



Magazine Report

By

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Fact Sheet

Online Journal: SmokeLong Quarterly

Web Address: <http://www.smokelong.com/>

Email Address: dclapper@smokelong.com

Editorial Focus: Flash fiction

Mission Statement: We are looking to be captured in the first few sentences of your work. Tell a story or paint a scene.

Founded: Fall 2003

Editor(s): Kelly Spitzer, Thomas White, Joseph Young, Dave Clapper

Founder: Dave Clapper (*View Clapper interview on Publishing Lab Web site.*)

Frequency: Content is published quarterly

What They Publish: Flash fiction under 1,000 words

Submission Guidelines: See website for details.

Reading Period: Stories are read all year around

Simultaneous Submissions: Yes

Reporting Time: four weeks

Contributor Payment: Due to the current economy, SmokeLong is currently unable to pay its contributors.

Submissions Per Issues: 900 submissions per issue (they accept 20)

Average Page Views Per Month: 107,988

Average Percentage of Pages Per Category Fiction: 100%

CLMP: Yes

Why I Chose *SmokeLong*

Before taking this class I was largely unaware of a lot of things. Flash fiction, short shorts (not the cut-off jean kind) and online publications were all relatively new to me, and I was apprehensive as I approached both this new form of fiction and publishing venue. It seemed like anyone who could make the payments on a domain name each month could suddenly own a literary magazine. And stories under a thousand words? That seemed more like poetry, and I hated my poetry class in high school.

Luckily, I was introduced to Smokelong. The journal's clean, accessible design first welcomed me in, but it was the quality of the prose that really grabbed me. The fiction is always superb and the artwork accompanying each piece adds a visual layer. The most refreshing and original aspect of the magazine is the short interviews done with each author, lending a deeper understanding to the story, and the reasons why it was written.

Comparison of Issues Over Time

	Issue Twenty-Four	Issue Twenty-Three	Issue Twenty-Two
Authors M:F	11:8	13:10	6:11
Protagonist M:F	11:8	11:12	8:9
Point of View 1 st 2 nd 3 rd	13:0:6	13:1:8	10:1:7
Author Credits Emerging: Established	15:4	20:3	11:6

Comparing issues over time gave a surprising amount of insight into what types of stories SmokeLong publishes. One aspect that came to light during the research was the amount of emerging writers that are included in Smokelong— between three and six per issue. I defined emerging writers as those with two or fewer publications in venues similar to SmokeLong. This was way more than any of my estimations, as I guessed that online journals in particular looked for previously published authors specifically in an attempt to help build credibility. Included in these emerging writers were two high school seniors, and three first publications. This has no effect on the quality of the work in Smokelong, in fact some of these emerging writers offered up some of the more entertaining pieces in their respective issues. In actuality, it reinforces the notion that SmokeLong is solely concerned with publishing outstanding writing, regardless of the author's pedigree.

Another thing that was refreshing to see was the number of women writers that are published in SmokeLong. While in the two most recent issues published slightly more men than women, issue twenty-two there were substantially more women than men.

In regard to the gender of the protagonists vs. the gender of the author, there was not necessarily any correlation. While in the latest issue, men wrote from the point of view of men, and women of women, issues twenty-three and twenty-two show distinct cross gender writing. While writing from the perspective of the opposite gender is not necessarily experimental, it does suggest a certain freedom in the stories published in Smokelong. This inclusion of cross gender writing

means SmokeLong isn't afraid of letting writers tell stories that are out of their own realm of experience.

Magazine Prose Reviews

Issue Twenty-Four

I use Commas like Ninja Stars by Samuel Lee is a first person realistic story set in a domestic setting in which a young immigrant child experiences the process of assimilation through his growing understanding of the English language. In the span of just over 600 words, we're able to see the growth of the narrator, the growth of his voice, the shame he feels for his poor English, his mastery over the language and the way he profits from it, and finally his redemption and return to his native tongue when visiting with his mom after the death of his father. Through this, the reader watches the narrator grow as his command of the English language evolves from the rudimentary through the playful, to the exquisite.

This story is a perfect example of what SmokeLong is trying to offer with their journal, as well as a beacon of what the flash fiction genre has to offer. The layers to this story are many, all of which interlock beautifully to create the story. All of this is conveyed through the subtle transformation from a fragmented sentence and missed punctuation such as this selection from the first half of the story “i can point. i can show this. i can tell this. nothing wrong with my words,” to this comparatively striking sentence from the latter half, “Now I own American words and pawn their configurations for money.”

Seattle Gymnopédie, by Scott Garson is a first person realistic story set in a domestic setting with a slightly poetic tone. The story revolves around an unnamed narrator and his neighbor Natalie, whose children watch TV so loud the shows songs get stuck in his head. The narrator works as a caterer, and while working nights, he comes to admire a certain radio dj who painstakingly constructs the narratives of the events leading up to the recordings of 1920's jazz pieces he plays. When driving in the catering truck listening to this dj's program, he sees Natalie in the rain wearing a sequined dress and the story ends.

Named after a series of ambient compositions by Erik Satie, Garson's story shares a number of the dreamy aspects of the songs. Strong metaphors such as “the bitter ale would glow like fire” help ground the reader in the place of the piece, while allowing the tone to take of in reflective

poetic directions. The story is full of images with poetic quality such as, “The fray in the hems of our jeans,” but they offer little more than a nice way to see what is happening in the story. The scenes in the story are beautiful, but so what? What are we supposed to get from the story? The sudden, almost surreal ending with the narrator seeing his neighbor in the rain in the middle of the night seem to cut the story short of its potential. To put it in one of Columbia’s pet terms, What is at stake for these two? We’re never fully told.

Issue Twenty-Three

The Society for the Preservation of Everything, by Kuzhali Manickavel is a first person realistic story in an exotic setting with a slightly mysterious tone. The story follows an unnamed narrator and her male companion Sathya as they move from village to village in an undisclosed country documenting the effects of HIV on the population. While the narrator seems hopeful that there might still be hope in helping these people, Sathya is content just crossing the name of the lost city off the list.

The principle conflict in this story comes not from the characters total immersion in a part of the world crippled by HIV, but instead from the difference in way the two characters would go about helping. The opening image, a nosebleed leaking blood into a broken well, sets a somber tone, which quickly becomes bitter. When the narrator speaks, her dialogue is reserved, obviously affected by the devastating sadness that springs from the area she is traveling in, while her companion’s voice is harshly indifferent making the tension in this story almost palpable. All of this comes together to lend an amazing level of realness to the story.

Ghost Bike, by Thomas Cooper is a third person realistic story in a domestic setting that shows the way a father deals with the death of “the girl,” presumably his daughter. Though the circumstances of the girl’s death are uncertain, it is implied that she was killed on her bike at an intersection across from a park, a spot that the father immortalizes by painting bikes and chaining them to a lamppost. The story ends with husband and his wife in a diner, a failed attempt on the husband’s behalf to reach out to his wife, and this haunting piece of dialogue “No devils, no nightmares, no such thing as ghosts.”

The real strength of this story is its ambiguity. The reader is never really allowed a clear idea of what actually happened to the girl, or how her sudden absence affects the mother and father, something accentuated by the pulled back, third person point of view. Instead, we are left to infer from the clues that the girl is really the daughter and that the reason the father paints these bikes and chains them to the lamppost is that it is his way of to cope loss, while his wife spends time talking to her mother on the phone. The difference in the ways the mother and father deal with loss reveal the sadness that is now a part of them. The tone of the story is hollow and haunting, much like the final string of dialogue, another aspect that makes the story superb.

Issue Twenty-Two

Asian Girl by W.P. Kinsella is a first person realistic story set in a domestic setting with a slightly absurd tone told from the perspective of a new father. It is the story of a presumably white family that has mysteriously given birth to an Asian baby. While neither parent denies that their baby is perfect in every way, the mother cannot seem to get over the fact that her baby is Asian, while to the father the prospect of his wife giving birth to a baby that is not of their race seems completely normal. Even after taking her child home, the mother still cannot deal with her Asian child and runs off with another man. The father, now a single parent, begins seeking advice from sources such as Steven King. There is a long time jump in which the daughter grows up, and the story ends with the daughter bringing home a professor from college that “looks old enough to be her mother,” and the two falling into each other’s arms.

This is the funniest story I’ve read on SmokeLong so far, something that really stood out when picking stories for this report. The strongest aspect of this story was the emotionally pulled back tone, reminiscent of the most bland, middle management type character which is utilized to great effect, bringing the comedic level of the story to a different level, such as in the fathers response to his wife when she points out that neither her or her husband are Asian. “ ‘I’m aware of that,’ I said. ‘Now, how should I word this? The fact that she's Asian is certainly no reflection on you.’ ” The story itself is completely minimalistic, and told almost entirely in dialogue, and giving almost no clues as to the setting. It was great to see a comedic story in SmokeLong, because out

of the issues I read for this report, not many were outright comical or featured much outside of the typical literary fiction fare. Including this story shows that Smokelong doesn't shy away from stories that are different, but rather it is the quality of the stories that determines if they are accepted.

Campfire by Donna D. Vitucci, is a first person realistic story in an outdoor setting with fairly poetic leanings that shows a sixteen year-old defining herself through the boys she chooses to sleep with. Told in short, model tellings, the girl relates her past sexual experience with these boys, her desire for more, and the current boy she sleeps with at the bonfire. Through the girl's voice we learn that these types of sexual encounters are fairly common for her, but have little emotional resonance. The story ends with the narrator contemplating a possible change in the way she deals with boys—taking things slower, caring more.

What I love about this story is that in 480 words, I'm completely drawn inside the narrator's head and can connect to her internal struggle. The first sentence, and particularly the first two words are what drew me in at first. "Wet October seeped through the seat of my jeans." Phrases and sentences like this are littered through out the story. They paint familiar pictures through the eyes of an obviously intelligent, emotionally distant young girl.

Interviews Review

I wanted to make sure that I took some time in this report to talk about one of the most endearing elements of SmokeLong (outside of the prose of course), the interviews. While there are a number of literary magazines that publish interviews with well-known authors, especially if those authors are appearing in their latest issue, but SmokeLong has opted to take a different route by publishing flash interviews with nearly all of the authors they publish. While at the outset it might not seem like much—who cares about these no names—it actually lends a deeper layer of intimacy to the stories and allows readers to connect not only with the story, but with the author and the feelings that inspired her to write. This doesn't mean that the interviews are an extra set of legs for a faltering story, but very much their own living, breathing entities. Through them you get a sense of the authors personality allowing us to note new favorites and possibly follow their careers.

Alternatively, from a writer's perspective the interviews are just plain exciting. Who doesn't want to talk to someone who loved your story enough to publish it? Even if its just a flash interview it's another great piece of exposure that helps us emerging writers get our collective feet in the door. Often times I enjoyed the interviews almost as much as the stories themselves. The questions are fresh, and rarely venture into stock literary interview territory. There have been occasions where the editors, and even the founder Dave Clapper, have published their stories in the journal, and the interviews with the people who make the journal happen on a monthly basis are always entertaining and informing. However, one of the best interviews I read was with Donna D. Vitucci, who answered all of the questions in a charming way, that was still informative for emerging writers while managing to be entertaining.

Interview with Editor Dave Clapper

Justin Keberlein: I've often read that there is a point when editors of longer manuscripts give up on a story they are reading. Because flash fiction is short by nature, do you try to give each story a read and why or why not?

Dave Clapper: I myself do not succeed in giving every story a read. We average about ten submissions a day, and I have a day job, kids, a life outside of SmokeLong. Ditto the other editors. We do, however, try to make sure that every piece gets at least a couple reads from the editors. At one point, when we had less folks on staff, we either had to sacrifice this or take a lot longer to respond to submissions. So we brought in more folks. Now, it seems like each piece gets read by four or more editors. There are exceptions—some pieces are so clearly not ready for publication that one editor's read is sufficient. But most of the submissions get multiple reads.

J.K.: Are there certain subjects that occur often in submissions to SmokeLong, and is there any type of story that you refuse outright?

D.C.: It seems like things come in waves. We'll get a bunch of submissions that relate in some way to bones, for example, and at least one of the editors will comment something like, "There must be a bone prompt in one of the workshops." But subjects that crop up a lot over time? Dead relative stories are big, babies and mothers especially. Stories of abuse. Bad marriages. Affairs. Because we see a lot of them, they have to be written exceptionally well for us to really take notice. We don't reject them outright, but something great has to be going on for us to get past a feeling of, *Seen this before*.

J.K.: You wrote in your submission guidelines that you can usually smell a draft a mile away, and that you prefer finished work. What does this imply about the role you or your editors play in the editorial process? Ever like to get your hands dirty and do some editing?

D.C.: There are different kinds of editing: proofreading, copy editing, content editing. We're first and foremost content editors—we decided what content, in pieces, makes up the larger whole of an issue. That's only part of the content editing process, though. Quite often, we see ways of tightening up pieces—cutting material, shifting bits around, etc. But here's the deal with drafts: we get about 900 submissions per issue, and we accept twenty. Think of us as professors

of a class grading on a curve; the stuff we publish is the A+ material. Sending us anything less than A+ isn't going to cut it. So make sure the work is as polished as it can be. Do we proofread and copy edit? Sure. Do we content edit? You bet. But pieces have to be damned near ready for us to invest the time.

J.K.: With what frequency do stories that appear on SmokeLong go through a series of drafts or edits with an editor involved?

D.C.: I'd guess that close to 90% of the material we publish, we suggest at least some edits.

J.K.: Could you name a story that you edited and perhaps go through the exchange between you and the writer in this process?

D.C.: I'd prefer not to be too specific about any one piece without checking in with the writer first. Typically, though, once we agree we want a piece, we'll talk about it amongst ourselves to see if we think it's as strong as it can be. If we see edits that we think would make it stronger, we'll contact the author with those edits. Usually, we give the author the final say on those edits. In a few cases, we've felt that the story wasn't strong enough without the edits (or at least right for us) and we've conveyed that. In a few cases, those specific authors weren't willing to make those edits and we wished them the best (and the stories found other homes). That's the exception, though—if we like a piece well enough to go to that step, we're usually okay with the author's choices to take or leave the proposed edits.

J.K.: My favorite story in the latest issue is *I Use Commas like Ninja Stars*, which I think is a great example of how rich and complex flash fiction can be. What about the story originally drew you to the piece?

D.C.: Damned near everything. Emotionally, it's a really rich story, but the way in which it's told is incredible—the style is so different from the norm. Style alone can't carry a piece, but in this case, the style was essential to the truth of the story. In some ways, it reminded me of *1/3 1/3* by Richard Brautigan. *Ninja Stars*, by the way, is one of the few pieces recently for which I don't think we requested any edits.

J.K.: I really love the artwork associated with SmokeLong, especially the cover of issue four. What's the process when selecting artwork for the individual stories? Is there an attempt to make the cover art reflect a larger theme that you've found in the stories that issue, or do you just go with pieces that are aesthetically pleasing?

D.C.: We leave the cover art pretty much to Marty Ison. How much he reads each issue before creating the art, I'm not really sure. He has access to reading all of the stories, but I don't think it plays a huge part in his creative process. To me, the covers are like flashes in and of themselves

J.K.: Seeing as how SmokeLong is an online publication, you're already part in some ways part of the digital revolution in the literary world, but as new technologies become available and the way we read literature changes, do you see your role in the literary community changing with it?

D.C.: Yes and no. I think change goes two directions. There's how we change with the literary community and how we ourselves change the literary community. That probably sounds a bit pompous, but I think we've played at least a small role in making flash fiction more "accepted" as part of the literary canon. I think we've also had some influence on the kinds of flash fiction that are being written and published. We're not the only influencer (far from it), but I think we're one of them. But do I see us changing based on technologies? I think we have to if we want to continue to be relevant. We're not going to jump on every new technology that comes along. For example, at one point it seemed like everyone wanted to use Macromedia Flash on their web sites. Great program. I love playing with it. But ultimately, flash fiction is about the words, and Macromedia Flash was doing more (in my opinion) to distract attention from the writing itself. So there's a balance—adopt the technologies that enhance the words while recognizing those that detract.

J.K.: I read in an interview with Richard Nash editor of Soft Skull Press, in which he said that independent publishers are never going to engage in advertising. As the founding editor of an indie lit journal, do you agree with his statement and what, if any steps do you take to promote SmokeLong?

D.C.: "Never" seems like a pretty strong statement, and I see it belied all the time. Will indie presses engage in the kind of advertising that we think of in the more classic sense of old media? In a few cases, maybe yes, but I don't think that's the best way of using dollars. With the new

media, though, there are so many ways of pimping the words that cost little to no money. A lot of indie mags and presses, for example, have fan pages on Facebook, where they can promote themselves. The only cost is time. We also use things like StumbleUpon to drive traffic to the site. Nominate stories for the various prizes. We have a page on Wikipedia. In the early days, I used to hit just about every writing-related EZBoard I could find to let people know about the magazine (to drum up both submissions and readers). I also did a lot to make sure that the various search engines dominant at that time had us indexed. Now, though, the best methods of promotion are more tied into the various social networking sites. Individual authors' profiles on Facebook, for example, have driven a lot of traffic to their stories when they've linked them in their updates.

J.K.: Any advice you could give to emerging writers who are taking their first steps towards making submissions.

D.C.: Read the magazines. Read them a lot. Find the ones you keep coming back to, the ones who publish lots of stuff that you really like. Those are the ones you should be submitting to. Try not to submit to any magazine that you haven't read—the odds aren't good that your writing is a match for something you don't know at all.

J.K.: If you could take a glimpse at the magazine in ten years, where do you hope to see it? Any long-term goals?

D.C.: We'll still be here. Beyond that? It's so hard to say. Even looking back five years, I didn't yet know most of the current editors on the staff. Most of them, I hadn't even read a single piece of theirs yet. And we move pretty organically. Most of what's changed about us in the first six years has been driven by a combination of what the staff wants and what the writers want. Based on how much writers want to be in print, I'd guess that we'll have some sort of print artifact. The reality of where the readers are is online, so that'll never change, but I think we'll probably have something in print, too. And I'd really like to get to a place where we're paying the writers. Those are the two most obvious things I see as likely to change from where we are now. Aside from that, I think our readership will continue to improve, as will the quality of the writing. Submissions will keep going up, which will probably mean that our staff will keep getting bigger

so we can handle the submissions quickly. But the biggest thing is that we ain't going anywhere, and longevity feeds into all of the above: more readers, more submissions, better quality.