

The Little Magazine in Contemporary America, ed. Ian Morris and Joanne Diaz (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2015), 264 pp.

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The value of literary magazines is hard to overstate. For centuries now magazine editors have been discovering and nurturing new voices, pushing the boundaries of artistic expression, fighting against the dreaded status quo, and initiating important cultural and political conversations. Yet there has been a scarcity of critical literature documenting the state of the literary magazine publishing in the US. The most significant texts, a 750-page volume edited by Elliot Anderson and Mary Kinize and an earlier volume (published by Princeton University Press), appeared in 1980 and 1946 respectively. Which is why Ian Morris and Joanne Diaz's new anthology, *The Little Magazine in Contemporary America*, is such a welcome addition. Like their predecessors, Morris and Diaz give voice to some of the most innovative editors of the last four decades, weaving together interviews, testimonies, and critical essays to demonstrate how the field of literary magazine publishing has evolved in the recent years.

Why do some literary magazines thrive while others fail? Morris and Diaz do not pose this question outright, but the stories they have assembled suggest a few possible answers. To succeed a magazine need not to live forever. In the words of Morris and Diaz, little magazines "burn brightly for a time and then extinguish themselves" (ix), and, in fact, a few venerable journals featured in this volume are not around anymore. A better question then, to quote Jeffrey Lependorf, who provides a comprehensive introduction to the anthology, is why some journals fail "to become the institutions that readers who enjoyed them might have hoped" (4).

To Lependorf, who has served as the executive director of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP) since 2001, the answer is contained in the very title of the anthology. Like Morris and Diaz, he favors the term "little magazine" (as opposed to "literary"), arguing that "little" implies "focused." He warns that "magazines that try to appeal to 'everyone' tend not to last very long" (8). Indeed, few of the magazines featured in this anthology can be accused of lacking focus. Charles Henry Rowell, who founded *Callaloo* in 1976, was spurred by the lack of literary venues available to the black Southern writers. Similarly, the founding editors of *Asian American Literary Review*, Gerald Maa and Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis, were driven by the need to create a journal that would foreground "issues about and work by Asian-Americans" (85). *Bitch*, founded in 1996, has been dedicated to the issues of feminism and pop culture from the start, while *n+1* has been inspired by its founders' left-wing politics and interest in history. Of course, not every successful journal must have a political or cultural mission.

Some are characterized by their editors' aesthetic sensibilities (like Ander Monson's *DIAGRAM*), tone, or even attitude, as in the case of *McSweeney's*, which, according to Lependorf, "[appeals] to those seeking something outside of the mainstream, something for a select few clever enough to 'get it,' though also decidedly outside of academia" (2).

But focus alone is not enough. "[W]here did the money come from?" an interviewer asks Betsy Sussler, the founding editor of *BOMB* (22), a question that most of the editors in this collection are forced to grapple with. They cultivate donors and carry on extensive fundraising campaigns; they beg and borrow from friends and family; they empty out their own pockets. Perhaps the most amusing, if morbid, anecdote comes from Andrei Codrescu, the founder of *Exquisite Corpse*, who at one point finds himself at the home of a dying bowling alley mogul—or as he calls him, an "imminent corpse" (101)—wondering how to ask him for a generous subsidy. Universities used to be a safe haven for little magazines, financially speaking, but that's not the case anymore. Ronald Spatz, the founder and editor of *Alaska Quarterly Review*, doesn't mention in his rather cheerful essay the journal's recent financial troubles, but Carolyn Kuebler, the editor of the *New England Review*, writes candidly of the budget ultimatum that Middlebury College presented to the editorial staff: begin operating in the black by the end of 2011 or else.

In light of these financial challenges, online publishing begins to seem like an increasingly attractive option. Some editors conceive their magazines as online ones to begin with; others switch from print to online format out of necessity, and it's not always an easy transition. Jonathan Farmer, founder of *At Length*, admits his initial reluctance to restart his journal as an online publication, citing his allegiance to print and "the hurry I feel in front of the screen" (191). Monson writes of the old guard who, back in 2000, when he founded *DIAGRAM*, "refused to recognize an online journal as legitimate venue for the publication of serious—meaning lasting, long-term work" (131). But Rebecca Morgan Frank, founding editor of *Memorious*, makes a convincing case for the persistence of online magazines and their content. If anything, an online magazine might prove to be more accessible and enduring than a print one. After all, we all know that nothing *really* disappears from the Internet. Frank calls it the "new reality of permanence wrapped in an ephemeral medium" (202).

Regardless of the format, it takes a strong personality to start a new magazine and make it distinct and long lasting, so it is fitting that Morris and Diaz open their anthology with a section on visionary editors. The problem is, most of the editors in the volume fit the bill. While there is little doubt that the editors of *BOMB*, *McSweeney's*, and *n+1* are visionaries, so is Rowell, who had transformed *Callaloo* from a regional publication into an international journal of African Diaspora, adding along the way annual conferences

and creative writing workshops. So is Lee Gutkind, widely known as the godfather of the Creative Nonfiction genre. So are Codrescu, Rebecca Wolff, Monson, and many others.

The one part of the book that seems like a missed opportunity is the section devoted to the university-based magazines. Universities feature throughout the anthology, but their effect on the little magazines appears to be questionable. At best they are indifferent, at worst hostile. *Women's Review of Books*, affiliated with Wellesley College, is given "space and other infrastructure, but never any money" (66). Gutkind's attempts to start *Creative Nonfiction* met little support from his fellow faculty at the University of Pittsburgh. Cara Blue Adams, writing of her tenure at the *Southern Review*, sees it as a miracle "that something as utterly improbable as a literary magazine could exist at a state institution at all" (156).

Unfortunately, none of the university-based journals profiled in this section (or elsewhere in the book) happen to be run by students. Students might become involved—as volunteers or interns—but they are not in charge. Yet student-run journals exist and contribute greatly to the literary scene. There is *Gulf Coast*, a product of the University of Houston's MFA and Ph.D. programs. There is *Madison Review*, published by the undergraduate creative writing students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. *Fourteen Hills* is one of the few university journals dedicated to the experimental work; it is produced entirely by the graduate students in the creative writing program at San Francisco State University. Finally, there is *Ninth Letter*, an inventive and visually stunning collaboration between the Graduate Creative Writing Program and School of Art & Design at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. These are just a few examples. The rise of creative writing programs in the US has been well documented. These days every MFA program seems to have a journal of its own, and classes on publishing in small magazines are becoming a part of the curricula. Student-editors face their own unique set of challenges, so not having their voices and concerns represented in this volume seems like an unfortunate omission.

Still, the *Little Magazine in Contemporary America* is an invaluable resource for students, professors, and would-be editors alike. The most compelling essays in the anthology speak frankly of their authors' journeys through the world of literary publishing. Such is the story of Adams, who first joins the staff of her high-school journal, only to become, years later, the editor of the legendary *Southern Review*. So is it also the story of Kuebler, whose career begins when she, a recent college grad working at a bookstore, writes a letter to Dalkey Archive Press and gets hired as its marketing director. As for anyone who dreams of starting a new journal, there's nothing like Keith Gessen's poignant and humorous account of how he and his friends founded *n+1*: their fumbling

road to success, their irrepressible enthusiasm and equally irrepressible fights. “Working on $n+1$ I lost years of my life; lost my temper; lost money; and lost one of my two best friends in the world,” Gessen writes. Yet he is pretty sure he would do it all over again, given a chance. Or maybe not. “[I]t’s too late now,” he writes (48). In his case—as in the case of most editors who appear in Morris and Diaz’s anthology, little magazine publishing seems not unlike fate.