Arts & Humanities

Better Read Than Dead

MFA grads meet up for an exchange of words.

By
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|
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Courtesy of KGB Bar

The KGB Bar on East 4th Street in the East Village is a small, dark, Soviet-era-themed establishment with candlelit tables, red walls, and pictures of Lenin and Odessa writer Isaac Babel. It is situated at the top of a narrow flight of stairs (the first and third floors are noisy theaters) in an 1834 walkup. Opened in 1993, the bar, born in the last gasp of ashtrays, maintains a gritty, ruby-curtained elegance.

On the first Thursday of each month from September to May, KGB hosts readings by Columbia MFA alumni. “It’s really about highlighting people,” Bryan VanDyke

’05SOA, who runs the readings with Emily Austin ’10SOA, told a full house on a winter’s night. “We ask recent graduates to make submissions. We take a look and select the best for you to listen to.” One big rule: you can’t already have a book deal.

VanDyke has been curating the readings for ten years and believes in mixing genres. This evening featured poems from Rachel Morgenstern-Clarren ’14SOA; an essay by Rebecca Worby ’14SOA on tarot cards and climate change; and a story by Kerry Cullen ’13SOA narrated by a thirteen-year-old girl, which starts: “I recently discovered punk rock.”

The bar was so dark that the lamp on the lectern burned like a sun. There were no laptops out, no phones on the wooden tables, no TVs except for the dusty, boxy relic at the end of the bar, unplugged and harmless. The crowd was young, sharp, alert to the flickering social currents in the room. Friends, old classmates, writers checking out other writers like musicians at a jam session. Scoping. Listening.

Morgenstern-Clarren read first. Her poems vibrated with impressions: rain fell “hard as dried beans into a metal pot”; her father sat at the edge of her sick brother’s bed, “trying to steady the caged elevator of his voice rattling between floors.”

After a break, VanDyke introduced Worby by mentioning journals she’d appeared in — *Pacific Standard*, *Salon*, the *Onion*, *Guernica*. “These are great publications; I’ve been rejected many times by these publications,” VanDyke said to laughs. Then Worby pulled out her phone — to read. VanDyke said, “I don’t think we’ve ever had someone do digital. I love it.” “I didn’t have a chance to print,” Worby explained. “Also, that’s *Orion*, not the *Onion*.” More laughter. “It would be really cool if I wrote for the *Onion*.”

Kerry Cullen finished the reading with her story “Honestly Olive.” Olive has a crush on Francis, a punk boy from her biology class. “When we dissected frogs again last week, I saw him steal one of the hearts,” Olive tells us. “He slipped it right into a tiny ziplock bag.” Beware of the boy who steals hearts.

Afterward, VanDyke expressed his gratitude to the KGB staff and to the audience. “This whole writing thing kinda fucking sucks,” he said in a tone of loosened confession. “Because, as Henry James said, you labor alone. You work in the dark. You do what you believe is best. It’s not a practice for people who need affirmation. And so it’s kind of amazing to show up and see the turnout that people get. It’s

kinda great, and I really appreciate it, and the readers appreciate it. It’s kind of a big deal.”

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