

TOASTED CHEESE

Literary Journal



Magazine Report

By

Joshua Lukasik

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Fact Sheet

Online Magazine: Toasted Cheese

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Founded: January 2001

Editor/Founder: Stephanie “Eden” Lenz, Theryn Fleming, Amanda Marlowe, Erin Nappe

Frequency: Quarterly

What they Publish: Fiction, flash fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry

Submission Guidelines: See Web site for details

Reading Period: A deadline for each issue

Simultaneous Submissions: No

Reporting Time: Two Months

Contributor Payment: Currently non-paying

Mission Statement: “Our primary reason for creating Toasted Cheese is to provide a place where writers can get honest feedback on their work and honest information about issues important to writers.”

CLMP Member: No

Why I Chose *Toasted Cheese*

I found *Toasted Cheese* through a class assignment where our group was given *Toasted Cheese* to write a market sheet on. It was Volume 7/Issue 4, “The Cigarette Rebellion” by Heather MacPherson that first caught my eye, and after other quick glances of the Web site, I found myself reading the editors page. As I read through their bio’s I finally understood that this literary journals mission is community. They’re a group of people who love to read our work, and work together to put out a great online journal.

They help the community by giving out writing prompts and creative exercises for writers to help hone their craft. Not to mention the huge amount of writing articles that tackle basic questions for the emerging writer. In fact, a lot of subjects that we read articles about in the Publishing class—ideas of showing and not telling, defining success, and writing while working—can also be found at the *Toasted Cheese* Web site. The generalizations assignment we did in class—the paragraph about showing how the dog embarrasses the man at parties—is a similar exercise to A Pen in Each Hand Section: *Just Show it* by Bellman features an exercise to show a man’s pain.

Also, if a writer gets published in *Toasted Cheese*, they get a chance to hear from the readers on a forum, so the writer can hear the strengths and weaknesses of the piece, what’s working, and what’s not. *Toasted Cheese* really cares about writers, and this forum is evidence of that fact. I imagine many writers do not go to fancy schools or don’t have friends that can provide intelligent feedback about their work, and the Web site’s editors and its readers can help hone our craft.

I chose *Toasted Cheese* because it cares about people like me. It hosts a Web site that makes a community that anyone is allowed into. And that title, *Toasted Cheese*. That image of warm cheese on a plate—it’s inviting, like an e-welcome mat before the writer enters the warm, toasty house of cheese, home of writers, editors, and readers. Welcoming people to be a part of the family.

Comparison of Issues over Time

	Vol.7/Iss.4	Vol.8/Iss.1	Vol.6 Iss.4
CNF:FIC:FLA:POE*	2:4:1:3	2:2:3:0	1:3:1:1
POV 1 st :2 nd :3 rd	5:1:1	4:1:2	2:1:2
Domestic/Exotic	7:0	5:2	4:1

*CNF=Creative Non Fiction

*FIC=Fiction

*FLA=Flash Fiction

*POE=Poetry

**I didn't count contest winners.

The magazine gets a variety in forms between fiction, flash, poetry, and creative nonfiction, but the first-person point-of-view has been chosen more in the majority of the three issues. However, the comparison I wanted to point out over time was the choice of setting; when I was reading these issues I noticed a trend of domestic stories. Volume 7, Issue 4 has nothing but domestic stories. I feel as a writer, that if I were to submit to Toasted Cheese, I might have a better chance with a domestic story, rather than an exotic one.

I also want to mention that I didn't include contest winning publications, or Editor's Picks. I believe that the literary journals actual work were the pieces that the entire editorial crew of Toasted Cheese accepted. In the interview, Stephanie Lenz mentions that the group picks and debates over certain pieces, and some get published onto the regular literary journal. If others do not agree, that editor has the option to make it their own personal pick. I do not believe that the Editor's Picks give a fair assessment of TC as a whole. If a piece isn't accepted by the whole editorial crew, it is basically a piece that only the editor Baker likes, or Ana likes, it's not what TC likes. Instead of adding these to the group of stories for comparison, it's best to label them off as pieces that didn't quite meet the standards.

Story Reviews

Volume 7/Issue 4:: December 1, 2007

Magic Lanterns by Mike Malloy is a plainspoken flashback of love in a domestic setting. The narrator's memory gets sparked by a cup of coffee he believes is gay, but assures the reader it is not in a derogatory way. We learn about Claire, his old girlfriend, and her fascination with the movie *It's A Wonderful Life*, and the seemingly endless nights on the couch lazily laying on one another while watching Jimmy Stewart on the television. Until she told him they would eventually break up because she doesn't want to get married. That night was the last time they watched *It's A Wonderful Life*, together.

The story is of lost love told in a flashback, but the mood is perhaps what sets it apart, which is set up by a description of Claire's body language and movements and the internal point-of-view of the narrator. As the vivid memory is being told, we get a strong sense of voice even when the tone is very subtle. He sets up a parallel plot of what is happening and, what he wants to happen, while neither of the lines, sadly, will ever intersect. And even though in the beginning of the story we are told that they have broken up, by the end, the narrator's story convinces us that he is still stuck on the couch.

The Cigarette Rebellion by Heather MacPherson is a plainspoken realistic story in a domestic setting, told in a first-person point-of-view. The narrator Anna O'Leary is a smoker, that is, until she meets attractive, single, and mildly rich Mark, who confesses he doesn't date smokers. And even as the reader can pick up through the sarcastic tone—drilled in by a side comment after almost every instance of interaction—she is not the type of girl who cares if he dates smokers or not. But the problem—a problem that occurs throughout the story—is that Mark is too damn good-looking to let go of so easily. So she quits, and is able to go out with Mark, but after he questions her appearance, and her cravings for cookies, she gets fed up and quits her job. She goes to look for Mark but finds him having sex with a blonde girl, even worse, a girl that smokes.

Anna gives the extra inch in life, and the piece is structured around the idea of giving another inch and another, until Anna takes back three feet. Each new instance has one interaction where Anna gives in to someone, and the next instance is always harsher on Anna than the last,

which builds incidental suspense of Anna's equal and forceful reaction. The tension of her eventual reaction is not a quick reaction, but rather annoying remarks from Mark on her clothes, or just plain rude actions in front of her mother, and then of course the affair with a woman, who smokes at the end. This slowly builds this climatic blow up. But, MacPherson doesn't have her characters throw chairs at or stab her boyfriend. She makes her character sit on a chair, and smoke in front of Mark. Which makes this act a rebellion, a rebellion against metrosexual men who should just concentrate on plucking their own eyebrows instead of controlling Anna's smoking habits. That's a blow up.

Volume 8, Issue 1:: March 1, 2008

The Secret of Despair by Karen Carlson is a plainspoken realism story in a domestic setting, told in the first-person point-of-view. A middle-aged woman writer is suffering through paranoia attacks, which she calls monsters, that she encountered in the grocery store. First, there's the Bacon Man Monster—a fat man who pronounces baking as bacon, and asks for the narrator's advice on the subject. This confuses her on how and what advice to give him, and leads into three paragraphs of internal point of view until she christens him a new monster. Then there's Watermelon Lady Monster who sets down a watermelon on a bench where she wanted to sit, and then that sends her into little tangents of what other people might think of her. Finally, she gets out of the grocery store and onto the bench to wait for the bus, where a small girl sitting on her mom's lap starts throwing the remains of her strawberries on the sidewalk. The narrator's obsessive compulsiveness acts up again, and she can't help but clean the remains of strawberries off the sidewalk. After she finishes cleaning up the mess, the mother gives her a dirty look, thus creating Strawberry Girl Monster. When she gets home she feels comfortable, but later on, as she tries to sleep, the thoughts of the monsters come back. Others as well, and they start calling her names, until her pillow gets wet, and she flips it to the other side, to try to get some sleep again.

The story is structured as a folktale. It's divided into parts by the main monsters each with a paragraph predicting the embarrassing things that might happen in the situation, then a paragraph of some action. Then, another paragraph of other monsters she's encountered like, "Writing Group Monster." Although it had a unique name for "paranoia attacks," after I read past the monsters, nothing stuck with me until the end. When the emotional nightmare—that breaks the form of the structure—and reminds the reader how hard it must be to live with that

type of paranoia. In this last paragraph, as she explains why she has so many pillows, her voice switches to a conversational tone: “The pillow feels wet under my cheek; I flip it over. I have three pillows, two sides each. It's usually enough.” It’s a very intimate detail, and the last sentence’s ambiguous adverb, leaves me with this sympathy for the narrator’s problems.

Murder, Suicide, and a Playgroup by Jessica Smartt Guillon is a plainspoken realism story in a domestic setting, told in the first-person. Four wives have constructed a play group. They are all sitting in the playroom at Carrie’s house. Carrie asks the group a playful question: Which Wiggles would you do? Then, Carmen walks in with bad news. Of course it’s not news, as in hurricanes, Iraq, political corruption. Its community news, who’s kid got cancer, who cheated on whom. Then we realize a well-to-do woman by the name of Astrid Hannigan killed her kids and her husband. During the rest of the story, the four moms give their opinions over the incident, and talk about how they would react to Astrid’s situation.

The narrator, Laura, Carrie, and Carmen are four mothers in this playroom. Each has their own personalities, and the author tells the reader all about them through the dialogue and description, rather than stopping to explain each one thoroughly. She develops them through their reactions towards the news of Astrid Hannigan. For example, Carmen learned about the news because she lives on the same affluent street. Laura notices Astrid’s actions through church services. The narrator talks about her son’s crying and how she could never kill him, and even goes on to tell how she deals with her son’s colic. The reader learns through indirect details that Carmen is a rich snob, Laura’s a staunch Christian, Carrie is very open-minded, and the narrator makes jokes to deal with her son’s stomach illness. Each of these characters is developed through their thoughts of Astrid’s suicide and murders. The story is an example of allowing the reader to build the characters through the little clues the author adds in to help move the story.

Volume 6/Issue 4 December 1, 2006

Last Mother on the Playground by D.R. Bertholdt is a plainspoken realism story in a domestic setting told in the first-person point-of-view. The narrator is telling a perfect mother about the unspoken truth of mothers abandoning their babies. She tells this to another mom on the playground while there with her son Trey. Not through dialogue, but speaking through

internal point-of-view to this woman, who cannot hear her. As she explains where mothers abandon some babies at, she mentions her shortcomings as a mother as well. Times where she cried during breastfeeding, or finding a cockroach in her son, Trey's, ear. Then, as she describes the other mother, she leaves Trey in a playhouse and runs away from the playground, and watches the other mother from a hill far away with binoculars, and sees her frantically look for her to return her son.

Second-person is a tricky animal, but Bertholdt does it convincingly in this piece. The image of the almost perfect mother playing with her daughter, juxtaposed against the voice of an adolescent girl who is on the verge of abandoning her son, draws such strong sympathy for the young mother narrator. Bertholdt doesn't let the second-person take over the story however. After the narrator talks a for a little while—using *you* heavily and asking questions to the reader for a sentence or two—she switches back to the scene before it gets overbearing. The story is in complete control using a strong voice and its melancholic tone.

Interview with Stephanie Lenz

How many manuscripts do you get per reading period, and can you explain to emerging writers the specific editorial process, you and other editors go through to put out an issue?

We get about 25-50 regular submissions per month (i.e.: not including contest entries). Two editors (Theryn Fleming and I) go through submissions each month. We remove submissions that are disqualified and ones that we feel don't meet the quality of writing we publish or have inappropriate subject matter. A disqualified submission might be several poems, a story that exceeds our maximum word count, a submission with an attachment or one sent to the wrong e-mail address or with the wrong subject line. Theryn posts our first-cut surviving submissions by author name on a private message board we have at our site. She also sends notification letters to everyone to let them know the status of the submission.

That process usually cuts the number of submissions 25-50 percent. Four times a year, the editorial collective reads the remaining submissions: January for the March issue, April for the June issue, July for the September issue, and October for the December issue. Each editor reads every genre (i.e.: no fiction editor, no poetry editor) and makes a "yes" list, submissions he or she would like to publish. Pieces with the highest number of votes are published; if a piece is on the cusp, editors will sometimes change their votes one way or the other. If there is a piece that an editor feels strongly about that is in danger of being cut, the editor may chose it as an "Editor's Pick" and the piece is published with that distinction.

Theryn also organizes and prepares the pieces for publication. We publish on the 1st of March, June, September and December.

Contest entries are handled slightly differently. An editor who is not judging the contest removes all identifying information from the submissions and forwards them to the editors judging the contest. Each piece is given a number. Pieces are judged based on use of the theme among other factors. The judges (if more than one) discuss the pieces via e-mail or chat and come to a consensus on ranking the stories. Sometimes we use another editor (not the one who did the

forwarding) as a tie-breaker. Sometimes our contests result in an honorable mention or a tie. We have four contests per year; there are contest winners in each issue of the literary journal.

As an editor, does Toasted Cheese have a bias towards certain types of fiction? Are there any concrete elements in manuscripts that you tend to lean towards? (e.g. third-person P.O.V instead of first-person, realism rather than magic realism, or character-driven instead of Plot driven)

I think every editor has certain things that turn him/her on or off, which is one of the things I like about working with a collective. For example, I'm not big on SFF, but we have some editors who prefer it over everything else. I personally like character-driven fiction, something with a fresh voice. I like to step into a story and feel at home, meaning that while there's no time wasted on orienting me, the author has a clear sense of what's happening and can guide me through the story. I like a good pace; it can be obvious when a writer has realized that the word count limit is close and the pace goes off-track. For me, the best indicator of whether or not I like something is whether or not I remember it from first cut when I read it during the reading period.

For flash, the style has to be tight, focused and feel like it was written as flash, not just as a story that ended up being under 500 words. CNF needs to be believable with a subject and writing that engage me in the way that good fiction does.

Are there elements or themes that you are sick of reading? (e.g. divorce stories, cancer bed tales, etc.) If you could, also comment on some of the common weaknesses you have encountered as an editor that emerging writers could look for in their own work?

I am a little weary of writers who use certain elements as a shortcut to emotion, like a dead child or pet, especially when these elements have nothing to do with the story. Also gratuitous sex or violence doesn't help a submission, although sex or violence that's essential to the story is fine.

In general, we don't like crass, pornographic ("pornographic" referencing sex or violence) pieces, which we get a fair number of. Our TOS with our service provider doesn't allow us to publish erotica but erotic elements are fine. For our Dead of Winter contest, there are always several stories with what we call "Sixth Sense Syndrome" – the narrator or main character doesn't know he's dead. A few times, a writer has pulled this off successfully but it's so common and overdone

that a story with that idea doesn't stand out from the crowd.

The best way a writer can put himself in the front of the pack is to respect our submission guidelines. Title your e-mail correctly so it doesn't get lost in the spam folder. Don't include any attachments. Include a cover letter. Stay within the word count for prose. Don't submit more poems than we allow. Check for technical errors (spelling, typos, etc.). If you can do that and write well, you've made it past the first cut. If you write exceptionally well, your work will be published.

One piece of advice I'd like to give to new writers is this: never allow the number of your publication credits determine whether your writing is good or bad. If your number is low, find journals that accept new writers (like ours) and submit. You don't have to say in your cover letter "I am an unpublished writer" but when that statement is followed by a great submission, there are few things an editor finds more thrilling. We also get submissions from people with writing credits or degrees out the wazoo and the quality of the work doesn't make it past first cut. The only thing that will determine whether or not we publish your piece is your talent.

The writers at your literary journal not only get to publish their work, but also a forum to get further critique on their work. What other things does Toasted Cheese do to establish a relationship with their writers?

Every month, we provide articles about writing. Our current article is a Q&A about "writing as a job" with three authors at three different points in their careers: John Scalzi, Laurie Halse Anderson and Seanan McGuire. Our next article, which I'm writing now, will be about writing communities. We provide exercises with each article as well. We also provide links, including links to other writing communities and journals. Our purpose is to help people write better and to get published, if that's their goal. Our calendar has daily prompts, which I write, that can be suitable for fiction writers, poets or (sometimes) bloggers. We're currently considering creating a Pod cast focusing on the literary journal but possibly on the writing community or the writing life as well.

Web magazines have become a new medium for prose. It is more economical and is able to reach

a wider base than most print magazines. However, there are some writers, readers, and editors alike who don't particularly care for the idea of the Web magazine. Can you explain your stance on the issue, and possibly give your opinions on why fellow writers, readers, and editors dislike or disregard the Web magazine?

I'm not sure why people are averse to electronic media. It could be because people like to hold the work in their hands or they enjoy the portability of a hard-copy journal. We use the term e-zine but more often, we just say "lit journal" when we're referring to our e-zine. A literary journal is a literary journal, regardless of the manner of its existence. I believe that, like any work, it should be judged by its contents rather than whether it exists in print or online-only. I know there's a similar prejudice against e-books and I admit to being wary of them at first (before Toasted Cheese existed). But it's better for the environment and with new reading devices, electronic media is as portable and accessible as bound matter.

There could also be a stigma that "just anyone" can create a literary journal. That's true. People have always created their own books, 'zines have a devoted and enthusiastic following, so why not literary journals? I think "just anyone" can and should create a literary journal and then set high standards as to publication. My advice would be to make your journal one that people are proud to list among their credits and one that another editor will see in a writer's cover letter and say, "Impressive."

In the eyes of a publishing house editor, who reads cover letters for writers pitching their first novel, do you believe they see Web magazine publishing credits the same as print magazines credits? Do you think Web magazines will hold as much fame and credibility as The New Yorker or The Atlantic Monthly, and magazines of this nature? If not, can you explain what you think it will take to achieve this ideal?

I queried a novel in 2002 and then set aside querying to begin a family. When I began querying again in 2007, I noticed a huge change in the querying process: many more agents and publishers accept e-queries. I think that the publishing industry is embracing the use of electronic media (unlike, for example, record companies) and I think that the stigma of online-only journals being somehow "less worthy" than a print journal is becoming archaic to the modern mindset in the publishing industry. Stalwart print journals offer online versions, including The Atlantic and the

New Yorker. Universities publish electronic versions of their literary journals. One advantage for agents and publishers is that when an author is published in a manner that they can find online, it's like getting an extra writing sample. They don't have to go digging for an obscure print journal when a Google search can bring an instant result.

As to the quality of the credit, I think it goes back to your previous question. If a journal is discerning in what it publishes and presented in a professional way, that's the best barometer of quality.

What does the future at Toasted Cheese look like in your eyes? Would you ever consider creating a print magazine, or an annual anthology?

I would love to print a hard copy anthology or do a print version of Toasted Cheese in addition to our electronic literary journal. In addition to the fact that it would just be cool to do one, it would be a good way to raise money to pay for our costs. (TC is run by volunteers; we all donate money for site costs, contest prizes, etc. Our only advertising is in conjunction with our Amazon and Powell's Books affiliation programs. We also accept donations. Our site is free and all of our contests are free to enter.) I think before we do that, we would like to create a Pod cast or a bank of audio versions of our journal. We're also looking at ways of improving our writing community.

What advice would you give an emerging writer who is about to submit his first story to a magazine?

Always follow the submission guidelines. Every publication is different. For example, some don't like attachments while others only accept attachments. If available, read back issues of the journal or magazine. If you're submitting to an agent, research what she represents. If you're wary about admitting that you're unpublished, just leave that information out of your cover letter. You can always let the editor know that it's your first publication in reply to your acceptance letter. If you're rejected, don't write a nastygram to the editor; if you feel you must reply, a simple "Thank you for your time" is sufficient. If the editor tells you something like "this piece isn't right for us but please consider us for future submissions," do. Have someone read over your submission before you send it; it doesn't have to be another writer.

Editors want to publish writers, not reject them. We're on your side and want you to succeed.