

'Stone Soup' Magazine: One Of A Kind

By DALE POLLOCK

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If James Joyce would have had "Stone Soup," a magazine written by and for children at his disposal, the world might have been graced with "Finnegan's Wake" 20 years earlier.

Who knows what Virginia Woolfs and James Joyces the current pre-literary generation is grooming, but "Stone Soup" is offering them a vehicle for publica-

tion that has traditionally been denied the younger set.

The Santa Cruz-based magazine is in its third year of publication, coming out five times a year with poems, stories and illustrations by children between the ages of 4 and 12.

"Stone Soup" is the only magazine of its kind in the world, and editors William Rubel and Gerry Mandel are justly proud of their success. Over 4,000 kids, schools and

libraries currently subscribe, and the publisher/editors are doing extensive brochure mailings to enlarge that number.

The magazine has already garnered praise from the cultural elite, ranging from "The New Yorker" to "Library Journal." The comments that mean the most, however, come from the children themselves.

"I've never seen a magazine more fun to read. It's really fun to read poems and stories by children your own age," wrote Brigitte Devine, age 11. The mail isn't confined just to admirers, however.

Potential contributors send in a steady stream of verse, fiction and artwork, 90 per cent of which is rejected. "First of all, because we can't print all of the material, and secondly because quality is hard to find," said Mandel.

"Stone Soup" seeks material with "substance, if not style," according to Rubel, or writing that will stand up under repeated readings. "Basically," he adds, "we print what we like, always keeping the children in mind."

Rejection slips would seem to be a harsh reality of the New York publishing world, but "Stone Soup" has its own form rejection that is gently worded, and always has a personal note appended. "We treat their work seriously, and that's usually not done," asserted Rubel.

Another significant feature of the magazine is its blend of seemingly unrelated art work and prose. "We synthesize the art and writing together, and allow children to express themselves creatively. That doesn't mean just the right form or style; we're looking

for the soul to be put into it," stated Rubel.

Aspiring writers or their parents or teachers send in manuscripts, and the attempt is made to stay faithful to the author's intent. For a while, that included keeping spelling and grammatical errors intact, but as Gerry noted, "Children who know how to spell (and their teachers) didn't like it."

Rubel and Mandel, along with staff member Leslie Smith are generally open about submissions, rejecting out of hand only "mass culture stuff," i.e. Batman, pet rocks and the like. The cutoff point for contributors is usually age 12 or 13, since, according to Rubel, "We're not interested in adolescent problems."

The "Stone Soup" people were surprised initially to find out just how popular their magazine was. "Publishers have long believed that books by children don't sell," commented Rubel. "We do sell, so we really don't understand that."

The magazine was begun to offer an outlet for children's creativity, and an alternative to mass-produced picture books, which downplay a child's ability to read and think. Rubel cites a general decline in the ability to read critically among children, reflected in low test scores and poor school performance.

"I believe you have to be able to read and write to keep our culture going," he says, adding, "kids who really like 'Stone Soup' are generally kids who enjoy reading."

Branching out from just stories and poems, the publication has added book reviews by children, and would like film reviews also, although they present

logistical problems. Material printed in the magazine is purposely more detailed and covers a broader range of subject matter than most children are exposed to in school. The type face employed is also larger than in school books.

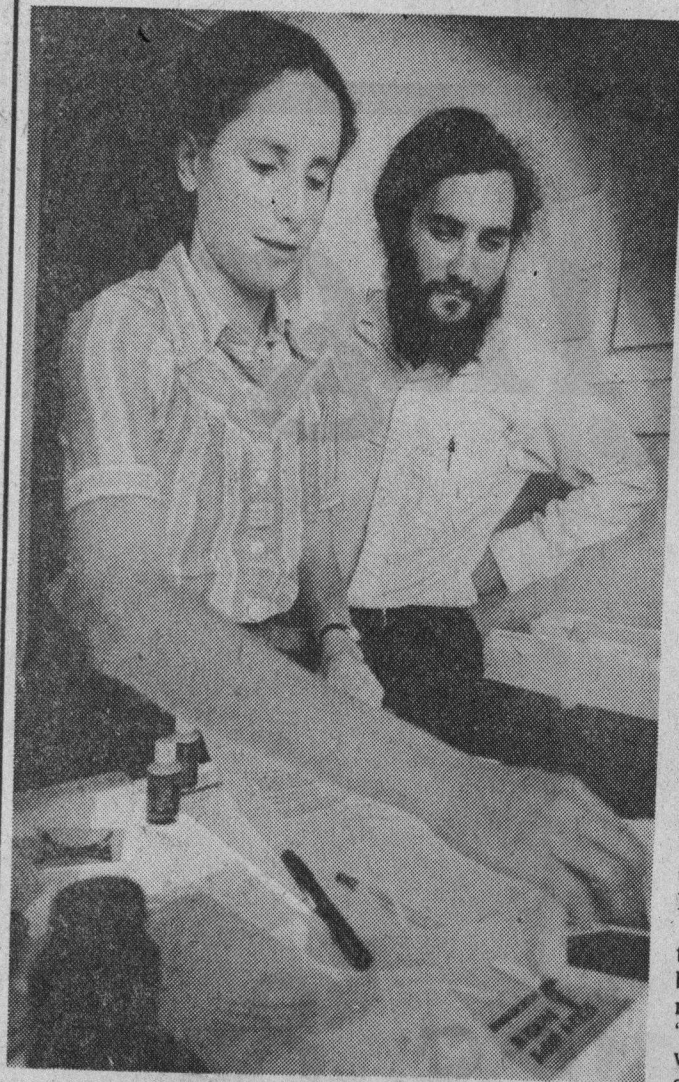
Despite the financial pressures on a small press ("It's very difficult just to survive," says Gerry), Stone Soup is branching further out into the children's media field. Next on their list is a Children's Arts Foundation, that will offer art classes, writing seminars and a low teacher-student ratio.

In the publishing arena, Rubel and Mandel are planning a series of "Little Books," along the lines of the 19th century chapbooks. These would be written and illustrated by children, and five are already in the hopper. There will also be a reprint of "The Young Visitors," a 100-page novel written in 1890 by a nine-year-old girl.

Stone Soup has also established itself as a clearinghouse for children's books from all over the world, hoping to distribute the work of foreign as well as American children. "These ideas will be supporting themselves," notes Mandel, explaining that the magazine has been successful enough to launch new projects.

An anthology of "Stone Soup" back issues is currently being negotiated with Doubleday publishers, but for now, previous and current copies are available through Box 83, Santa Cruz.

"For a small press that was uncapitalized, we've done very well," concludes Rubel. To the nascent Joyce or Woolf "Stone Soup" has done much more. It's opened the doors to the wonderful world of creation.



Publisher/editors Gerry Mandel and William Rubel lay out the latest issue of "Stone Soup," the only magazine by and for children in the world.