

2009 SAINT PAUL ALMANAC

Send Us Your Story

Find your place on the planet. Dig in, and take responsibility from there.

—Gary Snyder

Ah, they say, community is dead, the book is dead, story lies dying.

Not here in Saint Paul, where Kimberly Nightingale, a book editor schooled most recently in community development at the Hubert Humphrey Institute of the University of Minnesota, has created an extraordinary project celebrating community, the printed page, and most of all, story. “All my experiences have taught me that place matters deeply. Stories matter. Stories may be as important as food for survival. And it coalesced into a vision I had for creating a book about living in Saint Paul as defined by time (the calendar) and combining that with articles, stories, and poems that reflect on the city in a more timeless way. I hope the *Almanac* begins a conversation between people about what the place they live in means to them,” says Nightingale.

Now in its third year, the *Saint Paul Almanac* is unique. Its purposes are to preserve individual and community stories, welcome newcomers into Saint Paul’s yeasty mixture of communities through writing, and produce what will amount to a collective, communal memory for Saint Paul. “Each one of us suffers great difficulties,” Nightingale writes in her introduction to the 2009 edition. “Most of us will have several catastrophes in one lifetime. We move in and out of feeling we belong. We step out into wild frontiers that challenge and terrify us. Whatever you may personally be experiencing, we hope the stories in the *Saint Paul Almanac* offer a small place of refuge. It’s true, Saint Paul is often thought of as a quiet town where things change slowly. But that’s a deliberate disguise—hiding all the city’s newness and difficulties under a practiced stodginess. Helping each other through new times and tough times strengthens us all.”

The 300-plus-page annual *Almanac* solicits and revels in the work of poets; poems are all over the book each year. So are Saint Paul’s most prominent writers, Garrison Keillor—his limericks grace several month’s first pages—and Patricia Hampl. So too are baseball fanatics, who contribute essays about the game in Saint Paul; hot rodders; quirky Rangers (the Minnesota term for sturdy northerners from the cold Mesabi Iron Range); newcomers from Cambodia, Somalia, Mexico, Ethiopia, and the Twin Cities’ equally exotic distant suburbs. The *Almanac* regularly celebrates food and coffee in poem and essay (lots of coffee, lots of coffee houses), Saint Paul’s Winter Carnival, the discreet charms of winter (this year these include a paen to snowblowing), and moral advice from an excellent Saint Paul mechanic. As it’s picked up speed and recognition, the *Almanac* has become a teaching tool for Saint Paul Public School students and adult immigrants studying English as a second language.

The *Saint Paul Almanac* offers a range of poems, short stories, immigration tales, mild political screeds, essays, memoirs, and calendars of events that hasn’t seen its parallel since the subscription omnigatherums of the late nineteenth century: something for everyone, with subtle lessons on community organizing and community memory thrown in.

The bright particulars of writers’ contributions constitute a textbook case of how to charm and win the trust of readers through attentiveness to one’s own tale. Most of the *Almanac*’s selections are excursions into neighborhood, family, or personal history whose pleasurable lies in their modesty and detail. You can almost hear a child nudging each writer forward: “And *then* what happened?” And the contributor tells you. Its variety makes the *Almanac* great reading for the bedside table, the deck, the outdoor coffee house.

Fittingly, each new edition of the *Almanac* has been heralded by a roaring publication party entertained by groups drawn from Saint Paul’s many communities: in 2007, these included Irish and Hmong dancers, a children’s drill team, Winter Carnival royalty (there had to be people from the Winter Carnival), a bagpiper, a saxophonist, and historical re-enactors channeling Wabasha Cave gangsters. The party is followed by community readings throughout Saint Paul (such events get residents through the long winters) and canvassing by the *Almanac*’s community editors, who encourage and solicit work from their own neighborhoods and community institutions. This year’s party is Saturday, Sept. 27, noon to 4 p.m., at the Black Dog Cafe in Lowertown, St. Paul.

The result, as Minnesotans might put it, is “not so bad”—a plucky annual celebrating difference, similarity, wholeness, and weirdness.

