

the **Big**  
**Ugly**  
**Review**

An Online Magazine Report by Rachel Corsini  
December 2007

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## Fact Sheet

**Online Magazine:** The Big Ugly Review

**Web Address:** [www.thebiguglyreview.com](http://www.thebiguglyreview.com)

**Address:**

The Big Ugly Review  
490 Second Street Suite 200  
San Francisco, CA 94107

**Email address:**

*Fiction submission*-fiction@biguglyreview.com

*Nonfiction submission*-nonfiction@biguglyreview.com

*Poetry submission*-poetry@biguglyreview.com

*Photo submission*-photo@biguglyreview.com

*Music submission*-music@biguglyreview.com

*Film submission*-film@biguglyreview.com

**Founded:** Fall 2004

**Editor/Founder:** Elizabeth Bernstein

**Frequency:** Biannual

**What They Publish:** Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, photo, music and film

**Submission Guidelines:** See website for details

**Reading Period:** A deadline for each issue

**Simultaneous Submissions:** Yes

**Reporting Time:** Four to eight weeks

**Contributor Payment:** Currently non-paying

**Mission Statement:** Showcasing the best emerging and established talent in writing, photography, music and film.

**CLMP:** No

## Why I Chose the Big Ugly Review

I first encountered The Big Ugly Review searching through newpages.com. Automatically what caught my eye was the attitude of the magazine. It seemed to have its own flavor and style. I loved that. Then I read the editor's note for The Body Issue which goes something like this "Admit it. We look fantastic. I mean, just *look* at us! We're still big and we're still ugly, but my God. We can hardly stop looking at ourselves." Evidently they had had a makeover. From that point on I realized that the editor here had a sense of humor as well as pride in her magazine.

Then I started to read the stories. I was hooked. Even though the issue was themed, and every story had some way to do with a body, the work was completely original and edgy. I loved it. My favorite piece, *Baby Go Bye Bye* by Wendy Vanlandingham, is from the point of view of a doll. Everything that I read on the site was well crafted and completely original. The nonfiction blew me away at how honest and straightforward it was.

From my correspondence with the editor I can see how the magazine is shaped and also understand why she chooses the pieces she does. She invests her time into selecting every piece of fiction and nonfiction for the magazine. All the reasons above, including Elizabeth Bernstein's dedication, convinced me choose The Big Ugly Review.

### Comparison of Issues over Time

	Issue 6 Summer 2007	Issue 5 Fall 2006	Issue 4 Spring 2006
Prose: Poetry	2:1	8:3	11:5
Prose Writers M:F	7:9	1:7	5:6

Protagonists M:F	3:5	4:3	7:4
POV 1 <sup>st</sup> :3 <sup>rd</sup>	13:3	5:2	8:3
Issue	Body	Contest	Hidden Agendas

One thing I noticed doing this comparison table is that most of the stories published at The Big Ugly Review are in first person. That's not to say that the editor doesn't take third person stories, but most are in first. Almost all the nonfiction pieces I looked at were told from in first-person.

Another thing to note is that most of the contributing authors are female, with men coming in close behind. This doesn't have anything to do with the caliber of the stories and could just be a coincidence.

Another thing noted by the chart is the smaller amount of pieces altogether for the Contest issue. In my interview with Elizabeth Bernstein we spoke of why she themes her issues and if they hinder creativity or not. Evidently by having an entire issue devoted to contests as opposed to a theme, where a writer can branch off, the submissions were either fewer or not the type of writing that the editor was looking for.

## Story Reviews

*Issue 4 Spring 2006*

*I Have One Video* by Allison Carter is a first person realistic story in a domestic setting. Dr. Peters' secretary is setting him up for a large lawsuit. She'd been saving notes written to her by him, taking photos of all the bruises, etc. They're together in a hotel room when a room service worker walks in and sees the secretary on the bed with a shirt over her head. Dr. Peters put her in this strange position. In the end the secretary recounts all the evidence, from multiple moments of the affair, that she has against him and then Dr. Peters' wife calls.

The first person perspective for this story adds a sense of flavor for what could otherwise be a cliché. The author's voice allows for this throughout the narrative. The narrator's name is never given, but it really doesn't seem necessary. The story is told through this jaded woman's eyes. There's really no emotion in it which makes the reader wonder even more about the narrator.

*From Hymnals to Hymens* by Joe Loya is a creative nonfiction piece told in a domestic setting. Joe is a man from a religious background who works at Marie Callendar's. One day a girl named Prissy joins the staff as a hostess. He vows to seduce her using his knowledge of God to win over her family and get into her pants. He does just that and in the end Prissy dumps him.

This piece of nonfiction is extremely internal. There is one part however that I wished was more show than tell: Prissy's drunken father storming up to the porch and Joey's face off with him. The dialogue is written in description ("I told him that they didn't want him in the house anymore") as opposed to having it actually spoken. Instead of it being a fully drawn-out scene, it's cut by removing the dialogue between characters. The scene could have been extremely dramatic if the author had taken his time with it.

*Issue 5 Fall 2006*

*My Butter Likeness* by Colleen Morton Busch is a realistic story in a domestic setting. Russell, the narrator's boyfriend, creates a sculpture of the narrator out of butter. Her butter hair is longer and her butter breasts are plumper than they are in reality. He tells the narrator it's a representation. When she goes to Russell's house she makes the sculpture accurate, lopping off some of the butter hair and smoothing the breasts into smaller mounds. She then places the sculpture in the fridge and leaves, not angrily but more content.

In the beginning of the story the narrator seems content with her boyfriend. Then she sees the sculpture and realizes that he is not content with her. That small moment, where she understands that Russell doesn't see her for how she truly is, creates a real change in the character. It's just a small change. The story is told in such a way that you never feel sorry for the narrator, but you're just following her along in her journey. In the end the journey is a realization that she's perfectly fine the way she is and Russell is the real problem.

*But These Children Are Real Sweet* by Heather McDonald is a realistic short-short in a domestic setting. Darcy, a special needs child, wants her father to buy her a cake decoration flower, but it's decorative and inedible. The father refuses and continues to scold her throughout the story as he's thinking mostly about what Darcy will never do. In the end Darcy hugs her father telling him that she loves him. It's a flash fiction piece.

The internal thoughts show his conflicted feelings toward his daughter. "She'd have no sense she's too old for cartoons, no sense to walk her ass out of the trailer and to college." At the end Darcy hugs her father and says, "I love you pawpaw," dropping the cake flower to the floor.

*Issue 6 Summer 2007*

*Baby Go Bye Bye* by Wendy Vanlandingham is a magical realist story told in a domestic setting. The story is from the point of view of a doll that is being tortured by its former owner's daughter. The child doesn't play very carefully with her and smears jelly across her mouth. The doll ends up being spanked for being a bad girl when her former owner comes into the room and rescues her.

This is my favorite story from *The Big Ugly Review*. The doll is written with true human emotions, at one point the little girl spills water and the doll narrates, “Water, water everywhere.” She’s distressed but can’t say anything; the doll is completely incapable of sharing her human emotions. I truly feel for this poor doll and really hate the little girl that is being so cruel to her. There’s a real sense of humanity in this plastic object which would never have feelings, emotions or human responses. That accomplishment, and indeed the whole story, is truly remarkable.

*Heavy or Prolonged Bleeding* by Michelle Morrison is a realistic story in a domestic setting. Clair is a soldier in the Iraq War who gets pregnant and goes back home to have an abortion. While there, her mother is incapable of taking care of herself — there’s no food in the house and she hasn’t washed her hair in weeks. After the abortion is through she asks for the ultrasound but the nurse says that there isn’t one and Clair doesn’t understand why. At the end she spends the night with a Private named Steven, waiting until she can see the man who impregnated her again.

The story has excellent pacing, moving slowly through each of the steps that Clair takes to get to her abortion, and then what happens afterward. There’s no judgment of this character by the author, and because of that the reader doesn’t judge her. In a piece that deals with an issue as divisive as this, I think that’s something extremely hard to do. The entire story is very well pieced together.

## Interview with Elizabeth Bernstein

*What made you decide to start your own publication?*

We started *The Big Ugly Review* about four years ago on a whim. My then co-editor had published a print 'zine years before and he wanted to start another one online, now that the technology made it viable. I came on as the fiction editor, and then became the co-editor and now am the editor. I was tired of the impersonal process of submitting my own writing to obscure literary journals far away, and getting form rejection letters. I wanted to be more a part of the process, and to create a more inclusive, friendly, supportive community for writers.

*Obviously the Big Ugly Review is an online journal, what made you decide to have the journal online?*

Initially our desire for an online publication was simply a question of money. It cost us a tiny amount to buy and host the domain name. We have always been completely volunteer-operated. Our costs are minimal and our income from the magazine is nonexistent. We have no subscribers, grants or advertising.

But we soon discovered that the web offers many things that a print publication can't. For one, we are accessible to a much broader audience than we could ever reach on paper. We have readers on every continent, from about 75 countries. We get submissions from as far away as Iceland and Bangladesh. We also capitalize on the technology of the web, showcasing not just writing on our site, but also downloadable music and short films, which we could not do in a print magazine.

*Many of the online journals I've seen don't have a theme. Why did you decide to give The Big Ugly Review a theme for each issue, and where do these themes come from, like Fight or Flight for the next issue?*

We decided to have a theme just to give each issue a shape, and to make each issue distinct from one another. Also, I personally love having some limits or parameters to my writing. I love writing exercises. It makes me go places I might not ordinarily go. So I think it can act as a catalyst for writers who are inspired by a given theme.

As for where the themes come from, we (the poetry editor and I) brainstorm as many potential themes as we can. Then we narrow the list down, and show a selected group of trusted advisors and get their opinions. Then we pick one from there.

*The theme for the current issue is The Body. Do you feel that some of the writers who submitted took the theme too literally, and that a theme might restrict or add to a writer's creativity?*

We actually got the most submissions to The Body Issue ever, and the highest quality. I think people have a lot to say on the subject. The nonfiction submissions were exceptionally strong this time. Usually, the theme is not taken too literally, and we encourage writers to interpret the theme as loosely and artistically as they want. Our upcoming theme, "Fight or Flight," has actually produced more literal submissions than any other theme. We still have a couple hundred submissions to go through, but the initial bunch that came in was all about physical fights of one kind or another. We were surprised by that.

*The writing at The Big Ugly Review is unique and original, like Camo or My Eczema, Myself. How do you decide which work suits the criteria that you're looking for?*

A magazine may say it has an editorial philosophy and perhaps it may really have one, but my guess is the real answer is that a story gets chosen if the editor reading it likes it. I publish what I like. I don't have conscious criteria that I'm trying to fill beyond that. I tend to like work that is unusual and original, generous in its honesty and surprising in some way. I do not choose the poetry selections; our Poetry Editor, Miriam Pirone, makes those selections. We go over all the semi-finalists in all categories together, but she makes the final call on poems.

*Do you feel that there is more pressure on emerging writers to make a short story something exceptional as opposed to established writers?*

I would like to think that all stories we publish have something exceptional about them. I tend to skim over cover letters, and when I print out the stories so that they can be read later, I do not keep them with the cover letters, so I don't know the level of experience of the author when I'm reading their story.

*Most of the writers published at your magazine have been published elsewhere and even nominated for a Pushcart. Does that in any way sway your decision in their favor or do you look at all work from an unbiased perspective?*

See my reply to the question above. I like publishing writers whose bios make us look good. I also love publishing new writers, and helping to foster their careers in some small way.

*Everyone has personal taste in fiction, nonfiction etc. What's yours and how, when you're looking through manuscripts, do you get past your personal bias, if that's even possible?*

I don't try to get past my personal bias. That's what gives the magazine its voice and character. If I don't like a story for whatever reason, then it's not a good fit for the magazine. It doesn't mean it's not well-written; it just would be a better fit elsewhere.

*What should all writers know before submitting a piece to a magazine? What usually lets you know that an emerging writer hasn't submitted before?*

Let's see. Well, for us, each issue has a theme, and all submissions must somehow relate to the theme, however loosely. When we get a submission that does not relate to the theme, we know the submitter has found us in a directory somewhere and hasn't even bothered to check out the site and read the guidelines. This is also the case when they don't adhere to our word count limits. We'll get submissions that are 10,000 or 15,000 words, when our limit for short stories is 3,000 words. We know they have no idea who we are, nor do they care.

Another pet peeve that shows someone hasn't submitted much is when they include their contact information on the cover letter, but there is absolutely no identifying information on the story itself. This happens a lot. When I print out the story (most submissions come in as email attachments) I have to copy and paste the contact info onto the document that gets filed.

*When you decide to accept a story for publication do you have a lot of contact with the author on revisions etc., or do you choose to just publish the story as is?*

Most of the time, there is an editorial process in which some changes get made. Sometimes a story goes in as is, but that's the exception. I will work with a writer to make changes that I think would improve the story. I never make any changes myself. I'm a writer myself and would never want someone to doctor my writing. But I will have a dialogue with the writer about areas I think could be strengthened or pared down or whatever, and they will resubmit something if they agree with the changes. If they don't agree with the suggested changes and we can't come to an agreement, then we won't run the piece, but that has only happened once, and it was her decision to withdraw it rather than make edits.

*What advice could you give to all the emerging writers out there praying for their first publication? What do you expect from a story when you read it?*

Advice to emerging writers: Keep writing, and keep submitting. Submit to multiple outlets at once, even if they say you're not supposed to. Magazines simply take so long to get back to writers with an answer that you can't just sit around and wait months before sending your story out again. And don't take the process personally. It really is just the opinion of one (or a few) readers out there. You have no idea who is reading your story and what their perspective is. But it is **just** their perspective. I have turned down stories that were published in the New York Times. Clearly it was a good piece of writing – just not right for us. Rejection is an inevitable part of the process of getting published. Embrace it and don't worry about it. Don't get discouraged.

As for what I expect from a story, again, I like to be surprised. I like to learn something, about myself or the world. I like to be entertained. I like to be moved. I like to recognize a universal human experience or feeling that I didn't realize was universal. But mostly, I like to try to approach a story with no expectations at all.

*What is your inspiration and goal with The Big Ugly Review and why do you continue to pursue the magazine?*

My next goal with *The Big Ugly Review* is to publish a hard copy "Best of Big Ugly" anthology, complete with a DVD of the music and films. I continue to pursue the magazine because it's really, really fun. I feel like I'm building community, and providing a new outlet for writers and artists, and meeting lots of interesting people, and having a good time. My goal for the magazine is to keep on doing the same.

## A Few Things to Keep In Mind

A key thing for Elizabeth is having a story relate to the theme and also having the correct word count. Even though these things might seem small they are extremely important to an editor. Elizabeth cares deeply for her magazine so it's only right when submitting to reciprocate that care.

The Big Ugly Review is extremely well organized, so when submitting there is a specific email account for every type of submission they accept. Since Elizabeth and I have exchanged correspondence, I can truthfully say that if anyone submitting has questions they can send their questions to [info@biguglyreview.com](mailto:info@biguglyreview.com) and Elizabeth will probably respond quickly. She's that diligent.

