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## A publisher who is proud of his Readers

By Jon Anderson

**W**hy don't you run more stories about Pia Zadora," a visitor recently asked Bob Roth, a husky philosopher, debater, tennis player and publisher of the Reader. Roth returned the tease easily. Though a man of unfrivolous interests, he adjusted his glasses, gazed at the ceiling of his office and pondered the often-reviled pop entertainer. "We might," he allowed. "She just got a good review in Los Angeles. Maybe she shouldn't be the butt of so many jokes."

A "whither-Pia" feature is unlikely, but one quick point to make about the Reader, which late each week trucks 122,000 free copies into 10 Chicago neighborhoods and 15 college campuses from Evanston to Hyde Park, is that it is not predictable. Though its editorial content reads as if it were top-edited by Henry Thoreau, its publisher considers it a matter of pride to be imaginative, surprising and peculiar.

It often is—and so is he. Though raised in a suburb, Arlington Heights, Roth is an urban person, devoted to probing the depths, byways and themes of the rusting parts of the metropolis. He disdains fads, glitter and "stars." In conversation, he can be blunt, needling and intimidating. He dresses like a dump, appearing often in cutoffs and sandals, but he is an editorial perfectionist. He recently met a man whose name the Reader had misspelled. He apologized four times.

At times aloof, Roth, in his habits, reminds some of New Yorker editor William Shawn. Relentlessly curious, he never throws anything out. He lets freelance writers hang around the office if they want, never fires anyone [except once for stealing], but doesn't

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Catching, recording and interpreting real life matters in Chicago is the Reader's principal editorial mission, says publisher Bob Roth.



## Tempo

## Bob Roth: Successful publisher who is proud of his Readers

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encourage his writers to pal around together after hours. He dislikes what trendier editors call "the jet set" and "fast lane." He prefers trains, sailing and an isolated village in Maine, where he spends weeks each summer.

But, in describing Roth and the Reader, one adjective that draws no argument these days is "successful."

Holdings include the flagship paper in Chicago, a smaller Reader in Los Angeles, City Paper in Washington, D.C., part-ownership of the East Bay Express in Oakland-Berkeley, Calif., and the Ruxton Group, a national advertising sales organization that the Reader runs for alternative newspapers. Owners are mum on financial matters, but revenues for Chicago's Reader for the financial year ended Jan. 31 were about \$6.7 million, with pre-tax profits in the neighborhood of \$1 million.

Two years ago, the nerve center of this empire settled into a loft building three blocks north of the Chicago River above the Star of Siam restaurant. The Reader took two floors. Done in what might be described as raw bits decor, they are a dim maze of timber pillars, exposed metal ducts, tile floors and track lighting so soft that staffers complain they keep bumping into things.

Impressed with this success, streams of interviewers and would-be imitators flow up stairs there to ask Roth two questions—"How did you come to start the Reader?" and "Why did you succeed when others failed?" Given Roth's eclectic mix of social theory, journalism know-how and business wisdom, the process is like asking George Washington for 10 tips on "How to Start a Republic." These days however, his discussions usually start with some thoughts on other newspapers, notably daily newspapers, a subject on which the Reader and its publisher have, as they say, views.

Among the gripes of Roth:

- Claims of objectivity.
- Subjects who are "important" or "popular."
- Short time-frames.
- Editors.

"What's boring about newspapers," Roth says, "is that they write for the person who believes a decision made at yesterday's school board meeting is something you must read about. They don't write for the disinterested reader, the person who could be interested if someone explained what was going on."

Too often, he says, sports coverage is written for sports fans. Political news is aimed at political junkies. Other sections are awash in trivia. "Nobody can even remember how six years ago the

dailies were going ape over Suzanne Somers," he says, heating up. "Now who's Suzanne Somers? Or was it the shark craze, or pet rocks, or whatever idiotic fashion of the moment the dailies thought they needed to cover? That's what they spent the bulk of their time writing on."

Mainstream editors, he adds, suck energy out of the process by carving so-called news into narrow beats, dispatching bored reporters to cover daily fragments, printing drum-beat stories of momentary interest and ignoring the interpretation needed to understand anything. An expansion of this philosophy is contained in a two-page flyer ["Freelancing for the Reader"] aimed at the paid-by-the-piece contributors who write 70 per cent of the Reader's editorial content. "Don't call the Reader," it warns, "with stories about 'What Zsa Zsa Gabor Thinks About What the Mayor Said About School Desegregation Yesterday.'"

To keep enthusiasms flowing, the Reader does not "assign" stories or accept ideas in advance. "Sometimes," Roth says, "the worst ideas produce great stories and vice versa." Reader stories tend to be long. One, about a South Side murder case, ran to 24,000 words. Newcomers are encouraged to make their own judgments. Says Roth: "We don't set up our editors as people who know how to



Photo by Mike Topp

Four of the nine original owners of the Reader still are together, including [from left] advertising director Tom Yoder, art director Bob McCamant, editorial chief Bob Roth and operations director Tom Rehwaldt.

do a story. 'Do it,' we say. Bring it in. If we like it, we'll run it, then we'll decide how much to pay you."

Editors reject about 90 per cent of submitted manuscripts. "Virtually any topic can make a good Reader story if it's handled well enough," Roth notes. "Similarly, any article can be rejected, no matter how fascinating the idea, if it's butchered badly enough." For freelancers who do break through, fees run to \$675 for a major piece, not a substantial amount per hour considered the work involved.

Nine staff writers comb their own "areas of interest." Flora Johnson Skelly, for example, watches Chicago academicians. Harold Henderson has written on outdoor matters ranging from underwater archeology to a project to create a swamp. Robert McClory tracks people obsessed with causes. Steve Bogira catches urban underclass concerns. One recent Bogira piece, about white families choosing to live in a black ghetto, "was a particular favorite of the editors," Roth says. "It let you in on a mysterious life you couldn't imagine. It made issues, like bad relations between the races, come alive."

Catching, recording and interpreting real life matters in Chicago is, Roth says, the Reader's principal editorial mission. That concern is shared by the nine original owners of the Reader, seven of whom were unemployed when the newspaper began, shakily, in the early 1970s. Four of them, who own 80 per cent of the stock, are still together: editorial chief Roth, now 38; art director Bob McCamant, 36; advertising director Tom Yoder, 37; and Tom Rehwaldt, 37, who handles operations.

Though all four knew each other from Minnesota's Carleton College, the inspiration for the Reader came when Roth spent a summer at Boston University, qualifying to become a schoolteacher. Intrigued by two Boston street papers, The Real Paper (which folded in 1981) and Boston After Dark (now the Phoenix), Roth, by then enrolled at the University of Chicago in a master's degree program in political science, envisioned the Reader as an after-class project to make money. On Oct. 1, 1971, the paper's founding team, with \$3,761 in funding plus \$12,381 later, launched the Reader, a scrawny 16-page sheet, printing 56,000 copies.

Considering the demand, the supply was excessive. Times quickly became tough. Rooming together to save money, the founding parents, otherwise unemployed, laid out pages of their fledgling paper on a dining room table in a grimy walk-up apartment, rented for \$190 a month, at 4828 S. Dorchester, a difficult neighborhood.

Its second week, the Reader shrank to 12 pages; in its third

week, to 8 pages, in the fifth, to zero. Scrambling to survive, the team took a week off to reorganize. With no pay, each took \$55 a week in equity and added a part-time job to survive. Roth clerked in a florist shop in Harper Court. Yoder was a radio dispatcher for a paging service. Rehwaldt installed waterbeds. Nancy Banks, another Carleton graduate [and now publisher of the East Bay Express], typed for the University of Chicago.

In its first 10 months, the operation lost \$19,874. One black day, Rehwaldt's car, backbone of the circulation department, broke down: Unable to swing \$400 for repairs, the Reader rented a van for \$40 a week to get the paper

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around. Later, Roth bought a van, personally helped deliver papers for the first eight years and used it for personal transportation, often ferrying Hyde Park-bound revelers home from O'Rourke's pub, a North Side writers hangout.

In those days, the printer was Fred Eychaner, a waist-length-haired hippie operating a small print shop behind Farmacia San Juan on West Belmont Avenue, a tough area where, Roth recalls, rats patrolled the alleys he had to scurry down with copy. These days, Eychaner, still printing the Reader, is short-coiffed, controls a major printing operation, Newsweb Corp. of Chicago, owns WPWR-Ch. 60, a UHF station based in Aurora and dabbles in other media properties. He, and the Reader's other early supporters, are, to put it mildly, well-off, a success, Roth says, that is due to hard work, common sense, relying on instincts and ignoring traditions.

Free classified ads, for example, proved good marketing strategy, providing a non-editorial reason for people to grab a paper each week.

In three years, enough advertisers were on board to help the Reader break even. Two years later, the paper was in the black.

So why has the Reader succeeded while like-minded ventures have failed?

Some applaud art director McCamant's design, a clean look far above other street papers that often have trouble pasting copy right side up. In "Uncovering the Sixties," his book on America's underground press, writer Abe Peck, once an underground pub-

lisher, now a lecturer at Northwestern University, notes that the Reader avoided another pitfall of the street press, strident advocacy. The Reader offers "a community forum" and, Peck notes, quoting Roth, always "hoped to make money."

It certainly has. Should its owners want to sell, which they don't, one industry observer says a starting bid for the Reader empire now would be \$10 million.

These days, an average issue, 136 pages, out Thursday, goes to 500 distribution points. One Loop record store, Rolling Stones, at 175 W. Washington St., takes 3,500 copies a week. Most copies are gone by Saturday.

Advertising? Strong—and paid up. One recent edition carried \$142,000 worth of ads, 90 per cent from small retailers from whom, in 1974, ad director Yoder solved one traditional problem, how to collect. The Reader, requiring cash from all but the largest advertisers, collected in advance, on one recent week, for all its classifieds and 83 per cent of its display ads.

These days at the Reader, something of a management swing is taking place. Editor-publisher Roth is spending more time on "industry affairs," notably as president of the Association of Alternative Newspapers, a linking of 46 such papers across the country. Increasingly, Reader editorial matters are handled by managing editor Pat Clinton, an amiably intense, longtime Northwestern University graduate student who worked on a construction trade magazine before joining the Reader in 1979.

Will the Reader change? Not likely.

"Roth," Clinton says, "used to go through piles of manuscripts on his desk and fish out the week's issue. It's much the same now. You look at what you've got, then you put out the best issue you can. We'll always be smaller and leaner than other publications. That's an advantage. We can't win doing national stories. So we write intensely about our own back yard."

"When I think about Chicago," he says, "I think about two attitudes. One is 'no bull.' And that extends to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra which is known for its 'no bull' music. The other is that good work and good performers—anything made or done well—can find an audience in Chicago. Celebrities are not well-liked here."

The Reader's kind of readers, Roth says, want to know about their city. Unlike Sun Belt citizens, they are curious about the "mysterious others" with whom they share urban space. Such interests are also the Reader's. "The dailies think news is made at press conferences by governments and celebrities," he says. "We think a janitor can be newsworthy."

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