

# The Minus Times.

A Magazine Report  
By David Bauer  
Fall 2009



Photographs Courtesy of Minus Times and <http://www.dragcity.com/artists/the-minus-times>

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## FACT SHEET

**Print Magazine:** *The Minus Times*

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**Address:** Kennedy  
The Minus Times  
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**E-Mail Addresses:** [mt.hacienda@gmail.com](mailto:mt.hacienda@gmail.com)

**Founded:** In various forms since 1992

**Editor:** Hunter Kennedy

**Contributing Editor:** Jeff Johnson

**Frequency:** The magazine is back after a two-year hiatus, so publication frequency is pending.

**What They Publish:** Flash fiction, journal entries, artwork, comic strips, interesting newspaper clippings.

**Submission Guidelines:** The majority of *The Minus Times*' publication is solicited material. However, if you mail something it may get read, and if you mail them something with money in it, that will only increase your chances. Postcards will most certainly get read, as they are rare (their words).

**CLMP:** No

## **Why I Chose The Minus Times**

Scanning the shelves at Quimby's Bookstore, the colorful, the sometimes-tastefully artistic covers of the various magazines were shoved up against each other, vying for my attention. It was overwhelming, asking my eyes to do so much of the shopping. However, it was a magazine that went in the complete opposite direction that caught my eye. It was a brown cardboard cover with a simple, orange font that read "The Minus Times." Good cover, good name. I flipped it open and was struck by the fact that every page was typed and formatted on a typewriter. An old-looking one, it seemed. Mistakes were typed over, tabs uneven in some places. There were pieces of antique clipart attached pell-mell to the stories. Aesthetically, I was hooked.

Then there were the stories: varied, short, funny, outlandish, frightened, searching, poetic. The only thing the stories were not was conventional.

It was an interesting dynamic, I felt. The stories brimmed with diversity, yet were contained in a purposefully understated issue. It's this dichotomy that made me choose *The Minus Times*.

## **Issue Comparisons**

	Issue #26	Issue #27	Issue #28	Issue #29
Writers Male:Female	9:0	11:2	16:0	13:2
Protagonists Male:Female :Unclear	8:0:1	12:1:0	13:0:3	13:2:0
P.O.V. 1st:2nd:3rd	7:0:2	10:0:3	13:0:3	11:0:4

\*Does not include published artwork

Considering the data presented, The Minus Times, at least in the issue span that I viewed, is a bit of a boy’s club. Not that they acutely do not include women; there are women who help organize and produce the magazine, and the editor himself is a married man, so he can’t be that sexist, right? No, I think the case is rather that Mr. Kennedy isn’t out to produce the next Harper’s or Atlantic Monthly; rather I think he just enjoys making a magazine that is filled with his friend’s writing and artwork. If other people enjoy reading it and pay to do so, all the better.

I did notice quite a bit of personal writing—creative nonfiction I suppose you’d call it. Naturally, most of these pieces were written in the natural first person. The split between fiction and nonfiction was pretty even, in fact, with the fiction being longer, but the nonfiction being more numerous.

A few of the contributors have previous credits. Dave Eggers is obviously famous, though most of his contributions are drawings and doodles. Sam Lipsyte has written three books and has been in *Open City*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Slate*, and others. Patrick DeWitt has written a novel called *Ablutions* that was published by Granta. And several of the contributors are musicians who have cut records that have lyrics that they wrote. So that counts too, I think.

## Prose Reviews

### Issue #26

*Ashtrays and Housekeys* by David Berman is a plainspoken story told in third person in a domestic setting. Kyle is dealing with the death of his older brother, brought

on by complications of alcoholism. Kyle's dad tells him in a restaurant to get his act together and start thinking about a family, to "...get behind the ball and find yourself a wife....It's high time we laid the cornerstone on this dynasty." The story then jumps back in time and deals with Kyle seeing his older brother, who was an avant-garde piano composer that had left Texas for New York. However, Kyle finds him drinking himself to death in a cabin in western Nebraska, trying to write piano compositions. His brother confesses that he's been struggling with a longer piece until he was in a friend's car and found an actual glove in the glove compartment. The story then moves back to diner, where Kyle decides that maybe carrying on his brother's name is one of the best things he could do.

The plot of this story and the shape of its telling are very simple, but it's the details that make it worth the reading. The father is described as a man who, "...in his youth...had been known to cripple men with his high fives." The father also drives a DeLorean. And while these details are funny, they're delivered with a deadpan detachment that doesn't feel cloying. We find out about the brother's death at the beginning of the story, so that gives the scene between the two brothers more impact. The brother is infinitely fascinating, describing to Kyle a piece "composed by photographing mountain ranges and placing a note at each peak before transferring it to the musical staff." The brother, in his paranoia, also buries apple brandy in the backyard, only to dig it up and drink it again. Ultimately, this was a simply-crafted story whose pleasure was in the details of the characters.

### **Issue #27**

*Stafford & Son(s)* by Jeff Johnson is a plainspoken third-person story in a domestic setting. Stafford has a dog that his father, "heavy on the sauce," found eating jelly donuts behind a Hostess outlet. His father pretends to work drywall but mostly sells marijuana around town. Before he gets married, Stafford's brother leaves him with baseball memorabilia, but Stafford ends up giving them away to the neighbor kid. When his brother commits suicide, Stafford can't forgive himself.

As is the case with the above story, the real joy in reading this piece came from the voice and the details. The voice has a slightly uneducated twang to it, saying things like "Hissself," and getting "jewed out of baseball cards." The story also follows an interesting path, told almost in a stream of conscious manner, with each story detail unfolding and revealing the next portion of story. It starts with a description of the dog, which leads to how they got the dog, which reveals the dad's alcoholism, and so on, following a thread from one part to the next. The story ends on an unsure note, the only real change coming in the fact that kids at school stop picking on Stafford because of his brother.

### **Issue #28**

*The Janitor* by Patrick deWitt is a third person, plainspoken flash fiction story. A janitor's girlfriend, Muriel, has a college-age son named Douglas. Douglas and the janitor do not get along. At the beginning of the story the janitor is sitting in Muriel's driveway, remembering past encounters with Douglas. At one point they even fistfight, with the

janitor knocking Douglas unconscious with a blow to the temple. The apology letter is described as one of the low points of his life. Deciding he can't handle another encounter with Douglas, the janitor and leaves to go to work. He enjoys reading graffiti in bathroom stalls, and vacuuming. He finds that the cord to his vacuum has been cut, and he's upset, but he fixes it himself and continues vacuuming.

I read this piece several times and I still couldn't quite get a grasp on what the ending meant. To me, it felt like there was some sort of connection between Douglas and the janitor's realizing that he can't keep getting upset about little things. He is an angry man, even being described as full of "animal hate." Something about fixing the vacuum cleaner and enjoying the simplicity of work is what causes him to turn the corner. I was, however, left wondering what would happen with Muriel and her asshole son Douglas. Would the janitor return to her? Would he do more to try and understand Douglas? I was left with quite a few questions for this story.

### **Issue #26**

*The VFD* by Robert Bloom is a piece of flash fiction in a domestic setting narrated in the first person. A sixteen-year-old kid is in Mike's apartment. Mike is forty and is trying to talk the narrator into being a volunteer fireman. He's cooking chili and something about the smell convinces the narrator that he can smell Angela. We get his reminiscences of the party where he met her, where she took him in the bathroom where she "wanted it up the ass." He admits to loving her. He then accuses Mike of having sex with Angela, and they have a brief fight, with Mike winning. Viewing his bruises in the mirror, the narrator decides he won't call Angela anymore.

*The VFD* is an interesting story in how much is conveyed in such a short time. There are concrete specific details that bring Mike's apartment to life. "The couches were old and doughy like [Mike] was. The table... was a model city; skyscrapers were empty bottles of Early Times and So'Co, the surrounding 'burbs of deflated Schiltz cans." There's also a narrative distance that allows the narrator to give context and an adult perspective to the longings of a sixteen-year-old kid. *The VFD* seems to fall a little short at the moment of change for the character. However, the story is worth reading just to admire its handling of information. The back-story between the narrator and Angela is told quickly but is vividly seen, and it helps give weight to the confrontation that comes with Mike in his apartment.

### **No Issue Number, Titled, "Fiction on the Fringes"**

*Khmer Wedding* by Rob Bingham is first person story in an exotic setting that may or may not be nonfiction; it isn't clarified but isn't really necessary to know. An American journalist and his Cambodian translator are invited by a high-ranking Khmer Rouge commander to a wedding. They agree, fearing for their lives. Then nearly half the story is devoted to explaining, with journalistic straight-forwardness, the situation in Cambodia concerning the Khmer Rouge and its split with the more "hard-line" extremists of the east. The two arrive at the wedding and drink with many dangerous-looking Cambodian men and dance and then drink some more. The piece ends with the narrator going onto a stage that has been erected and reciting Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," which makes everyone laugh.

As a piece of non-fiction, a journal entry or such, this piece works and is interesting. As a story, with a beginning, middle, and end, it's missing something. Immediately, there's something at stake with the American outsider basically having no choice but to attend this foreign wedding, but he's let off the hook quite easily, and there's really no dramatic tension to the story. Whether fiction or not, the portions concerning the recent history of Cambodia feel authoritative and are well-told. Whether or not this story is enjoyable I suppose depends on what you "expect" it to be. For me, while there is no dramatic tension, it was an interesting short piece of reportage on a different and dangerous culture.

**INTERVIEW W/ HUNTER KENNEDY, EDITOR OF THE MINUS TIMES**

David Bauer: The magazine seems to be getting thicker with each issue. After being M.I.A for a little while there, things seem to be going well. Business is good?

Hunter Kennedy: Business is not necessarily good, but I don't approach this publication as a business. If I were in it for the money, I would be publishing children's books or something much more easily marketable. Human experience, however, doesn't always fit into neat little categories, and I think that is particularly true for the kinds of writing I seek out for the Minus Times. There's a lot of fiction here that's unlikely to be found elsewhere, because the magazine is shaped by the writing and not the other way around. Wells Tower's story "Swaddled" is a good example—no other major publication knew what to do with it but I knew Wells and his good friend Harrison Haynes who wanted to illustrate it, so I gave them the space to try something new and think it worked pretty well. This short story/parody of Caddyshack also worked seamlessly with the loose theme of the last issue, which was movies.

DB: Could you, without exhausting yourself, explain the process that goes into putting out an issue of The Minus Times?

HK: Process of making the magazine: get story in mail/e-mail, type out story on my old typewriter, glue on illustrations, figure out the best order of stories and other pieces, put my hands together and pray that what I think works is not a complete delusion and that I have caught every typo. You will notice in the last issue that my prayers were not completely answered.

DB: Did the aesthetic quality of the magazine come naturally, or was it something fostered over time?

HK: The aesthetic quality is something that evolved over time. I had the luxury of doing a very small single sheet which I published in Austin, Texas back in the early nineties before someone coined the term "Zine," which allowed me to slowly develop a style through trial & error that is still reflected on the front page of each issue. This includes stories made from newspaper clippings and a "Letter from the Editor" to the readers in the guise of "advice" to my little sister, who is really named Way Way.

The larger issue is an extension of this organic approach to creating a magazine. The material helps shape the publication, whether the page count or the organization of the sections. Little is fixed other than the front page, the interview at the middle of the fold, and the credits.

DB: Were there any magazines that you've read that influenced the way you design The Minus Times?

HK: I would say that the influences are as diverse as Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac", Mad Magazine, the Dada movement, and David Berman's one page "Civil Jar" which he used to mail me in college back in 1989.

DB: Upon opening the pages, The Minus Times seems to be a study in controlled chaos. Is there a method to the layout and sequencing of pieces?

HK: There is definitely a method in the "chaos" of the magazine, just like there's a method to the madness of jazz. The stories not only have to be right for the magazine but work with the other stories.

DB: Was it always your ambition to be an editor? How would you explain your trajectory into the world of independent publishing?

HK: It was not my ambition to be an editor. Drag City Records offered to publish the Minus Times in 1996 when it was still published on a single sheet at Kinko's on the late shift (thanks to those gents) and I suggested we might as well do a magazine. I had no idea what that might require but thought I knew enough decent writers to get started. Once the first issue came out, more found me. So that old cliché is true: if you build it, they will come, particularly if it's different. I should add that I reached this audience because Drag City already had the perfect distribution in place— my readers bought this magazine at record stores, not B&N. We found some highly motivated independent bookstores who carried us as well, but sadly, a lot of these places have gone out of business.

DB: And how do you, as a human being, balance your work as a writer with putting together the magazine?

HK: It's difficult to balance my life against the requirements of the magazine. The Minus Times took a long hiatus because I got married and renovated a house. Many readers speculated I had finally been locked up. Hopefully they're not too disappointed I'm on the loose again.

DB: You often publish writings and interviews by, for, or about musicians. Was this always the magazine's intent, or did it grow out of your relationship with Drag City?

HK: The focus on musicians reflects their place in the culture. They have wider visibility than artists and writers, and some are multi-talented people who also draw or write. Or maybe it's that writers don't spend a lot of time with other writers.

DB: Your endeavor is interesting in that, despite the trend of the market, you still seem more heavily invested in the print market, as opposed to online. Is that an artistic decision, a business decision, something else entirely?

HK: I have a problem with reading anything over 500 words posted online. I just can't do it. I also don't like writing on a computer, so I'm wondering how I got this far.

DB: As opposed to asking you for some advice for emerging writers, I'll ask: What are some common pitfalls that emerging writers fall into?

HK: Not writing, not taking chances, wasting time trying to get published in the New Yorker by 25, thinking that a book deal is the answer when really the answer is figuring out how to live without a book deal or between book deals and still write. But the big pitfall, the real scary one, is writing without humility, with sneering irony, with a cynicism that you haven't earned and a cleverness that you may later regret. But it's okay, because we all have to figure it out, and I can speak from experience that some take longer than others.

DB: Finally, what does the future hold for Hunter Kennedy and The Minus Times?

HK: Barry Hannah suggested in a postcard that I give it up and just go write a novel. Who knows, maybe this thing has run its course. The beauty is not really knowing until you get that great story in the mail from somebody and say, "Oh shit, I can't not do this again." So if I'm lucky, maybe I'll be able to do both.

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After reading back over our interview, the impression I got from Mr. Kennedy's magazine was echoed in his words. The magazine in no way stinks of high-fallutin' literary snobbery. Mr. Kennedy also avoids this stench. No, the man's magazine is a labor of love, and it certainly seems like labor getting it out, what with the typewriter work and all. But even if it isn't the quickest or most cost-effective business model for the running a magazine, Mr. Kennedy seems to have no interest in such things. Rather his goal is to put out a magazine that he can call his, that has writing he likes and is filled with people he likes. Other people seem to like it as well, because he keeps coming out with new issues. I know that I'll be making my way over to Quimby's as soon as Issue #30 hits the shelves.