

COMMENTARY

Thursday, October 16, 2003

EDITORIAL

Printing fan's name harmful, unprofessional

Wednesday was a bad day to be a journalist.

The Chicago Sun-Times, a respected newspaper in a major U.S. city, made the decision to publish the name of the infamous Chicago Cubs fan who tried to catch a foul ball during Tuesday night's baseball league championship game.

Cubs left fielder Moises Alou tried to make a play on the ball in the eighth inning, but the fan got there first. The ball wasn't caught, the Florida Marlins scored eight runs that inning, and the Cubs lost the game.

FOX, the station airing the National League Championship Series, showed the replay again and again, putting the man's picture in millions of households across the nation.

Later, the cameras showed the man being heckled by nearby fans. Angry attendees cast cups of beer and verbal abuse at the man, who had to be escorted out of the stadium by security officers.

Of course, he was not alone in reaching for the ball. Many other fans grabbed for the playoff souvenir, but only one man was unlucky enough to touch it.

The ball was in the stands, and the umpire ruled that there was no fan interference. The man likely did cost the Cubs an out, and possibly the game. But, to be perfectly clear, the individual did absolutely nothing wrong.

Wednesday morning, the Sun-Times published the gentleman's name and age. The paper reported where he works and lives. The reporters went to the home where friends and a neighbor said he grew up. They interviewed neighbors and acquaintances of the man after he could not be reached for comment.

Hours after the story was published, the individual issued a public statement in which he released his own name and expressed remorse for the incident. It's not clear whether the individual would have come forward, were it not for the earlier article.

It would have been disturbing enough to see the man's name briefly mentioned in the text of the game-recap story. The decision to investigate the man and publish such personal facts is downright sickening.

Journalists have responsibilities. Most papers don't publish the names of rape victims to protect their privacy. If such an arrangement has been previously agreed upon, journalists won't reveal the name of a source to protect the individual from persecution. These situations can get tricky, and the rule of thumb is generally this: Is the need to identify the person greater than the harm caused by naming him or her?

Journalists must then weigh their options. Does the public's need to know outweigh the person's right to privacy? Would identifying the individual help solve a crime or a missing-person case? Would identifying the person compromise the individual's ability to live a normal life? Or, perhaps most importantly, would identifying the individual bring the person undue harm?

Depending on the answers, journalists and editors have to make difficult decisions. Sometimes a paper has to do what it thinks is right, even if some people disagree with the decision.

On Wednesday, the Chicago Sun-Times made the wrong decision. There was no justification for running the story.

"It is the biggest news story in town, and this is Chicago," the Sun-Times editor in chief told Editor & Publisher, a widely read journalism magazine. "We talked about it for a little while and came down on the side of publishing it. It was not 100 to zero, but the decision was made, and on we go."

The man will be lucky to go on — the paper unduly subjected him to the possibility of harm.

The very same unruly fans who assaulted the individual during Tuesday's game are now armed with his personal information. Sports fans sometimes riot when their team wins. To then consider what angry Cubs fans could do — especially considering that the Cubs lost the series Wednesday night — is unthinkable.

Perhaps the man should have kept his hands to himself, given the significance of the play. But his decision is forgettable when compared with the sickening actions of the Sun-Times.

As enticing as it may be to stoop to the Sun-Times' level, integrity won't permit it. Instead, here are only the names and e-mail addresses of the story's authors and editor: Annie Sweeney (asweeney@suntimes.com), Frank Main (fmain@suntimes.com), Chris Fusco (cfusco@suntimes.com) and Michael Cooke (mcooke@suntimes.com).

Perhaps some of the attention should be diverted to these individuals, the potential harm they may have caused the Cubs fan and the disservice they did to the profession of journalism.

A war against poetry

It's not the first (truth), and it's not the second (human beings), but poetry has become one of the casualties of war.

Many a foolhardy critic has penned "poetry is dead," only to have it rise again from its coffin. I know this. I'm aware that this mission is sure suicide. But ever since reading the following poetic lines dealing with the war in Iraq, I've lost the will to live:

"Isn't it their duty to their Country / more to become a poet / than a brain-washed murder robot?"

"Why don't you tell those bastards not to fight? For Pete's sake, send an angel! Burn a bush!"

"I weep for justice."

"Tell these eerie people that killing children is wrong, that the U.S. becomes everyday more and more frightful."

Amateurs did not write these verses, nor preschoolers; they belong to past and present poets laureate in work collected by the organization Poets Against the War.

The PAW movement began in late January when Sam Hamill, longtime poet and pacifist, received an invitation from Laura Bush to attend a poetry symposium at the White House. Hamill declined in protest and asked his friends to write poems against war and the administration, which he could then send to the First Lady.

Within a week, over 1,500 poets responded, and by the beginning of March, Hamill had collected and posted over 13,000 anti-war poems on his Web site www.poetsagainsthewar.org. PAW has since created an anthology of the best anti-war poems from the site and recently published a companion book entitled "Raising Our Voices" that exclusively features Oregonian anti-war poets.

Let me be clear: My criticism is not about their politics; I too am against the war in Iraq and the policy of preemption. My criticism, put plainly, is: Their poetry sucks.

Over 99 percent of these poems are little more than glorified protest signs. Some use flowery language and elitist metaphor to say nothing more than "war bad," while others dispense with the pretense and go straight to partisan name-calling.

W.S. Merwin calls Bush "a fraud," and Lawrence Ferlinghetti calls his administration "the terrorists in Washington." I found quite a few "bastards," a peppering of "monsters," a "tin-pot tyrant," "usurper" and the old favorite of the left, "commander-in-thief." Using gross hyperbole and moronic simplicity, these poems declare that Bush "wants blood," has a "relentless appetite for war" and desires war to "appease his fury." One poem compared him to Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot.

These words don't sound like they came from the mouths of poets. These sound like words I would say. That's exactly the kind of ranting tripe that us dime-a-dozen opinion columnists use to satisfy our quotas. Shouldn't we expect more from poets? I know I do.

If not, then Michael Moore, Molly Ivans and Jim Hightower should be the greatest poets of the modern era. The person who came up with the phrase "Resident Bush" should win a Pulitzer.

Can good poetry be political? Absolutely! But it must dig deeper than "war bad," "racism bad" and/or "sexism bad." I agree



Steve Baggs Illustration

that all art is political. But the flipside is that only bad art is only political.

As I was wandering aimlessly through the 14,000 anti-war poems, banging my head against the desk with each trite verse, I ran across this poem by Katha Pollit:

"What good are more poems against war / the real subject of which / so often seems to be the poet's superior / moral sensitivities?" Is it great? Not really. But at least she understands that the nature of a poem is not to be a political statement but



David Jagernauth
Critical mass

rather to be a statement on the political.

Most of the poets in the PAW anthology do not seem to appreciate the distinction. They speak as if they were Southerners proclaiming that God is an American. For example, the great Stanley Kunitz said in an interview, "(War is) contrary to the humanitarian position that is at the center of the poetic impulse." Poet Li-Young Lee seconds his sentiment: "The way I understand poetry, all poems are anti-war poems."

This New Age-y nonsense is dangerous. Soon we will only have writing about what should be (peace) rather than insights into what is and has been (war). Soon everyone will speak of poetry as David Kirby does: "The value of poetry is it can say what is true in a really quick, concise way."

The art of quick truth and easy answers. If this is the future, then I feel confident to

prophesize poetry's looming demise.

The irony in all this is that President Bush is somewhat of a poet in his own right. Check out this love poem he wrote for his wife while she was traveling through Europe not so long ago:

"Roses are red / violets are blue / oh my lump in the bed / I miss you. / The distance, my dear / has been such a barrier / next time you want an adventure / just land on a carrier."

Not everyone was impressed with the President's poem and his ability to rhyme. Canada's poet laureate George Bowering, for one, offered a bit of constructive criticism: "He's not anywhere near a poet. It is just absolutely horrible."

I've already quoted one of Bowering's poems, the one about how killing children is wrong. What wordsmith worth his or her salt would describe child-killers as "eerie people?" Invest in a thesaurus you Canadian bastard, you monster, you fraud!

I wish these poets had attended Laura Bush's poetry symposium, so that they could acquaint themselves with the true voice of a poet.

"Did we think victory great? / So it is — but now it seems to me, when it cannot be help'd, that defeat is great / And that death and dismay are great."

Whitman displays more wisdom in those few lines than can be found in all 14,000 anti-war poems. That's because the PAW poets are propagandists, not artists. And though I appreciate their message, I deplore their exploitation of poetry to serve a narrow political agenda. They think they are empowering art, but in reality they belittle it: Poets Against the War is raging an all-out war against poetry.

And all I have to say is: "Bring 'em on!"

Contact the columnist at djagernauth@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

"Racial battlefield" a myth

History may be in columnist David Jagernauth's blood, but it is hatred and racial collectivism that is in his mind, and subsequently his pen. He describes our university as a racial battlefield in his Oct. 2 column ("Schoolhouse discrimination," ODE), not the gateway to opportunity that it truly is. Only the irrationality of racial collectivism would allow him to write such a perversion.

I am a freshman at the University. My

first week here has been filled with glimpses of great things to come and not visions of a desperate battlefield. The experience has been altogether liberating.

Maybe your professors don't really want you to "minimize" your "racial memories." Maybe they want you to maximize your individualistic capacity for independence.

Freedom doesn't lie in racial incentives and certainly not in racial warfare. It lies in the power of the individual to think and act for himself. Plenty of white people relate to your "historical feeling." But an individualist of any race doesn't act on his

feelings, he acts on reason, which your call to arms is sorely lacking.

I find it sickening that you would associate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with this column. He was a man of peace. Your "reasoning" can only result in war. He valued the content of a man's character over the color of his skin. As your generalizations about white students show, you believe skin color determines a man's ideas. There is a time for that belief. It is called the Stone Age.

Chris Potter
Pre-journalism