



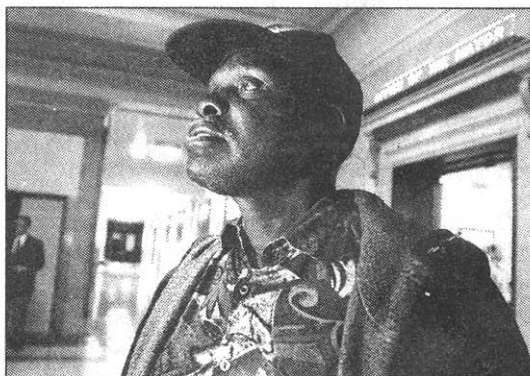
SECTION

5

TEMPO

FRIDAY
JUNE 6, 2003

BOOK FAIR



Tribune photo by Zbigniew Bzdak

Leon Howard, a retired City Hall janitor, learned the writer's craft at a neighborhood workshop.

Journal celebrates the inner author in ordinary people

By Patrick T. Reardon

Tribune staff reporter

Leon Howard is often told he resembles actor Danny Glover; and that has given him an idea for a book. "What I would like to do is write a good mystery about Danny Glover and me being twin boys," he says. A crime would take place, he explains, and "it would be hard to tell who did it."

But, first, Howard has a series of stories he's working on about his two decades as a janitor at that center of Chicago political power, the fifth floor of City Hall. He's got stories he wants to write about trading greetings with "old man Daley," Richard J. Daley. About the cocktail parties that Jane Byrne used to throw in the hallways outside the mayor's office. About Harold Washington installing a nearly life-size statue of George Washington facing the entrance to that office. And about sweeping up after the present Mayor Daley, Richard M., was given a quick haircut inside his office bathroom.

He also wants to write of growing up as an orphan amid the cows and farm fields of a rural children's home in Ohio.

It's an ambitious set of projects Howard has established for himself, especially when you consider that, for the first 73 years of his life, he never thought of himself as a writer. In fact, he knew he *wasn't* a writer.

PLEASE SEE **ORDINARY**, PAGE 2

ORDINARY: Journal's writers to read at the fair

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Then, two years ago, Howard joined a writing group sponsored by the not-for-profit Neighborhood Writing Alliance (motto: "Every person is a philosopher") and soon saw his work published in the group's quarterly *Journal of Ordinary Thought*. He described George W. Bush on television after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and he wrote of limping through his childhood in Ohio and learning much later that he'd had an undiagnosed case of polio as a toddler.

"I feel free that I can write," says Howard, who retired as a city worker a decade ago. "I *think* more. It's just like a bird, like you can fly. I can write anything I feel like." He adds, "I didn't know I could do it."

This weekend, the *Journal of Ordinary Thought* will host one of the more than 100 free literary programs offered at the Chicago Tribune Printers Row Book Fair, centered on Polk and Dearborn Streets in the South Loop. After 18 years under the auspices of the Near South Planning Board, the fair was sold last November to the Tribune for an undisclosed sum.

Margaret Atwood and Alice Walker are headlining an array of 120-plus authors who will appear at the fair Saturday and Sunday, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Other famous names in attendance will include novelist Elizabeth Berg, historian Robert Dallek, former Clinton aide Sidney Blumenthal, fantasy writer Neil Gaiman, science fiction writer Frederik Pohl and Pulitzer Prize winner Studs Terkel.

Average people

At the *Journal of Ordinary Thought* presentation, though, none of the readers will be famous. They'll be average Janes and Joes, many of them working class or retired or getting by with low-paying jobs. Ordinary, in other words, as the magazine's title suggests.

But writers nonetheless.

This is the third year in a row that the *Journal of Ordinary Thought* will be represented at Printers Row. As in previous years, all 200 participants in the Neighborhood Writing Alliance's 11 workshops around the city have been invited to appear in the program at 4 p.m. Saturday in the Nelson Algren Reading Room tent, near the corner of Polk and Dearborn.

But no one's sure who will be there to read at the hour-long presentation, says Annie Knepler, the magazine's editor and a workshop leader. Like most ordinary people, the journal's writers have a wide range of everyday commitments and responsibilities crowding their calendars. Leon Howard, for example, isn't sure if he's going to be able to make it.



Tribune photo by Zbigniew Bzdak

Maria Banda has written poetry about her experience as an immigrant from Mexico.

But dozens will, Knepler says, and they'll have a lot to say — about their lives, about their neighborhoods, about the city and the world.

It's possible, she says, to get the wrong idea about the *Journal of Ordinary Thought*. Although the magazine is focused on providing writing opportunities to people in lower-income communities, its goal isn't to give voice to the voiceless. That smacks of condescension.

"We assume people have something to say, and they know they have something to say," Knepler says. "They just haven't been heard."

She continues, "We want to be in neighborhoods where their voices aren't heard as prominently as they could be in the media. These are often places that are covered by the media, but people [aren't given] a chance to reflect their own experiences."

The experience that Maria Banda reflects in her poem "Return" in the spring 2003 issue of the journal is one that is achingly common in a nation of immigrants. "When I came here, I discovered the pain/of losing my town, of losing my people,/of losing my language,/of losing my life for crossing the river," the poem reads in part.

Feeling isolated

Born in Mexico, Banda immigrated to Chicago in January 1990 at age 20, after marrying her American-born husband, Jose, a landscaper. Jose's family lived on the Near Northwest Side, but, even though Banda was taking a class in English, she felt alone, isolated. "I had no family here. None. Zero."

To cope with the sadness, Banda would pour out her soul in poetry. "I would read it to my husband, and I would cry a lot." Then, she would put it away in a file folder.

Over the years, Banda started putting down roots. Her children, who now range in age from 3 to 9, were born. The family moved to a series of apartments and finally bought a home near 68th Street and Pulaski Road. Two years ago, Banda landed a full-time job teaching a parenting class with Project Hope, a service of St. Anthony Hospital, in the Little Village community on the Near Southwest Side.

When she was hired, Banda heard about another class offered by Project Hope, a Neighborhood Writing Alliance class, overseen by Jennifer Moran, and was immediately interested. Earlier this year, she signed up. "I like it," she says. "The other day, everyone wrote about how they were born. Everybody wrote something and read it out loud. We're becoming friends."

The goal of the classes — in the writing and in the group discussions of the work — "is to get the ideas down and the stories out," says Carrie Spitler, executive director of the alliance. In general, the writers, particularly those just starting, are encouraged to focus on getting their thoughts on paper. Refinements, if needed, in the areas of spelling, punctuation and grammar are dealt with later, during the editing process.

Banda originally wrote "Return" in Spanish in late 2000. Moran worked with her to polish it for publication, and then translated the work into English. Four weeks ago, Banda saw it in print for the first time.

"I felt very excited and happy, but, at the same time, I felt I was giving people a part of me, a part of who I am," she says. "I felt a little like I was uncovering myself."

Many who have seen the poem, including the women in her parenting class, have told her that she has expressed their own deep feelings: "The godmother of one of my daughters, she's from the Philippines. She said, 'It got me. I'm not Mexican, but I feel that way.'"

Native-born Americans, too, have been touched by the poem. "I'm happy," Banda says, "because some people tell me that, after reading it, they see immigrant people in a different way."

775 writers published

Founded in 1991, the Journal of Ordinary Thought has published the works of some 775 grass-roots writers. Fifty-five issues of the magazine have been produced, totaling 91,000 copies. Four issues of the journal are printed annually, with copies given free to the writers and neighborhood residents and sent to about 700 subscribers, some as far away as Canada, for \$25 a year for individuals and \$50 for institutions.

Over the last two years, more than 3,200 people have attended readings by journal writers and thousands more have heard them on WBEZ radio. And then there are the appearances at the Printers Row Book Fair.

Pennie Holmes-Brinson, a 44-year-old housewife whose husband is a maintenance man, has been writing for the Journal of Ordinary Thought for four years. Unlike most of the program's other participants, Holmes-Brinson had thought of herself as a writer before entering the class taught by Knepler at the Mabel Manning branch library on the Near West Side. She had an associate degree in liberal arts from Harold Washington College and had sent out poetry to small literary magazines, always getting the same response: rejection.

The class gave her a chance to work on her craft, and the journal provided a place to get it published. Just seeing her poems and stories in print "felt like I had made it," she says.

But that was only the beginning.

Last year, Holmes-Brinson received a letter informing her that her short prose work about a wandering husband, "Casey's Story," from the March 2001 issue of the journal, had won a \$1,000 Illinois Arts Council Literary Award.

"When I opened it and read the first line, 'Congratulations ...' I just screamed," she recalls. "I kept saying, '\$1,000! \$1,000!' But I stopped and said to myself, 'Pennie, you won an award! Forget about the \$1,000. You won an award!' That did mean more."

"I used to write my stuff and let it pile up. [The journal] has helped me to see that people really do want to read my stuff — and really do want to know what's going on in my head."