

# How to Start a Literary Magazine

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In 1998, I founded a literary journal called *Fence*, which has been in continuous, regular publication ever since, and which has gone on to be quite successful and respected. In this chapter I will tell you, or at least imply to you, how I did this. For the purposes of this discussion, let's establish the premise that you, yourself, have decided to start a literary journal. I am going to put before you some of the questions that I, in the bright light of hindsight, would have liked to be asked at the beginning of my process.

But first, let's acknowledge the role that impulse, and fantasy, and recklessness have in the founding of a literary journal. It is quite possible that, had I been asked all of these questions, and made aware of all the ensuing issues, and barraged with prerequisites in the manner in which you will be here, that I might have come to my senses, thrown up my hands, and quit before I began. Many is the time that I have been standing in a group of young students of writing, perhaps during the break in a class, or after a reading has ended and the cigarettes have been lit, and overheard one student say to another: 'I'm starting my own journal. It's going to be called "Old Lettuce"'. Do I, you may wonder, upon hearing this, attach myself to the student and bedeck her with reality-checking questions about funding and distribution? No, I do not. Or at least I do not, anymore. Or at least, I do not until the student comes running to me, months later, in a panic over the price of printing or the difficulty of finding distribution for *Old Lettuce*.

It is a peculiarity of my own journal, and my own journal-founding process, that I troubled myself from the get-go with questions such as the ones that will follow. I had, you might say, a head for business, at least in this one instance. There is something about the industry of literary production that I have an appetite for – something that in what I will churlishly call 'real life' I have no appetite for at all. You might call this something 'the nitty-gritty'. I suggest, at the outset of this discussion, that if you yourself don't have an appetite for the nitty-gritty, you find someone who does, and attach them to your project immediately. Unless, of course, you find yourself answering certain of these questions in a certain manner.

So here, finally, is a question to ask yourself: just exactly what kind of writing are you interested in publishing? To say 'good writing' is generally not enough – hundreds of journals are published annually, each one claiming that what they are publishing is 'good'. What you ought to have in mind is a specific editorial vision of what distinguishes the good work you plan on publishing in your journal from that published by the teeming hundreds. Why, in short, does your journal demand to come into being?

Your answer to this question may evolve in terms of how you envision its audience: is your journal of specifically regional interest? Is your journal intended to speak, either by virtue of its aesthetic policies or of its format and distribution, to a very specific group of people, one almost exactly the size of your address book? Many worthy journals arise out of the publisher's desire to publish his or her own writing, as well as the writing of his or her friends and community, between handmade hemp covers, and to hand-deliver the results. (If this is the case, you may find the acquisition of a business manager unnecessary).

But whatever the case, it is necessary to know exactly what you want out of your journal.

Once you've settled on your journal's identity, it's important to be able to articulate it. Hence, the 'mission statement' – a concise, one- or two-sentence description of your journal's *raison d'être*. If your journal is to be run, as many are, as a nonprofit organisation, this is an absolute prerequisite, as every grant application will request a mission statement. If your journal is to be run by the skin of your teeth, out of your own back pocket, this is still a very good idea, as the question you will be asked most often, when you mention to a friend or an author that you are starting a journal, is: what kind of journal is this to be? Why, in effect, must there be another journal in this world?

Necessarily, you have come upon the answer to this question after having immersed yourself in a sampling of what is already being published by other optimistic, creative, hardworking publishers like the one you hope to become. I say necessarily because it is necessary, in order to publish a journal worth the paper (or potato sack, or toilet roll) it's printed on, to understand the context you are entering, the field onto which your entry will march. Ideally, you have even spent some few months or even years working on an already existing literary journal. This will not only help you to understand the time and energy necessary for the project, but it may even dissuade you from proceeding.

But once you have determined that your journal simply *must be*, there are a few more questions to be answered.

### Planning

How often shall *Old Lettuce* come out? Depending on your answers to some of the following questions, the usual frequencies are one, two, three, and four times a year. How high shall *Old Lettuce's* production values be? It could be photocopied and stapled, printed on an antique, hand-cranked letterpress and hand-sewn, or professionally offset-printed and machine-bound with what is known as a 'perfect binding'. (Virtually all commercially distributed publications are perfect-bound, that is, they have a flat spine on which can be printed the title, name of the publisher, and so on). How many people shall I involve in *Old Lettuce*? Do I want total editorial control or do I like the idea of a more collaborative effort? And could I do this on my own, even if I wanted to? A big question: Is there a sponsoring institution available to me, such as a community centre, arts organisation, or even a university? An even bigger question: Do I wish to incorporate as a nonprofit organisation, so that I may apply for grants and solicit donations from private foundations and individuals? Or perhaps I will be able to finance this journal myself, as I have lots of money. Or perhaps I will attempt to support it by means of advertising sales, subscriptions, and the occasional fundraising event.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will jump to some conclusions and assume that *Old Lettuce*, soon to be renamed something more promising, like 'Thunderclap', or 'The Holy Grail', is to be a professionally printed, perfect-bound, regularly published and nationally distributed journal.

But for the purposes of a diversion, I will briefly and tangentially entertain the notion that your goals for *Old Lettuce* are more modest, or more community-bound, and that your romantic imagination is captured by pre-industrial means of literary production, such as the photocopier and stapler, while your aesthetic inclinations lead you, for a variety of possible reasons, toward the 'coterie' approach to publishing. There are a few good arguments for running this kind of shop, that is, a journal whose purview is self-limiting, and which aims to represent a very special slice of the literary landscape (your own backyard). You get to publish your friends, without too much bother about whether their works are quite up to par. You get to work with your hands, which, as everyone knows, is good for body *and* soul. You are free to ignore the potentially quite stressful issues of circulation ('How do I get my journal into somebody's hands so that they might read it?') and funding ('How do I convince some person or institution that my journal is worthy of their support?'). In the best of cases, as with certain famous journals of the past such as *Locus Solus*, or *The Little Review*, your friends are geniuses, and with your scantily-clad journal you are creating literary history on a scale to be known only by readers of the future.

### Finances

Many journals, like the one I edit, *Fence*, acquire nonprofit status. This route, much like the decision to start a journal in the first place, is not to be taken lightly nor for granted (no pun intended). The 501(c) (3) moniker means that you offer a public service worthy of support by charitable institutions, and even possibly by the government. If you are a nonprofit you spend an awful lot of time providing evidence of your worthiness of this support, in the form of grant proposals and financial reports. Nonprofits are also required to form a Board of Directors, a group of interested (and, ideally, affluent) people who will help maintain organisational and financial stability. The Board has both legal and financial responsibility for that organisation, and can make decisions without any input from The Editor. (It also has the power to put a new editor in place at any time.) The process of attaining a 501(c) (3) is lengthy and full of paper, and should ideally be performed for you by a lawyer.

Many journals, both nonprofit and otherwise, have what is known as a patron, or sometimes, 'The Publisher'. These lucky journals are supported in large part by wealthy individuals, or private foundations endowed by individuals. The degree of editorial involvement desired by this publisher or benefactor will vary considerably from journal to journal – if the benevolent publisher is you, then this will never pose a problem. If, on the other hand, you find yourself in a relationship of dependency with a patron, issues can arise – most notably: what exactly does the patron want in return? Editorial input? Social prestige? To be published in your journal, or to publish his or her friends? In the best instance your patron will be one who wishes to use his or her wealth to good end, and has decided that your journal is a great end, and looks forward to being in the company of like-minded souls.

If you plan to raise money for your journal, on whatever scale, the first thing you ought to prepare yourself to do is to become an Event Planner. Readings, either singly or in series; launch parties; parties with readings; benefit readings with wine and cheese; fancy fundraisers with famous writers; and so on. *Fence* funded its entire first print run with a benefit reading featuring four wonderful poets and a novelist. Event planners are resourceful people: you will wrack your brain for what are called, in any industry, your 'connections': people or organisations you have access to who can provide you with or help you locate free stuff: free venues, free wine, free catering, free printing of your invitations, free

mailing lists to which to send your invitations, and so on. The more connections you have, the easier it will be for you to get free stuff and therefore to have successful events and to accomplish your fundraising goals. If you are a nonprofit your Board of Directors should be helping you to accomplish some of this, either by throwing the fancy parties or by locating potential funders.

But you should plan on putting up a lot of your own money, be ye rich or poor, at first. With any luck you will be able to reimburse yourself within a few years.

### Submissions

Writers love to be solicited. For your first issue, go wild with invitations. Invite everyone you've ever admired, or fantasised about publishing, including former teachers. Depending on your structural decisions concerning your audience, you may wish to include lots of well-known, even famous writers (read: big draws, names to put on the back of *Thunderclap* so that people in bookstores will pick it up and not put it down immediately), or you may wish to entirely avoid such names and exclusively present the work of writers known only to you and your immediate circle. The thing to do is to know what you want, and why you want it, and to understand the consequences. A journal that does not feature any or many well-known authors, whatever the realm of their notoriety, will not sell on the newsstand, and will have difficulty finding distribution. More about this later.

After your first issue has come out, you will swiftly begin receiving unsolicited submissions. Again, depending on your desires, you may want to list *The Golden Fleece* in such venues as The Poets Market, and so on. Be aware that if you do this, *The Holy Grail* will soon receive such a tidal wave, a tsunami, even, of unsolicited and mostly inappropriate submissions as to render your editorial staff completely immobile. More effective, perhaps, is to circulate complimentary copies of your new magazine to writers and other significant figures you wish to know about it, in the certainty that they will pass the word on and in the probability that they will soon send work themselves.

### Handling mail

While many journals employ interns to open and sort through mail, opening your own mail, at least at the beginning, while it is still manageable, is a really good way to keep tabs on operations, both editorial and financial. Bills will get paid on time, promotional opportunities such as conferences and readings will be duly considered, and most importantly you will know what kinds of readers *The Golden Grail* is reaching. I have always considered it a pleasure and a duty to actually read the entire slush pile (an unflattering term for unsolicited submissions), or at least to divide it between *Fence*'s editors, rather than to allow interns to read and reject, read and reject, as many journals do. This is because it is inherent to *Fence*'s mission that we publish a significant amount of work by writers who are not part of any particularly prominent circles, scenes, or cultures. Our interns may miss some of the genuinely original, sometimes-difficult-to-recognise writing that comes in from inauspicious corners.

For a very long time, from January of 1998 until April of 2006, to be exact, *Fence* had in place the following procedures, concerning poetry submissions. We have four poetry editors. About every four months, the stack of submissions was divided between us according first to whom they were addressed and then second to whose pile was biggest (we try to even them out). Each editor read his or her pile and rejected what he or she felt comfortable

rejecting, then made copies of the work he or she was interested in publishing or at least discussing with fellow editors. Each editor mailed these copies to the other three editors about two weeks in advance of the date set for the editorial meeting. At the meeting the editor then employed a highly sophisticated system of cajolment, seduction, and harassment in order to try to convince the other three editors of the value of his or her favourite poems. The resulting *mélange* of accepted work is generally successful at representing the *mélange* of our editors' actual tastes and concerns. In April of 2006, *Fence* went exclusively digital; we now accept only online submissions. This is a slightly sad development, in that we will miss the excitement of opening real mail in search of the unexpectedly brilliant submission from a complete unknown; on the other hand, the ratio of submission to accepted work had grown insupportable, as is perhaps inevitable with a journal that aims to be recognised on a national level, and we could no longer manage the simple bulk of paper in our tiny little basement office.

*Fence* operates with a publishing backlog, at this point, of at least a year, which allows us to use a bit of hindsight in curating the issues; we attempt to create an even gender ratio – that is our only demographic concern aside from an abiding desire to publish writing we like by writers of colour as often as it comes our way. Because our response time has lengthened from four to sometimes as many as twelve months, we welcome simultaneous submissions; it's only fair.

### Copyright and contracts, author fees

Most journals obtain Serial Rights, which means that they have the right to publish the work first and that the rights revert back to the author upon publication. If the poem or story is subsequently anthologised or published as part of a collection, *The Holy Fleece* must be acknowledged in the copyright or acknowledgements page.

A contract is a good idea, as it will help to avoid any future confusion as to what exactly has been agreed to by the author. This document can easily be mailed out as part of your acceptance letter. Contractual considerations for the publisher include: Do you wish to obtain permission to post the work on your website, if you have one? Do you wish to be able to reprint the work in any anthology you may publish later, that is, *The Best of 'The Goose'*? At the very least your contract should ask for a current correct address for the contributor, including email address, and a signature assigning first serial rights. The contract should also state that the author must provide *The Goose* with a digital file of the work and a biographical statement, within a certain time, and delivered in its preferred mode (by e-mail, in the mail on a disk, and so on). If *The Goose* is lucky enough to be able to pay its authors, the contract should state its rate of payment and when the author can expect to receive this payment.

### Production

Desktop publishing has changed the literary landscape possibly more even than *Thunderclap* will. It is now feasible, even quite easy, for one person to edit, design, and lay out for production an entire book or journal. To do this requires many different 'skill sets', as they're called, most of which I personally have acquired on the fly, so to speak. If you are design-savvy, and handy with such programmes as Quark, PageMaker, InDesign, Photoshop, and so on, then you will be many steps ahead of the game. If you are savvy, but not handy, then you will need to either take a course or to find someone who is handy: a Production

Editor, who can work with you on the design of the magazine and then lay it out. If you are neither savvy nor handy, you will need to hire a Designer. This designer will come up with some ideas for the look of the magazine ('trim size' – width x height; what the pages will look like – fonts, text styles, and so on; a title design or logo) and work with you on arriving at a final accord.

A word about titles. Think carefully about how you want your journal's title to resonate in the mind's ear of your reader. Is your journal intended to have a slightly goofy tenor, and therefore might appropriately be titled *Old Lettuce*, *The Duck's Cracked Egg*, *Four Bent Fingers*, *Up in the Attic*, *Crocheted Plasma Afghan*, or some such thing? At the opposite end of the spectrum, pause for more than a few minutes before burdening your journal with a completely boring title like *The Poetry Review*, or *Writing Quarterly*, or *Journal of Poetry and Fiction*. Something like *Thunderclap* is safely middle-of-the-road, and as that, it runs the risk of driving in one ear and out the other. A good title is hard to come by, but ideally it will occur to you as part of your original desire to start your own journal, much in the same way that a good poem or story's title will seem to be of a piece with the actual text itself.

Similarly, the look of the journal should be considered carefully as a reflection of the kind of aesthetic statement you wish the journal to make – a very plain, convoluted, or unconsidered design may indicate to potential readers that the editor is not sufficiently engaged with the sensual world to be able to recognise interesting writing as a feature of this world. In beginning *Fence* I first came up with the title; for reasons I hope are obvious, the image of a fence, and those who sit upon it, was correlative with my goals as an editor. Hot on the heels of this title came a design imperative: I wanted *Fence* to be beautiful. I wanted readers to be attracted to its size and the image on the cover, to wish to hold it in their hand and look inside, and to be moved by the clarity and confidence of its interior layout as it serves to present the writing, confidently and clearly.

Generally, your production schedule for *Birch Bark* goes something like this: for an issue that you want to come out in, say, early May, your editorial deadline should be in early February. That's right, February. This means that by 5 February, all contracts have been mailed out and received back from the authors along with the works in digital form, ready to be poured into your template. First, you must decide in which order the work will appear in the journal, and inform your designer. The designer (or you, if you're handy) will pour everything in and, within a week or so, provide you with a version that is ready for you to start proofreading. This could either be an actual hard copy or a PDF file for you to print out yourself, depending on the benevolence of your designer. You proofread this 'first pass', using your copies of the original submitted work to make sure that errors in formatting have not occurred in the translation into digital information. You make your corrections, as well as any changes in formatting you would like to make, such as last-minute switches in the order, or the decision to move a poem into the middle of the page instead of justifying it against the left margin, and return the pages to the designer, who inputs the changes and prints it out again and returns it to you: The second pass. It is now approximately 10 March. It is wise to bring in at least one set of fresh eyes for the second pass, as they will invariably catch errors you have missed. Once you have retrieved these changes from Fresh Eyes, passed the changes on to your designer, and received a fresh printout, (15 March) it is time to check all the changes you have requested (the foul copy) against the new copy. The third pass. At this point it is extremely wise to ask your designer to create individual PDF files of the poems and stories and email them off to your contributors with a note requesting that they get back to you with any corrections (*not* revisions – the time is long past for such things) in a few days, that is, by 1 April. Then these changes must be entered

and a fresh copy printed out. When you have ascertained that everything is as it should be, it's time to get the thing together on a disk and ship it off to the printer: It is now 5 April.

### Printing

Regardless of your chosen format, you will need to find a printer. Perhaps the local copy shop will be your printer, if you are going low budget; perhaps you will seek out the services of a local artisan with a letterpress in his or her barn. But if, as we are assuming for the purposes of this discussion, you are intent on creating a journal that can be distributed nationally, that is, by a distributor, you will need to find a printer who can produce a perfect-bound journal.

Most printers now have electronic quote forms on their websites, wherein you submit your 'specs', that is, trim size, print run, colour/black and white pages, shipping information, and they in turn submit to you an estimated cost. Undoubtedly, you will want to receive at least three bids on your job. It is not always wise to go with the lowest bid; you'll want to see samples of their work and make a choice based on quality, rather than budget.

Your chosen printer will get what is called a 'proof' back to you within two to four weeks (19–25 April), depending on the size of the company and their busy-ness. This proof stage is crucial in terms of your ability to get *Birch Bark* out on time. You must check over these proofs (it's your last chance to fix errors; it will cost you something per every page that must be corrected) quickly and get them back to the printer as fast as possible. Once they receive the proofs and make any corrections necessary, they will begin to run the job, and *Birch Bark* should be ready to ship sometime around 5–15 May.

### Distribution and promotion

Only you will be able to judge how important these last two subjects are for the success of your magazine. It all depends on your mission: some journals, as I remarked before, are distributed by hand. Some are distributed only by post, publisher to subscriber. Many of the larger distributors are more accustomed to dealing with larger periodicals, and will have difficulty understanding that when they fax you a print order, they are reaching your home telephone. Similarly they will have difficulty understanding the care and attention that *Birch Bark* requires in order to ensure that it reaches its audience. I have personally discovered that in this instance as in most others, it is useful to be a squeaky wheel. I have developed a friendly telephone relationship with my account representative, over at my distribution centre, and have been able to effect many changes for the better with regards to the actual destination of those precious 770 copies of *Fence* that are distributed between four hundred or so bookstores and newsstands all across the US.

It can be very difficult to get a new journal distributed. Your chosen periodicals distributor will ask you to fill out an application form providing information about your journal such as the trim size, frequency of publication, and category of contents (literary, romance, gardening, etc.). They will also request that you send ten or fourteen sample copies of the current issue of the magazine, which they will cleverly deposit in a few of their stores. If they sell an acceptable number of copies within an acceptable time limit, they will accept your journal for distribution. Note that it is virtually impossible to find distribution for a journal before it has published at least one issue.

*Fence* was conceived with active promotion (or publicity, or marketing) as a prerequisite of its success. I wanted to reach as many readers as possible. This is what I desire for

the writing we publish; this is what I see as the *raison d'être* of this particular journal: not to be known and read only by a lucky band of insiders, but to become part of a very large conversation, or dialogue, between the many different writing communities at play in the fields of the Writing Lord.

With this in mind, we have coordinated and participated in as many readings, conferences, panel discussions, talks, festivals, and other gatherings of live bodies as possible. I highly recommend this as *Birch Bark's* best means of promotion: there is nothing like actually meeting people and talking about your magazine to help create a sense of excitement and actuality about it. Other, more expensive and less friendly means of promotion include: advertising, which I also highly recommend if you can afford it; Press releases, which are only as effective as your mailing lists; and email announcement lists, which are not actually expensive but which can be very time-consuming to create and maintain, and which often annoy people if they are used in judiciously.

While the initial impulse to found a new journal is a joyful one, it is one that is wisely tempered by a dose of pragmatic realism. Long live *Birch Bark*!