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Eng 482
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Literary Magazine Trends

Creating writing can be excruciatingly tasking on an individual and attempting to publish one's writing can further debilitate a writer. To avoid pain of endless rejections it is important for any writer to research the literary market to maximize the possibility for publication. In reviewing contemporary published material, one can come to the conclusion that the current literary market offers a venue for almost any style, subject, or experience level in writing. There are, however, key components that appear in much published writing. In order to find the common threads in the literary market one must investigate trends in fiction and poetry, examine the contributors to major publications, and analyze how magazines have expanded their content to include other areas of artistic expression.

Fictional works published in *Boulevard* and *The Literary Review* shared several stylistic characteristics typical of contemporary American fiction. The overwhelming majority of the stories in the literary market are written in third person limited. This point of view seems to be most popular because it provides objective details of the situation and reveals information from inside the head of one character. First person narrative has been criticized as a beginner's writing tool because there is a lack of responsibility on the writer's behalf to go beyond the main character. When writing in first person the story is told only through the eyes of the narrator who may or may not tell the whole story. The author then can rely on the character, instead of their own writing abilities, to make the judgments and present the details of the story.

Setting is a crucial component to many of the stories published in current literary magazines. One example is the story "The Museum Lost and Found" by Amy Potwatka in *The Literary Review*. The story's action takes place in a museum and relies heavily on the

atmosphere and connotations of a museum to reinforce themes and tones in the story. As the title may suggest, the story has central themes of loss, being forgotten, and discovery. These themes are perfectly suited to the setting of a natural history museum in which items found buried under thousands of years of dirt are now on display for people to discover again. The main character, Benson, is in charge of the lost and found at the museum. The storage area for the items becomes his own museum of treasures, but like the museum he works in, he does not have true ownership of any of the items. This story uses setting and situation exceptionally well to mimic Benson's feelings for his job and the way he feels in life. Throughout the story Benson wishes he had some sense of ownership; that he could find something for himself instead of finding things for other people. Potwatka tells a brilliant story about real human emotions through the use of setting.

The fiction pieces in both *Boulevard* and *The Literary Review* exhibited a strong story arch and character development. The opening piece for the spring 2004 issue of *Boulevard* is a coming of age story by Eric Puchner called "Child's Play." The story builds a tremendous amount of conflict within the main character, C.P., who is struggling with his desires to fit in with the popular kids while maintaining a relationship with the eccentric and socially awkward Everett Hazelrigg. The story follows C.P. and a group of as they seek thrills on Halloween. The group ends up at Everett's house where tension builds up to a cruel prank pulled on Everett. The ending shows the disbandment of the boys as they go home to get ready for trick-or-treating. C.P. thinks about his first Halloween when he was naïve and gullible, thus illustrating the development of his character over the action of the story. The final sentence is a poignant remark about the maturity of young boys: "Then, one by one, they branched off and headed for

the warmth of their own homes, where they planned to wait until dark before reemerging as startling things: animals, monsters, or men” (16).

In “The Museum Lost and Found,” Potwatka writes unique characters with clear character development. The supporting character, Penny, has many quirks that make her a memorable and unique character. One of her quirks is her habit of attending children’s plays purely to hear kids sing badly. Benson’s development evolves slowly through the story as he finds comfort in Penny’s company, especially as he loses his wife to the neighbor. The changes become apparent in the final scene as Benson takes control and ownership of the items from his lost and found. Benson feels the need to protect the people who are separated from their belongings because he identifies with their loss. He finally takes action by grabbing a notebook from his co-worker that was stole from the lost and found and running out to meet Penny.

Many reviews in *Literary Magazine Review* mentioned “the importance of voice in fiction” (40 *LMR*). For most of the magazines, presenting diverse voices in each issue is fundamental. *Diner*, for example, is committed to ““continue the tradition of supporting diverse voices that speak across boundaries of time and place”” (17 *LMR*). Dwayne Lively, who reviewed *Harpur Palate*, noted the “powerful voice” present in the writing (36 *LMR*). The stories in the issue were stylistically different but were “all carried along by narrative voices” (37 *LMR*). A strong sense of voice is apparent in the prose pieces published in *Boulevard* and *TLR*, notably the excerpt from *Ice Age* by Lotte Inuk in *The Literary Review*. The story is told in first person from the perspective of a young girl growing up in Greenland and facing cultural clashes between Greenlanders and Scandinavian immigrants.

While many of the stories share basic elements of writing, the subject area is extremely varied. The variety of content reinforces the importance of the stylistic components for a

successful story. David Jauss, editor of *Crazyhorse* magazine, wrote an editorial article entitled “Literature at the End of the Century” in which he discusses the types of stories that do not get published by *Crazyhorse*, and in doing so remarks on the type of stories that do get published. One major issue he sees in a lot of unpublished works is the numb character: “whatever emotion a character might feel is expressed-or, rather more accurately, *repressed*-in unemotional language” (3). Jauss notes that successful stories end with “him confronting the emotion he has been repressing” (3). In reviewing the stories in *Boulevard* and *TLR*, especially “The Museum Lost and Found,” the emotional turn around can be seen as the once stoic characters are overcome with emotion that brings about a fundamental change for the character.

Jauss notices a tone of fatigue in the vast majority of stories that pass his desk and ultimately do not get published. “The fatigue is not just emotional, then; it is aesthetic, and it underlies the lack of ambition” in the submissions (4). He also relates this fatigue to the writers themselves saying that there is an “attitude of exhaustion” represented in short choppy sentences and “language [that] is emotionally and intellectually deadpan” (4). Jauss’ description of what is not published clearly defines the type of material that does get published.

In the case of poetry, there is great variety in what is published in literary magazines. Generally, the poems are free verse, but the range of topics and styles vary considerably from publication to publication, but for all poetry one must consider “timing, vividness of language, and shrewdness of development” (44 *LMR*). In reviewing *The Literary Review*, there seemed to be more experimental poetry in regards to form and language use and could be considered language based poetry. Some find the trend of language based poetry dangerous because there is “a focus on language-making and virtuoso vocabulary at the expense of having something to say” (Gonzalez). Poet David Biespiel, interviewed in *The Grove Review*, is quoted to be

“‘invested in an explosion of vocabulary’” (29 *LMR*). It is also mentioned that he is more concerned with the “sound and rhythm of each line, rather than a poem’s ability to tell a clear story” (29 *LMR*). Some of the poems in *TLR* follow this vein and are very surreal. Fiona Sampson’s “The Looking Glass” feels like a dream world in which the character probes the subconscious: “The room smells of coffee and aired linen, / a blur of pleasure / reassuring / as the skirred light / caught in those spirit photographs” (116 *TLR*). The editor of *TLR* notes that Sampson’s poems are filled with “stunning, cinematic images” and “reach beyond ordinary language” (3 *TLR*).

The poems in *Boulevard* are more traditionally structured visually than *TLR*, but are still mostly free verse poetry. Most of the poems are laden with strong imagery. Carol Dine’s triplet of poems focuses on three van Gogh paintings and uses the images of the painting to convey meaning. The poem “Scheveningen Beach on Stormy Weather” describes both the painting and the sense of loss due to the painting having been stolen from the Vincent van Gogh Museum: “Vengeful waves. / Whitecaps, the color of parchment” and “Fishermen are lost, / the wives in white bonnets, / ghost ship, / its bloody flag” (153 *Boulevard*). Alice Friman has a similar approach in her poem, “Seeing the Sights (Loreto Palace, Prague),” in which she begins with a painting of a bearded woman hanging from a cross. Her poem is a witty combination of the story of St. Starosta and a comment on the treatment of women. The poems in *Boulevard* are smart and use a lot of concrete language to tell a clear story in the poem. A particularly memorable phrase from Jane O. Wayne’s poem, “In a Bed North of Sleep,” illustrates this well: “A branch rubs against the roof’s gutter - / bone against bone, the winter’s jaws / gnashing at nothing” (130 *Boulevard*).

The content of literary magazines is only part of discovering the writing marketplace; one must consider the contributors of magazines to fully understand the odds of being published. In reviewing the contributors of *Boulevard*, *The Literary Review*, and *Literary Magazine Review*, it is clear that there is a wide range of experience between writers. In general, the more established and high quality a magazine, the more likely it is that the magazine will publish strictly established writers, but there are magazines that depend on emerging voices. *Lorraine and James* publishes mostly emerging writers which “lends the magazine a certain vivaciousness” (49 *LMR*). *Silent Voices* and *Diner* also publish new writers, some of whom have never been published. A likely place to find new and emerging writers is in the inaugural issues of magazines. The final review of *LMR* looks at three new literary magazines: *Son and Foe*, *4AM Poetry Review*, and *Cesium*. The bulk of the material found in these publications is supplied by emerging and newly published writers. Magazines working to establish themselves may be short on submissions, so they may be more willing to publish a high percentage of the submissions received. There may also be less competition from well established writers who would not submit their work to startup magazines. Many of literary magazines publish both established and emerging writers. There are several writers in the spring 2004 edition of *Boulevard* that have only published a few individual pieces in various magazines and two writers who are being published for the first time in the issue. *TLR* also has a few emerging writers in its summer 2006 issue along side well established authors. The demographics of contributing writers are an important factor when considering the literary market and searching for publication opportunities.

The literary market is also an expanding field for new genres of writing and art. When researching the literary market, publications like *Literary Magazine Review* can be extremely

helpful to find the right audience for one's work. *The Florida Review* added a cartoon and comic section that Cindy Bily of *LMR* had trouble recognizing as literature or an art form. Bily contends that the magazine may "have to keep reinventing themselves to stay alive in new markets" but "suggest[s] holding off on running graphics until they achieve the quality of the writing" (23 *LMR*). More magazines are now including artwork and photographs as regular installments. The issue of *Diner* reviewed by *LMR* is noted for the inclusion of carved erasers that "compliment the poems next to which they are placed" and seem to be "especially fitting as the artwork for this journal" (18 *LMR*).

Other types of writing, like interviews with writers, artists, and other figures of artistic expression, are also included in some magazines. *Boulevard* includes a symposium which asks culturally relevant questions answered by past and present contributors to the magazine. These additional categories of literary magazines provide more options for writers and artists to publish their work. *The Reader* "creat[es] a platform for personal and passionate responses to books" and allows for discussion of how published works are interpreted. One of the new titles featured in *LMR*, *Cesium*, features reviews of CDs and current television programs. The scope of literary magazines is clearly expanding as more and more art forms find a place between the pages of prose and poetry. The additional features and the wide range of accepted material to literary magazines support the claim of a diverse literary market with opportunities for almost any subject, style, experience level, or medium.

After researching the current trends in the literary marketplace, I can identify the appropriate publication options for my own writing. At my current writing proficiency, I consider myself to be most successful in writing poetry. I have worked a little in nonfiction essays, but I do not feel comfortable in fitting my work into the nonfiction market at this point.

In considering my writing it is easier for me to determine what categories my poetry does not subscribe to in order to find where it would best fit. I do not consider my poems to be necessarily experimental in form. I do not attempt to stretch the definition of poetry or wildly manipulate the appearance the poem to achieve something new. In reading *Literary Magazine Review*, I discovered a magazine that would probably not be a good fit for my poetry, *Fourteen Hills*. Brandy Opse describes it as containing mostly experimental poetry. She notes that while it was creative, it was not necessarily quality work. She also alludes that some of the works were disturbing in one way or another which reduces my desire to be published in that magazine.

I also do not consider myself a language based poet who is more concerned with the rhythm and explosion of language than with what the poem is saying. I tend to write story like poems with detailed imagery. One of the first poems I wrote in my adult life was a long free verse poem about an encounter with a homeless man and the subsequent guilt of passing him: “A cigarette quivers between his fingers. / His raspy voice utters, Got any quarters? ... The guilt is a snake penetrating my insides infecting / Every inch of tissue, replacing my blood / Bones, organs, with its venom heavy and dark as lead.” This poem has a linear narrative like that of some of the poems within *Boulevard*. I have not been successful in my attempts to write poems more concerned with language than meaning, so I tend to write more for the story of the poem than the rhythm of the words.

My poems are also dependant on concrete imagery, as seen in my list poem “Contained Within Nylon Borders.” The poem lists the contents of my purse from a particular day: “A black faux leather wallet with bubble gum pink guts, an empty / ziploc bag with a hint of Romantic Wish ... Target brand green bubbled liquid to sanitize any surface.” I feel most

comfortable with concrete language and sensory details, both of which appear in the majority of poems I read in the literary magazines.

Some of my poetry would fit well with a publication like *Light* because I enjoy writing witty poems. One in particular is “Philip” which is about the relationship between a screw and a screwdriver; “He fits in them so perfectly it doesn’t seem a crime, / His dinged, dented, and grease stained head / Clicks into their clean polished and unturned grooves.” The poem ultimately comments on male dominance, but the surface value of the poem is light and humorous. Another poem that could be considered light is “Bulimic Swingline” which compares the results of pumping an empty stapler to dry heaves from a bulimic. I also wrote a very short poem about the Halloween experience in college entitled “Collegiate Halloween;” “Breasts bulge out of a lacy push up bra, / shyness made bold by inebriation / and false eyelashes. / Men in wigs and sloppy makeup / embrace their hidden homoerotic desires.”

My poems are usually the result of personal experience. Most of the time I see an image that is either odd or it is so ordinary that I want to express it in a poem with unique language and perspective. A poem I wrote about my retainers is an excellent example: “Yellowed plaque marks the grooves between teeth / and calcified crud fills the depressions / of the first and second molars.” The poem goes on to describe the throbbing pain I feel in my jaw as the plastic molds yank my teeth to the proper placement, an idea that reaches beyond the dentition and allows the poem to communicate much more than just an image of crusty retainers. Many of the poems I read in *Boulevard* and *The Literary Review* appear to be personal experiences by the author. In reading their poems I feel that my poems are similar in style and subject area, but have a unique voice and perspective that is my own.

In reviewing both the literary market and my own writing, there are many areas in which they overlap. My writing reflects a strong connection to imagery that tells a clear story which was apparent in the spring 2004 issue of *Boulevard*. Many of the poems in *TLR* were propelled by powerful imagery, but had more of an abstract feel that does not exactly match my own writing. I also tend to write sarcastic or humorous poems that may fit well with publications of light poetry. My poems also rely on concrete details which are present in a large amount of the published poetry I reviewed. My personal voice is another aspect that defines my poetry, and, according to many of the *LMR* reviewers, voice is an important component of published writing in the current literary market.

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