

Connecting Canada's cultural landscape

By Michael Davies-Venn November 1, 2010



(Edmonton) It pays homage to Edmonton; it serves as an unusual space in the nation's cultural landscape, and contributes towards creating a more mature society. And with the debut of *18 Bridges*—Canada's latest literary national magazine—the publication fills a void and helps connect Canada's cultural landscape.

“The United States has the *New Yorker* and the United Kingdom has *Granta*,” one of *18 Bridges*' founding editors, Curtis Gillespie, says. “The very foundation of these magazines is long-form narrative journalism, where they use all the hallmarks of great narratives—the withholding of tension, characterization, mood setting—they use all these classic elements of fiction and align them with great reporting and facts. This is indeed a rare combination in Canada.”

The magazine, published by the University of Alberta's Canadian Literature Centre in the Faculty of Arts, is borne out of a need that is beyond simply putting Canada in league with other nations that have similar publications, say its editors, and that many Canadian writers lost a space to publish after the nation's first magazine closed its doors four years ago.

“*Saturday Night* magazine was in a way Canada's *New Yorker*; I was contributing editor to that magazine until it stopped publishing about four years ago,” said Gillespie. “And *18 Bridges* is filling that gap.”

“There are so many great writers in Canada who really do not have an outlet; they have nowhere to publish the kind of works they are passionate about and that they used to publish in *Saturday Night*. And so much of the published works now in magazines are market-driven as opposed to being writer-driven. We really want this to be a writer-driven magazine.”

Whereas the magazine fills a void left by an earlier publication, it takes its name from a faded historical fact about its birth city. Four years ago, when the idea of the magazine was conceived, Gillespie and co-editor, Lynn Coady, wanted a name for the publication that connects with the city without calling it Edmonton magazine.

“At the time, there were 18 bridges across the North Saskatchewan River,” Gillespie said. “So we thought naming the magazine *18 Bridges* was a nice little homage to the city of Edmonton without being too overt.”

Since then, there have been more bridges built to connect communities in Edmonton and, much like how a bridge brings different places together, the diversity of the stories published in the first issue is matched only by the origins of their contributors. The current edition brought authors from across Canada, the U.K. and U.S., writing on a diverse collection of topics that range from the transformation of public spaces by street artists to questioning the arguments for genetic testing. But the diversity of its contributors and topics aside, *18 Bridges*, Gillespie said, is a vitamin to Canada’s cultural health.

“A mature society has many different venues and outlets for writing that is a little bit more immersive and contemplative; it takes it time to unravel and doesn’t feel rushed,” he said. “The pieces in *18 Bridges* tell stories that are not told in newspapers or driven by the news cycle. But they add depth and richness to the world. Take, for example, the 7,000-word piece on genetics; it is fun to read and informative.”

But it’s not all literature in *18 Bridges*; the pages of the magazine are interspersed with visual art work by some distinguished U of A art professors such as printmaker Liz Ingram and painting professor Daniela Schluter, among others. Marie Carriere, director of the Canadian Literature Centre, says that while the magazine fills a cultural void, it also advances the work of the centre.

“*18 Bridges* allows us to pursue our mandate to bring different constituents together, the public, writers and researchers, that is what we try to do at the centre,” she said. “There has been a lot of talk about the place of the arts in society and the usefulness of the arts. With the first issue of the magazine, which concentrates on art and science, Carriere says *18 Bridges* is making a connection that taps into something that Canadians are thinking and talking about: not just the place but the usefulness and need of arts in society.

The second issue of the magazine, which promises from its tagline to connect people through stories, is due in January. That edition will take a close look at the place of pop culture in society. And much like the first edition that Gillespie says has been well received, based on the number of subscribers. He says the next edition will continue to reward its readers.

“*18 Bridges* takes an investment of time on the part of the reader but they get insight and richness of content and entertainment that is enjoyable. That’s the essence of narrative journalism: the ability to read pieces they would learn something from and enjoy, all at the same time.

“That’s pretty rare.”

The magazine accepts donor support, which can be made to Carriere, marie.carriere@ualberta.ca, 780-248-1245