

Literary Magazines: Gateway to Publishing *Now*

By David H. Lynn

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Conversation and lively debate are at the heart of any good writing workshop. There's hardly a surprise in that claim. Participants are usually eager to share their own work and discuss that of others. They want to wrestle with what works and, in someone's humble opinion, what doesn't. What seems fresh and startling, fueled with surprise and delight? What may be a little too familiar or predictable? Disagreement is inevitable and even healthy—as long as it is controlled by a skilled leader.

Typically, and especially in an academic program, workshops also feature discussion and analysis of stories, poems, and essays of published authors. One of my own mantras is that reading—reading voraciously and widely—is more important to young writers than exercises or journals or anything else. The examples are often classic: Maupassant and Chekhov, Dickinson and Stevens. Hopeful, apprentice writers must immerse themselves in the history of the craft. That's where anthologies come in—usually vastly over-priced and often with selections of uneven quality. (But because copyright covers much of the literature of the 20th century, it's hard to share this material in any other way.)

It's also critically important for workshop participants to read what's being written and published *now*. What are the tastes and trends of our own moment? They need to understand the literary context in which they are putting pen to paper or, just as likely, finger to keyboard. For that purpose, nothing can equal reading a rich sample of contemporary literary magazines. Indeed, if teachers lean on the same anthologies to offer both classic and more recent examples, it can be striking how dated that “recent” literature may seem. Understandably, anthology editors don't have the luxury of time and distance as they weigh such choices. Often the tastes and trends of a particular moment not so long ago are revealed, like bell bottoms and Nehru jackets.

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I happen to believe that for undergraduates the most useful aspect of participating in a workshop is learning to read in a new way. They have spent many years struggling to figure out what a story or poem may mean. Now they get the chance to discuss how a piece of art *works*—why an author chose to use the present tense, for example, in order to make the story seem less distanced, more immediate. They may even come to the conclusion that writers of yore struggle with the same challenges we all still do—sometimes the immortals goofed! This can be liberating.

Graduate students are naturally following a different trajectory. Writing is not simply a part of their education, but something they aspire to pursue as professionals. They too, of course, need to immerse themselves in the work of others near and far. Studying models is an all but essential stage of apprenticeship. And study is only the first step. One may not “like” Hemingway, but any writer can learn a great deal by mimicking the dialogue that drives “Hills Like White Elephants.”

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What literary journals share with anthologies is that they represent editorial selection. Either an individual, or series of individuals, or a committee has read countless submissions and chosen this one, not those ten or fifty. Thus, a completed issue has been assembled carefully—and according to a particular aesthetic. The editors vouch for its value. This role of editorial selection will be, by the way, more essential, not less, in the age of the Internet and its limitless offerings.

Unlike commercial anthologies, however, a literary magazine offers student writers samples of stories, poems, and essays that have been written within the last year or two, survived the process of submissions, and been selected by an editor more recently still. They can discuss how these pieces work even more readily than the classics, because the language is *theirs*, the historical context their own. Like taking a watch or bicycle apart and, in a sense, putting them back together, they will better understand the mechanics and move toward a kind of mastery.

As a practical example, I would suggest laying two or three different literary magazines side by side. Just the look—the thingyness of the artifact—can reveal a lot about the aesthetic, the intended audience, the ambitions of each publication. This is every bit as true with online publications, as well. To take it to the next step, an instructor

might select a poem or story from each of the journals, ask the participants to read them, and then discuss what the pieces share and, perhaps more interestingly, what they don't.

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I am often asked what I'm "looking for" in the way of new pieces to publish in *The Kenyon Review*. My first response is flip, quoting the Supreme Court Justice on pornography: I know it when I see it. The more serious response is philosophical—I believe that all successful art, and certainly literature, contains elements of surprise (if you can predict what comes next, it's boring) and delight (what separate literature from other intellectual activities is the engagement of human emotions). And there's one more requirement, something that should be obvious in different manifestations within all these wonderful literary magazines: I'm looking for *mastery*. The writer, young or not so, famous or not so, needs to be in total control of the language and form of what I am reading. If not, I won't keep reading for long. But every magazine will respond to the issue of mastery differently.

Hundreds of literary magazines are published each year in the United States, and dozens and dozens are springing up on the Web. Each is different. Not all aspire to grand significance, not all survive very long. But much can be learned by sampling the variety. In my own fiction workshops I bring multiple samples to my students—not just *The Kenyon Review*. This is part of their homework, not for my class but for their own growth as writers. Certainly they learn from reading contemporary work. But they also come to see that different publications feature stories that may be like their own. Or not. They come to see a range of tastes and fashions that is strikingly rich.