

"Writing Chicago," aired 4-29-85 on WBEZ-FM; guest, Robert A. Roth, publisher and editor, Chicago Reader; host Jerry Nemanic.

Jerry Nemanic: I think one of the most remarkable publishing phenomena ever to hit Chicago, really, has been the relatively recent emergence of a publication called the Reader. It's there in that stack of papers we've gotten used to seeing each Friday at the newsstands, drug stores, and lobbies of various kinds ar^ound town. It's free, of course. It's also very brash at times; witty at times; it features investigative reporting relating to life in the city; it features serious criticism of film, theater, music, art exhibitions; and extensive listings too of what's currently playing in the area. Chicago has responded to it with great enthusiasm for more than a decade now.

I'm talking today with the Reader's longtime publisher and editor, Robert Roth. Bob, you began, as I remember, with a modest 16-page issue in October of 1971 with a pressrun of about 5,000 I guess, and now your average issue is well over 100 pages and you give away about 120,000 copies a week. I want to go back for a minute to the "baby Reader" if I can call it that. What was it like in the early days?

Bob Roth: It was a tremendous struggle and it's almost hard to remember how difficult it was. I don't want to bore your listeners with all our travails.

JN: Travails are the things that people are most interested in. Success they get bored with, but with travails they're interested.

BR: When we started the Reader in 1971 it didn't bear any resemblance to a business. It was more of a fun project. In fact, at the time we started I was a graduate student, and I thought I was going to continue being a graduate student and do the Reader as sort of an extracurricular activity. However, it didn't work out that way because the demands of putting out a weekly publication are just awesome. When I look back now the ^smost surprising thing is that I ever thought that it could be done as just as interesting project for fun, because it's too difficult.

Let me correct you, Jerry, in one thing you said. We started with 56,000 copies, which was one of our many, many early errors. We had a huge pressrun that cost us a lot of money and made us run at a big loss every single week from the first issue. I wish I had good recall of numbers and specifics from 15 years ago, but I don't, so I can't tell you the size of the loss without looking it up. But I'm sure we were losing over \$1,000 a week--and we were, like kids. Of the original nine owners of the Reader, I think that seven were unemployed. They were students or they were working on the Reader itself for free.

JN: Now you were down in Hyde Park, right?

BR: Right, that's where we started. We had no office--this will give you an idea of what a shoestring ^eoperation the Reader was at the beginning--there was no office; we just operated out of our apartment. The paper was put out at the dining room table. There was no telephone listing because we didn't want to have to pay for a business telephone, which has higher rates than home telephones.

JN: How did you distribute the paper?

BR: Same way we do now, distributed free. The post office calls

it "bulk drop" circulation, and at the time we pretty much took the model from the way the college newspapers are distributed. A hundred papers dropped in the lobby of an office building or a classroom building or a store or a bar or restaurant--the same distribution scheme you see^l now.

An awful lot of the elements of the Reader as an institution that people look at today and can't imagine being any other way, many of the elements of it were that way when we started, issue number one. In terms of both business and editorial decisions, much of the Reader as we know it today, the kernel of it, was there in that first issue.

JN: You had come from Carleton College, right, where you'd gone to school? Grown up here in suburban Chicago?

BR: I grew up in Arlington Heights, a Chicago suburb; went to college at Carleton in Minnesota; and went to grad school at the University of Chicago. With great difficulty and a lot of luck, I pulled together a group of friends, most of them from Carleton, who were either already in Chicago or who came to Chicago to work on the Reader.

JN: Now had you gotten the idea for something like the Reader when you were still up at Carleton, or how did that come about? Did you have models that you saw, other papers or something that you said, gee, I'd like to do something like that?

BR: The two alternative weeklies in Boston were important models that had a lot of effect on my thinking.

JN: How would you have gotten exposed to those? This is now, we'r^e_^ talking about what--the late 60s or early 70s?

BR: Yes, this was 1971. Boston had a--it's not fair to call it thriving; everybody says it was thriving, but it obviously

wasn't--they had a sort of faltering alternative journalism scene in the late 60s and early 70s that was exciting even if it wasn't truly successful. They had two very creditable weeklies competing with each other like cats and dogs.

JN: Boston After Dark was one of them as I remember?

BR: I'm not sure you want to get into this, it's so complicated. Originally, one of them was called Boston After Dark and the other one was called The Phoenix. All kinds of curious things happened to them, like Boston After Dark going out of business, coming back the next year under a totally different name Public Occurrences, which had been the name of an 18th century Boston newspaper, and they revived the name. And then after a short time they somehow dropped the name Public Occurrences and went back to Boston After Dark. And through an interesting twist of fate that I won't go into, somehow or other Boston After Dark stole The Phoenix's name and Boston After Dark became the Boston Phoenix. The outraged response on the part of The Phoenix people to Boston After Dark having become, in their eyes, the "Phony Phoenix," was to start a new paper of their own that was staff-owned called The Real Paper. And in, whenever this was, the early 70s, this battle between the Boston Phoenix and The Real Paper certainly captured my imagination. Of the people who today are still considered some of the best writers of that era, a lot of the best were on one or the other of those papers; many of the writers who you see all the time now in Rolling Stone or Esquire or many other national media.

JN: How do papers like that or papers like the Reader basically differ from the daily press? How do they differ, and what kind of philosophy did you have about why a paper like the Reader should exist

in Chicago? I mean, we have newspapers here--at that time we had several newspapers here--and magazines like Chicago magazine, and so forth. What was the Reader going to supply to Chicago that it didn't have?

BR: Don't let me mislead you into thinking that we had this all planned out in advance.

JN: Yeah.

BR: We're looking back now 14 years later, and it's a lot easier to generalize and draw conclusions based on many years of observation. When we talk "theory" like this, please remember that we didn't necessarily have all this theory in mind when we began. But here's what I'd say today in answer to your question. That the alternative press in Boston or Chicago or all over the country is truly an alternative kind of journalism that differs significantly from what the mainstream newspapers and magazines offer in each one of those cities. However, the difference in Seattle is different from the difference in Chicago, is different from the difference in Boston.

JN: How is the difference in Chicago? BR: In Chicago, due to the strength of the dailies, we naturally evolved into doing a kind of journalism that the dailies just couldn't even consider. In other cities, often what you find the alternative newspaper doing is attempting to do the daily's job for them. Say Portland, Oregon, where the alternative weekly is disgusted by the low quality of their daily papers. They strive, in a sense, to be the New York Times for Portland because they think their own dailies have abdicated that responsibility.

JN: They're actually doing news.

BR: Right. They're doing what they think a daily should be

doing, and that's why in some cities the alternative weekly is very much like a weekly New York Times.

In Chicago we didn't want to be a weekly New York Times. You could argue that the dailies here do a good enough job of what they do, and we didn't want to be redundant. We wanted to find a different kind of journalism rather than simply being an alternative to whatever they were offering. Basically, what we settled on is an approach that rejects two of the most important theoretical underpinnings of the way both dailies in Chicago operate. One is that we've totally rejected the "objectivity" that they think they're bringing to their work. If your listeners don't know what "objectivity" is, if they've never gone to journalism school, it would never even cross their mind that anybody believed that objectivity was a goal of American journalists, but it is. It's ridiculous, you can see every day in looking in any American newspaper that it's not objective, but somehow the writers told themselves that it was, and their quest for "objectivity" I think explains a whole lot about why daily newspaper writing is so boring, so thin, and so truly uninsightful. Anyway, I'd say, much more than daily newspapers, the alternative papers believe that the only way you can write anything that's truly ^{worth} ~~work~~ reading is if it's interpretive...if it's subjective...if it's got a point of view. Journalism schools, on the other hand, have been trying to teach their students for 50 years that they shouldn't write from a point of view. I think that's hypocritical, impossible to attain, and deleterious even if you could attain it. Anyway, that's point number one: what's alternative about alternative journalism?--one thing that's different is that it's intentionally written from a point of view; it intentionally avoids the standard of "objectivity." [#] Then number two, [^]

is that ~~daily~~ newspapers all over the country display a ridiculously narrow sense of newsworthiness. We, on the other hand, reject that narrow definition of newsworthiness and try to find something that's broader. That's why you'll find the Reader with amazing frequency writing about topics that the dailies wouldn't give a moment's consideration to, because newsworthiness to them means the mayor's press conference, it means the NCAA championship game, it means Linda Evans and whoever it is, Joan Collins--Linda Evans and Joan Collins, that's who it is today. The dailies have such an extremely short time frame in the way they view what's worth writing about that I think the readers fully expect that whatever is written about in the dailies is not going to be worth reading in a week or a month or a year. Nobody can even remember how six years ago the dailies were going ape over Suzanne Sommers. Now who's Suzanne Somers? Or it was the shark craze, or it was pet rocks, or it was 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.

JN: What kind of guidelines, if any, do you give to your own writers?

BR: Well, we don't. For the most part we don't give them any guidelines at all.

JN: Are they staff writers mostly who write for you?

BR: No, they're mostly freelancers.

JN: Mostly freelance writers.

BR: They're independents. You see, both those problems that I cite as characterizing mainstream journalism--like what's taught in journalism school--both of them arise from the editor-centeredness of the way they practice the profession. Some editor decides what's of

interest to the readers, or what's significant, or what's worth writing about, and then they make these assignments. They tell some poor mope he's got to go cover this press conference. So the ^{guy} goes, nothing interesting was said at the press conference, and the reporter still has to file. Like, what have we got intelligent reporters for if not to be able to decide things like whether that press conference is worth writing up? So for the most part we try to avoid giving our writers guidelines. We try to make our writers think of themselves as independents who are making their own critical and independent judgments about what journalism should be. Forget about what they taught you in journalism school, forget about what the editors want. We want you to decide what's appropriate in the case of the story you're writing. Should it be short, is that what's best? Should it be long, is that what's best? Should it be in inverted pyramid? Your listeners probably don't know what inverted pyramid is, but that's a ridiculous practice that all daily newspapers use.

JN: Who, what, when, where, why, sort of in the first paragraph nd a then narrow it down from there--right?--to the least important ₁ details.

BR: That's right. Aristotle never would have approved, I'll tell you!

JN: I want to ask you, I think one of the reasons why our tendency is to compare the Reader to newspapers is because it's in a newsprint format, but it might be, from what you're saying, just as fruitful or more fruitful to compare it to a magazine. How would you compare what you do to what Chicago magazine does?

BR: Well, I wish I had a better handle on what Chicago magazine does, but I think structurally, if you want to just talk about the

structure of their publishing idea and the structure of our publishing idea, certainly we're closer to them in terms of the formal elements because both of us are based on feature stories. There are a lot of similarities, but there are dissimilarities, and I don't know that I can give you any decent answer to your question. The dailies devote a lot of space to feature stories too, and somehow the way they do feature stories is still distorted by rules of journalism that sort of come with the turf. And with Chicago magazine the same principle is also true, even though they do their feature stories differently than the dailies do theirs. Well, anyway, neither of them do feature stories the way the Reader would.

I'm not sure that I'm going to be able to fairly characterize Chicago magazine any better than I characterize the dailies. I've got a very biased view of both. It's not so much that I think, in either case, that there's something wrong with the way they write, it's that they're already there. If you want to read a story about where to go on your next vacation to the Alps, you can find one in Chicago magazine, and that's good, I mean I guess. It certainly gives us reason why we don't need to be writing about the gourmet's dining tour of the canals of France. It seems to me that that's what Chicago magazine is all about and everybody knows it--Chicago magazine is a "good life" magazine. I think, of the "good life" magazines that I see around the country, Chicago magazine is one of the very best. I'm not trying to disparage it, but I also don't want to duplicate it. We don't need another "good life" magazine in this town as much as we need somebody who has an alternative sense of what's worth writing about.

I don't know how to explain this very well, because there's

nothing to say. It brings me back to your other question. The Reader is run much more on an absence of guidelines than on the presence of guidelines. Again, if one of our writers wants to write in inverted pyramid because that's the best way to approach that particular story, we don't care. It's a crazy general rule for journalism schools to teach, but we're open to it in just the right case; and we're open to an extremely long story in just the right case; and we're open to a story about a celebrity in just the right case; and we're open even to news stories in rare cases. Generally what we're trying to do is more or less throw out the format so that intelligence can be brought to bear on every little publishing decision each week, and somebody with a brain--not a format--can say this story needs to be shorter, or this story needs to be longer, or this part has to be expanded because it's unclear, and this part needs to be shortened because it rambles on (or there isn't a strong enough focus or whatever). That's what we always try to do with our stories: make them the best they can be while avoiding the tyranny of genre requirements. I think Chicago magazine, for instance, is closer to the Reader than the Chicago dailies are, but both Chicago magazine and the Chicago dailies are beholden to their genre requirements.

You'd have to go talk to them or study it yourself to see. I don't want to bad mouth them because I could never do as good a job of explaining what's wrong with Chicago magazine as each one of your listeners could if he simply picked it up and just flipped through, and tried to read the stories and saw where they're coming from and what's the vision of Chicago that they're putting out for their readers. It's interesting as a piece of ethnographic research, I guess. It shows you a lot about somebody's Chicago, but if you look

at it as say you were an anthropologist, one of the most noticeable things would be what a narrow sense of newsworthiness they have, and what a narrow vision of Chicago as a culture it puts forth as the Chicago. Well, I'm happy to run a story about Le Francais, we did it once. We ran a very long fascinating cover story--behind the scenes at Le Francais. And I'm happy to turn around the next week and write a full-blown feature story about a janitor. Now, when Chicago magazine starts devoting 5,000 words to a nobody, then I'll worry that we and they are redundant.

I think the editorial niche that the Reader has been able to find in this town is largely a result of the over-formatted nature of the more established publications.

JN: I want to just remind people that I'm talking with Bob Roth, who is the editor and publisher of the Reader. In your heart of hearts do you have printer's ink in your veins? I mean, did you expect 15 years ago to be doing anything like what you're doing now?

BR: Probably not. I didn't go to journalism school, I never ^{ned} plan to go into publishing. I went to grad school because I thought I was going to go into college teaching.

JN: In what field did you study?

BR: Political philosophy. I like to think that one of the great virtues of the Reader is that the spirit that kind of motivates it is the spirit of a reader rather than a writer or editor. I don't mean to disparage journalism schools too much because many of our best people went to journalism school, but many of them didn't too. And I think that, as in any profession, when it gets to be just a profession, once it becomes work for money, only work for money, the quality of that work starts to suffer. In part because we don't pay

as much, the Reader has been lucky, we've been fortunate that we've been able to avoid "professionals."

JN: Do you lose writers this way? I know for example that a number of the people who write for you also write for other publications, and that makes perfect sense that they would. We were talking about Chicago magazine awhile ago. Dave Kehr, who does your movie reviews--very good and serious ones, I think, a big cut above the daily papers in this town--also does some movie reviewing for Chicago magazine. Lenny Kleinfeld does work for them and reviews for the Reader too, under the pseudonym of Bury S^t. Edmund. And others. Now what is your sense then of writers? You seem to be saying that writers, they obviously have to make livings as well, do they then simply look for greener pastures, no pun intended? Do you lose the people that you want to keep, if you can't pay them?

BR: Sometimes. Of course, in neither of those cases you just mentioned did we lose the people.

JN: Right.

BR: Sometimes we do lose people where they go to a job at a daily paper or something, and it's inevitable that it's going to happen sometime. Our goal is to find replacements who are equally good.

JN: Do you like the idea of a turnover in your writing staff?

BR: Well, not in principle. If you could imagine the theoreticall^y perfect writing staff then you'd never want them to turn over, but in practice I fully recognize that there's going to be some turnover. That's the way it's always been here and I expect it to continue that way, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. The sort of tenure system that lots of newspapers and magazines use has far worse results--they don't suffer turnover, they suffer

deadwood, they suffer employees who stop trying.

I think there are great problems with both systems, but I prefer our problems because they are problems for the editors. They create administrative problems of how do we fill the paper. Their problems, the problems at a place like the daily newspapers or even the New Yorker, their problems are passed along directly to the readers, in which the guy who should have retired, or the piece that shouldn't have been accepted, gets foisted off on the readers because that writer was a "fixture" of that publication. We don't have as many fixtures as other publications do.

It's real hard to generalize, but I think that trying to avoid rules and formats and fixed elements works in the best interest of the readers. As a lot of writers in this town have discovered, "professional" is a code word, one of its many meanings is that "professional" publications are closed to newcomers because they've got their regulars. One of the things the Reader has always been proudest of is that we're open to names we never heard of, people we never met, people who don't have a reputation. It's part of the reason why we don't put at the end of the story "Joe Blow is a Chicago writer and critic," which has been a long time practice in this town. It's always tickled me because, first, they all have the same description, "Chicago writer and critic," and, second, it shows the inferiority complex of the editors who assume that when you got to the end of that story you'd want an explanation of why this author was allowed to write it! And I don't mean to say that it typifies Chicago; many, many national magazines do it. What it is, is a nod to the kind of credentialism that I'm very glad to keep out of the Reader. I don't want to know that somebody has a PhD. I want to be

open to a story submitted by an 18 year old that might be better than the one by the 58 year old PhD. It's very easy for me to believe that the guy without the credentials might be able to do the better story. The way to pick the good story is to try to ignore who submitted it.

The more "professional" the publication, the less they think that way. In fact, at Chicago magazine for instance, if some just nobody like you or me submits a manuscript and they never heard of us, they give it to a college kid to read. That's how they treat their slush pile and that's how it is in almost every professional magazine. I'm very pleased that we've been able to introduce so many new names into Chicago journalism. The way we were able to do it was by forcing ourselves--and it wasn't easy--to try to treat all those slush pile manuscripts respectfully, even though at first they all appeared to be crummy. For many years here, we read every submission twice before rejecting it, just on the chance that we were in a bad mood that day or, and this is a very common problem, that we were prejudiced against it when we saw that it didn't look "professional," say a story with misspellings or a single-spaced story. Most editors will refuse to even look at it.

JN: Grape jelly on the front page!

BR: You'd be amazed! We've had some wonderful stories come from the most peculiar places. One of my very favorite stories in the whole history of the Reader was the one I mentioned, the cover story about the janitor-handyman. It was a story about a complete nobody who did nothing in the entire story. This of course is hard to write about. It violates a lot of the way editors like us think. We want action; we want things happening in the story; we want movement; and we want automatic, built-in reader interest. A story on a handman ^hwo shuffles
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around the neighborhood and doesn't do anything hasn't got any of it, so it was slated for rejection. But by the time we had read this story like five times, all the editors here realized it was fabulous. It was tremendously well written; it was fascinating subject matter; it showed you another side of Chicago that you couldn't get anywhere else; it was entertaining. I mean it was everything we wanted in a story, but we had overlooked it because of our shortsightedness the first time through! So we're always trying to check those impulses in ourselves.

Daily newspapers, slick monthlies like Chicago magazine, and national magazines especially, they work the opposite way. They build up a set of professional routines that reinforce those lazy impulses. We try to steer clear of them and be truly openminded. I don't think I'm exaggerating, for many years at the Reader there was a new byline of an author, photographer, or illustrator every issue. In those same years the slick monthlies and dailies and national magazines were loathe to put in a new byline. You probably heard the story of John McPhee, who was rejected for 12 years at the New Yorker before he finally got his first one in. This fabulous writer, how could he have been rejected for 12 years? Now he's their biggest star! The only way that could happen is because of shortsightedness on the part of the editors who make those kind of decisions.

There's a whole structure that people in the business know about that is just counterproductive. The use of agents, for instance. I don't know how many of your listeners know that it's almost impossible to get honest, sincere consideration of your manuscript in either New York or Hollywood unless you have an agent. Use of agents is very economical for the professionals who have to make the decisions

because they aren't making the decisions, they're avoiding their responsibility to make those kind of tough decisions and they're not being openminded. In periodical publishing, a very similar tactic is the assignment system, where you've got to have an assignment or they don't even want to see you at Chicago magazine or Esquire or you name it. The best magazines in the country all operate on an assignment system. It's part of the reason that they're so closed to newcomers. By the way, we do not use the assignment system. We don't make any assignments at all at the Reader. Everything is on spec.

JN: I wish we had time to talk a lot about this but we're out of time now. I just want to mention I've been talking to Bob Roth, who is the editor and publisher of the Reader. And next week on "Writing Chicago" we're going to have a talk with James Merrill, American poet. Jerry Nemanic and I'll see you next week.