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Contributor

A week ago (15 April, 2013) I had the pleasure of hearing Jay MillAr read at Books & Company's Café Voltaire. MillAr was a vibrant and fascinating personality which managed to keep the crowd's attention and deliver some much needed laughter to the Prince George writing community. Yet, like most events like this, MillAr's reading was overshadowed by Prince George's "cultural ambassador," Dr. Rob Budde.

Prior to MillAr's reading, Dr. Budde had made several pointed comments directed at Graham Pearce, who teaches at the College of New Caledonia and is one of the other poetry organizers in the city, and his friends: the poet Dave Ogilvie and Paul Strickland as well as many of Pearce's former and current students who Pearce had brought to the reading. After Dr. Budde finished his poem, he introduced his own former student and close friend, Jeremy Stewart, who took to the stage and read irreverent cut-ups that had no overt political overtones. Dr. Budde, while introducing MillAr, read a strategically chosen MillAr poem which, for those who have followed what Brian Fawcett has termed a "Poetry War," was undoubtedly an ad hominem attack aimed at Pearce, the organizers and participants of events such as the Barry McKinnon Chapbook Awards, the John Harris Fiction Awards, and the Postnorth poetry series.

While these kinds of attacks can be (under normal circumstances) brushed off as nothing more than banter between poets, the current conflict has blown up into something much bigger. For readers unaware of the conflict in the poetry community, it may be summarized as critical thought and freedom of expression versus political correctness and ethical supervision. Dr. Budde used the event to pursue his agenda, which seems to be based on convincing other writers that he is a permanent and persistent victim of unwarranted bullying by members of the poetry community, specifically Pearce and company, and on demanding that poetry – and by extension, all writing, art and design – meet his ethical standards. Once MillAr had finished his reading, Dr. Budde took the stage to thank everyone for coming out before bringing up the matter of feuding poets. An awkward silence ensued as Dr. Budde described how "people feel unsafe going to readings," and how his work and art has suffered throughout the turmoil. He then followed up with why he feels community is an important element in the Prince George arts scene.

Yes, people felt uncomfortable going to certain readings. Barry McKinnon was not in attendance for that very reason. Dr. Budde made the dialogue open for suggestions on how to rectify this situation to which Pearce briefly explained that he promotes "wide-mindedness, critical thought and a poet's right to experience the world through their senses." He asked for an apology for being labelled as "a misogynist, a terrorist . . . and other various names" that he has been called (by people closely associated with Dr. Budde for poster images and poems) through this entire conflict. Pearce's response was met with silence by Dr. Budde.

After a few moments of awkward silence, Dr. Budde then called on MillAr to discuss how he dealt with similar situations in the Toronto arts scene. MillAr looked uncomfortable being put on the spot, but managed to answer the question by discussing the internet in a brief professional manner. Gillian Wigmore then spoke up and pointed out how awkward this situation was and asked if MillAr and Stewart would be able to return to the stage for a question

and answer session. Sadly, this soon digressed to Stewart discussing one-ups-manships, which served as a reminder about the previous awkward conversation.

Personally, I found Dr. Budde's behaviour unprofessional and unwarranted. The fifteen minute discussion of the poetry war overshadowed MillAr's reading, which was unfortunate, as his reading was engaging (and well attended) and it would have been interesting to learn more about his new book, *Timely Irreverence*.

If Dr. Budde truly wants to help contribute to a strong arts community in Prince George in a positive manner, then I would like to suggest the following:

- 1) Apologise to Pearce (on behalf of himself and those in his inner circle) for the damaging allegations made against him.

- 2) Attend readings hosted by people outside his close circle of friends and,

- 3) Be more aware of how his job as a poetry organizer is not to "correct" the culture (both directly or indirectly), but to encourage and grow the members of the arts community in PG.