

Service

An Editor's Note

John Barth, in a 1989 eulogy, extolled Donald Barthelme as a good “literary citizen,” citing Barthelme’s service with PEN American Center and other organizations. Kate Gale, a recent president of PEN Center USA, teaches seminars on how writers can help support other writers: write blurbs, produce readings, serve on boards. The poet Robin Becker makes literary citizenship a part of her teaching, which includes encouraging students to review new books of poems and to send the reviews to magazines, such as this one, to publish, which we have done.

To provide service means that you stand publicly for something you believe to have fundamental, innate value. Critic Roberto Calasso calls one such value “absolute literature,” which means, in part, “unbound,” writing, as he says, “freed from any duty or common cause, from any social utility.” Implied in that is a spiritual component to both writing and service; we do it for its own sake, as scholar Helen C. White has written: “For poet and mystic alike, it is the contemplation of the object and not its use toward some other end, that is the purpose of their being.”

The concept of literary service gets too little play, in my view, even though we live among great examples. The group of writers listed on our masthead as Awards Editorial Advisors—this year’s preliminary judges for our annual literary awards for writers—defines service perfectly. These preliminary judges are hard-working, widely published novelists, poets, story writers,

essayists, playwrights, and, most important, literary readers, who, for all their talents and ambitions, agree to truck off from our office bins and sacks filled with anonymous manuscript entries, to pore over them hour after hour, and to do so for what at best could be called token payment. That's service.

Go to our masthead. Read their names. Buy their books. The spirit of these writers will be your reward.

Recently, a poem from *New Letters* appeared on the Web site *Verse Daily*, without previous knowledge by either this magazine or the poet, himself—the result of a procedural mixup. The poet responded by wanting us to send him a revised contract, inferring, I suppose, that he had been badly used, and that the work required compensation. Of course it does, and *New Letters* is fastidious about paying writers and protecting their rights; but this poet overlooked those things, not to mention the quality of service being provided by the publishers of *Verse Daily* in their struggling, largely unheralded efforts to expand the audience for poetry.

Still, we need examples. Within the past few weeks, this magazine has lost some friends and literary laborers—the essayist and fiction writer Donn Irving Blevins; the poet Michael Paul Novak; former U.S. Senator Thomas Eagleton; critic and teacher Mary Reefer. They organized readings, mentored writers, advocated for the arts. They were people who measured up, in the words of critic Cynthia Ozick, to their “public responsibility” as commentators on art and culture, as citizens who were honest, fair, and, perhaps most important, selfless.

Please don't diminish the notion of literary service by invoking conventional pieties. I even now can hear someone whisper the phrase “labor of love.” Let's call this real work. It's a labor of determination, labor of acceptance, labor of transcendence.

—Robert Stewart