

**The Ordinary 81/2 x 11**

*Journal of Ordinary Thought* Brings Out Voices and Stories that are Anything but Ordinary

By Heather Dewar

On a thawing February evening foreshadowing spring, 15 writers gather with their friends and family in a second floor corner of a Hyde Park bookstore. After a few minutes of small talk and shuffling of coats and purses, they settle into their seats and focus their attention on Pat Guy, the emcee for the evening. Pat has tight curls and a wide smile. She exudes sass.

“Welcome,” she says, scanning her audience. “Today we’re celebrating a reading . . . are ya nervous?”

Warm laughter ripples through the crowd in response.

Writer James Rushing begins by reading from his personal essay, “My Family Gathering.” His voice is redolent and low, and halfway through, when he comes across several lines from the Little Milton song, “Grits Ain’t Groceries,” he begins to sing. His fingers snap, his head tilts back, and he gives his audience a soulful taste of the blues: “If I don’t love you baby, grits ain’t groceries, eggs ain’t poetry, and Mona Lisa was a man.” Once he gets going, he isn’t the only one singing.

Sharon Warner reads from her poem “Tick-Tick-Tick-Ticky-Tacky-Boom.” She stands before the group in what she terms an “Afrocentric and eccentric” outfit—purple shoes topped off by pants, jacket, shirt and head scarf in vibrant green, gold, purple and red. Her words come slowly, in a rhythmically forceful cadence:

*You live in the projects; you get off on the wrong  
floor—tick, tick, tick/*

*You live in the suburbs; you walk up to the  
wrong door—tick, tick, tick/*

*A person you’ve never seen—tick/*

*Points a gun at you, real cold and mean—tick/*

*Your last dying thought—“Why did my key fit  
this door?”—tick, tick, tick/*

*tick, tick, tick, ticky tacky, tick, tick, tick, ticky*

*tacky, tick, tick, tick, ticky tacky—BOOM*

The occasion is a reading of the *Journal of Ordinary Thought* (JOT), a quarterly journal published by the Neighborhood Writing Alliance (NWA). Listeners are in for a treat—the journal and its writers are anything but ordinary.

Many of the journal’s 130-plus contributors say they were hesitant at first to write. Rushing sat in on a writing group for three weeks before putting pen to paper—but it wasn’t for lack of a story. Now, he writes about growing up in Mississippi with no electricity, an outhouse and “flop jobs”—buckets his family kept in the house in case someone woke up in the middle of the night too afraid to venture out to the outhouse. He writes about swimming in the

creek near his house, throwing sticks at the water moccasins that swam with their black triangular heads above water. He writes about falling asleep to the sound of rain on his tin roof and sitting on the chairs his father made out of car tire inner tube. He writes about migrating to Chicago in 1954, and being denied a beer in 1967 in North Carolina because he was black.

“Writing is thought provoking,” says Rushing. “It’s a mental stimulation. If you don’t use the mind, you lose it. They say the mind is a terrible thing to waste, but if you waste it you can get it back. If you lose it you’re in a world of trouble.”

“EVERY PERSON IS A PHILOSOPHER.”

These five words, printed in black block letters on the back page of each journal, are the spine of *JOT*. In 1991, Hal Adams, Deborah Epstein, and Sunny Fischer (the latter two remain part of the board) gathered together a small group of adults and encouraged them to start writing. Personal essays, poetry, short fiction—anything that flowed out of their pen. The idea was that writing and discussion are powerful tools for self-expression, community building and social change. “They started with the idea that they were recording history. They went into the community to get people’s thoughts,” said Guy, now the journal’s assistant editor.

The first group published six copies of the journal. Thirteen years later, this one fledgling writing group has grown into nine different groups spread out across the city. The Neighborhood Writing Alliance currently has a quarterly circulation of 2,500–4,000.

“Our mission is clear and focused, and our audience is wide,” said *JOT*’s editor, Annie Knepler. “We want to use writing and art as a means for generating discussion, to build community and to engage people in what’s going on.”

Not only do workshop participants have the opportunity to write and discuss their ideas within a community of writers, they get the chance to see their work published.

“Publishing is such an important way for writers to think about their audience and the impact of their work. It helps people change their consciousness about what it means to create a public work,” said Knepler.

Once the journals are printed, NWA distributes them for free to the writers as well as the workshop locations. *JOT* has a list of subscribers who often forward the journal to policy organizations and other media. The journal is also garnering interest as a teaching tool. “We have had had university professors call to purchase classroom sets,” said publisher Carrie Spitler. The journal is archived at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Memorial Library in their Little Magazine Collection.

The idea is that the journal doesn’t just get stacked on coffee tables. It finds its way into all the nooks and crannies of the city. “It really kind of gets around,” said Knepler. “It ends up at the beauty parlor,” she laughs.

The journal itself showcases a wide variety of writing—essays, poetry, and short fiction—as well as black-and-white photography. The images capture workshops in progress, Chicagoans at work and at play, and artistic shots of various locations throughout the city.

“I think of this as a sort of documentary of what it is like to be in Chicago at this time,” said Knepler. “What if you looked back at this 100 years from now?”

*JOT* chooses the location for their writing workshops, which currently meet in libraries and social service agencies across the city, based on individual neighborhoods’ needs for “adult specific programming.”

“If you’re a young kid you’ll probably have more opportunities to get involved in the neighborhood,” explained Spitler. “For an adult, that’s not necessarily true. There are less opportunities for adults to have free things to do.”

The workshops are small (no more than 15 people), laid back, and conversational. Workshop leaders alternate between time for discussion and time to read work out loud and get feedback. The focus is on the writers themselves rather than on any particular reading or writing assignment.

“First I lived it, then I wrote it.” That’s the *JOT* way. *JOT* writer Jean Durkin writes in her poem entitled “Writing,” “So I asked her to spill it all out . . . onto a piece of common, ordinary 8 1/2 x 11. Fill the page, fill it again, fill it again, and fill it again . . .”

For the *Journal of Ordinary Thought*, the “ordinary 8 1/2 x 11” is the tool and the writers fill it up to overflowing with their voices and stories.

“I’m not a professional writer,” said Guy. “I’m just a person. I listen. I listen and I write it down.”