

## Robert Stewart

Editor of *New Letters*



Jendi Reiter conducted this exclusive e-mail interview with Robert Stewart, editor of the literary journal *New Letters*. Established in 1934 as *The University Review* under the auspices of the University of Kansas City (now part of the University of Missouri system), the journal adopted its current name in 1971. Authors published in this venerable magazine have included May Sarton, J.D. Salinger, Marianne Moore, Joyce Carol Oates, Tess Gallagher and Richard Wright. The companion radio program *New Letters on the Air* celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, making it the longest continuously-running broadcast of a national literary radio series, with more than 1,200 episodes. Listen to the latest installments via streaming audio or order CDs and cassettes of past broadcasts [here](#).

Since 1986, *New Letters* has offered three prestigious annual literary awards, each with a \$1,500 prize and a deadline of May 18, 2007: the *New Letters* Prize for Poetry, the Dorothy Churchill Cappon Prize for the Essay, and the Alexander Patterson Cappon Prize for Fiction. Past winners and judges are listed on their [Web site](#).

Editor Robert Stewart teaches creative and professional writing at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He is the author of *Outside Language: Essays* (Helicon Nine Editions, 2003) and the poetry collection *Plumbers* (BkMk Press, 1988), among other publications. His poetry, feature articles and travel essays have appeared in journals such as *Nimrod*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Notre Dame Review*, as well as numerous anthologies. He has been editor-in-chief of *New Letters* since 2002. Read his interview with Missouri poet Walter Barga (an Honorable Mention winner in our 2005 War Poetry Contest) [here](#).

**Q:** How would you describe *New Letters'* mission and aesthetic sensibility, as distinct from those of other literary journals in your region and nationwide?

**A:** Although I would like to leave that question to readers, critics, and the auspices of history, I don't trust any of them to see the magazine clearly enough. Even in-house readers of manuscripts seem prejudiced toward literary journals; they often will write a comment such as, "great story, wild, but probably not for *New Letters*." I am always shocked. I have to show such a reader the experimental short fiction we have run by Lance Olsen or Charlotte Holmes; I show that reader the peculiar essay styles from the magazine of Andrei Codrescu or Alyce Miller; I have to show the reader the disturbingly blunt images of prose writers such as Gail Waldstein (infant autopsies) and Lauren Slater (sexual predators). I could go on describing what I hope are the far ranges of literary style and content the magazine opens up to, but let me focus in on what I, as editor, care about.

I get pleasure from publishing the kind of short stories, poems, essays and art that our readers do not expect to see in the magazine. What is a typical *New Letters* story? Is it "What Does God Care About Your Dignity, Victor Travesty?" by Thomas E. Kennedy, about a crime boss who confronts God in a warehouse? Is it the poem "Ella," by Gary Gildner, about killing a dog? Every piece of writing that succeeds as literary art finds its own way to beauty. The "aesthetic" of this magazine values language used with freshness and authenticity. I read much poetry and prose both in other publications and in manuscript that values cleverness, smugness, inconsequence. I appreciate lots of styles, even traditional narrative, but I do not appreciate the use of conventional, mass-media jargon, and word games without serious purpose.

**Q:** What new direction have you brought, or do you hope to bring, to the journal since you've become editor?

**A:** I have started, I think, to bring to *New Letters* a clearer sense of the spiritual value of great literary art; second, I hope to move the magazine to confront more clearly social and political concerns of our time. By the latter, I don't mean the week-to-week pettiness of who's out front in a campaign. In recent issues, we have, however, published powerful essays and stories about the Indonesian tsunami, homeless people in Bogotá, more philosophically based essays on politics, and engaging scholarly essays, such as Scott Donaldson's on reviving the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson.

Art makes its impact, often, by indirection, and I do not intend for the magazine to become an ideological

rag for anyone. I am interested in what one of my own editor's notes describes as "the disinterested search for truth," which is where literary art shines.

**Q:** The poetry world always seems to be debating the merits of the institutional "insider" versus "outsider" tracks, and how academia affects writers' originality, craftsmanship and chances of getting published. What has been the impact of *New Letters'* university affiliation on the content and operation of the magazine? Pros and cons?

**A:** I have not seen anything that I would call an insider track associated with university affiliation. The competition for book publication is too intense. The director of the National Endowment for the Arts, who is a poet, has noted that working-class intellectuals are rare today in America. I mention this to say that this country needs universities in order to nurture its artists and thinkers. I know some prominent performance-style poets, slam poets, all of whom say their work deepened when they studied writing at universities. More important, I think the debate over so-called academic poets and street poets really misses the point. Art doesn't need the university system to be meaningful and important, but we live in a time of generic, mass-media popular culture; and popular-culture language, gimmicks, hyperbole and video distract the general audience from good art. A writer who reads and thinks deeply, who has talent and vivid experiences does not need university training to create great new fiction or poetry; but the chances are far better that artists will develop with university training. Or, develop sooner.

I don't want to overlook the fact that academic study probably also has ruined some poets. Pedantry does exist at universities. Finally, it's important for any writer to do some real work somewhere, whether in a factory or in a law firm, so he or she is writing about something other than the nuance of syntax and philosophy.

**Q:** Are most published pieces in *New Letters* solicited or unsolicited?

**A:** Most of the essays—what people want to call creative nonfiction—are solicited work. Unlike with poetry and fiction, almost no unsolicited essays wind up being any good. The terms "personal essay" and "memoir" seem to fool a lot of writers into thinking that they don't need strategy, style, or technique, when writing nonfiction. It hardly ever happens that a short-story writer or poet would fail to think about the effectiveness of the opening passage, for example, as seems almost always to happen with nonfiction writers. The nonfiction that comes in unsolicited is mostly dull and predictable, riddled with conventional phrases. So, in nonfiction, the published work is about 10 percent unsolicited; in poetry and fiction, that number is about 70 percent.

**Q:** For the unsolicited works you accept, where is the author likely to be in his or her career—e.g., first publication, some professional publishing credits, one book published, multiple books? What about your contest winners?

**A:** Contest winners have tended to be early in their careers as writers, many with no books. We do receive entries from writers with national reputations, and sometimes they win, but I have been excited and amazed by the quality of discovery the awards process uncovers. Lucie Brock-Broido is a poetry winner from 1986 and now one of the country's premier poets. There are many other such examples.

I most remember the unknown writers we discover out of the unsolicited pile of manuscripts. We do receive writing from people at all career levels, but those little-known writers with fresh, authentic voices remain vivid to me—an upcoming essay about a girl's dream of becoming Pork Queen, by Margaret McCarty Ozemet, for example; we recently published poems about Kentucky, written by Noel Smith, and a great story by Molly McNett—some of the strongest work we've published. That's really how the magazine will be remembered. In 1940, *New Letters* published a new story by a little-known New York writer, J.D. Salinger.

**Q:** Does *New Letters* place more emphasis on representing the mainstream of contemporary American writing, or discovering the avant-garde? How would you define those terms? What relevance, if any, do they have for writers today?

**A:** Robert Frost said that the study of literature is one of the few areas in life where one is asked to exercise taste and judgment. My taste runs toward fiction, poetry, and essays that care about the emotional and spiritual dilemmas of human beings. That statement will suggest to some readers here that we want

conventional sentiment, which is out of the question. We want eccentric and innovative writing. However, I notice a tremendous amount of published writing in journals that falls more toward the so-called lyric essay, language poetry, or postmodern fiction. The truth is, I like all of that in principle; but I need to see how it matters on a human level. If it seems like mere typographic game playing, or word games, I respond less well to it.

*New Letters* has published a great deal of writing by people clearly thought of as among the avant-garde today, including Debra Di Blasi, William J. Cobb, and Lance Olsen. I grab it when it's fresh, exciting, and makes an authentic claim on the human experience. I published a long poem once that I did not understand at all on a literal level. I just knew it was engaging me in a sparkling and surprising way. I took a chance and published it, and the poem has since won two national awards.

**Q:** Tell me about the judging process for your contest. Who are the screeners, and what guidance do you give them? How many entries are received, and how many make it to the finalist judges?

**A:** The *New Letters* Literary Awards for Writers are among the oldest in the country, by the way, and are scrupulously run to protect the integrity of each entry. (a) Our awards coordinator, Amy Lucas, removes any vestige of personal identification from each manuscript and gives them all numbers. (b) She then assigns them in batches to our battery of preliminary judges—listed each year in our awards issue. Those names change, but they are, themselves, award-winning and published writers in their own fields. Most of the preliminary judges have published many books each, for example. (c) We now have a three-level "grading" system, the top being truly exceptional, and we try to send only those to our final judges. However, most of the entries in the top two levels are double-read to make sure no good work goes unnoticed; and multiple entries by the same writer are divided among different judges. (d) Usually, out of roughly 500 entries in each of the three categories, we send on 20 manuscripts to each final judge. We do keep the identity of the final judge secret until after the decisions are announced.

The great thing about our competition is that everyone gets more back than he or she pays. A \$15 entry fee gets you not only the awards process and evaluation but a full year (four-issue) subscription, which normally sells for \$22. This might seem to make no sense, but we have decided to subsidize writers in that way in order to further stimulate creativity and the life of literature in this country.

**Q:** Have the judges ever failed to pick a winner? Do they ever reach back into the entry pool if none of the finalists are satisfactory? What is your policy on refunding fees if no prize is given?

**A:** We never have failed to pick a winner and don't anticipate that occurrence. Further, our preliminary judges are so accomplished, so astute, and our evaluation process so thorough, that the best material, I believe, is virtually certain to make its way to the final judge. Although we are but poor mortals, I have great faith in the process.

**Q:** What are some ways you'd like to see writers and publishers take advantage of new media technology?

**A:** I have no objection to any way writers use the new media; although I also admit, I don't go around advocating one thing over another. I just don't have time. I like printed broadsides, chapbooks, strips of paper with poems on them, hung on the branches of dogwood trees, or poems rolled into message capsules and strapped to homing pigeons. Let them fly.

*New Letters* has been involved in audio archives and radio broadcast of writers for 30 years, with our weekly public radio, syndicated series, *New Letters on the Air*. Although this is not what you'd call "new media technology," it does indicate our attempts over the years to find multiple outlets for great new writing. We are trying to expand our audio distribution to podcasts; and we do put two audio interviews from *New Letters on the Air* on our Web site.

**Q:** Are there topics, styles or cultural perspectives you'd like to see more of in the submissions *New Letters* receives? Any that you'd like to see less of?

**A:** I wish I could remember who said, Don't tell me about your sad and lost childhood. Maybe that. However, I think it's a bad idea to restrict any topics. *New Letters* does not usually make editorial decisions based on topic but rather on the quality of the writing. A great part of our mission is to publish

writing that advances the art, that uses language in a fresh and exciting way. Subject matter influences how that looks, of course, but a good subject—I want to tell all those cover-letter composers—won't sell the work. I would like to see more writing come to us with a social or environmental consciousness. Much of that kind of writing does turn to polemic, sadly, but I also think it's worth trying to discuss the crises in the world. We did run a powerful essay by Wendell Berry called "The Way of Ignorance," about the environment and politics; we have run other work along those lines, as well.

**Q:** What do you wish contest entrants would understand about *New Letters* before submitting their work?

**A:** Voice. If they write their stories, poems, essays by stringing together conventional phrases, they are unlikely to make the finalist batch. Preliminary judges want to discover a voice that sounds fresh, authentic, driven.

**Q:** Who are some of your favorite authors (classic or contemporary) that deserve a wider readership than they've received? What can today's writers learn from them?

**A:** I think the New York translator and critic Eliot Weinberger should have a wider readership, although he has several books of essays from *New Directions*. He strips his essays of hype and sentimentality, and every sentence moves forward more information. I think, believe it or not, Henry Miller remains underappreciated in this country. He's still known for writing about sex, but read his nonfiction; he's one of the most spiritual, uplifting, tough-minded and self-critical writers I know.

This interview was originally published in *Poetry Contest Insider*. For a free 10-day online trial, please go to [www.winningwriters.com/pci](http://www.winningwriters.com/pci).