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Campus literary magazines run the gamut

By Tim Obermiller and Mac McCormick '04

The very first student publication produced at Illinois Wesleyan, appropriately called *The Ventilator*, vowed to appear whenever the campus's "mental and moral atmosphere" becomes "noisome, and demands purification." After only one issue, published "underground" in June 1872, *The Ventilator* disappeared, indicating either that the steam had run out of its righteous mission or that campus administrators decided to pull its plug. It certainly couldn't have helped that the issue referred to a new textbook written by the University's president as "a regular crusher."

Despite this shaky start, student publications were off and running and have been a vital part of campus cultural life ever since.

The Wesleyan Bee, *The Elite Journal*, *The Avenger* and other early publications featured a combination of creative and rhetorical writings. Supported by various literary, Greek, and independent societies, these journals gradually fell into "bitter rivalry," according to the 1994 book *Through the Eyes of The Argus* by Jennifer Barrell Fusco '94 and Chris Fusco '94. Administrators eventually resolved the dispute by declaring their support for a single campus newspaper and in 1894 *The Argus* was born.



Above, a few of the many literary journals produced by IWU students or faculty since the 1870s. All of the above are stored in the University's Tate Archives.

The Argus continued the tradition of featuring a mix of poetry, short stories, and essays until it gradually eased into a more purely journalistic style. It's not clear when the first full-fledged journal devoted exclusively to creative writing emerged, though early examples in the University's Tate Archives include *The Black Bookmen*, published by a student literary group in the 1920s. In the 1930s, a journal specifically for freshmen, called *Green Inklings*, was introduced, which was later renamed *Spinach* (a name inspired by the fact that "spinach is good for you, but it is often very hard to take," its editor explained).

Albatross, published in the mid-1970s, heralded the modern era of student literary efforts. Gone were the rhyming elegies to rainbows, clouds, and morning dew that populated earlier student journals. Instead — in free, often jagged, verse — students described an unsettled society still reeling from the 1960s' cultural revolution. The tense, terse mood of the times is reflected in a poem from the 1973 edition called simply, "Viet Nam veterans without jobs."

As its title suggests, *The Unicorn* — published in the 1980s — steered toward more imaginative, introspective fare. However, after hearing a remark from visiting poet Gwendolyn Brooks where she described poetry as "life distilled," the editors were inspired to change the name to *Still* in 1989 — a name that better fit the journal's tone of post-modern edginess.

Still provided a creative outlet for dozens of aspiring writers throughout the 1990s. The shoestring nature of the publication is fondly recalled by a former *Still* editor, Eric Gardner '89, who is now a

professor of English at Saginaw Valley State University. He remembers one memorable incident while putting together an issue at a faculty member's house where a fellow editor was house-sitting.

“We spread the poetry and fiction out literally all over (the professor's) living room, and then his dog kept attacking the submissions. At moments that combine laughter and frustration, I still find myself thinking, ‘Get off the poems, dog!’”

One especially memorable issue of *Still*, printed in 1992, included an actual condom package, glued to page 19 over a banner declaring “Practice Safe Sex.” However, the editors saw fit to add the following disclaimer: “We are not saying that everyone on campus is having sex, as a matter of fact, we believe the opposite to be true.”

While *Still* (which became *Evolve* and, finally, *Tributaries*) was flourishing, IWU's English department offered other literary venues for students. Among them was *Clockwatch Review*, edited by English Professor James Plath, who began the professional journal as a graduate student and brought the venture with him to Illinois Wesleyan in 1988. (“Literary magazines are like tortoise shells,” he notes, “insomuch as they travel wherever the editor goes.”)

Attempting to break the mold of graphically dull literary journals, Plath designed *Clockwatch* “using slick magazine-style paper with jazzy and highly visual covers.” The review featured works by new and established writers as well as interviews with celebrities such as Bob Newhart, Buddy Guy, Arlo Guthrie and Vincent Price, “for which the magazine became famous.”

In 1990, *Clockwatch Review* was selected as one of the nation's five best literary magazines by the Council of Literary Magazines & Presses. Plath discontinued publication a few years later — deciding to expend the large amounts of time it demanded toward other pursuits — but not before dozens of students had gained valuable experience working on his staff as editorial assistants.

While campus literary journals are invariably associated with Illinois Wesleyan's English department, Professor Emeritus James McGowan says, “It has always been interesting to me that some of the best stuff comes from students I never heard of — say, music or even physics majors.” In fact, two of the most noted recent alumni writers were biology majors: Sandra Steingraber '81, known for her environmental books but also a respected poet, and Zarina Mullan Plath '94, a renowned Illinois poet and adjunct English faculty member at IWU.

Whatever their affiliation, students who labored on any of the dozens of literary journals produced at Illinois Wesleyan over the years hold a common appreciation that's aptly described by Gardner: “Folks consistently recognized that making poems and fiction was real work and that, as pieces of both art and craft, they deserved care, attention, criticism, and use.”