

Spinetingler Magazine



Michael Mullen
Literary Magazine Report
Fall 2009

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Fact Sheet

Web Magazine: Spinetingler Magazine

Web Address: www.spinetinglermag.com

E-mail Address: spinetinglermag@mysterybookspot.com

Founded: 2005

Founding Editors: Sandra Ruttan and K. Robert Einarson

Current Editors: Sandra Ruttan and Jack Getze

Frequency: Initially every quarter of the year, but now about once a year

What They Publish: Fiction “categorized as mystery, thriller, suspense, supernatural, ghost story, love, fantasy or science fiction.”

Submission Guidelines: E-mail submissions to spinetinglermag@mysterybookspot.com as .doc or .rtf attachments, written in Arial 12 pt. text, double-spaced. Use *** centered at section breaks, not other symbols. Include a less than 100-word author bio. Copy and paste the release statement available on the Web site into the body of the e-mail.

They primarily publish stories between 1,500 and 6,000 words; stories published under 1,500 will not receive payment.

Contributor Payment: \$25 USD for a published story via PayPal

Cost: Free PDF online, e-mail subscription available

Not-For-Profit: Yes

CLMP: No

Why I Chose *Spinetingler*

Spinetingler was recommended to me by a student in my class. When I visited the Web site, I was attracted to the black-and-white photo cover of the latest issue, Spring 2009. A woman, face obscured by dark hair and clad only in a white sheet, is aiming a semi-automatic at something or someone out of frame. She looks exhausted, hurt, and possibly deranged, but the soft sheet over her white skin gives her an almost tender vibe. I found the balance between violent and tender intriguing.

The letter from Editor Jack Getze promised “Hard-boiled, noir, sci-fi, horror, and even satire” in that one issue. I, for some reason, had convinced myself that the magazine only published mystery or thriller, but the wide range of stories one might find in a single issue was a welcome surprise. Upon reading the magazine, I found that almost any genre was published so long as the story never meandered or lacked stakes. These characters are imperfect and often face the consequences of their decisions or simply a tragic twist of fate.

Comparison of Issues over Time

| | Summer 2007 | Fall 2007 | Winter 2008 | Spring 2009 |
|------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| <i>Writers</i> Male:Female | 6:3 | 7:4 | 7:1 | 11:1 |
| <i>Protagonists</i> Male:Female | 7:2 | 7:4 | 7:1 | 11:1 |
| <i>POV</i> 1st:3rd | 3:6 | 5:6 | 7:1 | 8:4 |

Following the last four published issues, there's a noticeable trend of mostly male protagonists and writers. Horror, thriller, and science fiction genres often attract more male than female readers and, therefore, writers. Writers tend to write characters of their own gender, if only to use experience or knowledge to make it more believable. Or, perhaps, they're simply more inclined to "see" stories from the eyes of a character with their own gender.

The points-of-view in the stories shifted from a majority of first-person in the former issues to a majority of third in the latter two. It's hard to notice a trend here; neither female nor male writers tend to prefer either first or second, instead choosing to go with one or the other as it best fits the story.

Story Reviews

Issue 15, Spring 2009

Queen Anne's Lace by Stephen D. Rogers is a plainspoken piece of fiction in the first person in a rural setting. The narrator is a mentally-handicapped young man working at his father's gas station. He hung out with two older boys, Dominick and Russell, in a nearby forest, providing them cigarettes and enjoying their company. When Dominick starts bringing around his girlfriend Anne, Russell stops coming around. Dominick starts asking the narrator to steal from the gas station. When the narrator gives Anne a flower that Dominick claims is infested with flesh-eating bugs, the narrator worries that he's infected Anne and Dominick. Witnessing Anne and Dominick writhing naked in the forest, the narrator hurriedly collects the gasoline his father had once used to burn a tick. The story ends with the narrator dousing the two and lighting them with a match in an attempt to kill the flesh-eating bugs.

Rogers' story manages to convey the simplicity of a handicapped mind while allowing the narrator to remain observant and insightful. He allows the narrator to describe his mistreatment as if it's expected, and the tragedy of the "flesh-eating bugs" is both surprising and yet believable. The story's peppered with the narrator's observations of things around him, hinting at a tragic end for the story. "One day I saw ants attacking a caterpillar. It squiggled and jerked and twisted but they wouldn't stop. And that was eating from the outside in."

Successful Surgeon by Fiona Kay Crawford is a plainspoken short story told in the third-person. Dr. Baker is a renowned surgeon hours away from his vacation to Maui. One final surgery stands between him and relaxation, and he goes about prepping while thinking about how one quick trip to Asia had taught him more than medical school ever had. A struggling strapped-down patient is wheeled out into a surgery room with an adjacent viewing room, the reader's first hint that these patients are not volunteering and perhaps even inmates. He slowly injects the inmate, who slips into death, before signing a paper and being congratulated for a job well done. The victim's family is relieved, but Baker concerns himself with making it to Maui on time.

Little hints are peppered throughout the piece about the nature of Dr. Baker's job. "In his specialty, he pointed out; there is no concern about his patients having a latex allergy." "Every procedure he performs is front-page news." We're never quite sure whether he's simply poisoning inmates on death row or if his procedure is more sinister, but the satisfaction he gets from a job well done makes the reader uncomfortable. He laments his wife leaving him, but he notes it's "fortunate that the pre-nup cut her out of his newfound fortune. Well, there are plenty of other women out there."

Issue 14, Fall 2007

Under the Blanket of Sun by Daniel Hatadi is a short story in an urban setting told in the first person with a poetic prose. Under a blanket, a bum sitting near water is visited by an Indian man inquiring about the weather. Later, the bum sleeps on a Sydney beach, enjoying the quiet and the beautiful view. A group of drunk teenage boys begin to harass and then attack the narrator. In a flash of orange, the Indian beats the hoodlums and reappears before the narrator. The Indian asks how his life has come to this before sucking the life right out of him. When the narrator wakes the following evening, he feels thirsty and the water fountain tastes foul so he feeds on a possum he encounters. After feasting on a few more animals, he comes upon a drunken teenager near the harbor, who he then attacks and feeds upon. The story ends with the sunrise and the narrator going back beneath his blanket to sleep.

I didn't know until after the narrator had eaten the possum that he had been turned into a vampire. Hatadi's prose is quick and poetic with run-on sentences that seem to bounce around the shores of Sydney. "I walk again, down by the water, around the shoreline, through the suburbs, past a police station, past a floating restaurant, back to the park, along the path, dangling my feet in the water again and I suck in the air, never like this before." It goes on, flying in and out of sensory details and setting description like a seagull dive-bombing on the Sydney shore. It's a strong, beautiful little story with exceptional imagery.

Out of Service by Mark Troy is a first-person plainspoken story in a rural setting. The narrator is taking summer classes to get into University of Texas. He lives in a Podunk town, hanging out at a scrap yard with his buddy Ross while Ross' Uncle Jesse is out looking for spare parts. Hoser, another friend, works at his father's funeral home and charges Ross and the narrator to see the dead body of the "hot" girl from school. He tells them a woman insisted her late husband buried with a cell phone "in case he wakes up." The boys retrieve the dead man's cell phone number, and Ross calls it, leaving a message. Unsatisfied, they "spooof a call," calling the widow and making the caller ID say it's her late husband's cell phone. On their second string of prank phone calls, the dead man's gangster son Lonnie arrives at the scrap yard along with the dead girl's brother. They beat and torture the boys, who confess to their crimes. The gangsters make the boys dig up the dead man, with whom they buried a dead Uncle Jesse, who was not a scrapper but FBI. Police arrive, gunfire ensues, and the narrator hides in the dug-up casket. The story ends hours later, he wakes, trapped, and attempts to use the old man's cell phone, but he has no service.

The plot is thick and slightly convoluted, with twists often and conveniently coming out of left field. However, the author has a sure hand and elevates the stakes, especially the final scene, with one revelation after the other. The violence, sexual with the dead body and explosive with the gunfights, is relentless and not for everyone, but it works for the story. By the end, the story concludes in an orgy of violence and comeuppance. "Saldano spun and fired the shotgun. Hoser's head disappeared in a pink cloud. Pock-face opened up on the lights. Immediately, the surrounding darkness exploded in gunfire. Blood geysered from Lonnie's back. I dove for the only cover, the casket. Amid the gunfire I heard Ross scream and then darkness."

Issue 13, Summer 2007

A Tragic Affair by George Burden is a flash fiction short story told in the third person. A doctor, Greg, is leaving for a conference and an overnight stay at a condo when his disapproving wife relates to him a nightmare that he left her for a pretty woman named Doctor White. The man, however, does not appear to be an adulterer. In fact, after a disappointing conference and a satisfying dinner, a tipsy Greg decides he should simply drive home so his wife doesn't worry. As he pulls out of the lot, an eighteen-wheeler smashes into his car. The story ends in a quick instance at a nearby hospital, a nurse informs the female doctor, "D.O.A. I'm afraid. Not much you can do for this guy Dr. White."

This was a very quick read about a tragic hand of fate. Greg seemed like a stand-up guy, and it was his wife's nightmare about infidelity that caused him to comfort her, therefore killing him. The story moves at a brisk pace, but it feels like the surprise ending was created first, and the story an afterthought. There's no lesson or moral to be taken away from this story. Rather, the reader is left pondering a cruel twist of fate.

The Living Dead by Amra Pajalic is a short story told in the first person. It's prefaced by the narrator describing just how she went from being a beautiful woman to "the living dead." In a nursing ward, the narrator lies paralyzed, watching fellow patients and their visitors. While the other patients are brain-dead, the narrator is immobile and unspeaking, but completely coherent. Her physical therapist Leah and her boyfriend Dave begin having sex in an empty bed nearby, propping the narrator up to watch. Eventually Dave and Leah allow paying customers to have sex with the narrator's prostrate body, injecting her with contraception. As her limbs begin to revive, the narrator plots her revenge. She paralyzes Leah and Dave and props them up in her hospital room as victims to be raped—as she had—by Dave's paying customers. The story ends with her using the johns' money to buy a ticket to London.

At first, the story felt like it was going one way: the entertainment and distraction of a paraplegic through questionable means. However, Pajalic's tale took a dark turn, and I found myself cringing as the narrator was violated time and time again. Worse, she began to regain feeling, and therefore the pain, of rape. The author turns her into an angel of vengeance, and her tone shifts from longing and sad to dangerous and sadistic. "When Dave's customers had finished for the night I washed Leah and returned her to my bed. A tear dripped down her cheek. 'Shhh,' I murmured as I smoothed her hair. 'I won't hurt you. You're going to know exactly what it's like to live my life and I'm going to know what it's like to live yours.'" It's an uncomfortable piece, but I found myself cheering on the narrator as she exacted her revenge.

Interview with Editor Sandra Ruttan

Can you give me the brief history of the magazine: where it started and how it began?

In the early stages of my writing career I found it extremely difficult to get my work considered by publications, both in print and online. There was a feeling that in some cases, lack of name recognition was a factor in my rejections. I also felt there were gaps in the online market, so Spinetinger was created, in part, in an attempt to showcase some of the works being missed. I didn't want writers limited by genre, or by format, or to the use of guns or a subgenre. What I wanted to focus on was compelling stories, and to this day, one of the stories that's stayed with me was an early one, Jessie's Toothbrush, which makes me laugh even now. It's definitely not a conventional crime or mystery story, but it's got that memorable quality that's made it stay with me. That's what I was looking for.

As an editor, what are certain things you look for in submissions? Would you say each issue has its own theme?

The issues aren't usually themed. As mentioned, I look for memorable stories. Currently, I rarely review submissions. First round review is done by Jack Getze, and unless there's a particular issue with a story I let him choose what he wants to publish, but when I [do] the selections I'm looking for the perfect package. The writing needs to be clear and tight, and the characters need to catch my interest, and the story needs to have something fresh and memorable about it. It's hard to come up with new subject matter, but talented writers find a way to put a new spin on an old subject, and when they match it with quality writing their work will definitely get my attention.

What are some common mistakes emerging writers tend to make? What are mistakes you've noticed in your early writing that you avoid now?

There are procedure mistakes, and there are writing mistakes.

Procedurally, follow a publisher's guidelines. I certainly made my share of blunders early on, and have learned from being on the receiving end how infuriating it is when writers don't follow directions. Almost every day I get a submission that goes straight to the rejection pile because it doesn't include the release, or the bio information, or the story is 20,000 words long. I've had e-mails from writers saying they hope I'll make an exception for them, and then they proceed to tell me why they're submitting a novella or erotica, or whatever. The more professional the writer, the more likely they'll follow all guidelines to a T. Some of the most established writers we've published have been the easiest to edit, while many new writers often lack the self-editing experience necessary, and the self confidence, to receive constructive criticism.

Writing mistakes are also an issue. I know I made my share of POV mistakes early on with my own writing and now when I read a story, POV errors jump out at me. Everything, from the simple to the complex, matters when you're presenting your story. Typos are one thing, but continuous spelling errors can be very distracting when you're assessing submissions. Writers have to remember that the people reading submissions are editors, and technical mistakes are going to pull us out of the story. Our experience and role requires us to notice. Submitting clean copy is critical, and that also means you need to make sure that any editing or revision notes on the document aren't visible. I've had stories submitted where edits were typed in brackets that were inserted into the text, not even attached as notes, and those stories were impossible to read.

I do think that two of the hardest things for writers to master are endings and "show not tell" writing. Many stories fall down in the end, because the writer tries for a twist that hasn't been set up properly, or because the ending feels rushed, or confused. Short stories demand an economy of words, yet so often, writers will indulge in lengthy descriptions of the characteristics of their characters, when they could have demonstrated those characteristics through the character's actions during the story more effectively. Sometimes, you have to learn to trust the reader to pick up on the inferences instead of spelling everything out.

In an interview published in Spinetingler, you said that the magazine was created "to give people a chance to be published, based on the merit of the stories and the writing, not on their publishing history." As an established writer of the Nolan, Hart & Tain series, you've gone from an emerging writer to a published one. What are your experiences in trying to get published before those books and now that you have made a name for yourself?

Prior to starting Spinetingler I received a lot of form rejections. Eventually, after assessing stories that were published, I began to realize that some publications put more emphasis on the writer's name. I was frustrated that the primary focus wasn't on the written work itself, and wanted to give people a chance to have their work evaluated on its own merits. At the same time, I realized that starting an ezine would help me establish my own name, and that helped me get my work accepted for publication. Once I had the series with Dorchester I would receive invitations to submit to anthologies and publications, and have been asked to write articles for magazines as well, for pay. It's frustrating when you're starting out, but getting your name known is a huge asset if you want to have a serious career.

We're seeing a trend in the publishing world: the page to screen "digital revolution." What are your thoughts on the Amazon Kindle and similar e-readers? Do you see it having relevance today or ever? Is the paper novel becoming obsolete?

I don't believe the paper novel is becoming obsolete. The end of the book has been predicted for decades, and many lamented the invention of movies, and then TV, and proclaimed the end was near. The truth is, the nations that are going to be the world leaders tomorrow will be ones that have readers. My stepchildren have book clubs at school, in grades 2 and 3, and they discuss books and the children are encouraged to make personal connections with the text. Last year, the oldest didn't really have the reading bug, but over the summer they discovered *Goosebumps* and the youngest, who'd just finished grade 1, read 30 chapter books over the summer. We have to tell them not to take half a dozen books in the car when we're going to the store, and they come to the table with books in hand. Creating readers begins with creating a culture of reading, and this is what authors need to invest in and support. Our kids will choose books instead of video games and movies because they've captured their imaginations, and that's what kids need to discover.

I think e-readers will supplement the reading experience for everyone. Once the price comes down we'll see more and more people embracing e-readers. I know it would be convenient when traveling, and I also think if it was possible to be sent a file I could download for reviewing purposes it would save a lot of money printing ARCs and shipping them. I won't read at my computer, as that's uncomfortable for prolonged periods, but I'd definitely review from a Kindle if I had one.

I also feel that we'll see more interactive experiences created in the future, blending the written word with visual graphics, for example. I think it can be done effectively, without diminishing the value of reading, and if we can bridge the gap we'll have a lot of innovative ways to tell stories in the future.

Spinetingler pays authors to publish works. This is unique amidst both the economic recession and the generally unprofitable nature of e-zines. How does Spinetingler justify paying their authors, and how profitable is advertising within the magazine?

Advertising provides a limited amount of revenue. If we paid Spinetingler staff for what they do, we'd be so deep in the red we'd be closing shop. I think it's important to pay the writers to entice the highest quality work possible. One of the benefits of having a good reputation is that we do get a lot of submissions, but one of the drawbacks is that we get a lot of crummy submissions as well. People will submit to us instead of somewhere that doesn't pay, in the hopes of earning a little money. It's easier for me to reject the bad submissions when I can point out that we're paying, therefore treating the authors as professionals, and we expect professional quality. That holds true when it comes to editing. A number of writers in the past have refused to be edited, and we now conditionally accept everything. If the writer refuses edits they are unaccepted. Paying writers allows us to demand professional standards, and if we want to have a top-quality ezine that's important.

In the Spinetingler interview, you said you preferred novels over short stories because shorts "require very precise, tight writing and you don't have the latitude to explore subplots and tangents. And I love subplots and tangents. [With shorts] you have a few words to develop character, setting, situation and then wrap it up. What I like about writing novels is that you have time to build the scenarios, to play with the twists and to bring depth to your characters through their actions." Flash fiction, fiction even shorter than the short story, has seen a rise in popularity over the last few years. What are your feelings on flash fiction? What can it do and what can't it do compared to the more traditional short story?

I think flash fiction is an excellent discipline and that serious writers should try their hand at it. It's incredibly hard to tell a cohesive story in less than 750 words. When I was starting to get serious about my own writing career I started blogging, in part, to have a commitment to write something every day. It might not be for my manuscript, but I was still expressing thoughts through the written word. It was a good discipline and it worked for me. If I had the time, right now, I'd make myself work on a flash fiction piece every day I wasn't working on a manuscript. It's literary cross-training, working different muscles than the ones I usually use in my work.

What literary journals or e-zines do you read, and why?

I keep an eye on the newcomers and the long-standing names - Thuglit, Plots With Guns, Thrilling Detective. I don't spend as much time reading online as I used to, simply because of time constraints. I do try to help new ezines when they start out, but many of them fold in such a short amount of time, you begin to lose track of who's still around.

How do you balance the editorial workload of Spinetingler with your own writing, and—hell—your life?

Poorly. I've brought on Jack Getze as editor with Spinetingler, and he makes a lot of the decisions now. I also "sold" Spinetingler so that I don't have administrative headaches and the owners of the site handle the ads and the site maintenance. I have a partner who assists me with the awards each year. Every other weekend our kids visit their mother, and I try to get as much writing and work time in as possible when they're gone. The other 12 days out of 14, when the kids live with us full-time, I try to squeeze in time as I can, or as deadlines loom. I've slowed down, but I'm still working.

What input do you have over the visual themes or artwork of each issue?

The new administration really takes charge, and while they like to include me, I'm not a control freak or a micro-manager. I can't be - the issues would never get done. I trust everyone to do their job and only get involved if I have to. If I do have a specific idea I pass it on, but usually the people who have the skill with art do a much better job than I would.

What are your biases as a reader? What makes you avoid picking up a novel off the rack or stop reading a story after a paragraph?

I'm not a real romantic type, and I usually like a certain amount of realism in what I read. If the cover is pink and girlish and the jacket is talking about a female lead who loves to shop I'll pass. I do read on the darker side... but that doesn't mean I want to read gratuitous violence either. There needs to be a solid balance of story and character. It's hard to say just what makes me pick up a book anymore, because it's a combination of so many variables. Having heard good things through the grapevine, an interesting cover, a catchy title, a trusted author. All of those things will make me pick the book up. What makes me choose it to read has to be something about the story and character that catches my interest. I'm not big on gimmicks or knock-offs, and if something looks like a *Harry Potter* wannabe or a *DaVinci* knock-off, I'm not going to read it. I avoid trends like the plague.

Having read many stories that have and haven't made it into *Spinetingler*, what's one type of story, or one writing habit, that you never want to read again?

I don't want to read stories that move from one violent act to another with no convincing motivation, and no empathy developed for the victims. If I don't care about the character being hurt, it's hard for me to care about the motivation or the story as a whole. There has to be a point. Wonderfully subtle stories are often far more effective than shocking, graphic ones.

What's your reading process for submissions?

When I was one of the primary readers I would go through submissions once they'd reached a certain number, or as I had time or need (upcoming issue). I would grade them. I graded the opening, graded the character development, graded the grammar and spelling, graded the plot execution, graded the ending. Stories that held together start to finish and scored high were obviously on the short list at that point. If I had more stories than I needed I'd wait for the second reader to rank them and then we'd discuss. Sometimes, at that point, a really strong story might get cut simply because the theme was similar to another story we'd already accepted, or because the writer was difficult to work with... or just because we had to make a tough decision and another story just snuck by them.

What advice would you give to emerging writers like myself?

Keep writing, but also, keep reading. Read everything you can get your hands on. Figure out what works and what doesn't. Take time to play with techniques, styles and subgenres and you'll find your own voice. You'll know what comes naturally to you and what doesn't.