



## RED MOUNTAIN REVIEW

A PRINT MAGAZINE REPORT BY EMILY WITTE

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FACT SHEET

**Magazine:** Red Mountain Review

**Web Address:** redmountainblog.blogspot.com

**Mission statement:** *“Red Mountain Review takes its name from the seam of iron ore that runs through the heart of central Alabama... We have a simple goal—to produce a fine literary magazine that gets noticed, and to do so with Birmingham’s roots in mind. The Magic City has a long history of working hard and of grappling with hard truths. We will, therefore, always seek to recognize those in our field who do the hard work, who tell the hard truths, and who do so expecting little or no remuneration. Which is to say, the vast majority of writers of contemporary literature, literature that—for reasons of form, length, subject, or project—has traditionally had a difficult time finding the light of day in mainstream commercial venues. Luckily, our editorial tastes are broad: academics and “real people;” sonneteers and the so-called “Grrl-esque” poets; writers of very short nonfiction; those who write long, leisurely, expansive fiction. The list goes on.”*

**Mailing Address:** Red Mountain Review

c/o Creative Writing Department

1800 8<sup>th</sup> Ave North

Birmingham, AL 35203

**Current Editor:** T. J. Beitelman

**Editor’s Email:** RMRsubmissions@gmail.com

**Founded:** 2005

**Frequency:** Annually. (But really it comes out when it comes out.)

**Non Profit:** Yes

**What They Publish:** Poetry, chapbooks, fiction, nonfiction

**Submission Guidelines:** One entry per reading period. Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by SASE.

**Reading period:** Submissions must be postmarked from October 1 through April 1.

**Contributor payment:** Only chapbook contest winners receive a cash prize.

## WHY I CHOSE RED MOUNTAIN REVIEW

Red Mountain Review originates out of my high school, the Alabama School of Fine Arts, which serves as the typical “art school” in the atypical city of Birmingham, Alabama. I majored in creative writing. The editor is none other than one of my instructors, T. J. Beitelman. In 2006 I indirectly did some submission screening on the second issue, where as a junior I took a mandatory class called “Literary Editing,” where my peers and I received hands on experience about the biz and process of literary magazines. Unfortunately, at the time, I didn’t seem to “get it”—why we were studying lit mags so closely since we were all in high school and most of us wrote like shit compared to the stuff we were reading. But the small amount of exposure led me down a path to want to pursue publishing as a career, and a lit mag is the first place to start. It’s been three years since I took that class, and I owe a lot more to T. J. than I realize. Choosing RMR as my report’s focus is my own personal homage to what he instilled in me.

## ISSUE COMPARISON

	Issue 1 (2005)	Issue 2 (2006)	Issue 3 (2007)
Prose: Poetry	18:26	8:23	12:33
Protagonists M:F	4:3	2:4	4:4
POV 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup>	8:2:8	6:0:2	5:0:4
Author Credits Novel:Magazine:First	7:23:3	13:11:0	9:15:6

What takes my attention the most is the variety of who's getting accepted and published in RMR. In the first issue, the majority of those published possess publication credit only from other magazines, whereas the much thinner second issue leads in contributors credited with novels and collections. The third issue is the most evened out in contributor's experience. Since there are only three issues, it's hard to make a call on whether this is a pattern or not. RMR seems to accept a steady majority of first person stories, and about half of the prose is creative nonfiction. I wasn't expecting many second person stories, so I wasn't disappointed. The male to female protagonist ratio from issue to issue is mostly even. It's difficult to predict patterns for RMR's future issues since there are only three to gain info from.

## PROSE REVIEWS

## ISSUE ONE

*Dizzy Bridge* by Kevin Carey is a first person story told in a domestic, modern setting. A seventeen-year-old boy comes back from a year's stint in a mental ward. Once notable for being overweight, he's dropped extra pounds and bulked up, which everyone he reconnects with seems to notice immediately. He tries to visit his friend Martin, but he is turned away. He decides to paint his house for his father, and in between shifts of scraping old paint and applying the new, he's cornered by an old group of friends he used to drink with in the nearby marshes. They convince him to come out. While they're hanging out, his old friends jeer "good naturedly" at him being away. Then one of the guys, Percell, grabs one of the girls, Janice, and asks the narrator if he wants to cop a feel. This brings the narrator back to the night where he and his friend Martin were assigned to tie a dog up and leave it on train tracks until a train rolled by; their reward being a quick grope of Janice. This lust got the narrator in trouble before, so instead of copping a feel, the narrator chokes Percell and ties him to the railroad tracks. He sits next to the tracks as the train roars by and feels like he's finally home.

The biggest allure of this short story is how the narrator waits to reveal what he did to get considered "crazy." It doesn't seem to be a big question on the reader's mind at the beginning of the story, but by the time he reveals it, the importance of what he and Martin did is obvious. It is also interesting that Martin is never actually seen in real time, yet we still get a good sense of his character through the narrator's details supplemented from memory. We also get a better sense of what happened that night by the narrator waiting until a parallel event occurring to reveal it. This also opens up the possibility for the narrator to change the tide, which he does, and exacts his revenge. I sensed the banter between Percell and the narrator was too callous for them to be true friends, so what happens to Percell seems ultimately justified. In short, dude got what he deserved. It's nice to read a story where something is avenged or restored to its natural order, even if everything—such as the narrator's and Martin's mental conditions—is still messed up.

*Ladies in Red* by Kristine Somerville is a third person, coming of age tale that takes place in a modern, domestic setting. Dedra and Meg are both friends with stepmothers/ Meg hates her stepmother so much she starts a club to break her parents up, which Dedra obligingly joins. As they plant red herrings of their stepmother's disloyalties, Dedra realizes how fond of Helena, her step mom, she is. She attempts to reverse her misdoings too late, however, and ends up framing

her biology teacher for having an affair with her step mom. After the mess comes to a head, Dedra's mother drives them both somewhere out of town.

This story deals largely with the consequences of friendship and peer pressure. Dedra clearly sees nothing wrong with Helena, but bends to Meg's will anyway. The real kicker is how Meg turns herself in by the end of the story and blames the whole thing on Dedra. This story shows us that the good people can still get shit on even if they try to make things right. How very appropriate for life. The place of this community is handled well, especially with Meg's room and house being described as hot and stuffy; we feel as claustrophobic as Dedra in this environment. Meg's "no-bullshit" attitude explodes off the page when she tells Dedra to, "Write or go home to your mommy" when Dedra refuses to write unpleasant things about her stepmother. This story is very relatable to any child that's been through divorce, or had a rainbow of positive and negative experiences with stepparents. The story also invokes vivid imagers, particularly the opening paragraph's model telling of all the divorce that goes down in the neighborhood.

## ISSUE TWO

*What About the Bridesmaid Dresses?* by Elizabeth May takes place in a domestic, modern setting and is told in first person. The story follows spunky Mel who puts little belief in the idea of traditional marriage. Soon she meets a quirky Prince Charming. Upon her engagement, however, her mother Rose decides to oversee the wedding's particulars, much to the bride and groom's chagrin. As Marty, Mel's fiancé, is exposed to the rest of Mel's less-than-charming family, he and Mel hatch a scheme to wean the family off their interest in attending the wedding—by having the ceremony on a mountain summit, a six-mile hike from the ground. Unfortunately, this doesn't ward off the family, as Mel's father Hank plans to fly everyone up to the mountain summit via helicopter. When the wedding is crashed by a blizzard and the family is left stranded, Mel and Marty hike their way slowly down the side of the mountain. The family is later saved by a forest team thanks to Hank's cell phone.

This story deals mainly with the ugly horrors that families can sink to. The rescued family members are later televised on a show about real mountain rescues, and they blame Mel for being the "vengeful bride," even though it's clear to the reader how twisted each member is, thanks to the wonderful characterization of Rose, Mel's mother, and her father Hank (who

constantly bicker in the background of the story). The prose is witty and though it's a third person, it still manages to hold a distinct voice until its own—“[Marty] gets a little dyslexic sometimes and Mel thinks it's sexy”. The story also reads like a parody of magazines such as *Modern Bride*; random inserts of perfect wedding tips are scattered throughout the story. This mirror's Rose's wedding aspirations more than Mel's, so it adds an intriguing twist.

*High Fliers* by Joan Connor is a first person, modern short-short story told in a domestic setting. The narrator is flying on a small plane and notices a handsome man, whom she calls “Handsome Man,” across the aisle. During a bout of turbulence, she begins to panic. She starts envisioning the plane crashing but stares at Handsome Man across the aisle. As the plane seems to be diving nose-down, Handsome Man's seatbelt comes undone and he is next to the narrator, confessing that he'd lived his life in error until then. As they both seem to agree they are meant for each other, the pilot announces that the plane is safe, and the two return to their seats, finish their flight, and go their separate ways in the terminal.

This story takes surrealism to answer a question that cannot necessarily be asked until it's too late—what happens when the plane goes down? In this flash fiction piece, the narrator sees an entire new life extend before her eyes, even though she is convinced she is about to die. Her imagination gives way to this as the Handsome Man does exactly what she wants him to do. With the briefness of this piece, dialogue is everything, and becomes the only way we can get to know these people in such a short span of time. The dialogue delivers, of course—the Handsome Man says, “Let us... raise the minimum wage, ban cars in cities, smash the glass ceiling, ban spandex, and free the press,” with the narrator replying, “Oh baby, mandate childcare?” Clearly these are characters of political and social concern. I found this story invigorating in the way it dealt with communicating these characters, so by the end I'm sad that the plane isn't actually crashing, and everything turns back to normal.

### ISSUE THREE

*Safetyville* by Karen Dwyer is told in third person and takes place in a modern, domestic setting. Anne, who smokes too much, has just lost her second child due to miscarriage, and she is left dealing with the world around her, including her daughter Callie. Every day Callie attends a pre-preschool called “Safetyville,” in which she's taught about street safety. Anne assures everyone she meets that she and her family are doing okay—Callie's Safetyville instructor, a

neighbor named Norma, and Anne's best friend, Martha. It's revealed that Callie actually has been having problems at Safetyville since Anne lost the baby. Martha and Anne meet up at McDonalds one day and, as their girls run around on the playground, Anne asks Martha about her separated husband. The women aren't distracted for long as Anne looks up to check on Callie and sees her squatting in her dress. Anne reaches Callie too late as she defecates in the middle of the playground, while Anne continues to assure Martha that they're doing all right.

A brutally soft look at the effects of a miscarriage on a family, this story emanates honesty about a woman named Anne who cannot seem to cope properly with an unfortunate event. It's impossible not to sympathize with Anne in the midst of her understated sorrow. At one point, Anne thinks about how bad of a mother she is, yet the story also illustrates this by Anne picking Callie up late at Safetyville and Anne's forced avoidance of Callie's problems at school. For the most part this story is straightforward, and the prose is beautiful, especially the opening lines that describe Anne: "Hey body ends at her breasts. There is no terrain below that. She ended that terrain when the baby delivered itself four months early, dead." Though Anne seems complacent, the reader can suspect the miscarriage is taking its toll on Anne's conscience, shown by her habit of chain smoking and her apparent addiction to alcohol, which she had trouble staving off entirely during the pregnancy.

*Visitation* by Paul Pekin is a first person, story within a story, set in a domestic surrounding. The narrator is old man Peter retelling a memory. As a young Roman Catholic boy his father brings home a kitten one day. Anxious for companionship, Peter nurses the kitten back to health, and names it Sister Kitty. Once the cat gets healthy and big enough to eat scraps from the table, the parents get rid of the cat. Grief-stricken, Peter runs to a clearing and prays to the Virgin Mother to bring his cat back. She appears to him, tells him things will get better. Peter then hears the meows of his beloved Sister Kitty, and rushes to find the cat up a hiking trail. Peter returns home and tells everyone of his spiritual experience, but nobody believes him, and Sister Superior goes as far to reprimand him. The story within a story ends with Peter talking to his sister Myra, and he admits to her that there's a part he never told her. He reflects in thought, that he asked the Virgin Mother, "Is hell really here on this earth?" to which the Virgin supposedly replied, "Always remember that Heaven is closer."

This story stands as a wonderful example of a story within a story, as Peter, now an old man, tells about telling his Sister Kitty story over and over. The story he tells feels as well-told as

most stories of the Virgin are told in church. The voice is as authoritative as a story within a story aims to be. Peter's character is ultimately defined when he admits that he tells different versions of the story depending on the audience, as he doesn't want strangers to see him differently than his jovial, extroverted self. Peter's storytelling also serves to illustrate the conditions he grew up in; the details of his mother's constant proclaiming of "Hell is right here on earth" and his father's pathetic attempts at jokes make for delicious conflict. Also, Peter's model telling of church processes are informative to someone who is unfamiliar with the Catholic church. He doesn't spend too much time talking about Catholic guilt; rather he explains the day-to-day practice in enlightening detail.

INTERVIEW WITH RED MOUNTAIN REVIEW EDITOR, TJ BEITELMAN

**Emily Witte:** Let's talk story beginnings. A solid piece of advice was given to me in high school—"The conflict, place, and tone need to be established in either the first line or by the first three." How do you feel about that tidbit? Is it solid advice, or is it simply a resonance of our attention deficit culture?

**Red Mountain Review:** Sure that's solid advice. I like to say that a good beginning has an arresting image, a compelling action, and an open-ended question. Probably in the first sentence—certainly no later than the second. That might be a way to say the same thing, though I think you probably have a little more time to establish conflict and place than the first three lines. Tone's a different story. First line's the place for that. First word's even better.

**EW:** What techniques draw you into stories? Which ones set you off?

**RMR:** Hmm. I don't know if there's a formula for drawing me in or for setting me off. I like good words. That's an impossibly simplistic response, I know. But words are everything. There's an enormous difference between "orange" and "blood orange." Like, vast. The idiosyncratic choices a writer makes in terms of language and observation are what make a voice unique, and the only literature I find compelling is the product of a unique voice.

**EW:** What made you start Red Mountain Review?

**RMR:** One part hubris. One part stupidity. Two parts legitimate desire to be some sort of steward for the continuation of the writing craft. Okay, maybe two parts hubris.

**EW:** What's special about RMR; what distinguishes it from other magazines?

**RMR:** First and foremost, there's the free chapbook contest. We produce a limited edition stand-alone version of the chapbook and it's included, in full, in that year's issue of the magazine. Also, we're associated with a fine arts high school you know and love. Students get a chance to see the seamy underbelly of the process of producing a small lit mag, which is useful from both a practical perspective (what does a good cover letter look like, etc) and from a karmic one (serving in the mines of a lit mag has to count for something when it comes to being published, right?).

**EW:** What's the typical publication process for RMR like?

**RMR:** The first one is pretty standard. We accept submissions from Oct through Apr. Students open and sort the submissions. We farm the poetry out to our co-editors, who are poets and college profs in Birmingham. I read the fiction and make my selections. I also read the nonfiction, but I give the students a collective vote as well. They read each nonfiction submission (there are typically far fewer nonfiction subs) and we have a rush meeting to see how they vote. If an essay gets a majority of yes votes from the students, it gets the one collective staff vote. If we disagree, I pass it along to one of my colleagues in the CW department, who casts the deciding vote. Production we mostly farm out to the publishing arm of Greencup Books, run by the inimitable Russell Helms. If you ever got anything needs publishin', look him up.

**EW:** Are there other lit mags you enjoy that have influenced RMR?

**RMR:** Everything I know about publishing lit mags I learned in my experience working on the University of Alabama's national lit mag, Black Warrior Review. One of the best things about MFA writing programs, in fact, is the opportunity almost all of them offer to work on a lit mag staff. It's a confidence builder, invariably, because you understand the process so much better. Publishing isn't a meritocracy, but you can only really, truly know that—feel it in your bones, as they say—if you've seen it from the inside.

**EW:** How about ones you like just 'cause?

**RMR:** McSweeney's. The Sun. New Orleans Review. Glimmer Train. DIAGRAM.

**EW:** Describe the perfect cover letter.

**RMR:** Short and clean. Just like Tom Cruise. (I have no idea what that means.) Seriously, if you know to be businesslike, it's an indication you might know what you're doing. Might.

**EW:** What was your editing experience prior to starting RMR?

**RMR:** I did all the jobs you could do at Black Warrior Review. Plus I edited a quarterly statewide Popular History magazine, also published by the University of Alabama, called

Alabama Heritage. No, it did not require wearing a hood of any sort. It was actually quite progressive minded in its representation of the multifarious history of a, well, multifarious state.

**EW:** Where'd the idea for the chapbook contest come from?

**RMR:** This just in: it's annoying to launch a long string of \$15 checks into the black hole that is the USPS, entering poetry contest after poetry contest, all to no avail. I've done it more than I care to admit. In honesty, making the contest free was something of a strategy to get more entries (hopefully a few of them actually publishable). It's proved to be more than that. We get in the neighborhood of 200 submissions to the contest every year, and at least half of them are publishable. I don't know if that's encouraging or daunting. Probably both.

**EW:** How much fiction versus poetry do you receive in submissions? Estimate a ratio, if you can.

**RMR:** I'd say it's 35/55/10 (fiction/poetry/nonfiction). Small lit mags really are the realm of all things Poetry. Poetry is king because it has few other viable venues. (If you grant that lit mags are, in fact, a viable venue.) At least individual poems don't.

**EW:** Have you noticed consistent weaknesses with those that submitted stories? Typos, clichés, too many cancer stories—that sort of thing? (Pet peeves are fine, too—as writers, we've all got them):

**RMR:** Most of the fiction I get is competent but boring. The stuff of lightly published MFA students. That's a low blow to MFA programs/students, and I'm not really one to bash said programs/students. I owe my professional life to an MFA program. With that said, the truth is the truth: most of the fiction I get is competent but boring, and a goodly percentage of it comes from writers who are in or just out of MFA programs. Lots of stuff that is probably good enough for somebody somewhere to publish, all things considered. Very little stuff that you feel like you absolutely have to publish or you'll kick yourself. I understand RMR isn't *The New Yorker*, but all editors want to fall in love with what they publish. It's the only reason you dig through all those slush piles.

**EW:** Are there future plans for RMR?

**RMR:** You mean other than holding out our hats at a Greyhound Bus Station near you, soliciting your spare change? Seems somebody decided to throw a Great Depression 2.0 Party, and RMR has definitely been invited. Most lit mags have been, in fact, which is why they need (y)our support more than ever. For RMR, in the next year or two, it's just a matter of keeping our heads above water. Ultimately the thing needs a distribution deal to get it in bookstores nationwide on a consistent basis. Experience has shown we (I) can't handle it in house. Too much cost, too much time, not enough know-how. I'd love to publish a full-length book each year, as well, but that's pie in the sky at this point.

**EW:** You blog a considerable amount and seem to possess an acute awareness about using the Internet as a writing/publishing/getting-out-there tool. Yet the rise of this electronic medium is raising concerns in the publishing world; folks are complaining about the Kindle ruining the magic of books, and hell, anybody can go publish their own novel if they've got the money. How do you feel about this barreling bandwagon?

**RMR:** I'm just glad somebody thinks I have an acute awareness of...anything. Here's the deal. Anybody could always go publish their own anything. (I love italics, by the way.) Whitman is often bandied about as a prime example of this (self-publishing) but there are many others throughout literary history. Writing is an act of connection. Always has been, always will be. Publishing is only a means toward that end. We are lucky—not cursed—that there are more—not less—means of publication. I think when people complain about such matters (“What will happen to the book?!”) they're really complaining that the rules are changing, and they don't yet know how to make the new rules work for them.

For a reader, it means sifting through way more junk. You can't rely on arbiters of taste in NYC (or anywhere else) anymore, not as much, anyway.

For a writer, it means being strategic about finding new ways to access readers.

What it doesn't mean is the death of the book, at least in our lifetime. And it might not even mean the death of the independent bookstore. I look at what has happened here lately to the neighborhood coffee shop vs. the Starbucks monolith and draw some unsubstantiated hope. In lots of cases, the indies are surviving and the Starbucks are going the way of the Dodo. I think, in general, we're entering the Age of the Niche. Writers and readers (and coffee lovers, etc) are just

going to have to be more savvy about how we find -- and create -- the niches that sustain us. The potential is there, that's for sure.

**EW:** On that note, how do you feel about online publications?

**RMR:** The same way I feel about "regular" ones. There's a wide gamut. Some are good. Some suck. The vast, vast majority are mediocre. And, as with print lit mags, when you find one that's good, support it.

**EW:** Three favorite short stories. Go!

**RMR:** Impossible task, but here goes: "The Legend of Pig-Eye" by Rick Bass. "The Body Shop" by Elizabeth Graver. "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin. I like those stories because they teach me new things every time I read them. Stories by Raymond Carver, Jeanette Winterson, Richard Ford, Lucy Corin, Brad Watson, Italo Calvino, Edward P. Jones, Rebecca Brown, (I guess I could go on forever)—they teach me things, too.