

# SLAM! BAM! POETIC HAMS!

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photo Cathy Resmer

In fact, today there is a "poetry slam circuit," which includes venues in more than 30 states. Each year, the venues offer up teams, which then compete in the slam nationals. The Nationals will be held this year in Chicago, and will take place from August 11-14.

This timing, incidentally, puts the Nationals smack dab in the middle of the prestigious Bread Loaf Writer's Conference's week of poetry workshops right here in Vermont — though presumably this won't be a serious conflict for any of the parties involved in either event. Although it's been hailed by the authors of *The United States of Poetry* as the "most potent grass-roots arts movement in the country," the poetry slam circuit is seen by most academics as a kind of 'literature lite.'

This opinion is acknowledged by the slammasters (emcees and organizers of events) themselves. The National Slam Association's mission statement states that one of its goals is "to enhance the perception of literary merit and legitimacy of performance poetry as an art form."

One reason slammasters are looking to doctor their rep with a little pro-slam spin is that the events force poets to sell their work to the audience. Although judges are instructed to base scores on

both literary merit and performance value (5 points apiece for each), they often seem to give the highest scores to the best *performers*, not necessarily to the best *poets*. This has led to the tradition at some slams of awarding a prize to the lowest scoring poet — the logic being that this person may in fact be the best poet, having withstood the urge to "sell out" for a good score.

This is not to say that the ranks of national slam champions are filled with mead-swilling carnival barkers — far from it. Letta Neely, a veteran slammer who has won several national competitions, had her first book nominated for a Lambda Literary Award. Alix Olson, a member of the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe team that won last year's National competition, received a 1998 Barbara Deming Women in the Arts grant, and the In Our Own Write Award. Olson and Neely have also shared the honor of winning the slam at the Outwrite National Queer Writers' conference. Olson's victory came this year, in the sweaty frenzy of a final round against fellow Nuyorican slammer Staceyann Chin.

Slams are becoming increasingly popular with the queer community (see articles on Olson in the May editions of *The Advocate* and *Girlfriends*). There are a few queer-specific national slams, such as the Behind Our Masks slam, and the Outwrite Slam. Olson says that although she enjoys shocking the predominantly straight crowds at mainstream slams with poems about gender war, she feels more at home at the queer slams. "In a specifically queer slam setting," she explains, "...we're free to use queer expressions, jokes, linguistic turns that a primarily straight audience may never have been exposed to."

Though no queer-specific slam has yet reared its head anywhere north of Boston, the art form has manifested itself as a monthly series at the non-alcoholic Rhombus Gallery. Interested parties can partake of two rounds of high-quality verse as poets, judges, or members of the audience. Slammaster Shannon Williams, a former Burlington agitator and go-go dancer for the Velvet Ovum band, competed for awhile on the Dallas slam scene and has hopes of raising a team from the Queen City.

So far there have been fewer theatrics at the Burlington slam than at other big-city venues, as one might imagine. At the first slam, in May, the \$50 first-place prize went to Geoff Hewett from Calais for his poem about a romantic passion between fellow commuters. And yes, there was a poem about an ornery rooster, which won its author a spot in the final round.

Sound fun? It is. The competition between poets has the effect of heightening the energy in the room, creating an environment that's a cross between a tent revival and a boxing match. This means that poetry, which our culture seems to consign to dusty classrooms haunted by the hum of institutionalized fluorescent lighting, is free to creep back into daily life, disguised as edible public entertainment.

It's yummy. And better than South Park. ▼

*Alix Olson will perform at Rhombus on Wednesday, June 9 at 8pm, and at Pearl's with Katherine Quinn on Friday, June 11. The next Burlington Slam will be at Rhombus on Saturday, June 5, at 9pm. Poets should arrive at 8:30 to sign up.*

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