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The Benefits of Poetry Readings

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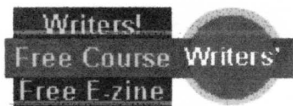
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Sandy Bernstein is a free-lance writer of poetry, fiction and nonfiction whose work has appeared locally, internationally and on the internet. She is a member of the Stoneham Writer's Group which will publish an anthology entitled, **Heels and Souls** later this fall. Sandy is also the editor/publisher of "Sour Grapes" a web-site newsletter. Sour Grapes can be found at: <http://members.xoom.com/Sandyberns/sourgrapes.htm>

Some time ago I got a call from an old friend. I told her about an upcoming poetry reading my writers group had planned at a local coffee house. "Coffee House? Poetry reading! Why Sandy, you old hippie." I laughed politely, realizing she's known me since I was a wayward teenager. I understand the association between coffee houses and poetry, but it doesn't mean we're bringing back the 60's in a tune in, turn on, drop out kind of way. Wearing beads and flashing the peace sign was as much a sign of the times as some of my first attempts at writing. I've come a long way since then, which is why the adult artist in me felt the sting of that harmless comment.

Harmless? Well...It got me thinking. Just why are artists and writers so misunderstood? Most writers I know have at least one relative or friend who doesn't get what they do or why they do it. Few people realize the struggle free-lancers face. Most of us want to be taken seriously, even if it means taking on the persona of a clown to get noticed. Simply put, we may need to call on other talents to make an impression. One sure way to accomplish this is through poetry readings. I'm not talking about slams where competition is key, though they may employ some of the methods

discussed here. My focus is on readings by individuals or groups who benefit from this outlet.

Many readings are performed with humorous sketches and multi-media collaborations. I have a friend who does some far out stuff. When you go to one of his readings poetry isn't the only thing you'll experience. Often there are props, music and comedic scenes that are played out between two or more people. At the coffee house I read a rock tribute poem that was accompanied by familiar guitar riffs. I read the poem while a friend backed me up on guitar; it added an extra dimension to the piece. We got lots of positive feedback. If nothing else, when you perk up your readings using visuals or sound, you jumpstart your audience. It's entertaining and fun...and you get instant gratification.

My friend who does the wacky readings performed all his poems live before ever getting them published. You could say he test marketed his poems first. Working with an audience may give the writer the advantage of understanding a particular market. Since doing readings I've become more open to ideas and tend to write more humorous material. I sometimes write with an audience in mind. Whether your poems are geared for readings or not, it doesn't change their meaning. Rather, it's the way work is presented that makes a difference. Consider the impact a reading might have if you take the opportunity to ham something up or drive home a point. Listening to the inflections in the author's voice could make or break a poem. With each rise and fall and noting where the emphasis lies, we can get a lot more out of it. Like art, poetry can be subjective, implying different meanings to different people. In the case of very complex material, poems may be better off read - not heard. You'll want to review them again in order to form an opinion. Other times it's the visual that grabs us. Experimental poems can take on shapes of their own, resembling objects or animals. We need to see it to appreciate it.

There are many facets of poetry and most anything can be worked into a reading. The choices are as vast as your imagination. I've seen lots of things at readings, but humor and imagery are key elements in keeping the audience interested. Personally, I like to mix things up a bit, reading serious work with lighter material. Immediately, I'll know whether I should rewrite something, or even if I should read it again. I now have a collection of standbys. My philosophy is, if it works don't change it. By mixing it up, you'll also give the audience a break from whatever mood may have been set either by yourself or a previous reader. Typically, my writers group will take turns, reading three to five poems before calling on the next person. We have four to six people reading, and assuming we have about ninety minutes, it gives us two or three rounds. People will get a feel for what each member is capable of on their

own as well as a chance to see how the group works as! a team. And this brings up my next point. If you suffer from performance anxiety as I sometimes do, you may find working with a group more comforting. There's security in numbers. If you've been with a group a long time, you should feel at ease, free to joke around. It helps quiet the nerves. But if you don't belong to a group or you're afraid to strike out on your own, you can always attend readings with an open mic. It's a good way to overcome initial fears.

Other benefits are networking and selling chapbooks or other items. If you have a website, or newsletter, or want to announce upcoming events, this the perfect opportunity to promote them. Most bookstores or coffee houses allow you to sell books or other items after the reading, though they may take a cut. And many booksellers now provide space for local authors to sell their work. Whether your book is self-published or produced by a small press, you can at least advertise it at readings. You can also pass out business cards for people to contact you. Remember, by doing readings you will increase your readership and perhaps make connections. Think of it as another outlet for your work, one that helps you develop as a writer. I consider readings a good learning experience and a lot of fun.

You can bet the next time I talk to my friend, I won't feel slighted by her comments. Instead, I'll invite her to a reading and insist she buy one of my chapbooks. After all, she knows I've long since traded in my hippie wagon for a mini van. Doesn't that count for something?

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