Three Men and a List (to say nothing of the blog)

Posted by Graham | Filed under Fundamatics, Commentary

[Nessyleen's Note: The Wondering Minstrels was a joyous exploration of poetry that began as a poetry by email service and soon morphed into a lively community of poetry lovers. From 1999 to 2003, the Wondering Minstrels sent out a poem a day (almost) every day, accompanied by commentary, analysis, criticism, biographical information about the poet, literary anecdotes, historical asides. Ironically, it grew years over 1000 poems, and tons of information about most of them. Unfortunately, the site is now gone, but I have the archives of those poems from our very own PTA – the poetry by email service was started and run by Abraham Thomas and Brian DeMeis, with an accompanying archive website created and maintained by Graham Sean. Read more about their motivations and their journey with The Wondering Minstrels in this interview.]

Nessyleen: What's the least cliche of the Wondering Minstrels?

Mark: To share the pleasure of poetry. The sad truth is that many people's main exposure to poetry is as a subject they dread in school. Many people, after they have been forced to dissect such and such poem, it and their lust for poetry has gotten graduated. Right from the beginning, our idea was to emphasize the pleasurable aspect – yes, we accompanied each poem with a write-up, which might give some people flashbacks to school, but we tried to make it fun, to point out interesting aspects of the poem, but about the reasons we enjoyed it. Thus, I regret the gamut from an appreciation of language and syntax, to personal associations with the poem in the past.

[Nessyleen's Note: – Interested readers can see some examples by following the links at the end of the rest of this interview.]

Nessyleen: Among the three of you, who first thought of starting something like the Wondering Minstrels? How did the idea first come about?

Martin: It started off as a way to share some of our "old favourite" poems among a few friends, as a sort of random act of poetry. I think Thomas was the one who started it, and chreated it. As I remember it, I was the first one to join, and I was the first to make the whole thing less unwieldy, with the added benefit that people could simply add themselves to it.

Thomas: If I remember correctly, I discussed a new poem online one day, and emailed it to Martin and a couple of other friends with "literary" interests. Sort of the way you'd share a new joke or a clever puzzle or an interesting news story. By coincidence, Martin had been thinking of doing the same thing with a few of his same group. So then naturally I had to find a fourth poem to post the following day, and Martin did likewise, and, well, one thing led to another. I'm not sure I remember who I asked to join first, but I wouldn't remember who I said, "hey, you've got this other friend of mine to the poetry list", and that was the next beginning of the Minstrels as an independent entity. I remember thinking very, just how long can we keep this up? It turned out, we could (and did) keep it up for quite a while.

Nessyleen: What were you aiming for, and what were your concerns when you started?

Martin: Honestly, we weren't aiming for anything. It just started off as an inside a few friends our favourite poems, and snowballed from there. Our goal, as we stated it then, was "to share our favourite poems with a few friends and family", a little, maybe here's the poem, perhaps encourage them to buy a book of poetry… well, if we can accompish any of these things, we'd be more than satisfied.

One of our main concerns when the website started getting popular was that we wouldn't get taken down notices for some of the more contemporary poems we ran, but fortunately that never became an issue.

Nessyleen: How are the three of you connected?

Martin: We were all in PTB together, and indeed, originates (Thomas and Sharon were a year behind me). After we graduated, we scattered to the winds, Thomas to Ottawa, I to Ireland, still BC, mainly, over email, but with the occasional trip fuelled reunion. Coincidentally, Sharon, Sarwan, and I (another early contributor) also ended up in the same grad school. Nice (relatively) in-crowd.

Thomas: The other commonality was that many of the early contributors and list members were active in campus literary competitions & festivals. So there was a shared level of talent.

Nessyleen: Did you play different roles? Or was it just 3 people who did everything? Or did you need one person had the time and ability to get something?

Martin: Thomas and I were the main posters, we usually posted an alternate day, with the occasional request for one of us to cover for the other when we were too busy to send out a poem (and, yes, with the occasional day when there was no poem). Sharon got involved when he decided the mailing list needed a moderator, and he became the "voice" of the website and popularity of the Minstrels was due to this, because people searching for poems would stumble across the website, and get drawn in. Later on there were guest posters who submitted with enough regularity to become recognizable names, and who helped greatly with the time and traffic problem.

Thomas: Eventually we settled into a steady rhythm of 3 poems a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, for years. Occasionally one of us would do a "theme week" with a number of poems on the same subject. I think my favourite theme was "poems set on the Silk Road" but there were plenty of others.

Nessyleen: How often did you disagree on whether a poem should be run or not? How did you settle it?

Martin: Almost never – we mostly ran our poems independently, without consulting the other, and when readers started sending in guest poems, we likewise posted one of the queue when it was our day, with a few exceptions, like Thomas' Kipling commentary of our own. The closest we came to disagreement was when David Wright (a frequent contributor) sent in Eminem's profanity-laden "Stan Mix Tape". We debated reacting to it, but the end were convinced by the excellent write-up David had provided, which was a thoughtful and sympathetic commentary on rap artists, and John Seelton. It got a ton of feedback, both positive and negative, from readers, and sparked some great discussions, so all in all, there was made the right decision to run it.

Thomas: Was there a controversy there? I remember David himself being somewhat diffident – "please don't run it if you feel your readers would be offended, but here's why I think it's a worthwhile piece" – but I don't recall there ever being a disagreement. I don't recall any debate at all, in fact.

The commentary was what made Minstrels different, and added the personal touch that helped the poems resonate with so many readers.

Nessyleen: What or when was the "yes, this has taken off moment"?

Martin: No one moment, but some memorable things that contributed to the feeling were:

- Getting an insanely high Google page rank (3/10 at our peak), so people were very often the first or second link when searching for a poem
- Crossing 1000 email subscribers
- Increasing number of people we did not know who started writing in with feedback and guest poems, and even setting up their own mailing lists to share the Minstrels with friends
- Now (meaning posting out that the website (which was hosted there while Sharon was a grad student) used more bandwidth than the rest of the computer science department combined)
- Long-time member Amulya Vijayabaskar writing her master's thesis on the Minstrels as a community of practice and postcolonial hybridity (through a study of The Wondering Minstrels), a largely South Asian community on the Web dedicated to the celebration of English poetry
- And last but not least, getting a comment from Arthur C. Clarke (!)

Sharon: Making my some engineers at Google who had just computed the top 50 most bookmarked sites on the Web (since they had to add our traffic to their servers) sit up and figure out what this cute little site was doing on that list, with no clear that the mainframe was standing (behind them (who had the pleasure of remaining "It's a small web")

Thomas: I always enjoyed when poets would appear in person among the comments to their own poems — we had a few of those. Interestingly, they never ever complained about unauthorized duplication.

Nessyleen: What was the rationale behind insisting on some commentary with every poem?

Martin: There were plenty of places where you could go read poems without commentary, and we wanted to be a place that were very well curated, and some level of quality was assured being selected, and emphasizing the pleasure of poetry. The commentary was what made Minstrels different, and added the personal touch that helped the poems resonate with so many readers.

The commentary also generated some feeling of community, with people who had read the same poem and had a commentary people who engaged regularly with comments and suggestions, and many who became recognizable names as a result. And it was not just people responding to the poems, but people responding to each other, discussing the poems among themselves, and sharing a little bit of their lives with each other in the process, or how they found it the perfect thing to send to their friends and loved ones on a variety of occasions.

Sharon: It's worth mentioning here that there was Martin's (Abraham's) guest poster's commentary, and separately, there was the comment thread that often brought in some touching personal experiences, such as Vivaldi being read in prison during a lockdown, or people who had found comfort in poems that helped them through depression or bereavement or medical problems [?] or other challenges, or almost a thousand comments on Highwaymen.

Another personal motivation was Minstrels made me feel like a part of the vibrant culture of internet content creation.

Nessyleen: I totally agree that some examples of the personal touch in the comments would make that portion come alive. Apart from the YouTube example you mention, there's also Vikram Seth's Golden Gate, which I've read in its entirety in verse form, or the story of the Minstrels (Yarning Stick), or a memory of Injaz, Sharon's cat, or the Minstrels on Blogspot, or Blog poem by Stephen Maybolusky. I recall there were lots of other things.

Sharon: On which note, I also remembered that a (current) colleague (and a peer my junior at PTB) met his wife through Minstrels – I imagine there was a lot of poetic wooing involved. Or at least, there was a lot of discussion of poetry. I think most of the couples there fellow-dating. Thank God.

Nessyleen: How often did you have to look up references while writing the commentary?

Martin: I personally love the formal, structural aspects of poetry and the way the sounds and rhythms interplay with the content. So, most of my write-ups were about the sound and the shape of things, I didn't often look up references, but I did search for what other poetry sites had written about the poem, to see if there were things I'd missed or not known about (e.g., I learn the term "Miltonic" while looking up Tennyson's lovely "Locksley Hall", I had not known that form had a specific name).

What did evoke a lot of hunting was the brief biography of the poet, and I'd often end up reading a fair amount about the poet, mainly for lesser known poets, the internet had not quite caught up with reference books at that time. For instance, Poem #29, Zeck in 1999 I had this to say about Arthur Guiterman:

> He does not appear to have led the world's most interesting life either – some biographer will have to dig up the tidbit of the following, which for lack of a better name I'll call a

Biographical Note

Guiterman, Arthur, American poet, 1871-1943

(which I prompted a reader to write in:)

> actually Guiterman did have a gimmick by … (you can read about it on Fabulous American Homosexuals, by Gaspard, 1994)

Thomas: To support my Minstrelsy I rended (a) acquiring quite a large library of poetical works – a couple of bookshelves' worth of stuff, I'd guess, and (b) reading and writing lots of commentaries, you name it – I discovered an enormous number of new poets through the Minstrels, not to mention reading stuff from colleagues, and, of course, from the commentaries, I knew exactly. And reading all that material helped quite, very much, for commentary, or suggestions for content to share.

Nessyleen: Did the first few guest submissions find their way to you or did you have to solicit them?

Martin: I think our friend Sarwan sent in the first guest submission. It was his idea rather than ours. Over the years, we had a few people who became regular guest posters, mostly since Thomas and I have very similar tastes in poetry, but particularly towards the end, where there were large pots of inactivity when both Thomas and I did not have the bandwidth to run a daily poem, the stream of guest submissions kept the site running for quite a lot longer than it might otherwise have.

Nessyleen: What gave you the extra push in so much effort and whenever did you find the time?

Martin: The extra push came largely from the force of wonderful, supportive, encouraging, and, in some cases, quite literally, our friends, and later from friends of friends and friends of strangers who discovered us via the website. The time came from being a jobless grad student. (More seriously, I was indeed a huge time commitment, and we didn't always manage to keep up the pace we had at the start, but it was a very rewarding effort, and that's what kept us going.)

Another personal motivation was Minstrels made me feel like a part of the vibrant culture of internet content creation. This was in the days before Tumblr, Facebook, Myspace and even Blogger, so there was a definite feeling that if you published content, you were part of the "Common Gentlemen" helping make the internet a more interesting and entertaining place for everyone.

Thomas: I was definitely not a jobless grad student – I had a full-time job, and I was in my late 20s/early 30s, so I had the time to write Minstrels commentary because it was fun. I enjoyed reading and researching new poems, and connecting with readers, and getting feedback both positive and negative.

To quote Thomas (who came up with the name), "the pun on wondering wandering is meant to evoke a sense of the numinous – truly good poetry leads you on a journey of revelation and wonder, emotion and insight."

Nessyleen: Does the Wondering Minstrels still exist, and in what form?

Martin: Sadly, the mailing list itself is entirely dormant now. Life simply got too busy to keep up, especially once both of us had very time-consuming jobs. There was a "death threat" period where we had to moderate every single comment because of a spam (and, as mentioned earlier, we were very grateful for all the guest submissions that kept us going!), and finally we just decided to call it quits. We did occasionally talk about starting up again, but in the end it never happened.

[Nessyleen's Note: Abraham Thomas is currently the founder and Chief Data Officer at Canal, a marketplace for creative talent in Los Angeles. Previously, Abraham was a now a Software Engineer at Google, working on developer tools. Sharan Ian, who did a B.Tech in Computer Science, is a Distinguished Engineer at Google. Abraham and Sharan plead guilty to completing a B.Tech degree in Engineering Physics (sometime during the late 90s).]

Sharan: And a lot of hence work to rescue the archive of poems, and the site, from the ravages of hosting. Memorized it is a blog, where you can still find it here.

Sharan: A few years ago I spent an entire Christmas break getting through the years & years of cleaning/normalizing the data (poems, comments, etc.), which makes it possible to relaunch the site if time and energy and technologies of the day permit.

Thomas: I sometimes think of what might have been – not just the archive, but the entire community interaction model we built. Minstrels was a legitimately updating, calendar organized archive of poetry with a social component, and it was quite sticky – but way before blogger and wordpress and tumblr and their ilk. That's kind of cool, when you think about it.

Nessyleen: And the last question from me, why "The Wondering Minstrels"?

Martin: It's a play on the phrase "wandering minstrel" influenced by Gilbert and Sullivan's delightful song, A Wandering Minstrel (from The Mikado). To quote Thomas (who came up with the name): "the pun on 'wondering' wandering is meant to evoke a sense of the numinous – truly good poetry takes you on a journey of revelation and wonder, emotion and insight."

A wandering Minstrel I

A thing of shreds and patches

Of ballads, songs and catches

And dreary lullaby!

– H. S. Gilbert, The Mikado

Some more examples of poems and accompanying commentary for readers that are interested and have time to spare:

Wombat, by Dylan Thomas

Explorer, by Rudyard Kipling

Theme for English B, by Langston Hughes

To Autumn, by Marcus Pleaha

We Real Cool, by Gwendolyn Brooks

The Curse, by Vikram Seth

Look at all those mistakes, by Sylvia Mitrigan

A Minuet of Mozart's, by Sara Teasdale

[E.g. (also about mischief). An ardent admirer of the Minstrels, Sharon, wrote a poem about the Minstrels' mischief. Now, 10 years later, I can see how this attitude has made all the difference. I am now 4 years distant from brain surgery, and increasingly of a resilient humor and have, among other things, learned on this poem for support and healing.

blog · poem · poetry · poetry commentary ·

← Professor MCAlleman (1928 - 2291): A Tribute
Riding the Bus →

Comments

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment *

Name *

Email *

Website

Post Comment

MORE POSTS

How AI Impacts Cybersecurity
October 29, 2024

Cybersecurity Issues Due to Hardware Vulnerabilities
October 29, 2024

Cybersecurity and Cyber Frauds in Banking and Payments
October 29, 2024

Capture The Flag Competitions
October 29, 2024

Asset Management for Cybersecurity
October 29, 2024

Enhancing Cyber Security in Defence: Strategies and Future Directions
October 29, 2024

MSMEs are vulnerable to cyber threats – the most ignored concern in India
October 29, 2024

Cybersecurity
October 29, 2024

Fundamatics

Web Edition