
WORD RIOT

A MAGAZINE REPORT BY

MOLLY TOLSKY

MAY 2008

Table of Contents

Word Riot Fact Sheet.....	3
Why I Chose Word Riot.....	4
Issue Comparisons.....	5
Story Reviews.....	7
Interview with founder/editor, Jackie Corley.....	11

Fact Sheet

Online Magazine: Word Riot

Web Address: wordriot.org

Address:

114 Four Winds Dr
Middletown, NJ 07748

Email address:

Prose submissions: wr.submissions@gmail.com
Poetry submissions: poetry@wordriot.org

Founded: 2002

Editor/Founder: Jackie Corley

Frequency: Monthly

What They Publish: Experimental and literary fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, and reviews

Submission Guidelines: E-mail submission as a Microsoft Word attachment to appropriate address, as listed above

Reading Period: Year-round

Simultaneous Submissions: Yes

Reporting Time: Four to six weeks

Contributor Payment: Currently non-paying

Mission Statement: We encourage the forceful voices of up-and-coming writers and poets.

Average Page Views per Month: 2,700

Average Percentage of Pages per Category: Fiction 60%, Nonfiction 15%, Poetry 20%, Reviews 5%

Why I chose Word Riot

I first came across Word Riot in one of my late-night, frantic searches to find a place to submit my work. The name alone caught my attention—a riot of words? Now that's what I'm talking about. The Web site has separate sections devoted to flash fiction, short stories, experimental fiction, and creative non-fiction. With four or five stories nestled under each of these categories, I immediately knew that prose was not in short supply.

But like anyone will tell you, it's quality over quantity, so I cozied up in my computer chair and started reading. The stories published on the site proved to be of great quality and variety. Some pieces were laugh-out-loud funny, others were completely bizarre, and others still had the powerful punch of an emotional, realistic tale. With a mission statement that makes a direct reference to publishing the voices of *emerging* writers, I knew Word Riot was one place I definitely wanted to submit my work. So I did.

And I got rejected. (No hard feelings, Word Riot.) I chose to do my report on this magazine because even in the face of rejection, I still have faith that Word Riot is one of the premier online journals for an emerging writer to submit to. The editor-in-chief herself attests to the grueling process of submitting work for the first time, so you know she's got heart. Go ahead. Give Word Riot a shot.

Issue Comparison

	April 2008 Issue	March 2008 Issue	February 2008 Issue
Prose: Poetry	8:10	12:10	10:7
(Writer) Male:Female	6:2	10:2	8:2
(Protagonist) Male:Female:None (or both)	4:2:2	8:4	7:2:1
(Point of View) 1st:3rd:2nd	6:2:0	8:4:0	2:7:1
(Pub. Credits) Novel:Magazine:1st time (or didn't say)	0:5:3	2:8:2	4:6:0

The first thing I noticed while doing this comparison chart was the stark contrast between the number of male and female writers. I find it hard to imagine that a magazine founded and edited by a female writer would have a bias against female writers, so I imagine that the magazine just must be getting more submissions from male writers. So, come on ladies, start submitting!

This also goes hand in hand with the number of male protagonists in each issue, as I found that the majority of male writers wrote about male protagonists and every one of the female writers wrote about female protagonists. This seems to be an overarching trend in much contemporary writing.

The good news is that from the looks of the past three issues, it seems that Word Riot is publishing more and more emerging writers. From February to April, there's a

huge decrease in the number of writers who have novels under their belt, and the number of first-time publications is on the rise. These numbers support what the editor, Jackie Corley, told me about her disinterest in publishing big-time writers and her primary goal of becoming an outlet for emerging writers.

Story Reviews

April 2008 Issue

The Crack and Strains! by Gabe Durham is a plainspoken, magical realism story in a domestic setting. The unnamed narrator plays records of pop music for Truman, who has never heard anything of this kind before. While Truman likes the songs, he gets upset at their endings when they just fade out. He explains that where he comes from, a revered musician will play a song until she's so exhausted, she goes unconscious. The narrator plays an 80-minute electronica song for Truman, who enjoys it until he finds out that the synth and bass is just coming from a computer. So disgusted by this notion, Truman uses his mind to "eject" the narrator's pinky finger, causing the digit to fly out of the window. Truman apologizes profusely to the narrator, so much so that he eventually goes unconscious.

This story seems to break every rule of good writing: we don't know the relationship between the two characters, we don't know where the story is taking place, and we don't even know what species or planet Truman is from. Yet the piece is engaging from beginning to end. Because we hear Truman talk before we see him using his power, it's easily assumed that he's from a different country, which makes his use of finger-ejecting mind power quite the surprise. The narrator chalks Truman's reaction up to simple "culture shock", and since he ultimately forgives Truman, the story seems like a satire on how to properly deal with people (or aliens) from other cultures.

Pseudocide by Melissa Ruby is a plainspoken, realistic story in a domestic setting. The unnamed narrator recounts the day she witnessed a woman jump off of the Golden Gate Bridge. She finally gathers the courage to report the incident by calling 911 that night, but the operator seems uninterested. On the news, she hears a report of a missing woman who may have committed suicide, and once they show her picture on the screen, the narrator is certain this is the woman she saw. At a coffee shop two years later, she sees a woman who appears identical to the one in the picture, and the narrator wonders if it could possibly be the same person, if she could have possibly survived the fall.

While there are some striking images in this piece, I think it ultimately falls short in getting beyond the stereotypical suicide story. Ruby does a nice job of letting the

reader clearly see the woman's fall from the bridge, and the sentence, "It almost seems as ordinary as the seagull perched on the orange cable suspension," offers an interesting detail about the anti-climactic nature of this suicide. What fails to engage me, though, is the narrator's internal thoughts. Phrases like, "I'm useless and helpless," and "I wonder how unhappy she must have been," seem so cliché and expected that the narrator herself is left underdeveloped and therefore, uninteresting.

March 2008 Issue

The Pony Theory by James D. Ardis is a plainspoken, realistic story in a domestic setting. It tells the tale of Warren Wundt, a prestigious Pulitzer Prize-winning chemist who declares in front of every well-respected scientist in the country that instead of atoms, every item and being on Earth is composed of ponies. This statement appalls Calvin Johnson, his colleague, who understandably insists that this theory is ridiculous. Wundt sticks to his guns, however, and soon the rest of the scientists agree that it's much nicer to believe that the world can be so simply reduced to ponies.

I think that Warren Wundt and his creator, James D. Ardis, have something in common—they both put forth seemingly outlandish ideas that somehow please an audience in the end. With lines of dialogue like, "There are quite literally ponies in your pants, dear sir," the humor alone in Ardis' piece can carry the story forward. Yet there's more to this story than just being funny; it suggests that perhaps we can find more happiness in the simpler things in life, rather than constantly trying to understand the complex.

Maybe Love Can Do That Too by Nick Ostdick is a plainspoken, realistic story in a domestic setting. Erin Segal, the daughter of famous actor Tony Segal (who has recently been charged with the murder of his girlfriend) goes to a class party held at her history teacher's house. Each student was to dress according to the theme—American history—so while Erin dresses up as a Native American, she is most enthralled with Christopher's costume, which is a piece of foam in the shape of Louisiana to represent the Louisiana Purchase. The children play a game of history trivia while Mr. Jorgenson gets some refreshments ready in the kitchen, but when they know he can't hear them, they begin to ask Erin why her father murdered that woman. Christopher, who has been

listening to the murder questions but not offering any of his own, feels sorry for Erin. For reasons unknown, he lights his costume on fire with a match. This inspires Erin to go home and set her own house on fire.

This is the kind of story that grabs you with the first sentence—”It's the night before Erin Segal sets her house on fire”—and never lets go. This promise of impending drama combined with the quirky details of the context, character, and place create a story that's never been told before. Humorous observations like, “The rest of the class is sitting around the table eating ham sandwiches shaped like the Mayflower and drinking homemade cherry shakes that everyone is calling Georgie Washingtons,” creates a nice balance for the more serious underside of the story, that of which explores the emotional stress that the daughter of a celebrity scandal must endure.

February 2008 Issue

In Limbo by Greta Igl is a plainspoken, realistic story in a domestic setting. Nora has been a waitress at Jimmy's Corner Café for 17 years. One day, she waits on a nicely-dressed couple, and though they are being perfectly friendly to her, she can't help but get frustrated with these kinds of people—the kind that are much off than her. When the couple notices the for-sale sign in front of the diner, the woman asks Nora where she'll go once the place is gone. While she doesn't say it, Nora knows she'll probably go to a place that's just like this one and keep doing the same thing over and over again.

The pace of this story is very slow and steady, which immediately wraps you up into the atmosphere of this “piece of crap diner,” where people move slowly and nothing ever happens. The only problem is that nothing ever happens in the story, either, so as a reader, I was less than engaged. There are some nice gestures here and there, such as, “Nora picks a fleck of dried egg yolk from one of the chrome jelly stackers,” but for the most part, all we get is Nora's internal monologue about her frustrations with going nowhere in life. This created too much internal, not enough external.

She Whispers, Nudges, Mumbles Something by Kevin Sampsell is a plainspoken, realistic story in a domestic setting. Told from the third person, two unnamed characters, a boy and a girl, stand next to each other at a concert. The girl winds up holding on to his back throughout the show, hooking her fingers through his belt loops. After the show,

they walk together to his car but can barely hear each other speak, their ears ringing from the loud music and pounding bass. She tries to make small talk, but only winds up mumbling things to herself during the car ride to his place.

This story is very sparse in context but incredibly rich in imagery. Being a piece of flash fiction, every sentence is used economically to pack in sights of the people and place. Images like, “She blew on his peach fuzz there. She imagined a field of dead grass blowing in the wind,” capture the strange relationship between these two people—they are connecting on a certain level, but there's still a strong feeling that both of them are very isolated. This is only emphasized more when they cannot hear each other; the use of misunderstood dialogue perfectly captures this disconnect.

Interview with Jackie Corley, Founder and Editor-in-Chief

Word Riot started out as just the literary component to a larger music Web site. Six years later, it's one of the more well-known and respected journals online. How did you get from A to B?

I had this online friend Paula Anderson. She was starting an online music magazine called Communication Breakdown. She wanted me to run Word Riot as the literary component. Paula was kind of a wild child; that's part of what really intrigued me about her.

One day, Paula kind of disappeared from the online world for another one of her adventures. I had some html skill so I picked up where she left off and ran CB and Word Riot. At a certain point, it just became too difficult to manage all the staff on CB—basically a bunch of college and high school age kids like I was—as well as keep Word Riot going. Paula and I had talked about putting Word Riot on its own site, so I did that. Eventually, CB just kind of died off.

Before you started working on Communication Breakdown, did you have aspirations of running your own literary magazine, or was it something you just fell into?

That was something I just kind of fell into. I've wanted to be a writer since I was about 15. I set up a Web site to house my personal writing and Paula stumbled on that and we became fast friends. When she started talking to me about CB, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. Paula just had this kinetic energy she came across. There wouldn't have been a Word Riot without Paula.

Plenty of online magazines go up and never gain any steam. Can you think of any specific steps you took that helped Word Riot get to the level of success it's at today?

I think a big reason Word Riot is still around is because it grew up slowly, from a section of a magazine, to a magazine, to a small press and a magazine. I think publishing monthly makes a big difference. I don't know if I would have been able to keep up if it had been a weekly, and I think it's difficult for an online magazine to maintain an audience if it's a quarterly. What an online magazine needs to stay successful is longevity and consistency.

What is the editorial process like at Word Riot? How do decisions get made among the editors?

There are two prose editors and one poetry editor. I help out with the prose submissions. My prose editors go through the submissions and pull out the ones each of us likes. We don't do a roundtable debate about stories or anything. If a story is good enough for one of my fiction editors, it's good enough for me. I'm not a good judge of poetry, so my

poetry editor (Charles P. Ries) has total control over that department. I just select a certain number of poetry submissions out of the “Yes” bin each month.

I like to keep our submission process low-key. I don’t think a big debate is necessary. There’s no reason for editors to take themselves too seriously. We’re all writers ourselves. We know how tough the submissions process can be from the writer’s end.

On that note, you are coming out with a collection of short stories with So New Media. How do you balance “Jackie the Writer” with “Jackie the Editor”?

It’s definitely a high-wire act. I’ve always thought of myself as a writer, but I’ve accomplished more as an editor/publisher, and I’m proud of those accomplishments. One of the most humbling moments of my life was when Paula’s family and friends read from selections of her chapbook (which Word Riot Press published) at her wake.

But there’s also a lot of grunt work involved in editing and publishing. Going through the submissions, keeping up with the site maintenance, building out the e-mail list, getting the printer paid. It’s easy to get lost in that and push off time I should spend writing. I have to keep myself in check to make sure I allow time for the writing. But I think reading submissions and editing has made me a much better writer. I get to see first hand what works for me as a reader and what doesn’t. You look at writing differently when you come at it with a critical eye than when you read for pleasure. That’s helped me as a writer.

It’s constantly said that most editors can read the first line or paragraph of a story and already know if their answer is going to be yes or no. Looking at Word Riot’s March Issue, the first line of Nick Ostdick’s story, “Maybe Love Can Do That Too” strikes me as that kind of perfect first sentence—”It’s the night before Erin Segal sets her house on fire.” How true for you is this concept of knowing whether a story works from the very beginning?

That’s pretty true for me. I always continue through a submission but I can usually tell by the first paragraph if it’s a “No.” Writing takes practice. It’s not just talent. It’s really, really hard work. There are certain mistakes we all make during the early parts of our careers. You can usually tell if those mistakes are present in a work early on.

Like, with my own writing: in the beginning I would overwrite; I’d go for the dazzle. Don’t reach for obscure words just because you know them. That’s what I did. It doesn’t work. Get concise. Cut to the bone. It took me a long time to learn that. I’m still learning that.

Let’s talk about Word Riot Press. What initially influenced you to start a press along with the magazine?

I wanted to get that Web writing out there and I thought having it in print would legitimize it. But I was also just in my junior year of college and had little money to

speak of, so print runs weren't in my price range just yet. Until I could afford to have a paperback professionally printed, I wanted to try putting out chapbooks just to get the press off the ground.

In an interview you did on bookmouth.com from 2005, you said after the first 1-1/2 years of Word Riot Press, you were "running slightly in the red." How are things looking now?

I break even or slightly in the red. I made a slight profit this year (like \$100) but we didn't put out new books. I've accepted the fact that publishing literary fiction is never going to make me any money. I look at it as a passion I'm pursuing.

I get a lot of satisfaction out of publishing other people's writing—on the web and in print. It's nice to have this packaged product you can step back from, forget all the hours of careful work, and look at and be proud of.

If you whipped out the crystal ball, what would you see in Word Riot's future? Any long-term goals?

I'd like to see us put out a 10-year anthology of the best writing that has appeared on the site. That's my long-term goal for Word Riot right now. Mostly, I just want to see the site keep going. I want to continue publishing up-and-coming writers. I don't have any desire to publish very well-known, established writers. Run interviews with them, sure, but publish, no. I want Word Riot to continue to be an avenue for writers who have a strong ability but are still trying to discover their voice.

Writing is tough. It's very difficult to establish yourself in the writing world. Finishing the work is hard, getting an agent is hard, getting a book sold is hard. We have to have a strong community for writers just starting out because otherwise, some very talented folks would just give up. We need outlets to let emerging writers know that it's worth the struggle, that there are victories to be had along the way.