



**A Magazine Report by
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May 2009**

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Fact Sheet

Online Magazine: Midway Journal

Mission Statement: “The work here complicates and questions the boundaries of genre, binary, and aesthetic. It offers surprises and ways of re-seeing, re-thinking, and re-feeling: a veritable banquet of literary fare. Which is why, in each new issue, we are honored to present work by both new and established writers alike.”

Web Address: www.midwayjournal.com

Address:

PO Box 14499

St. Paul, MN 55114

Email address: editors@midwayjournal.com (for questions only; no submissions)

Founded: 2006

Editors/Founders: Justin Maxwell, Rebecca Weaver, Ralph Pennel, and Nathan Thompson

Frequency: Six issues per year

What They Publish: Traditional and experimental work of: drama, ephemera, fiction, mixed media (including audio and video), nonfiction (including essays and interviews), and poetry

Submission Guidelines: Mail all double-spaced, single-sided manuscripts with a SASE to the address listed above.

There are no page limits or word counts.

Reading Period: December 1 to May 31

Simultaneous Submissions: Yes

Reporting Time: One to six months

Contributor Payment: None

Average Page Views per Month: 1,900

Average Percentage of Pages per Category: Fiction 30%, Poetry 30%, Nonfiction 25%, Video 10%, Audio 5%

Council of Literary Magazine and Presses (CLMP) Member: Yes

Why I Chose Midway Journal

The first thing I noticed about Midway Journal was its puzzling name. Was it about Midway Island? Midway Airport? A midway at a carnival, fair, or amusement park? Or was “midway” meant to be more of a preposition, as in something is midway between something else? And, if so, midway between what, exactly? The name did its job: it got me to check out the journal.

Upon entering “www.midwayjournal.com” into the address bar of my internet window and hitting the enter button on my excessively-clicky keyboard, I was greeted by a spectacular loop of images of hundreds of people shuffling down a crowded midway, kids riding the amusement-park swing ride, Curious George dolls grouped together—prizes ready to be won from a carnival game, and a 1950s-esque woman with “the big chill” hairdo, chowing down on a piece of char-broiled meat on a stick. I was immediately hooked.

I clicked on the current issue of the journal and quickly surveyed the genres of work published. I was disappointed when I couldn’t find any nonfiction in this particular issue, but I was otherwise impressed by the diversity of work (fiction, drama, and poetry). Then I clicked on the back issues link and studied the genres published in those issues, too. I discovered that Midway published quite a bit of ephemera (artwork) and mixed-media work (work in art, audio, or video), something I wasn’t used to seeing with many online journals. Having come from both a writing and an artistic background, I was thrilled to see all these mediums being given equal treatment, their titles and authors listed alongside each other. The artwork and audio and video work weren’t there to accompany the written work; rather, the ephemera and mixed genre work was allowed to stand on its own, without “representing” or “complimenting” any story or play or poem.

I was again hooked by the “About Us” page. I could tell that it was written by editors who were also *writers*: “Just off of I-94 and on the border between St. Paul and Minneapolis, the Midway, like any other state fairgrounds, is alive with a mix of energies and people. Its position as mid-way, as a place of boundary crossing, also reflects our vision for this journal.” Midway seemed like a journal that really knew what it was about, like it didn’t reject work because it was too literary or too “out there.” It really seemed like a coming-together, a midway, if you will.

And I’m happy to say that, as I’ve researched Midway further, that fact has become more and more evident.

Issue Comparison

	March 2009 Issue Vol. 3 Issue 3	January 2009 Issue Vol. 3 Issue 2	November 2008 Issue Vol. 3 Issue 1
Prose:Poetry	3:5	3:4	3:4
(Writer) Male:Female	3:0	0:3	3:0
(Protagonist) Male:Female:None (or both)	3:0:0	0:3:0	2:0:1
Point of View 1st:3rd:2nd	2:1:0	2:1:0	1:2:0
Pub. Credits Novel:Magazine:1st time (or didn't say)	0:2:1	1:2:0	2:1:0
Ephemera: Mixed-Genre	0:0	6:3	4:3

The most noticeable thing about the different issues of Midway Journal is that its content varies considerably from issue to issue. The ratio of prose (which, for the last few issues, has not included any nonfiction work) to poetry remains rather constant, but the amount of ephemera or mixed-genre work varies quite a bit. I was especially surprised that there was absolutely no artwork or audio or video work in the current issue. The number of plays—which are not represented in this table—also varies from issue to issue. (For an explanation as to the varying content in each issue, please see my interview with Editor Nathan Thompson that appears at the end of this report.)

The tendency toward first-person point of view is relatively constant. Each issue tends to have either all male or all female protagonists, which seems to reflect the author's gender for each respective story. But, it would seem to me, that this is a cultural trend in today's literature (if I can base anything off of the work coming out of my workshop classes).

Work also tends to be from already-published writers, either those with a novel or story collection out, or those who have published in a handful of other literary journals. This seems to contradict the editors' desire "to present work by both new and established writers alike," but perhaps these three issues are the exception rather than the standard.

Something else that I noticed about the *contributors* is that, at least in the two newest issues, some writers and artists have more than one piece of writing or artwork published. At first I thought that this was suspicious.

Why, when only three pieces of fiction (on average) are accepted per issue, are two of the three pieces from the same writer? However, after actually *reading* both of the author's stories, I realized that both the stories are well-written, original, and provocative, and if I'd never known that they were both from the same author, then I never would have questioned them. I'm assuming that that's what the editors of Midway thought when they accepted two stories, or multiple pieces of artwork, from the same contributor. The prosecution rests.

Story Reviews

March 2009 Issue - Vol. 3 Issue 3

Nice Things by Jon Boilard is a plain-spoken (with poetic syntax), first-person realistic story set in a domestic setting. The narrator sits on the hood of his mother's Ford Pinto drinking an ice cold can of Coke that his "big brother" Red stole while Red smokes a stolen cigarette. Rocky Gill comes by to mess with them, so Red puts his cigarette out in Rocky's eye. When Rocky runs home crying, the boys' mother calls them "little cocksuckers" and hits them on the head with an emergency flashlight. She says that she's going to put them on a bus and send them to their father, but she hopes their bus crashes. Without them, she "could have nice things."

Boilard has a lot going on in such a short piece of fiction. He establishes the family's low economic status with details such as their brown Ford Pinto, their mixed-race apartment building where they and, as the narrator says, "mostly niggers and spics" live, and even with the mother's desire for "a fur coat and a convertible." Boilard establishes the boys' reckless behavior by mentioning how they shoplift, smoke, and tried to drown a kid. But Red is more complex. Even though he steals and hurts people, he is very defensive of his younger brother, protecting him from their mother's blows and forbidding him from smoking. Red has a sort of complexity that the narrator lacks, which creates a clear and necessary distinction of character between the two brothers.

Domestic Violence by Jon Boilard is a plain-spoken (with poetic syntax), objective third-person realistic story set in a domestic setting. A man is walking alongside a highway with a young boy (possibly his son) on his shoulders. They hear a car coming so they hide in the woods, now kneeling on the moist wooded ground. They see two cops and a search dog pass by in a car. The man guesses that "she called it in" (possibly the boy's mother, who is mentioned earlier), and the two consciously fall into step with each other, again along the roadside.

This story, though apparently completely vague, is really told through minute details. Boilard writes, in the opening sentence, that the man walks like "he's trying to escape something." And, with a title like *Domestic Violence*, it's not difficult to assume from what he's escaping. When the boy notices how cold it is, and that his mother would be upset that he's barefoot, we can suppose that the person the man is escaping from is the boy's mother, possibly the man's wife or lover, who he guesses "called it in" (their disappearance). But, to me, the strongest aspects of this story are the initial and final images. At first, we see the man carrying the boy on his shoulders, perhaps a symbol for support and deliverance from something bad. By contrast, at the end of the story, we have the man and boy walking next to each other, the former slower and the latter faster, consciously supporting each other and acting as equals.

January 2009 Issue - Vol. 3 Issue 2

Blame it on Hammacher Schlemmer by Tara L. Masih is a plain-spoken, first-person realistic story set in a domestic setting. The narrator remembers "that day" when she drove home from work, when the "sugary-yeasty" smell of Christmas baked goods filled her car. Her husband greeted her at their front door, showing her the upside-down Christmas tree he'd ordered from Hammacher Schlemmer (the "unexpected gifts" store). She's disappointed that there's no star on top, and she fought back the urge to bend over and look at the tree right-side up. Her husband

claimed that this is how Christmas trees from the Middle Ages looked—according to the catalog. As he unwrapped the scarf from his wife’s neck, she finally told him that “It’s perfect.”

As much as this story is about the tree, it has *nothing* to do with the tree. The narrator says it best: “This is how our marriage went until that day—he was impulse, I was control; he dreamt, I walked solid ground.” Although Masih has her narrator explicitly state what is so important about this moment, *that* day, with the tree, she presents it in such a voice-driven manner that it doesn’t beat readers over the head. It lets us know that the narrator sees something wrong with her marriage so, at the end, when she concedes that the tree is perfect, we see that really she is taking steps to improve her marriage. The protagonist’s transformation is quick and subtle, which is what makes this short piece of fiction so powerful.

An Inconclusive Visit Among Strangers by April Durham is a plain-spoken, subjective (the point of view and vantage point change frequently) third-person realistic story set in a domestic setting. A young boy runs away from home, grows up, gets married, and has a son. The three of them travel back to his hometown to invite his mother and sister to live with them in the city. The young boy—now a man—tries to surprise the mother and sister, but they don’t recognize him and his sister knocks him out and his mother robs him before he rolls into a river and drowns. The wife and son, a day later, find out that the man is dead. (The wife then reveals to a police psychologist that her husband cheated on her since she became “large and heavy with child,” and he continued to have affairs even after the birth of their son.) When the sister realizes who the man she killed was, she drowns herself. The mother is left alone, at the end of the story, having discovered that the man she had robbed was her son.

This story is broken up into five parts, which tell the chronological story of the man, how he died, and how his widow and son find out about his death. But also, in each section, readers are privy to the thoughts, feelings, and even back story of the mother, the wife, the boy, and the sister (via a childhood journal). This character insight is gradual, and it slowly explains more and more of the complexity of these five characters’ lives. And by having access to each character’s thoughts—save for the man, who is dead—we aren’t sure with whom to sympathize. As the title suggests, the readers’ sympathy is inconclusive. That being said, the story is very much conclusive: the man is dead, his sister is dead, the mother will remain alone, the wife mourns but is free from a cheating husband, and the son is left paranoid and scarred.

November 2008 Issue - Vol. 3 Issue 1

Revelation by Tom Whalen is a poetic, first-person magical-realism story set in an exotic setting. During a storm, while his “brain was a shambles,” the narrator finds God at a payphone outside of a 7-Eleven. He tells God to go away, but suddenly they are inside the 7-Eleven, sitting on a couch, talking. The storm continues and washes away the walls of the 7-Eleven. The narrator assumes he’ll wake up the next day, “repair my brain,” and pray he’ll never deal with God again. But God rejects that and says that He is no “absentee landlord.” Then both God and the storm disappear, and the narrator spews many things from his mouth, including a beast with seven heads that speaks “great things.”

For a seemingly “out-there” story, *Revelation* actually makes a lot of sense. The theological issues that drive humanity (Does God exist? Do I need Him in my life?) also drive this piece. Without sounding preachy,

Whalen answers these questions when God says that He's not an "absentee landlord." And, on a technical note, Whalen's use of first person is necessary. The narrator uses so many analogies ("piss that smelled like pine trees") and allusions ("Grünewald's 'Isenheim Altarpiece'") that readers really get to know him, something that couldn't have been achieved in third person. It is that sense of character, of trusting the narrator's feelings, thoughts, and reactions, that allows readers to take hold of this experimental story.

Stigmata II (Padre Pio) by Jim Meirose is a plain-spoken, subjective third-person experimental story set in an exotic setting. The protagonist Padre Pio has the stigmata (marks resembling Jesus Christ's crucifixion wounds) on his hands, which he covers up with black bandages. He lets in a "piano tumor" (a character about whom we learn nothing) to fix a piano in the church. While the tumor is working, the storyteller shows readers glimpses of a grandmother with a dead cat, a mechanic—also with the stigmata, and someone named Lucas who abuses codeine. The piano is fixed. Padre Pio hangs in the church vestibule, as if nailed to a crucifix, and overhears an inane conversation. He angrily walks away, shaking off the black blood from his now unbandaged hands.

Meirose effectively juggles a dozen characters and settings while still charging forward with the main plotline. We only temporarily dip into the instances with the grandmother, the mechanic, and the codeine-addict, but they are complete moments. Meirose peaks our interest with these strange characters, then immediately drops us back into the story of Padre Pio and the tumor fixing the piano. It's a risky move, but Meirose pulls it off. I don't know what's more interesting, either Padre Pio or the other characters, but I know that the story requires both. It is their collective misery, suffering, and strangeness that confuses me, but keeps me reading. And the final image of Padre Pio with the unbandaged, bleeding hands is such a strong ending that—although I'm left questioning the origin of his stigmata, and even who this mysterious piano tumor is—I'm left satisfied.

Interview with Ralph Pennel, Fiction Editor

Ashley Schroeder: How was Midway Journal launched? Why did you decide to create an online journal, as opposed to a print journal?

Ralph Pennel: We all graduated from the Hamline University MFA program in St. Paul, MN and became close friends. About five years ago, Becky and Justin started talking about how to get a journal off the ground. Then they brought Nathan and me on board, and we decided to go online.

We knew that we wanted to be recognized as a legitimate literary entity that published serious literary fiction. But we didn't just want to be a literary magazine and we didn't want to attract the same literary crowd as do magazines like the Kenyon Review. We wanted to have a broader, more diverse audience, and being online helps. We wanted to publish work between the traditional and the experimental, work that simultaneously questions both those spaces. We wanted to house them together in the same journal, and an online journal allows for that.

A.S.: How did you choose the name "Midway"?

R.P.: At the time that we started the journal, we all lived in an area called Midway [halfway between St. Paul and Minneapolis]. It's where the fairgrounds are. So the name reflected our lives at the time. But we realized that we're also geographically midway between the coasts. It's a multifunctional name.

A.S.: What has been the response to your journal?

R.P.: We got in at the right time. [By publishing both the traditional and the experimental,] we hit an untapped niche. We caught people's attention with what we wanted to do. When we go to AWP (the Association of Writers and Writing Programs), people tell us that Midway inspired them to create their own journals. Because we're an online journal, we can't see demographics or the influence we've had, so it's interesting when those things happen. Public awareness has been great, and somewhat unexpected.

A.S.: How do you choose which work to accept?

R.P.: We are primarily interested in work that moves us, that asks us to ask questions and think critically about the genres we place submissions and accepted work into. We want each issue to be something different. We want it to be about the work, not about us. We want the work to give Midway its identity.

I look for about 18-20 pieces to publish from each reading period. But I won't just accept work because I'm low on stories for an issue. I've turned down some really good stories that aren't what we want. I have to think: Is it in line with what we're about, or does it detract from Midway's identity? If it does detract, then I have to turn it down.

A.S.: At what point do you stop reading a manuscript? What is it about a certain story that might prevent you from being able to finish reading it?

R.P.: The primary thing I look at is language and style. The actual story is tertiary to me. If the language is flat, then I usually don't get past the first page. If the language is moving me, but the story isn't, then I will give it three pages.

And I have a large “maybe” pile. Usually a story is in that pile because nothing about the language or style or voice resonated with me. If I’m still not sure about a piece, I’ll read it through twice and hold onto it and think about it until I’m sure. And then there are those stories that are trying to be too experimental. They are just out-there and beyond reasonableness. I don’t want to read those at all...unless the language is good or it takes me to a place that can make me forget about the horrible plot.

A.S.: “Nice Things” by Jon Boilard (Vol. 3, Issue 3) is tightly-written and filled with concrete, significant detail, both usually the signs of careful revision and editing. What is the editorial process of tightening and strengthening a submitted work as short as this?

R.P.: I didn’t have to ask him to change a thing. The story came to me that tight. Actually, both of Boilard’s pieces were that tight. I called him up immediately and said, “Give these to me.”

A.S.: “Blame it on Hammacher Schlemmer” by Tara L. Masih (Vol. 3, Issue 2) is another really tight story, with a punchy, solid ending. Did it always have this powerful of an ending?

R.P.: Yes, that was her ending when she sent it to me, but there was initially another image/phrase embedded into the final scene. I felt the story needed to push through to the end a little faster, so we worked to remove some of the language that may have held the reader up a bit and interfered with the strength of her final image.

A.S.: The story “Revelation” by Tom Whalen (Vol. 3, Issue 1) fulfills Midway’s desire for “ambitious work that occupies the realms between both the traditional and the experimental.” What is the process of editing a story like “Revelation” that, while being structurally easy to read, may have an experimental plot or style that is somewhat more difficult to follow than a more traditional story?

R.P.: The story is told in an unconventional way. It has linear movement, but it is not a linear piece. I didn’t want to do too much to it or it would have lost its spontaneous nature. I did very little. I just made a few grammatical changes.

A.S.: Are all the stories you accept that easy to edit?

R.P.: For the first two issues, I had to do quite a bit more editing. But recently we’ve been receiving wonderful, tight work, like Boilard and Whalen’s stories. I look for stories that already are like that. Then I’ll take on those that need a little work. I want the story to be so tight that the editing is invisible, that you don’t see the hand of the author or editor. You’re just engaged in the story.

A.S.: Midway has had over a dozen issues appear in less than three years. Where do you hope to see Midway in the next three years?

R.P.: We want to continue to explore what the internet allows us to do. We’d love to do live performance videos. We’d like to create revenue to bring writers to town for readings. And get staff to help with the web site. None of us are tech-savvy. We’re all writers.

We are also working to establish our journal locally, in the Twin Cities. We have a fairly deep and faithful following here, but it's difficult to have a voice here without being involved in certain organizations. And we do want to grow outside of the Twin Cities, too. We just don't want to grow too much, too fast. We welcome the growth, but we're crossing our fingers that it will take time.

We want to continue to be what we are. We don't want to become a traditional journal or a hard-copy journal. We want to keep reshaping the literary world's idea of online journals. We don't want to take on anything that will make us have to compromise, including a board of trustees or a principal funder. We want it to be about the art.

Interview with Nathan Thompson, Creative Nonfiction Editor

Ashley Schroeder: How do you and the three other editors of Midway Journal break down how submissions are read, and by whom?

Nathan Thompson: We essentially read the work in our genre. Submissions come in and one of us picks them up, marks the genre on the envelope, and hands it off to the respective editor. Since we deliberately attract cross-genre work, sometimes we'll have a piece that's read by multiple editors.

A.S.: Does each of the four editors only accept work in his or her genre, or is the selection process more of a collaborative effort between all of you?

N.T.: Each editor decides what is chosen, for the most part. The exception is poetry, which is co-chosen by Becky, the poetry editor, and me. We decided to team up on poetry because both of us are poets, and there tends to be a lot of poetry that comes in.

A.S.: At what point do you stop reading a manuscript? What is it about a certain story or poem that might prevent you from being able to finish reading it?

N.T.: First off, I have to say that I, too, submit a fair amount of work to journals. So I'm on both sides of the table, which I hope gives me a little more compassion for the writers submitting to us.

With that said, a few things stop me in my tracks: 1. Work that obviously was sent blindly without any sense of what we publish. For example, I get a fair amount of very self-focused creative nonfiction (CNF), which might be fine for some journals. But for Midway, I want CNF that explores much broader issues than simply one's difficult childhood or experience with a sick parent. 2. Lots of typos, or other careless mistakes. 3. Clichés. 4. If something is just too predictable, no matter how good the writing might be. 5. Long winded or preachy pieces. 6. Anything that reads like lines from a self-help book.

A.S.: How do you decide how many works per genre to include in each issue?

N.T.: Each issue is a little different. Much depends on the length of accepted works, what we have as a whole, and whose work seems to fit together. We really haven't done a themed issue as of yet, but we have sometimes tried to link pieces based on common themes. More often, though, linking things together isn't really that high on the agenda. Mostly, we just want to present the best work we have gotten in a given period. For some issues this might mean fewer pieces, either because of the lack of material we want to publish, or because we've chosen longer works that take up more space. Part of the reason we publish every other month is to keep readers coming back and to keep them interested, and by having shorter issues more frequently we can get more people on board with reading the work we're publishing.

A.S.: How closely do you work with a writer to polish an accepted piece?

N.T.: Most often, we accept work as it is. I'd say maybe only 15-20 percent of the work we accept is with revisions.

As for revisions, sometimes we point out specific changes, and sometimes we'll ask for a more general change that the author decides how to execute.

A.S.: Your journal accepts mixed genre and ephemera work. Do you choose this artwork, audio, and video work simply because you like it or because it demonstrates Midway's vision? How does choosing to publish these types of work differ from choosing stories or poems?

N.T.: We choose the mixed genre and ephemera work because we like it, and because it demonstrates our vision. We've always felt that one of Midway's goals is to push boundaries, and to be a home to writers and readers who are doing things that others might not understand or accept.

One thing we've done that isn't too common, if happening at all, was to publish cover letters that we felt were interesting or provocative. Often, this was the only thing we accepted from those writers—in fact, the letters often were much more interesting than the work itself. I sometimes wonder if people are too focused on polishing their writing, and forget that the beauty of many literary works throughout history has been a combination of aesthetics and rawness, or has been rough around the edges. Some writers sent us these cute poems that weren't challenging at all, and a cover letter filled with life and energy. Eventually, we had enough of these and decided to ask the writers if we could publish the letters. I'm pretty sure every one of them said yes.

A.S.: From the “About Us” page on Midway's web site, I see that the graphic and art design and the web site were done by Mari Richards and Laura Pham, respectively. How much input did you and the other editors have in the design and layout of the journal's web site?

N.T.: We have been in on every stage of the design and layout. Mari drafted a lot of logos and background materials for us to choose from, and we worked together to find combinations that fit our vision. Laura has helped us maintain everything since the site has been up and running—she's got the tech know-how none of us have—so we're fortunate that she is still interested in the project.

A.S.: With the recent economic downturn, many print journals, magazines, and zines seem to be having difficulty staying afloat and keeping costs down. Considering Midway is online, how have you seen the current state of the economy affect your journal? Would you say that it is similar or different to the plight of print journals?

N.T.: I don't think we've felt anything from the economic downturn. Our bills are pretty small—mostly just paying for Laura's work and our mailbox. Frankly, I think we've positioned ourselves well by being an active online journal. People know there will be new content on our site often, and we know that we don't have to worry about printing costs or trying to get “big names” to publish in our journal in order to sell copies. We have had some big names publish with us, but it was because they liked our journal and we liked the work they sent. To me, that's the best place to be.

A.S.: As an online journal, how do you increase readers' awareness of the existence of Midway while keeping costs down?

N.T.: Word of mouth is big. We have a Facebook page. We're on listserves, like the Buffalo Poetics Group. We also do literary events like AWP and the Twin Cities Book Festival.

A.S.: Midway has had over a dozen issues appear in less than three years. Where do you hope to see Midway in the next three years?

N.T.: We hope to develop some advertising and other revenue streams to pay for the upkeep of the journal and to get the word out to a broader range of people. We plan on shifting to an online submission process next fall, partly because one of our editors is living on the east coast now, and partly because of environmental reasons. I, personally, want to find more creative nonfiction to publish in Midway. It's possible we might do a "best of" print issue at some point as well.