



# The City That Reads

Baltimore's literary scene is booming

OVER THE YEARS, the city of Baltimore has spent millions of dollars to boost its embattled public image. In return, Charm City's clever, self-deprecating citizenry has been force-fed one underwhelming slogan after another, from "Baltimore Is Best" and "The Greatest City in America" to "Get In On It" and "Believe."

In his 1987 inaugural address, former mayor Kurt Schmoke introduced the well-intentioned but immediately mockable motto "The City That Reads" (think "The City That Bleeds," "The City That Breeds," and so on). That slogan is invoked sarcastically to this day, but it's not for lack of literature. In fact, the area's thriving independent literary scene should serve as an inspiration to anyone, in any city, who feels the creative slump of the economic recession and fears there's little room for imagination or innovation.

Baltimore's highly engaged community of readers and writers show up en masse for inventive reading series, fuel popular zines and lit journals, and support the city's industrious libraries, bookshops, and publishers.

The zine scene is particularly intriguing, especially since much of the creative energy that fueled that medium in previous decades is now often funneled into blogs and websites. Local darling *Smile, Hon, You're in Baltimore!* is published three times a year by William P. Tandy, who started the zine in 2001. Tandy collects stories from both polished writers and newcomers, filling the booklet's pages with colorful tales of rats, crime, and assorted neighborhood hijinks. Though *Smile, Hon* very much inhabits its native city, the publication will appeal to anyone who is compelled by the darkly funny, serendipitous, sometimes undignified realities of urban existence.

On a whim, Tandy sent a couple of early issues of *Smile, Hon* to Baltimore's then-mayor, Martin O'Malley. To his

surprise, he received a personal note from O'Malley (now the governor of Maryland). "Your books have caused a bit of a stir in my office," Tandy recalls O'Malley writing. O'Malley was referring, in particular, to a St. Patrick's Day story written by Tandy, which began innocently (if drunkenly) enough with a visit to Bohager's bar, where the mayor's

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céilidh-rock band, O'Malley's March, happened to be playing. At some point, Tandy explains, one of his friends spilled a shot of Rumble Minze on the table—which then caught fire. "Yeah," he says. "Caught fire. While the mayor was onstage."

Though Baltimore is home to more than 600,000 people, the mayor's gesture speaks to its tight-knit vibe and lack of pretension, characteristics that help keep the lit scene open and evolving. "The city never had the resources that a lot of the bigger cities around here did, certainly not New York or Philadelphia or D.C.," Tandy says. "Those are all the bigger siblings who

got the farm and the looks, but Baltimore got the personality. When you're starting with less, it fosters creativity."

It's no surprise, then, that the city responsible for offbeat visionaries like filmmaker John Waters, essayist and novelist Madison Smartt Bell, and *The Wire*'s David Simon has built a busy, imaginative schedule of literary readings in independent bookshops and art galleries, events that are distinct from the sleep-inducing, sparsely attended sessions typical of many a Barnes & Noble.

Tandy hosts open-mic nights at bars and bookstores that also serve as calls for *Smile, Hon* submissions. The **i.e. reading series** convenes once a month or so for avant-garde poetry. Each installment of **The 510 Readings**, a fiction series run by local authors Jen Michalski and Michael Kimball, lines up three or four writers for 12-minute readings. They perform for packed houses on the third Saturday of every month at the cozy Minás Gallery, where eager fans snag spots on the floor after the chairs fill up. Touring authors pair up with locals at the **Atomic Fiction Series**, recently launched by the artsy indie shop Atomic Books. "It's sort of like that punk rock show aesthetic," says co-owner Benn Ray, "where you take a touring punk band, pair it with a local punk band, and make a show out of it."

The larger community gathers every April for the CityLit festival, which is put together by the **CityLit Project**, a nonprofit that gives writers and readers year-round opportunities to mingle in its own classes, workshops, readings, and happy hours (where Michalski and Kimball met and hatched the idea for the 510 series). The sprawling festival takes over downtown's regal Enoch Pratt Free Library, where blockbuster authors like Pulitzer winner Junot Díaz read to a packed auditorium and newly published local luminaries discuss their first books in

an office across the hall. Three thousand people make their way into the library over the course of the day, stopping to chat with purveyors of literary goods and flip through their wares. Tandy is there, as is his wife, Davida Gypsy Breier, who publishes the zine review **Xerography Debt**, the personal zine **Leeking Ink**, and the new horror zine **Rigor Mortis**, a zombie-oriented project she launched just last year.

Baltimore's creatives aren't playing by some predetermined set of rules that govern what counts as "literary"; much of what happens in the city is simply about stories and voices. "I find that a lot of people love the avant-garde and the experimental," says Kate Wyer, a 29-year-old mental health interviewer by day and writer of fiction and poetry by night, "so there's support for that kind of risk-taking literature."

This sense of adventure helps projects like Adam Robinson's **IsReads**, an "outdoor poetry journal," thrive. Robinson, a writer and poet, wanted to find a wider audience for the genre by removing it from the constraints of both bound pages and html. Instead, he prints out poems that he has selected for an issue and posts them all around town on electricity poles, vacant buildings, and fence posts.

"The concept is to put poems in places where people normally don't think about literature—or poetry, specifically—and would never encounter it," Robinson tells *Poets & Writers* (May-June 2009). Of course, these chanced-upon poems, fastened as they are with Scotch tape, ultimately get torn down, flutter away, or bleed black in the rain. So, to ensure exposure, Robinson, who also helped launch versions of *IsReads* in Nashville and Pittsburgh, posts each poem at least 50 times.

A smattering of tiny publishing houses specialize in experimental lit and poetry, including **Narrow House**, **Shattered Wig Press**, and Robinson's own **Publishing Genius**. But there's also support on the more mainstream, commercial front. Brad Grochowski built **AuthorsBookshop.com** to offer independent and self-published authors a friendlier model than giant online booksellers like Amazon,

which, as Grochowski found when he wrote his first book a few years ago, charge monthly fees and take a significant percentage of the book's cover price for each copy sold. Grochowski's online shop charges just a flat four-dollar fee per copy sold, and agrees to list the book until it's out of print.

The site hosts a strikingly diverse inventory of some 350 titles. There's *Spirit of Place*, a beautiful, top-selling photography book about Baltimore's favorite spaces; a young-adult series about Morgan horses that, Grochowski says, hits enough of a niche to be pretty popular; and how-to titles, including *The 28-Day Cleansing Program* and *The Complete Guide to Energy Conservation for Smarties*. In addition to offering guidance to authors throughout the publishing process, all the way up through touring and publicity, Grochowski hosts the online **IndieBookMan Radio Show**, which often features a book and the story of how it got published. "My personal

belief is that all people have a book in them," he explains, "and the idea is to inspire them and help them understand that they can [write]."

Grochowski has also been getting together about once a month with a group of writers, publishers, and book marketers for informal meetings in which people share what's working, toss out new ideas, and discuss how to get people interested in indie books and literature. They're calling themselves the **Baltimore Book Mob**, a reference to the city's long-running nickname: Mobtown. It's a small, spontaneous manifestation of what Wyer calls the city's DIY mentality. "People are building the scene," she says. "They're making it what they want it to be." **UR**

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