

Sub-Lit
An Online Magazine Report
By Jessica Hall
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Fact Sheet

Magazine: SUB-LIT

Editors: Laurah Raines, Michael Ogletree, John Casey Keyser, Addison Williams, Amber Nicole Brooks

Message from the Web site: “*SUB-LIT* isn’t an uptight rag. Sure, we want your best work, but we also appreciate originality, derisiveness, decisiveness, and most importantly, dissidence. Is your work experimental, focused on a less-than-mainstream topic, or reflective of counterculture? Good. We’ve read and enjoyed Alice Munro, Raymond Carver, and Ernest Hemingway, but we don’t want their imitators. We want *new*, exciting, funny, or even shocking work--give us writing that **comes from the gut.**”

Web Address: www.sub-lit.com

E-mail: editors@sub-lit.com

What They Publish: Poetry, Visual Art, Non-Fiction, and Fiction that comes from the gut.

Submission Guidelines: Word count is flexible, but keep it under 7,000 words. Send only one story at a time. If submitting a novel or novella excerpt, include query. Submissions should be attached to a cover letter e-mail as an .rtf or .doc *only*. Address your work to fiction@sub-lit.com with fiction/submission/title/author/word count as the subject line. Incorrectly formatted submissions will not be read.

Simultaneous Submissions: Ok, with the knowledge that Sub-Lit must be informed.

Response Time: 8 weeks or less

Frequency: Three times a year

Reading Period: Varies depending on when issues are due to drop, but the site informs when reading has stopped in the submission information section.

Why I Chose Sub-Lit

I first stumbled upon Sub-Lit while surfing the lit journals on NewPages.com on a very glum Sunday morning. I was looking for something quirky to perk me up with not much luck, when a little icon featuring a Betty Paige lookalike's seductive eyes and the title SUB-LIT in bold white font flashed across the screen.

I spent the next two hours pouring over the sexy, original short stories, poetry, and images that the online zine had to offer. Every issue had a fiction piece that tantalized and satiated a different unorthodox writerly taste bud of mine. The stories featured weren't just risqué, shocking, or exciting, but quality work, finely tuned and edited to perfection. I enjoyed reading the pieces, found everything entertaining or funny, and each story resonated and left some kind of impression. I don't know if that is because Sub-Lit caters to people with taste like mine, if their stories are just expertly picked from the slush pile, or both.

I go on the Sub-Lit site almost every week now, waiting for the day when the next issue drops. I've turned into a bona fide fiction fan girl. In the meantime, I like rereading Hinge by Adam Moorad, featured in issue three, volume 2. It is the short short I use to introduce the zine to friends, knowing that it will have them clamoring back for more.

Comparison of Issues

	Volume 1, Issue 1	Volume 2, Issue 1	Volume 2, Issue 3
POV			
1st: 2nd: 3rd	3:0:0	3:0:5	5:0:1
Writers M:F	2:1	5:3	5:1
Prose:Poetry	3:7	8:5	6:7

In the issues that I read, there was a larger number of male contributors than female, which doesn't surprise me, because I think men tend to be the creators of most sub-culture fiction. There are more Henry Miller impersonators than Dorothy Allison, which is a shame, but it shows in this comparison.

Aside from the first issue, there was a fairly even distribution of prose and poetry. The point of view was surprisingly focused in the first person, at times straying into third. I wonder if edgier or grittier stories are better told in an authoritative first person narrative. With first person narrative, the audience can get a better sense of place and culture, especially if the audience is not aware of the culture portrayed. However, there was a large focus on an overall third person teller in Volume 2, Issue 1, and I enjoyed reading the effective place description that can otherwise be lost in the strong cultural voice of a first person narrative.

Story Reviews

Volume 1, Issue 1- 2007

Mrs. Miller Takes a Stand by Katie Perry is a first person narrative in a domestic setting. The Miller family holds a baby beauty competition every year and Mrs. Miller's blond, perfectly poised son Sam has lost four years in a row and is now a month away from the cut-off age. Mrs. Miller calls out this injustice, comparing Sam to lesser babies who have won the competition just so that they could feel better for their eventual shortcomings, and demands a fair match from the flurry of crusty great aunts who make up the judging table. Baby Sam, four years old and overgrown, sits on the cold kitchen counter, awaiting the baby beauty judging round for the final time. Mrs. Miller is adamant that Sam will win.

Mrs. Miller's voice has a strong sense of authority, effectively sucking the audience into the story. Although the mid-western mother language and direct use of dialect was a little unnerving in the opening, Perry uses very precise story telling, slipping in subtle details, so that you can fully apprehend what is going on in the story. Her repetition of certain vivid images, like baby Sam on the cold kitchen tile, keeps us grounded in scene.

Skeletons/My Fourth Birthday/Hell is Channel Three by Erin Pringle is a first person, present tense short about a boy whose father is off at war. The boy's mother tells him that he is too old for stuffed animals and leaves him with a trash bag to throw them out in. He lines up the stuffed animals in his bedroom, their glass eyes against a wall, and shoots them all sopping wet with a moldy water gun that he hadn't used since the Fourth of July, the last time he saw his father home on leave. He then piles the wet toys in the trash bag, mimicking what he saw on Channel Three, the station his mother watches religiously to see if she could recognize her husband among the soldiers and dead bodies that looked like "laundry bags of flesh." The boy crawls into the bag and wonders if he would reach Channel Three if he goes all the way in.

Every word chosen for this short has weight. The effect is tight, concise, to the point, and extremely poignant. The sentimentality displayed is apparent in the way that Pringle shows us every scene, rather than tells us. Rather than telling of the boy's discontent, she shows us how he copes with his missing father by acting out in an indirectly violent way with the water gun and stuffed animals. The boy's voice is strong and descriptive, without lacking believability. The rich imagery, which basks the reader relentlessly, is not lost within the context of the dialect. Seriously expertise short story writing.

Volume 2, Issue 1

Arlen's Arm by Amy Shearn is a third person story in a domestic setting. Minnie and Arlen have sex the first night they meet and continue having sex every night for three months, usually standing up or

on toilets. Arlen never sleeps over because of an early work schedule. While they were driving around on a rainy night, another car ran a red light and crashes into the driver's side. Arlen put an arm out across Minnie's chest to protect her, leaving a bright purple bruise, but he was killed instantly. Minnie spends the month after his death in a stupor, pounding on her chest in public bathrooms and sleeping with crowbars above her breasts to keep the bruise alive.

Shearn depicts an otherwise unromantic relationship, which occurs eventually in everyone's life, in a very positive, yet realistic light. We can all relate to Minnie and Arlen's sexual relationship, but Shearn has woven something deeper, two people who just happen to fit together and subconsciously rely on one another. Minnie's modern, blasé character portrayal is strong, being as this is her story, while Arlen is depicted in a more subtle light, in tiny details like his morning schedule.

Promise by Merle Drown is a third person flash fiction piece about Eric, the town psychopath. Eric steals people's cars and sets schoolhouses on fire, but he never bothered to do anything to his neighbor Mr. Johnson. When Eric drops out of high school, Mr. Johnson tells him that he never did anything bad to him and for that, he still had hope for Eric. Eric simply responds with, "I'm saving the worst just for you."

Drown has written a potent blueprint for the perfect piece of flash fiction. His style was nicely compacted, clear, but not terse. The audience gets a full view of Eric's character within the first few lines and we can infer from that bit of knowledge that whatever he concocted for Mr. Johnson's demise was rather terrible. The story resonated and left me thinking well after I stopped reading.

Volume 2, Issue 3

Hinge by Adam Moorad is a close first person, magic realism piece about a woman in a white gown who transforms a man's body into a shutter. She pulls out all of his veins and inserts tubing, before stitching him up. When he comes back a few weeks later, there is plastic sticking from his neck, back, and ribs. He lies on the operating table and she rips out the thread stitching. It finally tears out near his nipple and she tells him that the hinge is on his heart before turning off the light.

Moorad created a genuinely weird short with *Hinge*. It is something that you can enjoy reading and inspecting from all different angles multiple times. I've drawn conclusions to the shutter being the "window" or gateway to the soul and heart, but in the end, my analysis seems like mere speculation. My final conclusion is to accept it for what it is, an intense, richly described magic realism piece with crisp, quirky dialogue.

A Fan Letter by Ethel Rohan is a first person letter story addressed to US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, from an extreme fan with a sad life. An alcoholic woman living unhappily with her pushy husband Alan and two uncontrollable boys in a small, filthy apartment, expresses her love and admiration of Hilary in a close letter, which she attempts to read aloud to her husband over the sound of the television. She is interrupted mid-letter, because Alan gets in her face about putting the boys to bed, who are causing mayhem in the living room by smashing filthy diapers on the family dog. He attempts to wrestle the letter

out of her hand and eventually throws her glass of cheap Target brand wine against the butterscotch wall in vexation. The woman concludes the letter while Alan is pulling the boys up to bed, but takes the time to again express her gratitude for Hilary's strong presence and how she wishes that for just once, she could be in the US Secretary of State's powerful shoes.

The ravenous, almost desperate glorification of a loved and unattainable celebrity was captured in such a way that put the narrator in a sympathetic light. By keeping the point of view so personal, we can relate and commiserate for a character who in any other light would have been depicted as a bad mother or an apathetic alcoholic. Rohan sucks us into this woman's perspective and we see how harsh and heartbreaking life is when one presumably has no prospects and can only look up to others, who are distant figures of prestige, for any semblance of happiness. Strong, consistent voice throughout. The audience gets a fuller told story from the letter form, because it strongly expresses the narrator's opinions, while allowing some creative leeway into directly written scene or interruptions during the narrator's process of writing.

Interview with Editor Laurah Raines

Jessica Hall: Sex, Literature, and Rock & Roll is really the best combination out there. I've noticed that in some of the stories chosen for the latest edition of Sub-Lit (Volume Two, Number Three) there was neither a theme of sex nor rock & roll. With a very bold body of work circulating around sex and rock, what kind of stories that lack such a strong theme make the cut for publication? Is there something special you look for, perhaps quirky and off the cuff, or do you go more with what most moves you and the best caliber of quality?

Laurah Raines: We're not looking for work that meets any sort of thematic standard. When we say "sex, literature, and rock and roll," we mean that we're looking for work that in some way breaks the boundary of politeness – work that doesn't sidle up easily to, say, an Alice Munro story. We seek literary fiction that is well-written and is in some way "edgy" – though certainly we're not looking for experiment for experimentation's sake. That edginess may come from theme, topic, style, or innovation. We seek the best quality within that group. Work must have this "edge" AND be high quality in order to meet our standards.

JH: What is your process in editing stories? Only a few fiction, and one or two non-fiction stories are chosen for publication in each one of Sub-Lit's issues. How difficult is it to weed out those few?

LR: We get hundreds of submissions each reading period. I have several readers (most are former students) who go through the slush pile for me. Anything they like becomes a "second" read, and is sent to Kat or Pete. Addison and I make the final decisions on all work. We don't always agree. In cases where there is a difference of opinion, we bring Kat back into the discussion. Addison works with fiction authors on stylistic edits, and I handle the nonfiction style edits. We try to only pick work that really speaks to us.

JH: Do you give a lot of feedback to the writers whose work makes the cut? How extensive is your communication with the writers chosen for publication?

LR: Sometimes, a person might have to change a word here or there; other times, we have major plot or character suggestions. Once the editors and authors are satisfied, we go through a few rounds of proofing. We probably exchange 10-20 e-mails with selected authors.

JH: Do you give any feedback to the submissions that fall flat?

LR: We don't tend to give feedback unless an author almost made the cut.

JH: *Trashcan Special* was on the raunchier end of the spectrum of what was published in the latest edition, but it is well written with strong dialogue and expert first person narrative dialect. It is not usually what one expects when they think sexy literature. Do you have to go through a lot of smut before coming across a gem like *Trashcan Special*?

LR: I know Derek Nikitas personally (we went to grad school together), and I have read his fabulous book, so I knew the story would be worthwhile. We don't get a lot of smut, because we're looking for literature.

We do tend to get the occasional Bukowski wannabe, but in general, the “bad” work tends toward the violent or the drug-focused (both of which can work if done well).

JH: Do you ever have to request a writer to turn down the heat or dirtiness in a particular story to retain literary merit, or does that not affect the caliber of a truly good story?

LR: Nope. A good story is supported, not overpowered, by its elements.

JH: As a free online zine, you must not have a big budget, yet you have eight seemingly dedicated editors and a flurry of readers. Do you receive any form of compensation, or do you really defy bitter writers world wide and actually find reward in the literature you publish?

LR: We are planning on applying for non-profit status in the next year, because we will be publishing chapbooks and a possible anthology. We all work for free, so we just want to generate enough money to pay for the printing of the chapbooks.

JH: Sub-Lit is pretty kick ass. As much as I enjoy the online zine, I wouldn't mind seeing it in print. Are there, or were there, any plans to take Sub-Lit to paper publishing? If so, what would you need to do as a co-founder and head editor to make that happen?

LR: We're in two minds of this. I feel pretty strongly that online publications can be (and are) as viable as print journals in terms of furthering both lit and authors' careers. We would like to produce an anthology, but we're still in the works on that one. With all of the editors working more than full-time, it's slow going.

JH: The site's design is simple, easy to navigate, yet undeniably sexy. What kind of say do you have in Sub-Lit's Web site? Is there any talk of changing the design?

LR: We plan to change the design. We call it, “None of us knew web design and Casey had iWeb.”

JH: I love the incorporation of visual art in Sub-Lit. I'm particularly jazzed about Charles Farrell's stunning subterranean images. The art chosen harmonizes well with Sub-Lit's mood and feel. Have you or any of the other editor's considered pairing each story and poem with an image of their own?

LR: We have considered this, but we just don't have the volume of art submissions necessary to accomplish it. Amber, our art editor, does a GREAT job selecting the art for each issue.