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A flood of creativity

In the popular campus journal *Tributaries*, students' literary ambitions flow freely.

**By Mac McCormick '04 & Anna Deters '05
Photos by Marc Featherly**

It's been said that creativity is the act of organizing chaos — but chaos seemed to have the upper hand on a chilly Friday night in February, just minutes before an open mic poetry reading was scheduled to begin in the Memorial Center.

Due to a scheduling conflict, the event's location had been changed, forcing the organizers into a last-minute scramble to set up chairs and find a suitable spot for refreshments that included a modest cheese-and-cracker tray. As the room filled, a notebook was passed around for those wishing to sign up to read that evening.

This book offered more a rough suggestion than a precise outline of order, as students who had signed up suddenly turned up missing, having rushed back to their rooms to retrieve a forgotten poem from their notebooks or laptops. The suggested topic for the night's reading — in keeping with Valentine's Day — was love, but even that wide a subject net couldn't hold the range of material that was presented. Along with poetry, there were essays, stories, aphorisms, scenes from movies — even a critique of the federal “No Child Left Behind” act. The high energy in the room reached a crescendo with a dramatic reading of fluffy top-40 songs that brought the group of about 35 students to their feet.

During the event — sponsored by the Illinois Wesleyan chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, a national honorary society for English majors and minors — Megan Thoma '05 took the floor. As editor of the student literary magazine *Tributaries*, Thoma reminded students that the deadline for the spring issue was looming for those who wanted to express their creativity in a more formal outlet.

Illinois Wesleyan students have actively taken part in reading and publishing their creative work since the first campus literary journal appeared in 1872 ([click here to read related story](#)). But interest seems to be at an all-time high, as evidenced by the fact that the staff of *Tributaries* recently announced it would expand its publication to twice per academic year to accommodate the growing number of poetry and fiction submissions.



Cathy Gilbert '05 (above) served as *Tributaries* editor last fall. In the popular campus journal *Tributaries*, students' literary ambitions flow freely.

IWU English Professor Emeritus James McGowan says that interest in creative writing steadily rose from the time of his arrival in 1969 to his retirement in 2000, but received its biggest boost in 1996, when the writing track was adopted as a major in the English department. The entire University underwent a reform of its general education program, and the department decided to use the opportunity to respond to a continually growing demand by students for courses in creative writing and journalism.

According to McGowan, the creation of the English-writing major “legitimized student interest in writing, and it’s gone gangbusters ever since.” A tradition of visiting writers — starting in 1994 with a memorable series of workshops given by the poet/journalist Carolyn Forché — have helped pique that interest. In the past decade, many students have successfully competed in national fiction and poetry contests, and in 2002 the first May Term travel course with a creative-writing focus embarked to Paris. Today 71 of the 156 declared English majors are on the writing track (the rest are in literature), and that number is expected to increase.

For those students, as well as non-English majors with literary aspirations, publication in *Tributaries* has become an important standard for success. *Tributaries*, as it was renamed in 2001 by English-writing major Jeffrey Stumpo ’02, is the latest in a long line of journals celebrating the strongest and most original writing by University students.

It was last year’s flood of submissions that prompted the staff to increase the frequency of publication, according to Cathy Gilbert ’05, an English major who served as editor of *Tributaries*’ fall issue. Each semester, students have four or five choices for creative writing courses, depending on their experience level, so each semester more and more is written, says Gilbert. “It’s important for us to keep up with the work being produced.”



Jordan Ault ’04 (above) leads a sing-along of the immortal top 40 hit “Mmm Bop” at an open mic.

The magazine is run entirely by students, with Assistant Professor of English Michael Theune filling the role of faculty advisor. While Theune is available to support the staff in any way that he can, he has no influence on what is chosen for publication, according to Thoma. That job is left up to a panel of student judges who rate pieces through a blind submission process in which all of the authors’ names are removed from their pieces. Although differences of opinion are expected and welcomed among the judges, some general guidelines for considering each piece are recommended, including consideration for both craft and originality.

Thoma estimates that about 25 percent of submitted pieces are selected for publication, but

that number can vary. “The length of the magazine depends on the quality of work submitted — and our budget,” she says. *Tributaries*, which is funded by the Student Senate, has a circulation of between 500 and 1,000 and is freely distributed throughout the campus.

Tributaries is not the only campus outlet for literary efforts. Each year students invest their own time and funds to create a variety of independent “desktop” publications. Past titles have included *The Typhus Chuckle*, *Porch Swing*, *Theunepfisch* (a title that pays homage to Professor Theune), and, most recently, *Stuff*.

The gratification that comes with publication is not the only reason to submit material, however. “The experience of submitting your work is worthwhile in itself,” says Gilbert. “Being published, even at a microcosmic level, is good for writers’ self-esteem, and we need to encourage people to express themselves in artistic ways.”

But authors are not the only people who benefit from *Tributaries* and other campus publications. As Theune puts it, “A campus creative-writing publication helps to show the soul of a campus. Look at the latest issue of *Tributaries*. In it, you’ll find grief, anger, silliness, profundity, wit, passion, and irony — an amazing and moving body of complex work, the revelation of profoundly human emotions and thoughts.”

Shaping all that emotion into an appealingly readable format remains a challenge for *Tributaries*’ editors. “Our primary goal of the last few years was to produce a quality magazine,” says Thoma. “Now that we have done that, we are searching for greater distribution and also recognition through various contests.” Thoma also said she was looking forward to a release party for the spring issue. It will no doubt offer the same giddy mix of creativity and chaos that continues to make the campus literary scene a phenomenon that’s well worth the read.



Above, Alicia Rodriguez '05 reads a selection of her poetry.