

Don't Quit Your Job to Raise a Litmag

by Jane Greer

"Poetry is the most overproduced commodity on the market, next to zucchini."

—Judson Jerome, *Writer's Digest*
poetry columnist since 1960



According to a 1985 study cited by *Writer's Digest* Books, 23.3 percent of all people who think of themselves as writers—or “*more than two million people*”—write poetry for publication.

It follows that there are then six million housewives and househusbands, stockbrokers and nurses, college professors and ranchers, who write short stories, novels, and, God help them, novelettes.

Eight million would-be writers.

The number of people who make a *living* writing fiction or poetry would fit into a phone booth. Along with hardcover copies of Joyce Carol Oates's *oeuvre*.

The rest of the “poets and other authors of unpopular literature,” as Judson Jerome calls them, work at real jobs and send their spare-time literary efforts tirelessly to literary or “little” magazine (litmag) editors and independent publishers (the “small presses”), many of whom pay them in copies and little else. These publishers are “independent” in that their choice of material to publish has less to do with profit than with a passion for literature or for an idea.

(Hmmm. Let's see. 1989 *Poet's Market* says that there are approximately 1,700 publishers of poetry, and 1989 *Writer's Market* sports 4,000 listings, some of which accept poetry. So let's say there are 5,000 markets—mostly independent publishers of books or litmags—for our eight million writers. That makes 1,600 writers per market. A quarterly litmag will publish maybe ten new writers in each issue, along with writers it's published before; that means it

would take 160 quarterly issues, or 40 years, for American litmags to publish at least once all the writers writing *today*. By that time, if the trend continues, there will be far more writers. And the average lifespan of a litmag or independent press is generally far shy of 40.)

What's in this for anyone?

The deep psychic scars faced by independent editors, publishers, bookkeepers, marketers, subsidizers (usually the same person for any given press), and submitters to these markets seem about evenly distributed. People who gather the courage to send a short story or batch of poems to a litmag editor face postage costs (both ways) that can be debilitating if the sender is broke and his output prodigious. A lot of money—and worse, a lot of hope—can be squandered on the *wrong* markets if the sender doesn't study the listings in places such as *Poet's Market*, *Writer's Market*, or *The Writer*, or if magazines and houses aren't honest or clear, in their listings, about what they want. Some independent publishers *are* quite blunt in their listings, and say things like “backlogged through January 1990 issue,” “New Age or Aquarian, nature and animals (rights/liberation), the Inner or Spiritual Life,” or “the work and ideas of lesbians of color, Jewish lesbians, fat lesbians, lesbians over 50 and under 20 years old, physically challenged lesbians, poor and working-class lesbians, and lesbians of varying cultural backgrounds.” I am not making any of this up. Almost all small publications will suggest that submitters (what a *great word*, from an editorial perspective!) purchase a sample copy or two before submitting anything, in order to learn the magazine's character. This grosses anywhere from \$2 to \$8 for the litmag, but is expensive and usually unhelpful for the

Jane Greer has edited and published Plains Poetry Journal for seven years. Her Stronghold Press has published five poetry chapbooks, but is no longer in the book business.

writer. It doesn't really help the editor a lot, either: the same amount of garbage and number of masterpieces will come in the mail no matter *how* much submitters study the guidelines.

Worse than any of these curses on submitters is The Big Chill: that two-to-36-month void which occurs between the date on which you send a submission to almost any independent publisher or litmag with a circulation of 100 to 10,000, and the date on which the preprinted rejection slip is received. This often happens after several inquiries, all containing the ubiquitous self-addressed, stamped envelope known to insiders as the "SASE." The curious thing about this waiting game is that many independent publishers are also writers who complain themselves about the anguish of The Big Chill. What's wrong with this picture?

Submitters put in full days at jobs to come home, write, and submit poetry at night. They squeeze it in among a million common domestic and civic duties to spouse, children, home, and community. Many submitters teach English and creative writing at institutions of higher learning (or are retired academics, or grad students hoping for tenure). Do they teach because they're frustrated writers, or because they can't make a living writing—or do they write because teaching inspires them? Never mind; the same question could be asked of the millions of people with nonacademic jobs who are published by independent presses.

A litmag editor's problems are different but, of course, related. Each day she faces a post office box full of sad, fifth-rate meanderings about broken hearts or a darling puppy (and that's the *better* class of failures; it's impossible to tell *what* some of the leavings are about). Then there are the nasty notes from would-be poets who were previously turned down, as gently as possible, as well as the poignant near-misses from promising writers whom the editor will try to mollify and coax into submitting again. On a good day, there'll be one or two subscriptions, which will lull the editor into thinking that the cost of printing the next issue is no longer a problem. And once in a while—just often enough—there will be a sheaf of brilliant poems from an old regular, or a pro who's only recently discovered that litmag, or—best of all, in many editors' opinions—a previously unpublished dentist or airline stewardess. Editors, very few of whom teach English at universities (the one obvious exception being university press editors), work hard at jobs all day and then spend their evenings and weekends going through the mail, making publishing decisions, toting up debits and credits one more time, and emptying their checking account to pay the printer. Oh, yes, and writing, typing up, Xeroxing, and sending out *their* work to *other* litmags. All of which happens *after* a little end-of-workday conversation with one's spouse, after the dishes and the kids' homework are done and the kids are in bed, the household bills paid, the plumber called, the lawn mowed.

From a bottom-line point of view, there's nothing in this enterprise for either party: neither riches nor glory in *sending* literary work to independent publishers, nor in *publishing* a litmag or chapbook series. Why, then, do so many people persevere, and why do their numbers proliferate?

There are several motives for those who send their work to independent publishers. These motives also determine whether they *subscribe*. First of all, there are the "Helen Hooven Santmyer Wanna-bes." These people have written one poem or story in their life, about Iwo Jima or the birth of their first grandchild, say, and are convinced it's Pulitzer material. Also in this category are people who have vague but uplifted feelings about "nature" and write about daffodils and mountains and warm spring rain on their face, and prison inmates whose no-doubt-therapeutic work invariably begins, "Who am I????!!" These people are serious about many things, but writing a good poem or story is not one of them. They send their work to independent publishers because someone else—usually a family member or parole officer—suggests that they should. Teenagers fall into this category, too, but they're merely *young* and may very well grow up into fine writers. None of these people buy litmags or books from independent presses.

Secondly, there are the star pupils from university writing workshops and what *Poultry* (an outrageous parody tabloid edited by Jack Flavin, Brendan Galvin, and George Garrett) calls "Meatloaf Mountain"—professional amateurs who crank out one or two pieces a day, every day, and send them off just as quickly. These people are scattershot experts. They aim to be published *once* in every extant litmag. (It makes for a longer résumé—with the effective use of white space it's possible to fashion a whole page out of 20 published poems, if they were all published in different places—and many of these people are college professors who don't want to perish.) Once an editor publishes these writers, they're history there, that litmag a *fait accompli*, even if the editor has praised them and asked for more of their work. Surprisingly, what they write is often very good, but they don't take time to build a readership anywhere. Their commerce with the litmags that publish them is similar to that of a man with a prostitute: both parties benefit a little, but not as much as they would if they had a *relationship*. And these people don't buy litmags.

The third category of submitters to independent presses is larger than the other two, and balances them. These people write, and send what they write out into the cruel world, simply because they *love* to write. Whether or not they graduated from or even attended college, they are always *studying* their craft. Their work ranges from mediocre to exquisite; they may be shy or masterfully self-confident; but they *all* want to become *better*. They ask for comments on their work. This is the group most bothered by The Big Chill, because they are too painstaking to be prolific, don't have a lot of poems or stories circulating at any given time, and care more about the work itself than the warm fuzzy that produced it or the way it will look on a résumé. These people assume—often mistakenly—that the editor knows more than they do. They will revise strenuously based on an editor's late-night off-hand remarks. They will ask an editor they like who *his* favorite writers are, and then study the work of those writers, not necessarily to increase their chances of getting published, but just to enlarge the scope of their literary knowledge. Needless to say, *these* are the people who *buy* litmags. They give gift subscriptions to their brother-in-law and the library at their

alma mater. They show the litmag to friends and try to get *them* to subscribe. Out of sheer appreciation and a starving need for literary intercourse, they send Christmas cards and newspaper clippings to editors who have never written them more than a brief critical note.

Otherwise-normal human beings turn independent-press editor or publisher for one very uncomplicated reason: *because it sounds like fun*. Oh, after they're in the business for a while they may begin to enjoy correspondence with certain writers or other editors or publishers they wouldn't have met otherwise; and they may discover, through their litmag, others who will appreciate their *own* work—but these are peripheral benefits. There's no money in editing a litmag, not even compensation for one's time; there's no glory, and a lot of kicks in the backside; it's never improved a résumé or impressed *anyone*; and there are a dozen varieties of frustration. These days, when the only seemingly solid proof of success is to have reached people in quantities upwards of seven figures, independent publishers struggle for years to raise their circulation from 200 to 500, from 500 to 1,000—and that's *people*, not thousands. The only explanation that makes sense is that those who stick with a litmag or independent press through the lean years (which may continue indefinitely) do so simply because in spite of it all, it's *fun*. To make something beautiful and enduring in your own image, from dust and a little spit and the work of others: why, it's almost more fun than writing!

Still, the writing is what matters, when you get down to it. Editors understand that as clearly as submitters and readers do. People associated with independent publishing in any way—whether they edit, write for, or buy literary magazines and books—believe that literature *is* important in the cosmic scheme of things. Yes, it's true (as George Steiner and others have noted) that many Nazis did their ghastly work in the concentration camps and then went blithely home to read Goethe each evening, but literature *can* inform us of our moral position in the universe, if we're receptive to it. It gives us a glimpse inside the writer's mind, and thus inside our own, because literature is essentially about the human dilemma: the problem of being half animal, half angel. And certainly not least of all, literature *can delight*.

It can do none of this, though, if no one can read it. And that's where independent publishers come in. *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* and *McCall's* couldn't print all the good stories and poems being written if they *wanted* to (which it often seems they don't).

One example of a relatively successful independent press is *The Spirit That Moves Us*, founded in Iowa City in 1974 by Morty Sklar, who had “just wanted to get out of New York.” Sklar is among a handful of independent publishers who try to earn a livelihood publishing literature. Unmarried and childless, he's squeaking by.

The Spirit That Moves Us was, in 1983, the first press to publish a collection, in English, by Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert, who would the next year win the Nobel Prize for literature. Sklar is proud of this, but not noticeably any prouder than he is of 14 years of poets who *haven't* found notoriety. His press is relatively mature and has a good reputation, none of which will ever bring in Morty Sklar a

Mercedes or a condo in Palm Springs. “I'm just hooked,” he explains, citing (inevitably) friendships with other poets and editors, and the euphoria of contributing to the literary world. “And if I can't sleep at night, there's always some work I can do.”

From 1971-1985 Linda Hasselstrom ran *Lame Johnny Press*, which produced books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and from 1971-1976 published *Sunday Clothes: A Magazine of the Fine Arts*. She did all of this from her ranch near tiny Hermosa, South Dakota.

“The reward of *Lame Johnny Press* was helping good regional writers see their work in print, often for the first time. Those rewards are still coming in: Dan O'Brien, an author whose first published short story appeared in *Sunday Clothes*, saw his first novel, *The Spirit of the Hills*, reviewed in *The New York Times* last year, and it's been optioned by Steven Spielberg. Other writers have gone on to other books. It is a source of immense pride to me that many of them might have given up, or might have waited years and years more to be published without my help.

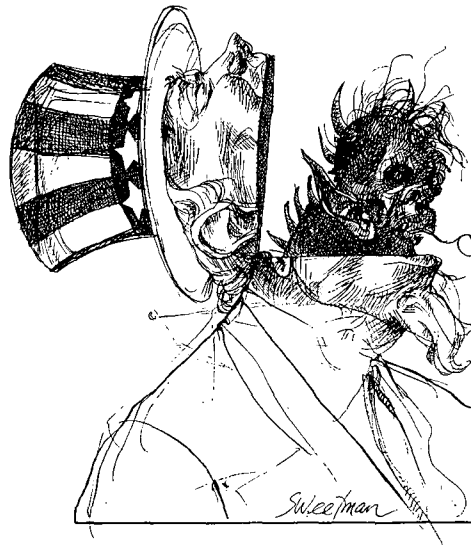
“*Sunday Clothes* . . . endured being entirely broke three times, as I experimented with various ways of supporting it. I was fleeced by a flood and then [by my first] husband. The third time I went broke it was because I briefly took a job out of state to supplement my income and to add to my experience and resume. While I was gone my brand new advertising salesman sold \$5,000 worth of advertising, spent the money, and disappeared. The magazine limped along until I'd printed the ads that had been contracted for in my name.”

Lame Johnny kept publishing books for another decade. Why did Hasselstrom give up her press after 14 years in which she published 23 books, several of them small classics now, and developed a national reputation? “I had gradually whittled jobs out of my life to make room for the expanding work of the press; I had given up valuable time with my husband (and now that he is dead that is painful for me), until there were only three things left in my working life: the ranch that keeps me in enough money to live, the press, and my writing. The press was all I could give up.”

Why, then, did she *do* it for so long? “Almost every other publisher of an independent press in the nation could probably narrate this story by heart, though the details may differ a little. I suppose not many of us brand a bull and paste up a book on the same day. But the principle is the same: we all give our time, our energy, our money earned at various jobs, to bring out writing we think is important to the world.

“We keep doing it partly because many of us are writers, and we hope that somewhere in the world another independent publisher will love *our* books. But even if we aren't writing, we are involved in the struggle to provide fine literature. Most independent publishers can probably recite the names: Crane, Pope, Byron, Shelley, the Brownings, Tennyson, Poe, Edward Arlington Robinson, Willa Cather, Thomas Hardy, Walt Whitman, Thoreau, Kipling, Robert Burns, Washington Irving, Thomas Paine, William Blake. Without independent publishers, many of them might never have been published.”

◀



Beyond Moral Equivalency

by William A. Donohue

"The triumph of demagogies is short-lived. But the ruins are eternal."

— Charles Péguy

Covert Cadre: Inside the Institute for Policy Studies
by S. Steven Powell
Ottawa, IL: Green Hill Publishers

◆

J eane Kirkpatrick has given us two useful ways to think about that segment of the American intelligentsia that continuously finds fault with virtually everything this country does: they are the "blame America first" crowd and the believers in "moral equivalency." After reading S. Steven Powell's penetrating study, *Covert Cadre: Inside the Institute for Policy Studies*, it seems clear that a new vocabulary is needed. If some of the nation's critics "blame America first," it is because many of them "hate America first," i.e., they find the political, economic, social, and cultural institutions of America more offensive than those existing anywhere

William A. Donohue is the author of *The Politics of the American Civil Liberties Union*.

on the globe. It is not "moral equivalency" they seek to promote, but "moral malfeasance"—they hope to convince the world of the immorality and venality of everything American. There is no better example of the "hate America first" crowd than the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). Founded in 1963 by Richard Barnet and Marcus Raskin, two disenchanted members of the foreign policy establishment in the Kennedy administration, IPS has spent the past quarter century trying to undermine the foundations of American society and destroy its defensive capabilities. Given seed money by the Stern Family Fund, IPS has long depended on the Samuel Rubin Foundation for the lion's share of its revenue, and has received generous contributions as well from the likes of the Playboy, Ford, and MacArthur Foundations.

The late Samuel Rubin was a member of the Communist Party and a wealthy businessman, a capitalist who took the millions he made from Faber-

ge cosmetics to discredit the very system that made him stinking rich. His daughter, Cora, as well as her husband, Peter Weiss, has been faithful to the family tradition, working through IPS to sabotage American security interests and disable the economy that supports their subversion. It is no exaggeration to say that IPS is the most respectable mainstream left-wing institution in American history. It even enjoys tax-exempt status.

The strong language used to characterize IPS is deliberate: it is designed to provoke readers to understand that we are not simply dealing with yet another case of the unintended evil caused by well-meaning but deluded intellectuals. We are dealing with planned, organized, intended effects engineered by people who are neither well-meaning nor intellectuals. IPS personnel are strategists, activists who are sometimes engaged in the war of ideas, sometimes in breaking the law, and sometimes in giving succor to our adversaries. It is a mistake to think that