

RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

The Seattle Writers' Club

By Peter Donahue

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"I don't mind criticism, as long as it's unadulterated praise," Noel Coward famously said. Indeed, a good writers' group, where members rigorously critique one another's work, is not for the faint-hearted. Precisely because writers' groups are prone to fragile egos and overzealousness, they often dissolve quickly. Not so the Seattle Writers' Club, which flourished for more than two decades in the early 20th century. The club helped its members pursue their literary aspirations and achieve a degree of writing success that they may not have otherwise. Just as important, the club bolstered Seattle's image of itself as a literary town.

As the raucous era of the Alaska-Yukon gold rush receded and Seattle hurled itself into a period of growth and prosperity, the city sought to distinguish itself as the Northwest's cultural capital. It offset its reputation for brothels, gambling houses, and variety halls with dramatic theaters, concert halls, and arts societies. The legacy of Mary Ann Boyer, aka "Madame Damnable," who ran Seattle's first brothel, gave way to the accomplished Nellie C. Cornish, founder of the Cornish College of the Arts.

In this vitalizing atmosphere, Sara Pratt Carr and Florence Martin Eastland founded the Seattle Writers' Club. From the start, the membership was predominantly women, some married to prominent men but most of modest middle-class means, such as Flora Huntley, a teacher at Broadway High School, or F. Roney Weir, a Mount Baker housewife.

The club met every Thursday at members' homes. As stated in its bylaws, its mission was "Mutual improvement through just criticism, aid in marketing of manuscripts, and the encouragement of the art of writing," and its mandate, "Criticisms shall be broad and comprehensive, unbiased and sincere...." As if to counter any accusations of "scribbling ladies," the members undertook their mission seriously, meeting without fail each week and producing a prodigious amount of writing, as the club's handwritten minutes (extant through 1909 and archived in the Seattle Public Library) faithfully record.

Yet, as Cora W. Charlton, a charter member who wrote a "Historical Sketch" of the club in 1926, recalls, members did not always adhere to the club's by-laws. During one critique session, "one of our bright members comported herself as though she might have been dining on porcupine steaks. She fairly stopped our respiration with her perfervid onslaughts on both manuscripts with the result that we lost both members...."

Despite such flare-ups, the group remained true to its purpose. Members routinely published articles, stories, and poems in local and national periodicals, including *Harper's Magazine*, *Pacific Monthly*, *Argosy*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Several published novels. Cofounders Carr and Eastland were among the most prolific members. Carr published two novels and had

produced her opera based on the life of Narcissa Whitman. Eastland undertook a series of boys books called the Little Apostle Series, the first of which—*Matt of the Water-Front*—presents the Oliver Twist-like tale of a 10-year-old orphan who lives in a shack on the Seattle "beach" with only "Big Kate, the Indian neighbor" and "Daddy Burns, old and drunken" as his family, and the paperboy "Skillets" as his nemesis.

In writing about their region, members of the Seattle Writers' Club saw themselves as contributing to an emerging Northwest literary tradition. They also wanted to sell their writing. In 1907 the club published, with its own funds, a collection of its members' stories with Seattle publisher Lowman and Hanford. The 20 stories in *Tillicum Tales* offer distinctly Northwest variations on the current Western adventure, gothic romance, and domestic turmoil popular fiction. Kathryn Wilson's "A Maker of Violins" opens, for example, with this Seattle-inspired flourish: "Caught in the draught of sea-air, the fog curtain of nightfall curled outward, and swinging over the waters of the South, folded itself above the swaying ships, shadowy wharves, and gloomy warehouses of the waterfront, and lifted to wind about the terracing hills of Bay City."

Beautifully illustrated with original photographs, drawings, and paintings by local artists, *Tillicum Tales* unfortunately sold just enough of its print run of 500 to recover printing costs. The book, however, is available online today for just a few dollars.

Nonetheless, by 1910 the Seattle Writers' Club had made its mark on the city's literary landscape. A 1909 article in the Seattle *Sunday Times* boasted, "Seattle as a home of famous authors. Impossible, you say" and then countered such skepticism by reporting on the new local authors' shelf at the Seattle Public Library, which included titles by pioneer Arthur Denny and University of Washington professor Edmond S. Meany as well as several members of the Seattle Writers' Club. The club also began to entertain local and visiting writers of renown. These included Joseph Blethen, playwright and son of Seattle *Daily Times* owner Alden J. Blethen; Anna Louise Strong, radical journalist and labor activist; and Hiram Chittenden, builder of the Ballard Locks and himself an author. Rex Beach, bestselling author of *The Spoilers* and other gold rush novels, also made a much-heralded appearance.

Not all meetings, however, were dedicated strictly to wordsmithery. The club's minutes record whose work was discussed each week and duly notes that cake and coffee were served at each meeting. Every fifth Thursday's meeting was designated as "semi-social." Romance even stirred among members. Cora Charlton recalled how Miss Brownwin-Jones seduced "the matinee idol of the Club," Frank Pratt: "little by little she wound her [c]oils about our idol and dragged him from our combined infatuations to the haunts of plain domesticity."

In its first decade, the club maintained a waiting list for membership. In later years, as founding members fell away, the club became more loosely knit while still remaining dedicated to encouraging writers and helping them publish their work.

On the occasion of a party for the club at the Hotel Washington Annex, Charlton asked herself "if some were not nice to us on the possibility that they were entertaining an embryo Dickens,

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or even Shakespeare." While the Seattle Writers' Club did not produce any enduring literary greats, it made genuine contributions to early Northwest writings, and had people paying attention to its members' literary output.

Peter Donahue is author of the novel Madison House, which won the 2005 Langum Prize for Historical Fiction, and the short story collection The Cornelius Arms. He is also coeditor of Reading Seattle: The City in Prose.