

The War to Keep the Written Word Alive: On the Front Line with America's Literary Journals

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"Literary magazines . . . are on the front line — where discoveries are made, new visions birthed . . . Our goal is to get people to read again, to contemplate, to think about things . . ."

(Ronald Spatz, editor, *Alaska Quarterly Review*)

The writing is on the wall. A recent survey of American spending habits found that the average household shelled out a total 5.5% of its disposable income for various forms of entertainment and reading material. That sounds fine — until you check out those graphs a little more closely.

Entertainment is broken down into two categories. The first, accounting for a full 5%, lumps together movies, tickets and admission fees for sports and other events, rentals and purchases of videos, tapes, and CDs, and items for our pet. (Yes, getting that CZ-studded genuine leather collar for Fang or buying Hair Ball a deluxe litter box with an electronic eye to trigger an automatic poop-scooper is considered amusement for us.)

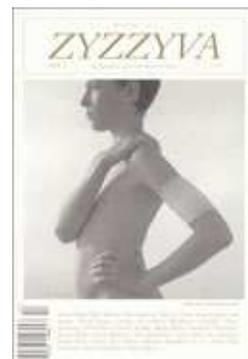
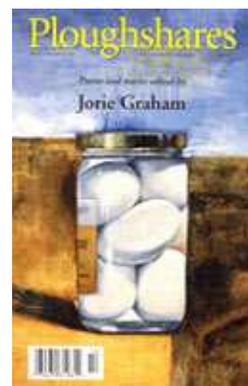
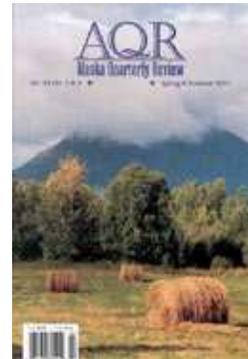
At the very edge of the entertainment wedge on the pie chart, there's a microscopically thin and virtually imperceptible sliver. It's the category called "Reading Materials" — and it accounts for a scant 0.5% of the average American budget. On the graphs, the individual categories of liquor, tobacco products, lottery tickets, soft drinks and chocolate each easily beat out books and periodicals for our hard-earned dollars.

The writing may be on the wall, but it sure isn't on the typical American night table.

The view from the trenches

Of all the types of publications facing tight times and the threat of extinction at the beginning of the 21st century, perhaps the most dramatically endangered is the literary journal, the long-standing bastion of free expression and creative endeavor in prose and poetry. I recently interviewed the editors of various university-supported as well as independent journals to get their perspective on the changing intellectual climate in the country and the future of their genre.

Bayard, editor of the independent New York-based literary journal *Happy*, stressed the general emptiness of our culture, particularly as reflected in the entertainment and literary sectors, at this point in time. "We have the feeling that if we just consume enough of it, we'll be filled. But we're only full of emptiness. Most people spend eight to 12 hours a day watching television. If you listen to most people's conversations, they center around they saw on *60 Minutes* or on some sitcom last night." *Alaska Quarterly Review's* editor, Ronald Spatz, echoed those sentiments.



"There's no time for reflection in our world anymore. It's too fast-paced, and it is not run by creative or visionary people."

The anomaly of a non-reading literate people in a country with priding itself on a high rate of literacy and a remarkably well-educated populace in general was first observed within the last twenty years. George Core, editor of the 110-year-old *Sewanee Review*, said in a recent interview, "The Wall Street Journal ran an article over ten years ago in which it was show that most graduates of leading American universities read five books or fewer a year . . . (but) it's too simple to blame the development of television or computers." This is bad news for everybody in publishing, for sure. But it is most profoundly impacts the smallest and most culturally significant sector of the business.

The last ten years have seen the demise of many highly esteemed journals of long-standing. Naomi Horii, editor of *Many Mountains Moving*, summarized some of the hard realities that have brought about the permanent closing of so many literary magazine doors. "This is a particular tough time . . . with factors such as cuts in arts funding, increasing postage rates, decreasing readership, and more and more chain bookstores and distributors refusing to carry lit magazines." Pam McCully, co-editor of *Lynx Eye*, an independent California magazine, stated it simply: "The economics of small magazine publishing is brutal."

Cathy Capozzoli, guest editor of an upcoming issue of *Many Mountains Moving* described the frustrating situation that non-profit (non-university) literary journals face in trying to keep their boat afloat. "Most foundations and funders of non-profits will not pay for printing costs of any kind. They'll fund a reading series or a literacy program, or even erect a sculpture in a public place."

There are other factors, however, that explain some of the attrition in the journal scene. Ploughshares's Don Lee offered a different perspective. "Many magazines were founded as shoestring operations thirty or forty years ago by people from the '60s culture who wanted to 'do their own thing' creatively as a counter-reaction to commercial publications. These people are now retiring, and some are retiring their magazines as well."

Regardless of the causes, the dwindling numbers on the front line don't do much for the morale of the remaining troops. "The great age of literary quarterlies occurred in the 1940s and 1950s," was the wistful assessment of Sewanee's George Core. In light of that, the view from the trenches can seem pretty grim. When asked about the future of literary journals, California-based ZYZZYVA's editor Howard Junker responded, "The future is always grim. Death is always at the door. These times are desperately bleak . . ."

"A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say, it just began to live that day." (Emily Dickinson)

Historically, literary magazines have played a unique and vital role in America, shaping our culture and cultivating a taste in this young and robust country for the well-turned phrase, the keen-eyed insight, the incisive criticism, the breathtaking observation. In the words of Doris Lessing, "That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life but in a new way."

For the last two centuries, literary journals have functioned as our nation's ongoing adult educator, providing the reading populace with food for thought and visions for the future. Moreover, they are the backbone of our literary tradition and have been the springboard for great writers from Washington Irving to John Irving. From their very inception, they have been the single major force to popularize the short story form, from the finely crafted macabre tales of Poe to Twain's humorous yarns to O. Henry's wry ironies to the cynical accounts of Hemingway to the latest work by the rising authors of the present day,

such as Lorrie Moore, Thom Jones and — just maybe -- me and thee, if we are aspiring writers. Erma Bombeck once quipped something to the effect that there was a time when everybody she knew claimed to be writers, except two people . . . now it's everybody, period.

One of the inherent functions of these magazines has always been to hold up a mirror to its era, to reflect the many faces of a diverse country, to record the history of a time and a period through the words of its writers and poets. The horrors of the Civil War, the experience of slavery as told by the voices of newly-emancipated Southern blacks, and the harsh realities of the urban poor in the North all found a place for expression in the literary journals of their time, such as *The Atlantic Monthly* (started in 1857), *Harper's* (started in 1850), *The Galaxy* (started in 1866) and many others.

Literary magazines were the first to recognize the emergence of women as writers and open their pages to them. Interestingly, one of the earliest literary magazines in America was *Godey's Lady's Book*, which began in 1830 and rapidly grew to an astounding readership of over 150,000 a month. Snuggled up side-by-side with the works of Poe, Longfellow, and Holmes were the writings of Lydia H. Sigourney, Frances S. Osgood, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. In the mid-1800s, the literary scene changed even more radically as Louisa May Alcott, Emily Dickinson, Rebecca Harding Davis and many others stormed the predominantly male citadels of literature with their finely-crafted prose and poetry. Ultimately, this gave rise to a whole new genre of publication, namely the "women's magazine," beginning with *The Ladies Home Journal*, which featured fiction and poetry along with articles on homemaking.

You've come a long way, baby

Beyond molding minds and opinion, and standing as a living record of our many and varied lives, experiences and times, literary journals were the stepping stone for America's entrance as a player in the international arts scene. In the early 1800s, a British writer in the *Edinburgh Review* posed the rhetorical question, "In the four corners of the globe, who reads an American book? Or goes to an American play?"

Obviously, the answer was, "No one," but that was about to change, and in a big way.

While early America had always enjoyed a lively cultural life, it had remained very much homegrown and homebound, as a young country receiving little attention abroad and eclipsed by the many prodigious European scholars and writers. Beginning in 1815 with *The North American Review*, the first literary magazine in America which is still publishing to this day, and rapidly joined by a vast host of other university-based, commercial and independent journals, the critical thinkers and creative visionaries had both a place to hone their skills and a showcase to display their works to an ever-widening circle of readers. In a very real sense, literary journals created a cultural identity for a new nation that ultimately impacted the "Old World" across the ocean.

That great tide of native talent, capitalist innovation, and international influence only grew stronger as time went on, and our country's reputation as a worldwide literary trend-setter became established as the twentieth century began. Magazines such as *Harper's* and *The Atlantic Monthly* had become the leaders in publishing the best of the new writers, and ran gorgeous ads featuring the commercial work of acclaimed artists such as Maxfield Parrish. The O. Henry Short Story Award had been established, honoring the man who had changed the face of short fiction. *The Saturday Evening Post* was sporting covers by Norman Rockwell and stories by the popular writers of the day.

In 1925, *The New Yorker*, arguably the best known and most widely influential of all the commercial magazines that featured fiction and literary criticism, opened its doors, billing itself as "not for the little old lady from Dubuque" — a label that over the last seven decades undoubtedly managed to get more

little old ladies from Dubuque and everywhere else busy reading its pages to enjoy the works of William Thurber, E. B. White, John Updike, John Cheever, Donald Barthelme, Isaac Bashevis Singer, J. D. Salinger, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates and a list of others that reads like a Who's Who in American Literature. However, the 1990s brought about major changes in editorial policy and reader preference. The fact that powerful commercial publications such as *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* have decided to devote ever-decreasing space to fiction and poetry, combined with the closing of countless "little" magazines — always considered the backbone of the literary tradition and the hotbed of creativity — means serious habitat loss for the today's creative writer.

"Literary journals won't perish, although they may be different."
(Cathy Capozzoli, guest editor, *Many Mountains Moving*)

The shrewdness and skill needed for literary journals to stay alive in this downward- spiraling market of mounting costs and disappearing readership is considerable, but the editors I spoke with are uniformly determined to do whatever it takes to avoid joining the growing list of casualties.

David Lynn of *The Kenyon Review*, a formerly academic-affiliated journal, believes that magazines are going to have to get creative in finding funding. "Seven years ago, our journal was incorporated separately from Kenyon College, with a board of trustees responsible for setting up an endowment and developing funding sources. This has greatly simplified my job, allowing me to turn my attentions to the creative end of the business instead of the financial."

Bayard discussed his present strategy for keeping *Happy* on the literary landscape. "Getting subscriptions is the hardest thing we face. To get the word out about our journal, we give public readings on a regular basis. We recently had one at an off-Broadway theatre. We had another at an art gallery just a couple of blocks from ground-zero in lower Manhattan. It was held not long after 9/11 and was extremely well-attended. I also did a 'Sandwich Seminar' for SUNY not long ago, where I talked about *Happy* and literary journals in general. It was a great success. They want me back."

Hilda Raz, editor of *Prairie Schooner*, sees a trend for literary journals to diversify and branch off into other media to draw readership and revenue both. "Many print journals are adding an online component to provide depth — interviews with authors, indices to volumes, videos, historical background and such . . . In addition, *Prairie Schooner* is expanding its program of publishing with a prize book series in poetry and short fiction . . . Other journals have also taken up the charge to publish in print through a book series and we're glad to join them."

The relative "smallness" of even the largest literary magazines poses real problems with getting sufficient publicity to increase circulation. "It's hard for this genre to compete against the large commercial publishing conglomerates and get the attention of the 'biggies' — like *The New York Times Book Review* -- which are the powerful 'verifiers' of creative endeavors and reach such a huge readership," *Alaska Quarterly's* Ronald Spatz pointed out. And in the world of "small," even the smallest things are important. "Where your literary magazine is placed on a bookstore shelf, for instance is important," he went on to say. "Even the cover you choose for an issue is a critical factor for attracting attention." He also emphasized the importance of featuring diverse voices to reach today's reading public. "Journals should try to get the 'mix' better with every issue . . . give people a chance to experience new flavors and gain a few new dishes on their literary menu."

"The literary magazines that will survive . . . are those that can evolve with changing needs," Naomi Horii at *Many Mountains Moving* said. "We're revamping our journal, which will be relaunched July 15, and my hope is that we can keep growing and going strong."

It's clear these soldiers aren't going to succumb without a hell of a fight.

"A vision is not a vision unless it inspires people and is a reason to get out of bed in the morning and come to work."

(Gifford Pinchot)

Vision combined with a strong sense of mission is what motivates the editors with whom I recently spoke. All of them declared it was a labor of love. In the words of *Happy's* Bayard, "Making money isn't what literature is about." "The function of literary magazines is to provide many markets for as many different voices and visions as possible," Spatz at *The Alaska Quarterly* said. He pointed out that journals like AQR are in a position to take more risks, because artistic rather than solely financial considerations govern their editorial decisions. "Many works we publish are ahead of their time or present an unpleasant or unpopular viewpoint. We value the experiential and revelatory qualities of a work and consequently we may champion a piece by a new writer that is a bit less polished or stylistically sophisticated if it engages, surprises, and resonates."

Pam McCully at *Lynx Eye* cites reader feedback as one of the satisfactions in this often lonely, difficult, and precarious business. "It's exciting to meet a reader who tells you how much they enjoyed an issue. You say to yourself, 'Wow, someone is really reading our magazine, enjoying it, and appreciating the work of the writers we support.'"

In the long run, it is the love of good writing and the excitement of discovering new talent that keeps these editors plugging away at what often seems to be a long, tiring and thankless job. "I love helping other people become successful," Bayard told me. "Recently, I published a story by a 24-year-old writer, Jennifer Lapidus, who was working for me as an intern. It was her first published story and it made the short list for the 2002 Pushcart Prize. That sort of thing is really exciting."

For "little" magazines, the rewards may be small, but they run deep, touching the very essence of what it means to be creative in a world run by P&L statements, demographics, and opinion-shaping conglomerates. *Ploughshares's* Don Lee summed it up, "Small publications shouldn't feel bad about having a small circulation. If a writer gets noticed as a result of appearing in your magazine, you've succeeded."

"Literature is news that stays news."

(Ezra Pound)

The real battle that literary journals face is deep in the Homeland, in the very heart of our modern society. The fast-food, freeze-dried, pre-packaged, push-button, instant-everything, cryovac-sealed, convenience-bewitched culture of the 21st century affects the way Americans approach art and how highly they value it. In the words of David Lynn of *The Kenyon Review*, "We are a country of consumers. We consume art the same way we do burgers."

The bottom line, for literary journals and the arts in general, has much less to do with figures and statistics as it does with the collective soul of America, which is in grave peril of losing its way in the glutted marketplace of facile but unfulfilling solutions to national angst and personal ennui. In a world of disposable everything, the concept of timelessness — which is the essence of all art — is becoming unimaginable to minds bedeviled by ad slogans, moment-to-moment news flashes, the latest gossip from Hollywood, and the omnipresent pressure to be thinner, richer, younger-looking and sexier in 30 days or your money back.

In the words of Ronald Spatz, "When you're dealing with art, you can't have the one-stop-shopping mentality. Art should be transformative — not changing the world all at once, but reaching one person at a time."

That remains the mission of literary journals, and the battle strategy for winning the war to keep the written word — and the American intellect — alive and well.

Editor's Note: *PopMatters* will run a series of literary journal reviews over the next few months. We hope to encourage our readers to include literary journals in their regular reading routine. Support the written word!