

LITERARY EDITING & MAGAZINE PUBLISHING,  
AN EDITOR'S VIEW

Interview with Robert Stewart, Editor of *New Letters*  
University of Missouri-Kansas City

Conducted by Valerie McDonnell, Student at Virginia Commonwealth  
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1. How do you uphold a code of ethics when choosing pieces to publish?

Stewart: I don't understand this question. I choose the best writing I can find, whether written by my sister, or Annie Dillard, or my barber, Don. I don't see what ethics has to do with it. The magazine is all about the writing. The Awards competition is different, because we promote an "anonymous" judging process; we maintain that anonymity with a scrupulousness the CIA could learn from. Here is our ethics: We do what we say we will do, and we are clear about it.

2. What kind of work do you publish in *New Letters*?

Short fiction, poetry of all kinds and lengths, essays, book reviews, an occasional play script, criticism, visual art, interviews, memoirs, travel articles, testimonies on torture and rehabilitation, news notes, and other things. My main questions of evaluation are: (a) Is the writing intense, (b) does it offer hope, (c) and does it advance literary art?

3. Is the editorial staff paid?

Yes, and not well.

4. Have you ever encountered plagiarism when looking at submitted pieces?

I never have noticed or discovered plagiarism at *New Letters*. If I were to, I would track down the writer, fly to his or her city and knock on his or her front door. Then I would throw the ripped-up pages of his or her supposed work into his or her face.

5. Do you solicit manuscripts?

Yes. Editors can not just sit back and open the mail; and I attend conferences and readings, bring writers to town, read other magazines, all in search of writers to solicit. We also have a great advantage with our nationally syndicated weekly, public radio series, *New Letters on the Air*, which attracts major writers who want to be interviewed – that has allowed me to speak face to face with Jim Harrison, Sherman Alexie, Kim Addonizio, and many others, and draw them into the life of the magazine.

I also ask fellow writers and colleagues to recommend writers they know or respect, and send those writers a copy of the magazine with my compliments, all in an attempt to expand the reach of the magazine. In recent years, fellow writer Robert Day has been helpful in recommending major writers of his acquaintance, such as John Barth, to the magazine; but I also have used references by Conger Beasley Jr., Michelle Boisseau, and others to enlarge the circle of our contributors.

6. Do you have different levels of rejection letters you send out or do you use a form letter for rejections?

I write detailed letters to writers with whom I am actively working, and if the work has been solicited – much of it goes by e-mail. Otherwise, we use a single type of form rejection letter for everyone, many times with a handwritten comment at the bottom, such as “Thanks” or a reference to the manuscript. The “Thanks” means thanks, and does not mean send more writing immediately; but either way is fine. We really are grateful when any writer sends us work.

7. What percentage of your writers have previously been published? What percentage are first time writers?

Rarely do we publish someone who has never before been published. Editor’s typically hope to find the undiscovered genius or two, but that’s kind of a bonus, if it happens. It’s hard to know, unless the writer tells us. I think Margaret McCarty-Ozemet, author of the essay “Bovine Dreams” was first published here, and a few others. Most writers have some form of publication, although many have appeared only in smaller or localized

magazines. More often, *New Letters* is a writer's first national magazine publication.

8. What do you do to market your magazine?

We never lose a chance to offer our subscriptions. We are building data bases of writers who submit work to the magazine (they get a flyer offering special "writers rates"); we offer subscriptions as part of our Awards competition; we use our Web site and our radio series to market the magazine. We send free samples to writing conferences around the country. One thing we never have done is a major, high-volume, full-color direct-mail project. That would take a professional marketing firm. Nevertheless, we do a lot in-house; our success is tied directly to subscription numbers – and our current push is for multi-year subscriptions.

9. What do you think makes a good author/editor relationship?

I try to treat writers professionally and not condescend to them; my tone is pretty much the same for rejections as for acceptances. I knew a literary editor once who agonized each time he rejected a fellow writer. Almost wept. I don't. I strive for professionalism and clarity in rejections, or if I accept work "pending required edits." There is some sloppiness of syntax and grammar, or some poetic, phony diction that I won't have in the magazine. Some otherwise good essays, for example, include clichés, clutter, and other problems.

It also can happen that I invite a writer to resubmit work after revision; but I am clear to say, "This is not an acceptance, only an interest in reconsidering the work." Misunderstandings are easy. The key here is to be clear from the start that a work is being accepted, or not, or accepted only with specific edits; sometimes I show the writer my edits and say, "Edits optional but recommended." Clarity.

I put my publication requirements in writing, up front; then, I send all writers hard copies of my edits and "final" page proofs. Ultimately, the accepted manuscript is the definitive version; after that, I give the author his or her prerogative if there is some dispute.

10. Do you offer editorial advice to writers whose work seems promising?

I do, perhaps too often, because writers then come right back with another manuscript, exactly as they should. Keep in mind, an editor's work must focus on what benefits the magazine, not on his or her being a correspondence-course writing teacher. The advice I offer goes to a tiny percentage of submissions, but I will detail my comments if I think the work shows real talent but is flawed in some way that I can identify. I comment if I think I am being helpful and not just negative. Mostly, writers have been grateful, but I have, on rare occasions, been told I was a goon. Here's my approach:

a) If I can do some teaching to upgrade the quality of writing anywhere or by anyone, I will have done good;

b) If a writer sends me a packet of writing out of the blue and unsolicited, it's entirely my decision how I care to respond. If the writer wants only one kind of response, don't send to me.

11. Would you encourage emerging writers to attend a writer's conference? Absolutely. Just sitting "at the feet" of John Gardner, John Irving, Tim O'Brien, Grace Paley, and Maxine Kumin, as I have done many times at writing conferences, made me a better writer. I believe younger and older writers should seek out the masters and listen to every word they say.

12. What do you do in a typical day for the upkeep of the literary magazine? Everything would work better if I had typical days, by which I mean more structure. Given the publishing cycle, we might be working on (a) production, proofreading, page design; (b) grant writing and development; (c) marketing strategies to expand audience; (d) administration of the annual awards submissions; (e) producing one of our writing conferences or hosting a visiting writer; (f) teaching, and etc.

13. Why do you enjoy working for *New Letters*?

I am the least uplifting person I know to be around. I'm a drudge. My job at *New Letters* allows me to work with people -- among them, staff, other writers, and artists -- who offer joy, excitement, transcendence. We produce a magazine that, to me, represents a revised version of who I am. It is bigger,

more interesting, more hopeful, and more inspirational than I ever could be as an individual. We get to put that out across the globe. That's a great job.

14. Do you believe emerging writers need a literary agent in order to get published?

My expertise here is limited, but I think a literary agent would be important to any writer, beginning or not, who writes novels or full-length nonfiction books. Poets and short story writers don't need and, generally, won't attract, agents.

15. What is your editorial slant?

My main questions of evaluation are: (a) Is the writing intense, (b) does it offer hope, (c) and does it advance literary art? I must add something hard to articulate: I look for "voice" in writing, a term few people can define. I want something that seems authentic.

16. What is your take on the publishing/literary business?

I am amazed that we still have a literary publishing business, given the reductiveness of the communications business. Radio, TV, and computer communications, not to mention cell phones, pods, etc., are all anti-literature: that is, they are designed to keep us distracted, preoccupied, and unfocused. Literature requires that we readers slow down and go deep, get quiet, be alone. Evidently, the world on some level still values literature, despite the communications industry.

17. How is *New Letters* perceived by the publishing industry?

*New Letters* was a finalist for a 2007 National Magazine Award in the Essay – the industry's highest honor – alongside *The New Yorker*, *Smithsonian*, and etc. *New Letters* appears on a regular basis in all the major prize anthologies. I am contacted frequently by editors and agents who want to contact our authors. In many ways, we can take these things at face value, that this is not a magazine to be overlooked by the publishing industry.