

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

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Let me begin by saying I am for Poetry reviews and journals. In fact literary magazines of every shape, size and hue. Absolutely. 100%. They are sterling institutions in and of themselves; and without them many a talented poet would never have seen their name, or for that matter their work, in print. And, in their time, they have been enormously influential in setting both the standards and many of the 'trends' in modern poetry. They are the harbingers of what is fashionable in poetry. They are the cogniscenti - the self styled and self appointed fashionistas of verse. Judge, jury and executioner of what the poetry reading public will be allowed to see. Our literary dieticians - both in this country and others. THEY decided, for the better part, whose face would fit; who would be promoted; who would be the next big 'thing'; who would make a living as a poet and who would never be heard of again... They had a lot of power and by God they knew how to wield it!

Not unsurprisingly therefore, aware of both their prestige and their influence, over the years the editors of these august institutions felt free to erect a significant number of hoops for the aspiring poet to jump through. They would be the first to see this work; it must not have been published - anywhere - in any form. Neither must it be on offer to any other publication at the time of viewing; the author of the piece will wait patiently while the editor/s sit on it for three or four months before rejecting it. For which a stamped and self addressed envelope must be enclosed - whether the author wanted the copy (nobody EVER sends originals through the post) back or not. It must fit precisely into the genre of poetry currently adjudged to be 'a la mode' by the journal - which will be whatever the journal's editors decide, in their infinite wisdom, is currently 'in'. The poet is thus expected to purchase a copy of their journal, from his own purse, and study it at length to decide if his offering 'fits'. To fail in this is nothing short of blasphemy and ALL work not complying with this diktat will be adjudged to be of no merit and summarily rejected.

All this aside, naturally, from the fact that prospective contributors would be expected to offer up the hard wrought compositions with which the journal filled its often overly expensive pages, for gratis, or, at the very best, a free copy of the auspicious journal in which their offering was fortunate enough to appear.

However: with the advent of modern electronic communications. In particular the 'World Wide Web.' The boot is now most assuredly on the other foot. The astute poet, if possessed of a degree of internet savvy and the wherewithal to purchase both a domain name and a 'lump' (I'm sure there is a nerdy word for it but I don't know it) of web space, may bring his work to a mass audience while entirely circumventing the traditional 'journal' and 'small press' led routes. That, and the advent of 'on demand' publishing allowing the poet to produce his own slim volumes at a reasonable cost, opens up a whole new audience to the untried and untested poet. The poetry reviews and literary journals, traditionally the gate keepers of poetic achievement, have had their keys wrest from their rings and are now, like the Beefeater outside the Tower of London, little more than an amusing entertainment for the traditionally minded.

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That does not however serve to diminish their position in the literary world - nor should it, or in any way devalue their worth as commentators upon, rather than the setters of, current poetic trends; neither does it diminish their role in educating the callow poet in how good poetry should look and sound. But: It has eroded their position as the only conduit through which poetry may be brought to the reader! Okay; I accept that we are now subjected to absolute torrents on the most appalling doggerel on a daily basis; utter deluges of the most irredeemable codswallop that has ever suffered pen to paper. No argument. But at least WE now get to decide what is and isn't worth the reading for ourselves. WE make the decisions as to which poet is worth reading and which is not. What poetic style is of merit based simply on whether it is good poetry or bad poetry; Not on whether a select handful of individuals decide it is, or is not, fashionable.

Now. All that said; It will not have escaped the notice of those aspirational rhymesters still hell bent on seeing their name in a magazine, 'e' or conventional, that what once was a handful of poetry magazines; has become a horde to rival those of Genghis Khan. Furthermore; they vary from the hugely worthy and entirely creditable, through the broadly informed and competent, to the inept and breathtakingly amateur. Produced in their hundreds by every barely post pubescent creative writing group; of pretty much every secondary school and second rate polytechnic; across the length and breadth of the seven continents!

And yet! Almost to a man, apparently unaware of the paradigm shift that is modern communication, they continue to demand of the poet that they jump through the same bloody hoops as their predecessors! And, to add insult to injury, for exactly the same fees - sod all! Log onto the 'submissions' link of any poetry or literary review and there they will be - a literary showjumping ring of what they do and don't require of the potential contributor before they will allow him/her to give them their work! All still 'suggesting' this potential benefactor study their often irritating and inept little e rag before considering making a donation!

In light of which: I stopped sending submissions to any form of journal/review a long time ago. Occasionally I get a request from a publication inviting me to contribute; invariably followed, (something of a irritation I confess in light of the fact they had approached me), by a link to the 'submission guidelines' that govern their particular three ring circus if I weaken and show any willingness to be involved. I had in fact, for some period, stopped replying at all to these 'invites'... Until it occurred to me that when I added up my readers on the various 'social' and other sites, and added them to the hit rate on my home site, I probably had a bigger readership than some of the journals that approached me.

Now; it pleases me to suggest perhaps they should purchase a couple of my published collections and study them to see if their magazine was 'suited' to my poetry before approaching me. And then, if there is a particular piece of my work they have been taken with and would like to publish; they should make clear which piece, when they intend to publish it and in which part of their publication, and if I am content I will render them a single use license and an invoice by return.

I don't generally hear from them again... Funny that.