

Book Review: How Literary Magazines Shaped America

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Paper Dreams: Writers and Editors on the American Literary Magazine. Travis Kurowski, ed. Madison, NJ: Atticus Books, 2013. 433 pp. \$29.95 paper.

This diverse collection of essays and interviews fully illustrates the enduring influence of literary magazines in shaping American literature. Travis Kurowski, a professor of English at York College and founding editor of literary magazine review website *Luna Park*, has compiled a selection of writing that offers both a reminder of and a tribute to the rich history of literary magazines and their contributors. The name for Kurowski's website is taken from a short story by Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño featuring a magazine of the same title. Kurowski notes his assumption that Bolaño had imagined *Luna Park*, but through discovering it was a real publication "came the idea that literary magazines are as much a conception of the reader's imagination as they are the writing within." This sentiment proves to be a driving force in shaping the text, with Kurowski emphasizing the spirit of discovery, which is manifested through the writing collected here. The editor's definition of literary magazines put forward as "objects filled with objects" emphasizes his belief in their overarching function. Whilst individual publications may come and go, literary magazines form a whole that is greater than the sum of their parts, which can be understood as "both the backbone and the outer rings of American literature."

Contributions range from extracts focusing on key moments, figures, or publications in literary magazine history, such as Jane Heap and *The Little Review*, to broader sketches, such as Len Fulton's account of little magazines in the 1960s. The first two sections of the text explore the origins of the literary magazine, which Kurowski traces back to the French periodical *Nouvelles de la republique des lettres* in 1684. Excerpts from Algernon de Vivier Tassin and Eric Staley span the history of American literary magazines from the mid-18th century to the rise of literary modernism. Kurowski argues that "little magazines" such as *The English Review* and *Little Review* provided a crucial base for many of the writers and artists who came to define "the influence and electricity of early twentieth century modernism" (p. 37). The writing collected here illustrates how important a period this was for the development of the contemporary literary magazine, while simultaneously playing on depictions of literary magazines that limit or confine their influence. As Ezra Pound asserts in his 1931 article "Small Magazines," literary magazines were central to the development of modernist giants such as James Joyce and T.S Eliot. Alternatively, Jayne Marek and Abby

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Ann Arthur Johnson illustrate the prominent role played by female and African American writers and editors in advancing the cause and function of literary magazines.

In contrast to the popular conflation of literary magazines and literary modernism, the heart of the text is devoted to the post-modernism period, with Kurowski suggesting that we are “living in a literary magazine renaissance” (p. 6). The impact of new media technologies on literary magazine production—first television and cinema and more recently the Internet and the proliferation of new online publishing technologies—is a central concern of sections four and five. Literary figures, including Jodee Stanley, contend that transformations in literary publishing offer not a danger but an opportunity for the evolution of literary magazines. Indeed, Gwen Allen notes that magazine publishing has always been a precarious business, with the average American magazine established between 1741 and 1850 lasting just 18 months. Such contributions reiterate Kurowski’s emphasis on the concept of literary magazines as much as their content. In his eloquent contribution “The World of Little Magazines,” Felix Pollak asserts that “little mags may die after a short span of publication, but the esprit that gave them birth lives on and begets forever new titles that take their places” (p. 159).

The final three sections of the text offer further insight through short vignettes of contributors’ personal experience writing for and working on literary magazines. Often comedic and intensely personal, these accounts ably demonstrate the spectrum of meaning attached to literary magazines by the writers who produce and inhabit them, and also touch on the essential relationship between writer and reader. More informal pieces are joined by selected manifestos of editors ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson and *The Dial* in 1840 to the founders of *n+1* in 2004, which provide a telling account of how the intentions of individual publications fit into and react against “wider literary, popular, perhaps even political, realities” (p. 369). A rich and eclectic appendix includes an abbreviated timeline of the literary magazine, and articles illustrating how teachers and educators can incorporate literary magazines into their curriculum.

Like the field it surveys, Kurowski’s text can be argued to be a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The editor begins by asserting that *Paper Dreams* was intended to be read as a conversation, with “Rick Moody swapping stories with Laura van den Berg about editors” or “Abby Ann Arthur Johnson and Gorham Munson disagreeing over which 1920s magazines were most significant” (p. 1). The writers in this collection illustrate that the “little magazines” often shouted the loudest in American literary history. As Kurowski acknowledges, the vast terrain of literary magazines cannot be contained within the pages of a single text, but his compilation weaves together the past and the future of the literary magazine in an ambitious and largely successful overview. The instructional aspects of the text and its appendix, alongside a companion website, <http://paperdreamsbook.com>, which features a gallery of literary magazines and further learning resources, make it particularly useful for educators at high school and college level. However, the collection’s scope will

carry broader appeal for all readers interested in American literary journalism and literary magazine history.