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Beyond Comics: Reports from Expozine 2024

02/12/2024 · FRED AZEREDO ([HTTPS://IMAGINATLAS.CA/AUTHOR/KHKMHHL/](https://imaginatlas.ca/author/khkmhhl/))



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Another year, another <https://imaginatlas.ca/a-comics-pilgrimage-reports-from-expozine-2022/>) Expozine (<https://imaginatlas.ca/expozine-2023-an-interview-with-co-founder-louis-rastelli/>). ImaginAtlas has been covering Montreal's yearly small press fair for two years

now, but this reporter wishes to put it on record that he has never seen such a well-attended iteration. The immense crowd made traversing the narrow passageways was sometimes challenging; even baby trolleys were doing the rounds! You could be forgiven for thinking a Margaret Atwood or Stephen King was signing books somewhere in the spacious basement of Église Saint-Arsène, but in fact, there were hardly any 'big' names to be found, which, in all honesty, is quite cheering. It seems harder and harder to get people to turn out for literary events these days, and yet Expozine is drawing huge crowds for local low-profile artists. Evidently, something strange and wonderful is going on here.



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Izabeau Legendre (<https://programmation.salondulivredemontreal.com/auteurs/izabeau-legendre>), a postdoctoral researcher in zine culture at Concordia University and author of *La scène du zine de Montréal*, has a theory as to why. The French publishing scene in Montreal, he explains, is quite small due to the limited market, but it is highly localized and specific—unlike the Anglophone press, which is mostly an extension of the rest of Canada. As such, the formal and informal publishing scenes are unusually intertwined here, with zine authors regularly migrating to official

publishing houses. Because zines have such high visibility here, he explains, they can also serve as potent activist tools. Legendre himself recalls getting into the medium around the time of the 2012 Quebec student strikes when student zines helped rally support for the impressive protests that successfully stopped planned tuition hikes. Quite the contrast with this year's lacklustre McGill and Concordia protests.

Activist presence is one thing, but institutional and critical respect is something else entirely. That's something Legendre saw as highly lacking when he first announced his research focus at Concordia in 2017; the general response seemed to be, "Zines? Really?" Thankfully, that now appears to be changing, in his view. Quebec libraries as large as the BANQ now have zines on display, and even the city's greatest literary institution, the Salon du Livre (<https://imaginatlas.ca/tag/salon-du-livre/>), spotlights them. Expozine was way ahead of the curve in this regard, operating as it has since 2002, though it certainly seems to be reaping the benefits of that increased respect and visibility now.

Also at Expozine this year were the Stygian Society (https://www.stygiansociety.com/?srsltid=AfmBOor47Wz8tr19BAoaxxM8uGGGueMZ-XSi1DBg7_bHTRsMeWSv7pvY), a local small press braving its own path somewhere between zines and mainstream publishing. Holly Rhiannon, the press' CEO and co-founder, tells us the endeavour came out of her frustration with Canada's publishing industry monopoly and the predatory practices of the giants who dominate the market. In line with these values, the Stygian Society does not demand that authors maintain social media accounts (as most large companies do) and splits all profits 50-50 with them. Their output ranges from horror, like Rhiannon's own "Buffy"-inspired *A Time When Demons*, to more far-flung genres like astral fiction, a blend of SF and spirituality.



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Rhiannon also has another issue she's passionate about: AI in fiction. The Stygian Society is committed to publishing only work written by humans, a sharp contrast with an emerging embrace of AI fiction elsewhere. In fact, Rhiannon quit her position at [NaNoWriMo](https://nanowrimo.org) (<https://nanowrimo.org>) over the organization's [stance](https://nanowrimo.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/29933455931412-What-is-NaNoWriMo-s-position-on-Artificial-Intelligence-AI) (<https://nanowrimo.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/29933455931412-What-is-NaNoWriMo-s-position-on-Artificial-Intelligence-AI>) on generative AI, starting her own movement instead, the [Order of the Written Word](https://www.stygiansociety.com/theorder?srsltid=AfmBOoqCDVqUm8U843ty6OR184wtS8Dx8Ns3OZ34peTHNIYCEeXO8gsb) (<https://www.stygiansociety.com/theorder?srsltid=AfmBOoqCDVqUm8U843ty6OR184wtS8Dx8Ns3OZ34peTHNIYCEeXO8gsb>), which already has over 400 devotees. A powerful—and necessary—statement when the livelihoods of all who write for a living are threatened.

Yet Expozine does not only host original work; it also welcomes folks like Stacey Case, collector and author of *Tchotchke*, a zine about collecting. His stand featured an impressive array of classic paperbacks, ranging from SF to “smut” (as he himself describes it). Though he takes great pride in his extensive collection, Case scorns the mainstream collector culture that seeks out only the rarest

and most valuable exemplars to maximize profit. Indeed, he notes that most of the books he sells are worth significantly more than his asking price. Yet, for him, sharing his passion for these curios of another time is the only goal that matters. While we spoke, a curious customer walked over and looked through a vintage copy of *Fahrenheit 451*. When he decided to buy it, our interview came to an end, but Case’s clear delight in selling the book said all that remained to be said. With that, we bid *adieu* to Expozine for another year. This place is always filled with stories, both on the printed page and in the people who create them, and it remains a privilege to discover them.

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