

What's New?

Community Building with Literary Magazines

By Kimiko Hahn

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Literary journals—paper and online—are a natural ingredient when it comes to literature courses and writing workshops because students are hungry for what's new. This is the case for all levels, from first-year undergraduate courses to MFA craft classes and workshops. Students want to feel included in the world of hot-off-the-press or cutting-edge literature, and they look to their professors to begin the introductions.

My colleagues and I have utilized journals in a number of ways, and for a variety of purposes at Queens College/CUNY. In our urban university system, the undergrads are mostly from working class and/or immigrant families. Many are first-generation college students. For them, to suddenly have a copy of *Hanging Loose* or *BOMB* in their hands is tantamount to receiving the keys to the temple (or alley) of writing. Many were not aware such journals existed.

In our new MFA Program in Creative Writing and Literary Translation, graduate students come from all social strata, from inside and outside the New York area. Some come from working class and immigrant backgrounds, while others come from the private universities' more upper-class environments. Most are aware of *The Paris Review* or *jubilat*, but very few have been a part of a community of active readers that sit and talk about what they find in those magazines—and community is one reason they are in an MFA program, even if they don't quite know that when they walk through the door.

This is where professors come in: to introduce students to the vast and varied world of literary journals, or to provide a venue to talk about what is available. This is exciting. It makes us refocus on our own literary communities and networks, and on our own journal preferences and how we can be more expansive.

For example, when we launched our MFA Program three years ago the core faculty wanted to create a cross-genre dynamic. Towards that end we have summer reading assignments, with a journal in the mix. During the fall semester, a faculty member moderates the annual event, "On the Same Page," where students from the various genres, including translation, come in to discuss their thoughts on content and style, production issues, likes/dislikes—and what has engaged them the most. Expletives fly as often as praise. Practical questions come up, like what to put in a cover letter. This

kind of event has also proven to be a good mixer.

During this past fall's event, novelist John Weir commented: "In the computer room, I've placed copies of journals, from *Analecta* to *Zoetrope*. Aside from borrowing these, my hope is that all of you regularly go to bookstores, find the journal section in the back, and stand there for an hour or so reading things. (Not to mention buy them!) I have a list of bookstores for starters. Plus, for those in my Craft class, we'll look at several online journals."

John regularly brings in a wide variety of journals. He often emphasizes those published by universities, such as *New South*, because he feels that they are particularly receptive to emerging writers. He also turns the tables and has a weekly "journal moment," where a student brings in a literary journal and gives a five-minute show-and-tell presentation. Obviously the goal is to make these magazines readily available and to encourage reading and submitting work.

Professor Nicole Cooley conducts both Poetry and Fiction workshops. In the latter, she has required students to subscribe to *One Story* instead of assigning a classic anthology for class readings and discussion. Students felt that these were about as up-to-date as you could get. The *Poetry Daily* online website functions much the same way in her courses. In regard to anthologies, she has also used "sight unseen" *Best American Poetry*; each year the guest editor (a writer chosen by series editor David Lehman) sifts through the past year's literary journals to find what she or he finds most compelling. Any given year the collection presents an intriguing cross-section of journals. It's a very good introduction to journals for those who are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity available *or* for those who are not near any bookstore or library.

Nicole comments on her pedagogical outlook: "I use journals in the classroom as a way to foreground aesthetic values—what makes a work in a journal interesting? We also compare the journal to the journal's website, what they profess they look for (e.g. new writers—but are there really new writers there?). We look at bio notes: who is getting published and where? We look at the masthead—who works for the journal? (So many magazines have students from MFA programs working on them. I worked as fiction editor of *The Iowa Review*, and both poetry editor and fiction editor were always MFA students)."

Professor Roger Sedarat, poet and translator, takes a different approach in his courses: "In a recent translation craft class, we looked at the *Poetry* translation issue; including each translator's comments. Using the latter as a model, I had students write

their own one-page comments in relation to their own work." He's also used *Circumference*, a journal devoted to translation: "In my translation craft class and now in my graduate poetry workshop, we try our hand at homophonic translation exercises using *Circumference* texts; students can explore writers different takes on a single work." This is an important point: we can use journals not just for reading and discussion but also as a basis for formulating exercises. We can take a magazine that focuses on one genre use it within a workshop in a different genre. It's especially important for, say, fiction writers to appreciate poetry in translation.

I have used literary journals in various courses. I am particularly partial to *Court Green*. As a whole, their solid collection of work reflects the sensibilities of the editorial board; moreover, they have a dossier section in the center. Several years ago an issue was devoted to the *Bouts-Rimés*, a fairly obscure form. (What is it? Ah, you'll just have to order a copy!) Other issues presented themes: Sylvia Plath, poetry on film, *Letters*. My workshop participants take a look at the several dozen examples and this spurs conversation, as well as a host of assignments. (In my workshops, all readings are transformed into potential exercises by the students themselves.) In an undergrad lit course, we read the Plath dossier in tandem with an anthology on writers who respond to others' works, *Conversation Pieces* (Kurt Brown and Harold Schechter, eds., Everyman). The students could clearly see that contemporary writers still respond to those from generations before, canonical and otherwise.

One of the outstanding moments of our MFA program's first year was when *Kenyon Review* editors David Lynn and Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky came and spoke to a gathering of students and English Department colleagues. For that event, the students all subscribed (at a special rate) and read the summer issue as part of our "On the Same Page" series. It was a moment where emerging writers could see that the editors from a venerable magazine were taking them seriously as writers and readers. David and Sergei spoke about *KR*'s history—including the then-forthcoming online version, which was instructive to our students launching *Ozone Park*, an online journal of new writing. A lively Q & A session showed students that publishing is competitive, but not impossible.

In all these cases, students and faculty alike felt that we were participating in cutting-edge cultural community—whatever shape or form that takes at any given moment. And, that that community includes an even wider literary one outside campus boundaries.

