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Stone Soup

The Little Magazine That Could

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By CAROLYN LEAL
Sentinel Living Editor

WHEN WILLIAM RUBEL and Gerry Mandel were 20 year old college students at UCSC, they dreamed of starting a magazine that would publish the best of children's writing and artwork.

"Stone Soup" was born, with the first editorial offices in their dorm rooms.

It's ten years later and the little magazine has grown to a circulation of ten thousand and garnered rave reviews.

Says Library Journal: "Once an adult gets this 48-page magazine, it may be hard for the kids to get it away."

"One of the handsomest, least self-proclaiming and most satisfying of the children's magazines...an inspiration to all those aspiring writers and artists," praises the San Francisco Chronicle.

Today, Rubel and Mandel, who share the title of co-directors, receive hand-scrawled manuscripts and painstakingly drawn pictures from all parts of the United States and Canada at the Cedar Street offices of the Children's Art Foundation.

But Stone Soup is not an easy market to crack. Rubel and Mandel pore through hundreds of submissions a week before choosing one or two items that shine with creativity worthy of publication. "The writing we publish is never trivial or insincere," says Rubel. "Stone Soup encourages children to take their literary and artistic skills seriously."

Stone Soup is published five times a year. It's 48 pages long and measures a handy 6 by 8 inches. Each issue contains about 25 drawings, spotted among the children's stories. "It's the largest of the small magazines," says Rubel proudly. It costs \$15 for a year's subscription and copies go mostly to school and public libraries.

Each issue of Stone Soup features a four-color drawing on the cover. But, significantly, the drawings are all done by foreign children.

"We've never seen any American children's paintings sufficiently beautiful for a cover," says Rubel.

"The big difference between children's art in this country and abroad is that American children seldom paint and the subject matter of their pictures is very rarely their lives. You seldom get a sense of place when you look at an American child's drawing."

Rubel goes on to explain this is because the chief model for American children's pictures is commercial art, the kind of drawing a child faces on the breakfast cereal box as he consumes Cocoa Puffs.

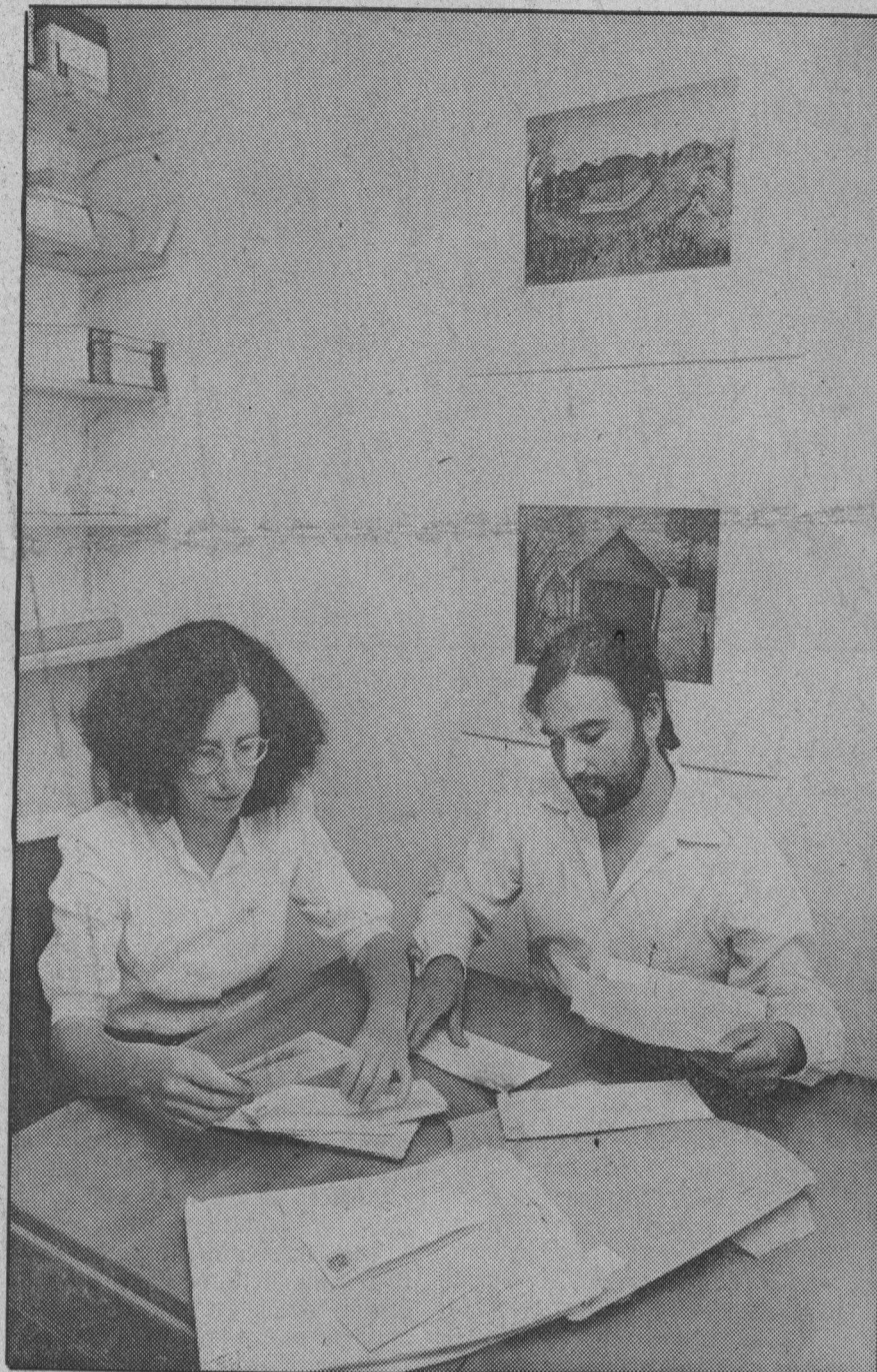
"Commercial artists are not concerned with depicting objects the artist has seen and experienced," says Rubel.

By contrast, the artwork by foreign children that Stone Soup has reproduced is striking in its sense of place and time. Cars crash in a street accident. A 12 year old celebrates a birthday with family and friends. Chickens peck the dust in an African village scene.

American youngsters are more likely to lift their ideas from TV, the movies or books and magazines. "When children are making pictures from Star Wars at age six, they're studying commercial art, as opposed to inventing their own characters," says Rubel.

Unfortunately, the same problems plague the writing Stone Soup gets. Most "creative writing" taught in schools is not creative at all, says Rubel. "Their stories are by and large copies of stories produced by commercial writers for TV, the movies or from current children's books."

The missing ingredients, like lost clues, are creativity and inventiveness. "It's important that the work is genuinely original, that the idea grew out of your personal experiences — those experiences you and no one else had," says Rubel.



Gerry Mandel and William Rubel, co-directors of the children's magazine "Stone Soup" look over submissions.

"You don't do children a favor by publishing their ordinary works," says Rubel. "You do them a favor by insisting on the best."

"There's not enough good work," laments Rubel.

Many of the stories they get follow formulas, says Mandel. Favorites are the Haunted House Story, the Girl Who Wants A Horse Story, the My Life As A Pencil Story, the Orphan Story, the New Kid in School Story.

The trouble with these stories, says Rubel, is "they're not orphans. They've never seen a haunted house and they're not the new kid in school. With these kinds of stories, you're distanced from their lives."

But Rubel doesn't blame today's generation. He thinks the inability to write and to paint is pervasive. "Most adults can't write and don't draw even."

"People ask, 'What are today's children going to grow up to be like?' The answer is they're going to grow up to be like us."

"Most people don't feel comfortable writing. Our purpose is to try to change that in a small way."

Even the rejection slip is carefully worded to salve egos and encourage youngsters to keep writing or painting. "Please understand that our decision not to use your work does not mean that it is not good. Don't worry about trying to please us. What is important is that you are satisfied with your work and that you know you have done your best." "You don't do children a favor by publishing their ordinary works," says Rubel. You do them a favor by insisting on the best.

At 30, Rubel and Mandel have reached a measure of success. They can and do work less than 40 hours at week and make a living wage. And they have a lot of pride in what they do.