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Editorial: Reader, Writer, and Editor: An Imaginary Interview

Author(s): Nolan Miller

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editorial

Reader, Writer, and Editor: An Imaginary Interview

Editor: How fortunate that we meet. You may have questions, which I may be able to answer. You may want to understand why the *Review* year after year publishes more and more fiction. We now run not only two or three stories an issue, but recently have been publishing all-fiction numbers.

Reader: It seems fiction has become popular. In her introduction to the 1982 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*, Anne Tyler states that Shannon Ravenel, the annual editor, read 1,379 stories in 502 issues of 154 different magazines. Of that number, 120 stories were candidates to be chosen as most distinguished.

Editor: So many! Yet quality is always a matter of judgment. That so many were published is phenomenal—and think of how many were written and not published. Here at the *Review*, every week of the year from fifty to a hundred manuscripts bounce through the mails to land on our desks.

Writer: Most of them bounced right back. How can you read them all?

E: Not all are read by all of us. Still, we feel all must be considered, if finally only about 5 percent command grave and hopeful consideration.

R: Does the previously published writer stand the better chance?

E: Never. It's the story, not the author, that counts.

W: Is a cover letter helpful?

E: We find cover letters a courtesy. We like knowing something about the author, whether he or she has a publishing history. Still, as I've said, it's the story we have to like. Few well-known writers submit to us, there being better-paying markets. Just the same, Borges, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates have not ignored us—nor even Anne Tyler when a beginning writer. We take delight in publishing writers who have not previously appeared anywhere. Our pleasure in making discoveries is similar to that of all editors I know.

R: Exactly what is it that makes you decide to accept a story?

E: It's not too hard to say. It's when the writer and his story command our unrelinquished attention. We are readers reading for readers and assume that anyone literate, fairly well educated, with some interest in contemporary literature, will find something of interest in our pages. Those who, like us, seek intelligent use of their leisure time, shun the fast-food equivalent of the unimaginative, the bland and predictable.

Something out of the ordinary at-

tracts us. At times we feel a bit jaded and relish the intellectually stimulating, the emotionally rousing and fulfilling. When something comes along that is freshly appealing, we fling aside preconceptions of what our readers might like and cockily choose what *we* like. There's little risk. We can't remember in over forty years that many of our readers have been heard from in a state of shock or distress.

R: You're pretty sure of who your readers are?

E: Would-be contributors certainly flatter us. Of course, we have responsive friends, one of whom thoroughly rewards us with a quarterly critical survey. It's just as well that we don't know who reads us. We are the more free to publish what *should* be of notice. As it is, we work in isolation, strive to be receptive, patient, and try to avoid exasperation and fatigue.

Time does pass. The world changes. What we liked and published ten years ago we might no longer find acceptable. Taste changes. Language changes. Our freedom to use language today, to print it, is revolutionary, as phenomenal as our tolerance of all extremes of off-beat human behavior. What goes today when anything goes? Keep tuned in.

W: Speaking of tolerance, why doesn't the *Review* encourage more experimental writing?

E: No need to encourage it insofar as it would seem all use of language has always been experimental. Every attempt of a writer to achieve a fictive experience is experimental. Of course, if you mean that kind of writing which concentrates on stylistic effects, on multiple rather than on a cohesive single effect, as in the short story, as much as we're interested, we've never seen such a piece that

works. Language has to work or what use is it? Language crosses the void between listener or reader or it doesn't work. Content, meaning, a message of some sort, even if it's nonsense, is instrumental, or else language, man's unique invention, progressively invented age after age, even year after year, is without utility. Words die, clutter our unabridged dictionaries. But words come alive, newly minted, whether our dictionaries hop to it to record them or not.

Writers, like editors, are word-smiths. Sentences precisely crafted are the writer's art. Certainly the craft of fiction is an art that gives us unique pleasure. Like theater, painting, ballet, fiction is practiced deception. As E. M. Forster says, a story is a "made up thing." Fiction is a supreme metaphor in that it imperatively sustains the "fiction" that it seems true, even more "true" than life itself, urgently stimulating and entertaining the reader's imagination.

W: What about beginning writers? How can an editor help?

E: Few can be helped unless they are aware at the outset that the fictive experience is *realized* experience, that it aims to be rewardingly fulfilling.

W: Isn't that too much to ask of the inexperienced writer?

E: Not of one who aims to be professional. Yet it is the duty of an editor to spot the writer of promise, to be encouraging. Editors plunge into mountains of manuscripts, must spare readers the amateurish, the mawkish, the sentimental, the incoherent, the tasteless, the slick. We find much that is competently written but that repeats what has been said before, or, worse, says nothing at all. We may reject, say, stories about children because we have accepted too many. Further, we may have on hold too many

stories about wife-beating, domestic quarrels, old people with terminal illnesses, or what have you. It may be a time when we have accepted light-weight comedy and hunger for something serious and meaty. We want a balanced menu for each issue, neither all desserts nor appetizers, tempting as these may be.

Often we write an author suggesting revisions of a story if we feel confident the job can be done. Not too often. We remind ourselves that we're editors, not teachers.

R: Just what are the most frequent faults?

E: The story line may be weak. The narration crawls along at too slow a pace. The conclusion is obscure. There may be a need for suspense. A story should get off the ground, take a direction. Readers like the feeling they can guess where the story is going, which does not mean they know just *how* it is going to get there.

R: How many writers ask for criticism?

E: Too many. The bulk of the submitted material is by amateurs who are not really writers, are hobbyists. After reading a page or two, we know we're wasting our time. The chief fault is a lack of story sense. An incident, a string of incidents, doesn't add up to a story, nor do the case-history, flat reportage, the retelling of a joke. Excessive description and exposition are composition-class exercises. In a short story both should be so deftly attached to the spinal column of the narrative as to seem incidental.

W: Don't you have some general advice to give contributors?

E: Simply this: make a good first impression by sending in a manuscript typed doubled-spaced with the blackest ribbon available; include an envelope adequately stamped and self-addressed

for return of the story should we reject it. Mail it flat, please, without a binding.

Your best second impression is the story itself. By our publication of it we aim to give it distinction, a distinction earned by hard work that the author has dedicated to his craft and his art. The story's success lies in its attraction of readers, readers who must be charmed, seduced, into reading and appreciating its every word.

W: How a story begins must be important.

E: Where else does a reader start? With a story's earliest sentences the reader places his trust. At the outset the reader wants to be drawn into the story-making process to the point of being little conscious of the reading process. Basically, a story is about *something*; it's on this the reader concentrates. It's futile to discuss techniques, style, all that. No book of instruction, no course in what's called creative writing can be of much help. A writer invents what is needed. Few writers root themselves in a life-long, distinctive style of writing. Learning to be direct, to be honest, to be always conscious of what the reader needs and only what he needs requires tremendous self-discipline. Writers learn what they teach themselves, self-stimulated, self-instructed, passionately devoted to practice, practice, practice.

W: Only by practice?

E: By studying the art, by learning to read like a writer, closely examining what other writers have published, whether it's good or bad. All writers we know are motivated readers. The writer's apprenticeship never ends. A writer works every day, has acquired the writing habit, observes as a writer, thinks as a writer, lives as a writer.

Writers *use* their experiences, rather

than wastefully allowing their experiences to use up them. If, like most people, you purposelessly float in the reality of life, bye-bye.

R: Still, the writer's big problem is getting past editors.

E: Alas! The editor has a job—getting out a magazine. It's his business. Although the *Review* is not a money-maker, the fact is we attract the attention of agents and publishers, which confirms our dedication to finding material of the highest quality.

R: Will you comment on the trends in the fiction you currently choose?

E: We're getting much more fantasy, some of the stories on the borderline of what is inadequately called science fiction. More humorous stuff comes in now, rather than the serious story that deals with some contemporary issue. Literature as what Matthew Arnold called "a criticism of life," if it ever existed, seems to have vanished. It's perhaps come about because real life is more "serious" today.

R: And what about the stories in the present issue? Why were these chosen?

E: Our decisions were made difficult, the material submitted unusually good.

The wind rises, the wind changes, and what blows in is unpredictable, as often bad as good.

Far too many stories submitted we resisted because written in the first person. First-person narration is a growing habit, tending toward monotony. It was as easy to resist stories that were too empty as to content, stories with more or less stereotyped characters.

R: Which of the stories in this present issue are your favorites?

E: All are for different reasons. Who can make a choice between such well-known writers as James Purdy or Mark Strand? Personally, I find both irresistible, no matter what they write. The story by Serena Crystal is remarkable, and that by David Dempsey, who does not publish as much fiction as he should, we think is going to please all of our readers. No, it's wrong to claim we have favorites. What we have is a collection, varied forms of individual expression and all of top quality performance. We've put out a magazine; and that done, our readers change places with us and become our editors.

Nolan Miller