

Organizing a Writes of Spring – Notes for Provincial Reps

This is a volunteer reading for the fundraising benefit of the League of Canadian Poets, held most often before March 31, so funds get in the current year's budget. Do it when university and college students are still in classes – Oct/Nov and Feb/Mar being the good months, when they are just into classes and not preparing for exams, or have left school for the summer.

Over the three successful years I organized, I raised \$5000 in total. The preceding first year, though, was a flop; I did it at a venue people would not go to normally and in the afternoon when no one was free to come. Much work, very little money. The basics of what I did in the following years is below and proved much more successful.

If there are no universities or colleges in your town, a local recreation centre, where people congregate is an alternative target. Or take a look at Katherine Lawrence's Poetry Salon style event in your League binder, for a home event. It's very good.

Readers and Reading Fees

Ask a number of senior local poets to read, along with some in the League, having them understand that the reading is a benefit. The senior people are the real draw for people to come out, the main audience is students from college and university. I did not get any reading fees, as I let readers know it was a charity to benefit the League. On the other hand, it may be useful to get a few readings, asking readers to donate their fees back to the league. If, when you ask him/her, the poet is not willing to donate the fee back, accept that, and ask someone else. Note that a charitable donation receipt can be given. Or take the fee yourself, as a reader, and donate it back. When you point out that everybody is doing things for free, most people will be happy to be involved, particularly if it has not been done before. I once had to give someone, who at the event would not read without some payment, some cash to read. It came out of my pocket.

Note, while it may be a bit scary at first to be phoning up the senior people, if you don't know them, the great personal benefit is that you get to know people who it would otherwise take a decade to meet any other way. It's a good thing.

PR – Poster, News Release, PR

Put together an 8X10 ½ inch poster on your computer and deliver 7 to 10 days ahead of the reading to every cubby hole of all professors to announce in their classes of local colleges and university English, and Creative Writing departments in town. Put some up in usual places where the poetry reading crowd goes and local business that would allow putting info up on their news and events board. This means that you need to write something that is acceptable in more places. Then drive your car down an avenue of businesses, stopping at places that are likely, like coffee houses, laundry, convenience stores, picture framing and art related places.

Put together a snappy one page news release to be sent to all local newspapers, radio, television, calendars, 7 to 10 days before the event. Sooner and the event is forgotten, later and those who would go would already have made plans. Media need some lead time to be put in their events column. Check with them to make sure when they need it. Try to get interviewed by the press, radio or TV as this also gets people out. If a senior poet will be interviewed, too, this is a good thing for mobilizing an audience. Local channels like those of Rogers and Shaw are always looking for this kind of thing to fill their local programming.

Put out a chapbook, if you have time, of those who read for sale for \$5. Ask each poet to sign some copies for you. These days, stuff you do on a computer is good and cheap. I got some card covers printed and scored so that I could saddle-stitch them – means you have to buy a saddle stitcher, not expensive. Every one was sold, and I had to hide one away to avoid having to fight for my own copy.

If you know a local fundraiser as a friend, ask them to figure out how to approach other audience people, as the greater the groups you can appeal to, the greater the number of people who will attend, even if they have never been to a poetry reading before.

Cover Charge

Charge \$5 at the door and have a league member take the money as people come in the door. This is the main way to raise funds. Don't pass the hat later, get them coming in the door.

If you can sell alcohol, do so. I used the local Open Space Gallery one year and it was a smash success so much so that we had more people come than the fire code. They took the drink sales.

Pick a theme, we did love/sex/erotic poetry two years, and that was very successful. For example, the League of Canadian Poets does Sex!

Have a local artist who paints, say, nudes, bring a few down to be put up prominently on the stage. This then draws in some painters.

Venue

After the gallery, I used a local nightclub two years and they were glad to have us in, for no charge to the LCP, on an off night for them, Wednesday, as they received the alcohol sales. And this was a place that locals would also go, as they would go out to the same club on a weekend. Do not have an open venue, one that has people for other purposes. They make it difficult to hear and can be negative to someone else's presence. Ditto for espresso machines. And known venues have microphones and speakers.

You could do a 50/50 draw, or auction off a few literary memorabilia donated by audience members, to raise more money.

If you use a licensed venue, then those younger than the legal drinking age cannot attend.

The venue should understand that they will not receive any \$\$ because no one is receiving anything as this is a fundraiser; they must be comfortable with that. Just be upfront and things will go well. Another option is a local private school, as they themselves will form a large part of the audience, not to mention that most such people have lots of money.

Location is important as people will not come out to a place that is not close or that they do not associate with a usual venue.

The announcer should have some comments on each reader, and be a confident speaker.

Put together a schedule of readers and let them know the order and that they have, say, five minutes in total. This keeps the pace up and influences the next year's success.

I did all the work myself, and this assured that the needed deeds did indeed get done.

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