

Sex, Death and Rejection



Bedwetter Magazine

Christopher Russell, Publisher
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By Bill Brent

OK, so Bedwetter was doomed to excite me and annoy me at once. While its super-slick "higher-low-production values" increase with each new issue (gotta love color photocopying!), so does its insistence on having its audience interact with, and therefore alter, its content. (You will probably do best to sit down to issue five with a staple-remover in hand, as I did. You will most likely gouge several color-copied images in the process, as I did.) So this rankles my anal-retentive, raised-in-a-library, leave-it-as-you-found-it sensibilities to no end.

Dreamlike and disturbing, this zine of art and literature provokes its readers into acknowledging the discomfort caused by our subconscious impulses, as well as the frustration we experience when we lose control over our external environment. What the predators and prey of Bedwetter's urban landscape share most is a Hitchcockian loss of control over either or both. So the desire to keep the physical zine neat and tidy and under the viewer's control is an apt echo of its literary content.

So Bedwetter is an uneasy ride. The usual canon of harsher zine themes is present: urban alienation,

loss of sanity, stalking, serial murder, violence, various forms of abuse. Gay, straight, and in-between get equal time in Bedwetter, giving the zine a post-orientation aesthetic that feels current and authentic. At the same time, the zine goes out of its way to make things tough on the reader: color text on same-colored paper, disturbing post-surgery photos, politically incorrect stickers designed to offend the easily offended, and so forth.

What makes Bedwetter worth the bumpy ride is its content. While the content ranges from brilliant to uneven, much of it is intriguing, and the best of it is highly original. The story printed in black ink on black paper turns out to be worth the effort: a haunting vignette of an insane charismatic rewards the patient reader. And clearly the literary and artistic aesthetic at work is arresting, if not always appealing. Initiated as a one-man effort, Bedwetter has morphed into a multi-contributor effort with a shifting literary lineup. It has a seamy, noirish, underbelly-of-El-Lay quality. If that intrigues you, then check out this zine.

It intrigued me, so I caught up with Christopher Russell, Bedwetter's publisher, to ask some questions:

(Bay Times) It's not obvious from the content, so I'm curious: Why did you choose the name "Bedwetter"?

Bedwetting is an early issue with not being able to conform one's

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body to a social norm, so "bedwetter" can have a read that is fairly sad, yet bedwetting is also an indicator, alongside animal torture, that a child might become a serial killer. It also brings watersports to mind, so it's this combination of sex, death and rejection that attracted me to the name.

I was a bedwetter until age 12, so I had a fairly visceral reaction to your zine's title. Were you a bedwetter as a kid?

No. I actually felt embarrassed—former bedwetters have approached me, thinking that my mag would offer support.

Did you have any particular vision or aim in mind when you started

Bedwetter?

It really did start as a formal experiment, and any possibility is chased after more or less by whim. I try to keep questioning what I've done, and what I am able to do.

How close is the actual product to your original vision?

It's well exceeded it!

With each new issue, your zine seems to grow more challenging for the reader, in its insistence on having its audience interact with, and therefore alter, its physical content in order to access its literary and artistic content. Why bother?

Every time one interacts with the magazine, they are aware that they are consuming; that if they want one thing, another thing has to be torn, something has to be changed. That's what consumerism always tries to avoid. I don't want people to think that there's plenty. I want to provide an uneasiness with consuming resources, and an understanding that information isn't transparent, things don't just come into somebody, they are let in.

Your zine is quite expensive-looking, so I'm curious: Do you have access to free photocopying? If not, how much does each copy cost you to produce?

I'd become bitter if I broke it down to a per-unit price. But the important thing is that zines have been locked into a 1970s-punk-rock-DIY-cut-and-paste aesthetic that has a venerable history, but seems codified and too often relies on the familiarity of the aesthetic rather than the content of the idea.

I have been interested in the possibility of using desktop publishing to address an audience. Four-color printing has become affordable for even the vaguely middle-class (\$700 used color laser printer on eBay, super-cheap, off-brand supplies, a bootleg repair manual, and saintly patience). The look of DIY can and should change to reassess how technology can effect the question of what a zine is, and how information can be conveyed. When Bedwetter really works, it doesn't allow its reader to forget that information is being consumed, that the reader is allowing something to come into him.

What are your current plans, if any, to keep Bedwetter going?

There are a number of Bedwetter story books that were originally designed for free, anonymous, random distribution. I'm interested in doing small novels—excerpts from "undiscovered" novels that will hopefully get attention to transgressive writers and lead them to bigger and better things. I'm working on a small book called Contempt, in which writers have been asked to address the issue of hate, or to write a list of ten things that they hate. It's really a pro-discontent (i.e., realist) piece.

If you could get just one idea into your readers' heads, what might that be?

Send me stuff: use the PO box, use the e-mail. I'm really curious about who comes into contact with the zine, what they think, what sorts of art and words are being produced, etc.▼