't even trust its own members.

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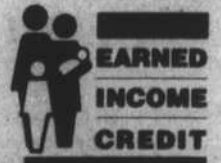
There are strategically placed video cameras scoping the member's every potentially furtive move. A sign by the books wrapped in plastic warns that if you take the packaging off of the precious products, your membership may be revoked. Heavens no. Say it can't be so.

The membership game puts the customer right where the company wants him: in a position to be controlled.

Unfortunately, I'm beginning to realize that the prestige of being a Sam's Club member may not quite match the cachet of driving a Mercedes or belonging to a country club, but you get what you pay for, after all.

There are restrictions as to who can apply and be accepted, but it can't be too strict, because I got in. Also, as immense as the warehouse store is, it was fairly filled with people, presumably all members.

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