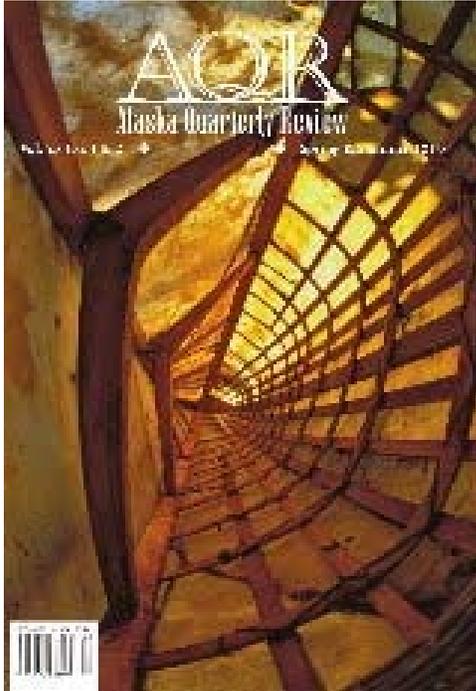


# Alaska Dispatch

## Books

### Latest AQR full of delights

Nancy Lord | Apr 3, 2010



Many if not most literary journals are predictably similar quarter to quarter; they have a certain aesthetic the reader gets to know, and contain a mix of prose and poetry - rarely art, drama, criticism, or graphic literature. Not so for [Alaska Quarterly Review](#), which distinguishes itself not just by its general (high) quality but with inventiveness. Past issues have focused on Alaska Native writing, narratives that were not identified as fact or fiction, and special sections ("hidden Alaska," a Richard Ford interview packaged with a story and essay, conversation and selected poems from Billy Collins.) Past issues have also included varieties of creative nonfiction and memoir, plays, photo essays, expert essays on translation and language, "faux interviews," and novellas as well as short stories. Very

often there have been guest editors -- especially for the poetry sections. It is much to editor Ron Spatz's credit that, after 27 years, AQR is always celebrating new and expanded literary expression. [Read a 49 Writers interview of Ron Spatz which covers many of those 27 years, [here](#).]

The current issue (vol. 27, no. 1 and 2, spring and summer 2010) is no exception. Here, the special feature is "innovative fiction" assembled by guest editor Amy Hempel, herself an outstanding practitioner of short fiction. As if that's not enough, the "nonfiction" section is equally special -- a 79-page manual called "How to Write a Good Sentence," by Arnold G. Nelson, a 91-year-old retired English professor. And then there's the poetry section.

But let me take these one at a time, in the order they appear.

There are 21 stories in the "innovative fiction" section, some by well-published writers, some by first-time writers, some by writers better known as poets. (A feature of AQR that I appreciate is the short bio note that appears at the bottom of the first page of each piece of writing, which prevents having to fumble to a back section to learn about the writer.) Hempel said, in her introduction, that she looked for writing that would be new to readers, but also new to the writers --

something they had not tried before. There's a lot of very good writing in this section, but I'm afraid I have to say that I didn't find much that awed me with its "newness." Prose poems -- not new. Segmented writing -- not new. Monologue -- not new. All dialogue -- not new. Obscurity -- neither new nor particularly desirable. I suppose my personal definition of good writing includes, even requires, innovation -- the presentation of whatever the narrative is in some fresh way--and so to single out innovation as a particular sought-after quality can lead to disappointment, at least in my case.

The stories I ended up liking the best might have been among the more traditional ones, in the end. Jamie Quatro's "Up 58 South" concerns a woman dying of cancer -- a hackneyed (unfortunately) situation made remarkably fresh through character development, well-constructed scenes, and humor. Megan Mayhew-Bergman's "The Social Life of Mice" is also a traditionally constructed story, but in an odd setting: husband and wife veterinarians tend injured hounds at a bear hunt, and, in their conflicted relationship, speak to one another through their animals. Two others of my favorites are more unusual in structure and voice, and rich in surprise. Michael Ahn's "Flesh" is a short (four-page) narrative that braids three different stories in tight, fast-moving, image-filled paragraphs. Patricia Volk's "Did You See Me See You," masterfully conveys an entire relationship through a brief (one-page) first-person inquiry.

Now, "How to Write a Good Sentence: A Manual for Writers Who Know How to Write Correct Sentences." This amazing piece of work is really a book unto itself; the author speaks of it as a manual or book and compares it--fairly I think -- to Strunk and White's [Elements of Style](#). It's clearly a life's work for the nonagenarian Arnold G. Nelson, who reaches back to his own school days to remember and analyze "good" sentences and who brings much of his personal life into this appreciation of style. This was an absolute pleasure to read, and truly instructive for any writer concerned with style (which I assume is all of us). Nelson analyzes forty-eight exemplary sentences from writers as various as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Eudora Welty, Woody Guthrie, and Gertrude Stein.

Take for example, this from William Faulkner's "Spotted Horses": "Calico-coated, small-bodied, with delicate legs and pink faces in which their mismatched eyes rolled wild and subdued, they huddled, gaudy, motionless, and alert, wild as deer, deadly as rattlesnakes, quiet as doves." Nelson calls this "the adjective sentence" -- (he gives each sentence example a name, as "the onomatopoeic sentence," "a moving sentence," "the triple ambiguity sentence") -- and devotes two pages to discussing why and how the multiple adjectives and their placements are so perfect in this case. As someone who is always lambasting my students to cut the modifiers and write with nouns and verbs instead, this lesson has humbled me into a new appreciation for the effective uses of adjectives. Or consider Norman McLean's "In my family there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing" ("a beginning sentence"): Nelson shows how this

first sentence of [A River Runs Through It](#) perfectly signs the themes of the entire story.

The final section of this issue of AQR is devoted to poetry. I found a good variety here, including "The Sky I Die By Will Be Grey," by Todd Boss, author of the amazing collection [Yellowrocket](#) and a current favorite poet of mine. Here also are represented the only two contributors to the issue I recognized as Alaskans -- Amber Flora Thomas, who teaches at UAF, and Amy Groshek, who received her MFA from UAA and later taught at APU before moving out of state. The Groshek poem, "Rubia Writes a Poem About Light for a Contest," ends with this: "...Yet,/ light! Don't you want it? Don't you sit/in the sun and read on a February day?"

**Nancy Lord** is the Alaska State Writer Laureate and most recently the author of [Rock, Water, Wild](#). This review originally appeared on March 22, 2010, on [49 Writers](#), an online forum of collaborative reflections and book news by and about Alaskan authors, and is republished here with permission.