

Find a custom home at a niche journal

Tailor your work to fit a themed literary magazine and improve your odds of acceptance

Let's face it. No matter how closely we examine some literary journals' websites, guidelines and past issues, we don't always know if our poetry or prose has a real shot of acceptance and publication. But sometimes, we can improve our chances for success—and contribute to some distinctive cultural conversations—by submitting to “niche” journals, which seek and publish work with a particular thematic slant.

Like their unthemed peers, these journals, too, look for the very best, most powerful writing they can find. But their scope is focused. Their specific interest may be “new writing on justice,” as is the case for *J Journal*, which published my story “For Services Rendered” (and, disclosure: on whose editorial advisory board I now serve). Or, the combined poetry, prose and artwork may “touch upon relationships to the human body, illness, health and healing,” as occurs each time *Bellevue Literary Review (BLR)*, which published my story “Consultation,” releases a new issue.

Of course, plenty of niche journals have passed on my work, too. But they continue to sustain my interest, and perhaps they'll pique yours. Examples include the print journals *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, which examines the deeper and darker sides of food, and *War, Literature and the Arts (WLA)*, which is based at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Then, too, there are journals I've not yet attempted to crack, such as *Stymie*, which describes itself as “a non-profit online literary magazine ... focused on sport (and games) in literature.”

Benefits

As partial as I am to niche journals, others have expressed their benefits much more eloquently. *J Journal* editors Adam Berlin and Jeffrey Heiman explain: “Our justice theme puts the pieces we publish in a special light and, ideally, helps readers to interpret each piece and

(John Jay College of Criminal Justice of The City University of New York), Berlin and Heiman are writers in their own right. It's their background on the other side of the submissions table that leads them to suggest that “journals with a specific thematic focus make the submissions process easier. With so many writers submitting their work, a focused idea narrows the pool.”

“And there have been times when each of us has worked on a new piece specifically because we saw a venue looking for a certain kind of submission,” Berlin and Heiman continue. “Our hope is that there are some strong writers out there, ready to begin a new story or narrative or poem who, seeing our call, will be inspired to work on a piece that fits under *J Journal's* wide umbrella.”

Niche journals offer another plus: significant potential for crossover appeal. Although it may be true that the submission pool narrows, the integration of an “extra-literary” field or discipline can expand readership.

For instance, *Gastronomica's* press coverage includes mentions in the “Food Stuff” section of *The New York Times* and on various food-focused blogs. In New York, where bars and bookstores feature crowded reading schedules, *BLR's* public readings are distinctive for taking place on the journal's home turf of Bellevue Hospital, inviting readers and writers into the hospital and inviting the hospital population to partake in the writing.

What they're looking for

Currently, these journals seem most hungry for prose. At *J Journal*, which publishes two print issues yearly, Berlin



Some journals look for writing on themes ranging from health to food to war to sports. They may also dedicate an issue to a narrower topic, e.g., baseball stories.

to draw connections between pieces. That's the joy of a more niche journal and the joy we feel most pointedly when reading over drafts and ordering the pieces in a particular issue.”

In addition to serving as faculty members at the journal's home institution

and Heiman receive “more poetry (and more strong poetry) than fiction and personal narrative. Out of every hundred submissions, about 80 percent are poems. So we’re always looking for more prose.”

Berlin and Heiman also emphasize the broad potential of the justice theme. “Our best work usually touches questions of justice tangentially rather than directly. Many of the stories we receive are genre pieces or pieces that rely too heavily on courtroom drama or noirish plots. That’s not at all what we want.”

There’s no dearth of poetry at *Stymie*, which publishes semiannual digital issues as well as more frequent Web content, either. According to founding editor Erik Smetana, “There are weeks where we get simply inundated with poetry, so much so that it’s the one area of the journal where we have two people focused on it. We’d love to see more submissions for the website, which we update weekly (or thereabouts) with new brief pieces of fiction and nonfiction.”

Writers should take note that *Stymie* now publishes an “open” issue each autumn/winter; the spring/summer issue has a theme within the sport focus. In 2011, this theme was baseball; in 2012, it will be “the feminine perspective,” which will focus both on women writers and on stories that feature female characters, “something you don’t often see in sports-related fiction,” Smetana says. *Stymie* is not alone among niche journals in featur-

ing themes within their themes. *Gastronomica’s* editor in chief, Darra Goldstein, hopes to publish a special issue on “food and the environment,” and *BLR* has published themed issues on aging, mental illness, infectious diseases and disability.

As for *BLR’s* poetry/prose breakdown, managing editor Stacy Bodziak notes that poetry and fiction submissions are about even, “but—perhaps somewhat surprisingly—we receive fewer creative-nonfiction manuscripts.” She adds: “*BLR* is actively seeking essays that reach beyond the standard ‘illness narrative’ to develop a topic in an engaging and original manner.”

Not just for academics

At *WLA*, editor Donald Anderson recalls that the journal’s inaugural issue, which was published before his arrival, contained academic essays only. But the times—and content—have changed.

“These days, we publish annually some 300 pages of critical essays, personal essays, poems, short fiction, visual art, novel excerpts, memoir, interviews and book reviews.” In Anderson’s view, “Memoir and the personal essay have represented our strongest material, though we have published a large amount of strong poetry, too.”



Journals that focus on one subject may appeal to a group beyond the usual literary crowd. Plus, your published work could find its way into an anthology.

“Our weakest material ... has been the ‘weak’ poetry—a poetry of state-

ment rather than a poetry of image,” he says. “When it comes to war, especially to personal experience in war, inexperienced writers will veer to cliché and heartfelt, simplistic pronouncements. The difficult part of the job at *WLA* is respecting that personal knowledge but needing to decline publishing [that] is, in the end, unprocessed experience.”

Gastronomica’s Goldstein states that her journal “is always open to all contributors, and it pleases me no end that many writers see their first publication in the journal. I work especially closely with young writers in the hope of moving food writing beyond the merely descriptive and sentimental.”

Beyond that, Goldstein expresses interest “in writers who don’t necessarily define themselves as food writers. I think *Gastronomica* succeeds because it presents so many varied and often unexpected perspectives on food. For instance, in the [Winter 2012] issue, a war-zone photographer has an essay about land mines still buried in Laos from the 1960s, and how dangerous it makes any attempt at gardening or agriculture there. Poets who have never written about food suddenly discover or write a poem appropriate for our pages.”

Goldstein adds: “I tend to favor the dark over the cheerful and the quirky over the mundane. A loving description of a great meal you had in Italy, no matter how well written, will not likely find its way into *Gastronomica’s* pages.” Potential book reviewers should query the book-review editor, Allison Carruth. “We never accept completed book reviews that are

NICHE JOURNALS

VISIT THE publications’ websites for sample content, subscription information and writers guidelines:

- **Bellevue Literary Review** blreview.org
- **Gastronomica** gastronomica.org
- **J Journal** jjournal.org
- **Stymie** stymiemag.com
- **War, Literature and the Arts** wlajournal.com

Looking for other niche journals? For poetry and fiction, Duotrope (duotrope.com) provides an ample database of literary magazines. Search the database by theme for some leads. Subscribers to *The Writer* can also search its online market directory at writermag.com/markets.

—E.D.

sent in on spec, and don't even generally accept offers to review specific books," Goldstein says. She adds, "As a quasi-academic journal, we have to make sure that our reviews are completely impartial."

Common bonds with other lit mags

Keep in mind that in many ways, niche literary journals have much in common with their more general-interest peer publications. That means that the usual rules apply. You should always become familiar with a journal's content before submitting. Moreover, like other literary magazines, some niche journals close to submissions for certain periods of the year, so be sure to consult and follow the guidelines.

Unfortunately, another common bond concerns payment. As is often the case with literary journals, payment for contributors to niche publications frequently takes the form of contributor copies. Sometimes, writers of published work will receive subscriptions and discounts on additional purchases. Smetana states that *Stymie* does "try to promote our contributors as much as possible ... through our various social-media presences or as part of an interview series. When a contributor has a book come out, we'll gladly emblazon our website with a banner."

Cash payments are less frequent, but they do exist. When *Gastronomica* publishes writers' work, for example, they receive \$150 to \$200. "This fee doesn't come close to representing what the writers' work is worth," Goldstein says. "But at least it's a token acknowledgement of their labors." She adds: "What *Gastronomica* can offer, beyond payment, is a gorgeous layout and the writer's exposure to an influential group of readers. Over the past 10 years, publication in *Gastronomica* has led to more financially lucrative work for many of our authors, and in some cases even book contracts."

Erika Dreifus

Contributing editor Erika Dreifus lives in New York City. Her short-story collection, *Quiet Americans*, contains several stories that appeared first in niche publications and other journals' themed issues. She regularly includes calls for submissions from journals on her website and in her newsletter. Web: erikadreifus.com.

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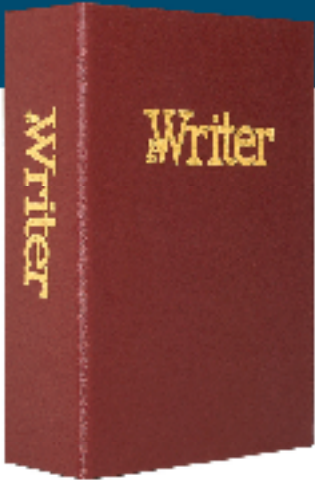


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