



Electica Magazine Review
A Magazine Report by Justin Powers
April 2008

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Fact Sheet

Magazine: Eclectica

Web Address: www.eclectica.org

Email Addresses:

editors@eclectica.org

submissions@eclectica.org

Founded: October 1996

Editor/Founder: Tom Dooley

Frequency: Quarterly

What They Publish: Fiction and non-fiction, poetry, articles, reviews, interviews and emerging writers

Submission Guidelines: E-mail only, no more than three stories at a time. No previously published work. Accepts all length of stories.

Simultaneous Submissions: Yes, as long as you tell them.

Reading Period: Always accepting work.

Notification: At least a month before the next issue is due out.

CLMP Member: Yes

Number of Submissions Annually: 3,000-5,000

Readership: Around 4 million hits per year

Why I chose *Eclectica*

What drew me into *Eclectica* was how simple it was. The layout isn't fancy; it's basic html. Its not in-your-face and trying to snatch your attention with crazy fonts and funny pictures. It's not breaking ground with a sly attitude. It's humble. It looks like an online magazine that provides one service only: giving you something to read. You get there, you see the stories, you click on them, and they make up for the rest.

The name of the magazine is telling, *Eclectica*. It has many categories of writing from poetry to travelogues, fiction to interviews. As I delved into the stories and their authors, I realized I was looking at a collection of fine works by all varieties of writers, emerging and established.

For eleven years (and counting) the magazine has been sustaining itself on a healthy diet of good writing.

Issue Comparisons

	Vol. 12, No.2	Vol. 12, No. 1	Vol. 11, No. 4
Prose: Poetry	14:25	25:26	13:22
Prose Writers M:F	5:9	9:10	7:6
Protagonists M:F	6:8	8:11	7:6
POV 1 st :2 nd :3 rd	10:0:4	12:2:4	8:1:4
Author Credits Novel:Magazine:First	2:9:2	6:9:1	1:12:0

Eclectica has these author spotlights in which it features the work of a particular author or authors. In the Vol. 12, No. 1 issue, there was a tag team between two writers, which is why the amount of prose spiked in that issue. Many of these stories are in first-person even when subtracting the non-fiction pieces from the equation.

The number of emerging writers published is small, but most of the writers who have been published in magazines have only made a few appearances. There is a good deal of people fresh on the scene with a short literary biography, as well as writers who have been around a while.

The ratio of male and female writers seems to be evenly and randomly distributed. *Eclectica* doesn't seem to mind the history of these writers or the statistic of what they're publishing. As long as its good, it goes.

Story Reviews

Vol. 12 No. 2 (April/May 2008)

Losing My Religion by Lyn Fox is a plainspoken, first-person story in a domestic setting told with three anecdotes. Fulfilling teenage wanderlust, the main character is traveling across Arkansas when a storm ushers him into a church. Here in this “black” church, he connects with the congregation, unlike the townsfolk, from whom he’s heard several racial remarks. Later while crossing a field, he removes a thorn from a cardinal’s wing, and upon setting it free, feels his own spirit fly away. “Ever since that day, I’ve preferred to take my spirituality with as little religion as possible.” And this statement is reinforced while he experiences another completely different church in British Columbia whose congregation is secretly bashing one another.

This story was a pretty insightful inspection of one man’s view of theism. The three anecdotes are quickly told yet captivating, sometimes sprinkled with humor. We get more a sense of the characters’ reasons for being spiritual and not religious than the stories that brought him to these conclusions, but after all, it is titled “Losing My Religion.” Fox provided some very strong images. Describing the countryside quickly, Fox managed to create vivid images in my mind. Wanderlust, being something I relate to, gave me a strong sense of the desire in the character and is such an archetypal trait, which immediately allows the reader to understand what the character is going through when the story begins.

Dale by Ravi Mangla is a plainspoken, first-person story in a domestic setting. The main character is an innocent bystander who chronicles a few days at the office. After finding out that Dale Westinghouse (a man who draws cat whiskers on his face) is actually a genius, his cubicle neighbors all spy on him. Rumor of Dale’s IQ quickly makes it to upper management who all meet with him individually. Their next step is to fire him, along with another employee, so the layoff doesn’t appear planned. Later, the main character runs into Dale at a convenience store he now manages. Later still he finds out Dale wasn’t a genius at all, but rather Danielle Westmoreland, the other random layoff.

This story is slightly quirky as we watch the gossip spread around this caricature of a cubicle farm complete with odd bosses and strange co-workers. Dale is a strong source of content, yet as a character is offset from the rest of the narrative. I’d like to have seen more of this supposed genius, whose IQ appears to be far lower than average. There were many side commentaries on the lives and habits of these people that made for an entertaining cast of

secondary characters; Mangla portrayed the amount of staffers and their various personalities well. We'd get people who we'd never met before injecting dialogue into the story as if it were an actual cubicle farm with hundreds of employees who we don't know. But each other their personalities glimmered with their cameos by the things they said and the way they said them.

Vol. 12 No. 1 (January/February 2008)

Grover by David Bulley is a first-person story in a domestic setting. A freak cold snap pummels a town, and two young people manage to survive by burning old furniture in an abandoned house they've taken refuge in. When the cold spell ends, most everyone in the town has died. The girl and boy main characters go to check on her grandfather. The first living person they find in the ruined streets is trying to hotwire the frozen cars unsuccessfully, as the batteries are dead. The girls' grandfather is in one of those cars frozen solid. The two decide to run away to California to start a new life.

The natural disaster that propels the story is quickly summed up in the beginning so we can get right to the moment of truth. We are told how important the grandfather is to the girl and are taken through the eerie, foggy streets to where they find his body. This allows the story to remain dramatic. We are given little explanation as to why they were in the abandoned house, the science behind the cold snap or their thoughts during it. Where some questions remained unanswered, the image of her frozen grandfather in this bizarre scene is impacting. The story works well the way it is, but it could easily be part of a much larger story. The dramatic event seems to be a catalyst for things to come, and a conclusion to a previous story. From a writer's perspective, reading this story stirs my creative juices. The story seems to want more; my mind begins to frantically think of their fate.

Talebearer by A. Ray Norsworthy is a first-person story in a domestic setting. The main character is in a mental institution and through internal monologue, it's discovered why. She remembers when she and her husband Jerry went to Las Vegas; she was pregnant with her twin daughters then. When the twins are young they are murdered. Soon after that Jerry dies from a heart attack. The main character remembers as a child she was abused by her father who would "baptize" her (put her head under water until she nearly drowned). Then it's remembered that the main character herself was the one who killed her children.

This story is brilliant as it pieces together the fragments of memory to explain why the character is in a mental institution. We're never quite sure what is reality, and she keeps thinking that people who are dead (her husband and children) are actually alive. I love how all the seemingly random events are tied together at the end. First we learn about these children, but we don't know who they are. Then we learn about Jerry and find out the twins were murdered. Then we find out about the abuse she received as a kid and how she then went crazy and killed her children. It's a story that works like a puzzle, and the image doesn't make sense until the very last paragraph, where Norsworthy reveals a eureka moment that is quite satisfying. I'm not one for physiological, mind stories, but this one worked because of the depth of the point-of-view. Instead of watching the poor woman struggle in her own mind and sympathize with her as the sane people we are, we are turned into crazies. So the frustration of her situation never comes to fruition to the reader because we don't see clearly enough to be frustrated, just like the narrator.

Vol. 11 No. 4 (October/ November 2007)

The Librarian and Reinaldo Arenas by David Massengill is a first-person story in a domestic setting. Taking place in Havana, Cuba, the narrator and his friend Reinaldo work at a library. They're both writers and Reinaldo's works are considered to be fresh and imaginative with a recurring character, the sea goddess. As time proceeds, Reinaldo disappears from Cuba, having fled to the U.S., where he becomes a published author. The narrator keeps up with his lost friend through news sources and eventually learns of his AIDS-related death from AIDS. The character, the sea goddess, continues to visit him even after all these years.

I found this story to be even more intriguing after I found out that Reinaldo Arenas is an actual person. This isn't a biography of the man, as the narrative stays with the narrator who loses touch with Reinaldo. Before knowing this is about an actual person, the story was still interesting. The magical realism of this sea goddess was probably the most inspiring part. The snippets of his old friends' life abroad allowed the story to focus on another character but still be about the narrator. The narrator, always though Reinaldo, was the superior writer, and in his story he uses his friend as a subject for his short story, which is kind of funny when you think about it. The author seems to be forever overshadowed by the man even after he is dead.

Rammed by Paul Silverman is a third-person story in a domestic setting. George Smoller is a scrawny, spineless man who is obsessive-compulsive about his personal health. He decides

to take a trip to Ketamesset Island, Maine to do an Eskimo roll on a kayak in the fierce waters as a symbolic first step to overcoming his many fears. On the ferry ride there, he befriends an obese student named Sandrina who he sleeps with, in an entirely non-sexual way. He leaves the Island after a few days, scared off by his own health concerns. Driving on his return journey and distracted by eating a sandwich, he almost gets hit by a train. This scare makes him consider his OCD and how ridiculous it is if a train could just hit him and kill him. He immediately begins to change his behavior.

This story blew me away. The voice has an authority that looks down upon George but also sympathizes with him. The author really takes his time with fully telling characters and each event. He slows down to a crawl when describing the size of Sandrina in hilarious detail. The time he spends on the certain quirks his characters have bring them to life. This is something I find incredibly important when it comes to storytelling—the story is not just in the actions, but in who the people are. George is a unique character and we're put right into his mind in order to understand his OCD. Without this understanding, George would be just a name walking around on the page going through these events if Silverman didn't provide the insight on his character's personality. Conversely, every instance in the story is important in developing George and the final scene where he has his moment of enlightenment is the perfect ending.

Interview with fiction editor Tom Dooley

Q: When first starting the magazine, how did you know an online format was the right choice for you? And how did you overcome the obstacles you faced in order to get it started (i.e. promotions, creating the Web site, submissions)?

A: Our purpose in founding *Eclectica* was specifically to create an online publication, so the format wasn't a choice so much as the whole point of what we were trying to do. There weren't many obstacles to overcome—the biggest obstacle to online publishing is realizing that everyone with a few dollars and a few hours time can start up their own publication, too, so it's really about establishing standards and building credibility.

Q: When co-founding member of Eclectica, Chris Lott, left the magazine, what drove you to keep it going? And what sort of obstacles did you encounter when taking on the full weight of the magazine?

A: I've mentioned the magazine at times as something of a child, in that it's the first (and only, really, so far) thing I ever had a part in creating that then took on a life of its own. I couldn't see letting it die. Also, I thought (and still think) that if I plugged away at it for a few decades, it would probably amount to something greater than the sum of its parts. I was amazed to learn how much work it took, though. I still stand in awe of what Chris was able to accomplish in that first year and a half, doing almost everything himself and making it up as he went along.

Q: Besides being an English teacher and working on Eclectica, do you have any other experience in editing or working in the publishing industry?

A: Nope. The closest I get to the publishing industry is providing an occasional blurb.

Q: Being an online only journal, in what ways have you achieved and sustained your credibility in this new medium.

A: I see it as a war of attrition. I've done the best job I could do for the last twelve years, and I'll continue to do so for the next twelve. With each piece of writing that achieves some recognition—is published in a short story collection or poetry anthology, is recognized by Million Writers, etc.—and with each author who goes on to publish books and win awards, credibility as I care about it is achieved and sustained.

Q: Amongst the legions of other online magazines, what philosophies do you hold to in order to be unique and fresh?

A: I publish what I feel is the best stuff that gets sent to my inbox. By best, I mean the stuff I feel is really well-written, which is by definition unique and fresh. So really, aside from trying to be a good judge of good writing, I don't do anything to keep *Eclectica* unique and fresh. That part is done by the authors.

Q: Some magazines have themes for each issue. Has this idea ever enticed you? Explain why you've chosen thus far to steer clear of that avenue.

A: I'm not crazy about themes anyway, but when the title of one's publication is *Eclectica*, it really doesn't make much sense to limit oneself in that way.

Q: How do you balance the workload of the magazine, a project that doesn't draw income, with the rest of your life?

A: I spend as little time as I can on the magazine. On business trips, I hole up in my hotel room after hours and edit like a madman. I make my wife unhappy for about two weeks, four times a year, and I mildly irritate her the rest of the time when I "hunker" (as she puts it) at the computer.

Q: What advice do you have for emerging writers trying to get published, either on your site or any magazine? What is good, what is bad?

A: Generally speaking, good is writing that serves itself. Bad is writing that serves its author or its author's agenda.

Q: What do you like to see in a cover letter?

A: Correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation, lack of pretension, some indication that the author isn't just firing a million subs off at random and isn't a total nutjob. Cover letters are like referees, in that they're necessary but not something I'd like to notice. I'd rather focus on the submission. However, if there's no cover letter or one is poorly written, it doesn't fill me with much hope that the sub will be worth the time I'm going to invest in reading it.

Q: When you printed the anthology "Eclectica Best Fiction Volume One," in what ways was it different from organizing a new issue of Eclectica?

A: Putting together the anthology was like throwing a party and inviting thirty friends, while building each new issue is like going to a party where there are a couple hundred people in the hopes of meeting ten new friends.

Another big difference is that if I discover a typo in one of the issues, I can always just open up Dreamweaver and fix it. The print anthology required more attention to detail. Which isn't to say that I'm a total slob with the online issues, but I'll admit that I sometimes don't have the time to edit as carefully as I'd like to. The permanence of print heightens the senses.

Q: Has the prospect of a print entity ever attracted you? Explain your thoughts on keeping Eclectica exclusively online.

A: Definitely. I'd like to start an old-fashioned fanzine kind of publication devoted to mystery/detective/noir writing. I'd call it "International Mag of Mystery."

As for *Eclectica*, it is what it is. I like the fact that tens of thousands of people can read it for free every month, and it doesn't have an ecological footprint or require distribution or an operating budget or a sales team. We aren't *Harpers* or *The New Yorker*, but we're as close as you're going to get to them content-wise from a Web site put together by some dude hunkering at his kitchen counter. I think that's cool.

Q: Eclectica has been around a long time! Has the process of running the magazine gotten any easier with all that practice? From receiving submissions to all the way to publishing, what is your process?

A: In some ways it has gotten easier. My HTML techniques are probably inefficient and antiquated, but I've got them down. On the other hand, I receive more submissions, and there are more of them that are pretty good. Sometimes a pretty good submission can be a small curse, because it takes a lot longer to realize it is only just pretty good.

Q: How have your expectations for the magazine changed since first starting in 1996? And what would you like to see happen in the future for your magazine? What are the goals you've set for yourself?

A: My expectations are much the same now as they were then. I hope to keep publishing cool stuff that is as representative of the full fabric of human existence as possible. Maybe someday I'll find a way to make an income from the magazine, both for myself and to compensate our contributors. Maybe someday one of *Eclectica's* stories will show up in Best American Short Fiction. A more likely scenario is that someday I'll be old, crazy, and poor enough that they'll make a movie about me, along the lines of "American

Splendor,” but it won't premier at Cannes. Maybe Taos, which would be cool, too. But if that happens, it'll be many decades from now, and I'll have to get a lot more interesting in the meantime.