

Literary Magazines in Context: A Historical Perspective

By Carolyn Kuebler

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American literature was born and bloomed alongside American literary journals, with both alternative and mainstream magazines providing the audience and inspiration for a great variety of new work. This is as true today as it was in 1840, when *The Dial* was formed by the Transcendentalists to promote a new kind of writing and thought that was not considered appropriate for more established magazines. With *The Dial*, writers like Emerson and Thoreau found a place to air their ideas, which then gained cultural momentum and eventually formed a cornerstone of our literary history.

Literary magazines have been central to the flourishing of American literature since its beginnings, with the twentieth century seeing a boom in the number and variety of journals and the twenty-first century keeping pace. As galleries of current work, literary magazines offer direct access to the trends and tastes of the times, where new ideas and new writers, many of whom exist far from the mainstream, are given their first audience. Because they encompass the living history of literature right into the present day, these journals are useful and vibrant tools in the classroom, in particular for creative writing students but more broadly for students of literature and American culture.

In a course at Middlebury College called Literary Magazine Publishing, I covered the history of these journals, their current status, and the practical aspects of running a magazine today. The course involved a little of everything, but any one of these areas could be explored more deeply. The purpose was to give the students an informed, inside view of the nature and demands of literary magazine publishing in the context of representative journals throughout U.S. history, in particular the twentieth century.

History and Overview of the Field:

Two indispensable (though out-of-print) resources for this exploration include *The Little Magazine: A History and Bibliography* by Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles

Allen, Carolyn F. Ulrich (Princeton Univ. Press, 1946) and *The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History*, eds. Elliott Anderson and Mary Kinzie (Pushcart Press, 1978). These books offer colorful profiles of individual magazines and their editors, as well as essays looking at the field overall, though each book has a very different tone and perspective. For a more recent view, we read Gayle Feldman's "Independent Presses and 'Little' Magazines in American Culture: A Forty-Year Retrospective" (CLMP website, approx. 2001) and "The Man in the Back Row Has a Question," *Paris Review*, 167 (Fall, 2003), a roundtable discussion with a variety of magazine editors. *The Mississippi Review* recently added another useful text with its issue devoted to historical and current views of literary magazines, in Vol. 36, #3 (2008).

Students used these books and articles to guide their research into magazines from American history and prepared and presented reports on individual magazines. Bound periodicals, though they are dauntingly thick and monochromatic from the outside, open up into page after page of original magazine content and can be found in most university and large public libraries. Some institutions will also have a range of defunct free-standing journals, which are even more vivid (the sometimes fragile spines, odd presentation—including, in one case, a coffee can full of papers—and trends in typography all contribute to the experience). We were fortunate to get our hands on original journals from the early twentieth century, mimeographs from the 1970s, and some of the more esoteric magazines published in recent years, all held in the library's special collections.

Seeing the evolution of print journals firsthand makes it a tactile as well as an intellectual experience—the paper and artwork and even the smell of these periodicals create an acute sense of the time period in which they were created and of the fluidity of publications in general. Journals are full of all kinds of artifacts that you won't find in canonized anthologies, like passionate manifestoes, advertisements for hair products, and early works by some of our literary heroes in rougher states than we've come to know them. Students can then see how the well-known writers of the past century or so got their start as well as how different journals have held different aesthetic positions, often with great passion and optimism.

In preparing their reports students answered questions, such as: Who are the editors and why did they start this magazine? What is the nature of the work presented here, and does it fit with stated intentions? Does anything seem dated about this? What does the design tell you, and how does it affect your reading of it? How has it managed to survive (or not)? Does this magazine fit into any broader historical/literary movement? Who are some of its primary authors, and which, if any, went on to be well-known?

Contemporary Magazines:

With a background in historical magazines, the students then went on to explore contemporary magazines. For the class I chose two contemporary journals for required reading (*New England Review* and *Fence*, chosen for their distinctness and proximity), and then each student selected a magazine for a second report. (Selections and assignments for individual reports included *Iowa Review*, *McSweeney's*, *Post Road*, *Granta*, *Zoetrope*, *Fiction*, and many others.) After reading issues of *NER* and *Fence*, the students met and spoke with the editors of these journals and learned about the practical processes and aesthetic choices. They enjoyed hearing anecdotes and getting the inside view, and most were surprised to learn about the struggles to keep even well-known journals running.

Our library has a wide range of contemporary journals that the students could choose from for their reports, and to augment this selection I presented some more irregular and/or independent publications, because these too have been historically significant even if not long-lived. Each student reported on a different magazine, showing the class not only the physical aspect of the magazine but also any editorial statements, the history and evolution of the magazine, and their own perception of the contents from reading an issue cover to cover. The students read interviews with the editors and explored the magazines' websites and historical record. Also helpful were the contemporary editors' profiles from CLMP's *The Literary Press and Magazine Directory*.

Processes and Practices of Literary Magazines:

In order to learn about the processes involved in publishing a literary magazine, we held mock editorial meetings to discuss manuscripts, read samples from *Editors on Editing: What Writers Need to Know About What Editors Do*, ed. by Gerald Gross (Grove Press, 1993), reviewed style sheets and copyediting tests, and learned about the path a manuscript takes from submission to selection. Also helpful were readings from *The Whole Story* and *Spreading the Word*, both edited by Warren Slesinger (Bench Press), books that feature comments by editors about their selection process followed by the work they chose.

For the final project, students broke into groups and created business plans for a journal of their own. Required components to this were a magazine name; mission statement and intended audience; list of staff positions and descriptions; a basic plan for funding (university support, ad support, etc.); a plan for getting the word out; submission guidelines; a sample solicitation letter and a list of writers they would solicit; a description of the format, design, and look; a sample ad; and a sketch of the magazine's online presence. This project allowed them to creatively combine their own ideas about writing and aesthetic choices with what they learned about how magazines operate.

To explore literary magazines, both defunct and contemporary, is to see the process of literary development, with its failures and successes presented side by side. It contextualizes the works of now-canonized authors and gives new writers perspective on where they might fit in. To know that, for instance, *Poetry* magazine published Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" the same year as it published the first imagist poems by H.D.; that James Joyce's *Ulysses* was once an untried experiment, appearing serially in *The Little Review*; and that Hemingway and Faulkner and countless other authors were first published in what were then called "little magazines" (and also received numerous rejections), is to gain perspective on the fluid process of literary creation and publication. In addition, the study of literary magazines can help to build mutual respect among editors and writers, give writers a new sense of the accessibility and malleability of literary "greatness," and help to demystify the process and significance of publication in literary magazines for those just starting out.

Books for Further Reading (in no particular order)

- *The Little Magazine: A History and Bibliography*, by Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, Carolyn F. Ulrich (Princeton Univ. Press, 1946)
- *The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History*, eds. Elliott Anderson and Mary Kinzie (Pushcart Press, 1978)
- Gayle Feldman, "Independent Presses and 'Little' Magazines in American Culture: A Forty-Year Retrospective" (CLMP, approx. 2001)
- *The Unfeigned Word: Fifteen Years of New England Review*, eds. T.R. Hummer and Devon Jersild (Middlebury College/UPNE, 1993)
- *The Whole Story: Editors on Fiction*, ed. Warren Slesinger (Bench Press, 1995)
- *Spreading the Word: Editors on Poetry*, eds. Stephen Corey & Warren Slesinger (Bench Press, revised ed. 2001)
- CLMP's *The Literary Press and Magazine Directory* (various years and publishers)
- *Editors on Editing: What Writers Need to Know About What Editors Do*, ed. by Gerald Gross (Grove Press, 1993)
- "The Man in the Back Row Has a Question," *Paris Review*, 167 (Fall, 2003)
- *The Mississippi Review*, Vol. 36, #3 (2008)
- *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*, edited by Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips (reference only, special collections)
- *Pushcart Prize* anthologies
- *Women Editing Modernism: "Little" Magazines and Literary History*, by Jayne E. Marek (University Press of Kentucky, 1995)
- *Editor to Author: The Letters of Maxwell E. Perkins*, ed. by John Hall Wheelock (Scribner, 1950)
- *A History of Poetry in Letters: The First Fifty Years (1912–1962)*, eds. Joseph Parisi & Stephen Young (Norton, 2002)

Web Resources

- Council for Literary Magazines and Presses: www.clmp.org
A resource for independent publishers of magazines and books. Includes a directory of member presses, background reading, and practical information for editors and writers.
- New Pages: <http://www.newpages.com>
News, information, and guides to literary magazines, alternative periodicals, independent record labels, alternative newsweeklies and more. Also contains reviews.
- Duotrope's Digest: <http://www.duotrope.com/index.aspx>
Another online directory of magazines. This one includes viewer-added information about submissions' turnaround times, statistics for rejections and acceptances, plus links.
- LunaPark Review: <http://lunaparkreview.blogspot.com/>
A compilation of reviews and excerpts from a great variety of literary magazines, large and small.