

The Reader: Not for Political Junkies

BY BEN WILDAVSKY

Don't expect too much excitement around the offices of the *Chicago Reader* while the Democratic National Convention is in town. As the *Sun-Times* and the *Tribune* go head-to-head with extensive convention coverage, the *Reader*—one of the great-granddaddies of America's alternative newspaper scene—is barely breaking a sweat.

"We have a few people going to see what they see," said editor Alison True, "but we're not doing any coverage. If somebody came back with a great story, we'd print it, but we're not planning anything."

About the only (backhanded) acknowledgment the *Reader* has given to the convention's presence is the cover story that came out Thursday—a sort of anti-booster's guide to "What Stinks" in Chicago. Things to shrug off in the City of Broad Shoulders, according to the *Reader*, include deep-dish pizza ("It's pizza's obese bastard stepson), the Billy Goat Tavern, the Navy Pier, Wrigley Field and the parking lots at O'Hare International Airport, where a number of corpses have turned up in recent years.

The *Reader*, a free weekly with a circulation of 134,000, prides itself on barreling down the road not taken. It cares little for timeliness, preferring to run long, carefully crafted stories on such topics as baby photographers, the dangers of air shows and—in a by-now-famous 19,000-word opus—beekeeping.

"We have always styled ourselves as an anti-daily paper," said executive editor Michael Lenihan, who wrote the *New Yorker*-esque beekeeping piece back in the 1970s (and who created the popular "The Straight Dope" column under the pseudonym Cecil Adams). "We reject a lot of the assumptions that go into writing a typical daily newspaper story. We're not pretending to any objectivity, we're trying to be literary, we're not trying to be concise."

Not that the *Reader* is oblivious to its surroundings. It has covered plenty of local issues (such as police brutality and city politics) over the years, runs a sassy media-watch column and has a long-standing institutional taste for urban affairs stories.

Still, the *Reader* cherishes its reputation as a feature-oriented writer's paper, a place where editors don't assign stories, reporters don't have rigid beats and unsolicited manuscripts from unknown freelancers can make the cover.

"It's the kind of place where you literally come in with a 10,000-word story

and give it to them without ever having told them what you've been working on," said former *Reader* rock critic Bill Wyman, who left in the spring to become arts editor of San Francisco's alternative *SF Weekly*.

Founded by a group of Carleton College graduates-turned-entrepreneurs 25 years ago this October, the *Reader* has become an enormous financial success. It's now as thick as many Sunday papers and is published in four sections that total around 180 pages. With an average reader age of 32 (77 per cent are single), the *Reader* is crammed with ads for futons, bike stores, stereo equipment, bookstores and so on. And the *Reader* is read.

"They're as much a part of the fabric of the city as any of the dailies," Peter Kadzis, editor of another alternative paper, the *Boston Phoenix*, said. The *Reader* is distributed around noon every Thursday. When Kadzis was in Chicago earlier this month, he had to walk about

two miles to track down a copy by mid-afternoon Friday, in an area near the Loop that's saturated with distribution points. "They're a precious commodity," he said.

The *Reader* pioneered the free-distribution system now used by almost every alternative paper in the country—including a recent convert, the *Village Voice*. The paper also created the most comprehensive entertainment listings available in Chicago, including clubs, bars, restaurants, movies and obscure theater groups and galleries. Its classified ads—which are free for private individuals—became a big draw. And its journalism drew praise early on from the likes of Tom Wolfe, who wrote to the founders that "the future of the newspaper (as opposed to the past, which is available at every newsstand) lies in your direction, i.e., the sheet willing to deal with 'the way we live now.'"

Jack Shafer, longtime editor of the *Reader*-owned *Washington City Paper*

and now deputy editor of Microsoft Corp.'s new on-line magazine, *Slate*, said the *Reader* thrived by combining a winning commercial formula with dependable journalism. "Alternative weeklies in cities like Chicago rose to replace the revolutionary and underground newspapers, where the truth value of the stories was low," he said. "What the *Chicago Reader* brought was credible journalism with high truth value."

The *Reader* has never specialized in bomb throwing. It doesn't even run editorials or endorse political candidates. And with occasional exceptions—this week's issue says President Clinton "long ago sold out to corporate America"—it avoids the tendentious cant often associated with the alternative press.

But some complain that the *Reader* has become stale. Even as he praises the brilliance of the paper's editors and the seriousness of its journalism, Wyman of *SF Weekly* argues that the venerable weekly has become too venerable. The *Reader* has been in a "severe state of decline" for a decade because of its "inhospitality to younger and new writers," he maintained. (A competing free weekly, *NewCity*, was established in the mid-1980s, but it doesn't appear to pose much of a threat to the *Reader*.)

Wyman, who frequently clashed with editors during his eight years at the *Reader*, said it is no longer a "vibrant, important" publication. "I'm completely convinced that you could print *Mein Kampf* in one of those cover stories and no one would notice," he said.

Editor True calls the cover-story criticism "the oldest, tiredest, most boring charge you can make against the *Reader*." The 35-year-old Vassar College graduate worked her way up through the ranks and became editor last year when the paper's middle-aged founders decided a changing of the guard was in order. "I don't print cover stories that I'm not interested in," she said. "And while every single story might not be something that you would drop everything to spend your weekend reading, some of them will be, and you will."

Reader founder Bob Roth—who once studied political philosophy under Joseph Cropsey at the University of Chicago—shies away from grand pronouncements about the *Reader*'s influence on American journalism. "We're just trying to have a broad intellectual curiosity about our world," he said. "The real standard is, you run good writing for its own sake." ■



Alison True, editor of the *Chicago Reader*, a leading alternative weekly newspaper. About the only mention of the convention was a visitors' guide to what places to avoid.

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