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1455

Movable Type

State of the Art

A BI-MONTHLY
PUBLICATION
**CREATED FOR
WRITERS**



ISSUE NO.

4

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DIRECTOR'S CUT

It was March 2020 when many of us began to recognize—if not fully accept—that COVID was going to be a serious disruption, and not a fleeting one either. Here we are, one year later (or one hundred COVID years later), and nothing is the same, which doesn't mean everything has changed. Or, as Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr put it much more poetically, “plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose” (the more things change, the more they stay the same).

At 1455 we were obliged, seemingly overnight, to reconsider how we conceived and positioned our programming. Until last year, poetry readings, author interviews, concerts, and festivals all were by definition in-person events. For a variety of perfectly understandable reasons, many organizations suspended or cancelled their programs. Until further notice threatened to become the new reality. This seemed unacceptable and I, equal parts stubborn and optimistic, realized that the proverbial show must go on. 1455 took our free events online and tried to find a silver lining for every potential setback.

We certainly anticipate returning to semi-normalcy in the coming months, and acknowledge that nothing can replace or even approximate the intimacy of live events. That said, we could hardly have imagined the opportunities provided by virtual programming. As we saw with last year's Summer Festival, the potential for genuine inclusivity is significant: we more than tripled the number of panels and speakers, reaching many thousands of people across the country and the world. We have even grander plans for our [third annual festival](#), this July.

It seems there's been at once too much and not enough discussion about the ways this past year has impacted our artistic communities, on both macro and micro levels. When assessing the state of the art (or, arts), anyone hoping to stay abreast of what's happening—much less what's coming—must have at least a familiarity with how things have always been. This issue of MOVABLE TYPE attempts to explore what has (and hasn't) changed for writers and writing.

Courtney Maum, who has already established herself as a brilliant novelist, has delivered an incredible gift to aspiring (and even established) authors with her recent book *BEFORE AND AFTER THE BOOK DEAL*. Exhaustively researched and carefully assembled, it's an instant-classic, with comments and quotes from countless authors, editors, and agents. Any writer hoping to navigate the ever-complicated literary landscape would do well to acquire this, and we're honored to showcase Courtney as our Featured Writer this month with an excerpt from her book. Vonetta Young discusses how—and why—in times of uncertainty, she turns to words. We're fortunate to have the insider perspective from two important fronts: Anna Sproul-Latimer explores the state of things from her vantage point as an agent, and Gregg Wilhelm, who directs GMU's Writing Program, offers a candid appraisal of what's going on (and why change is always necessary and welcome) in the MFA workshop. Finally, we have Detroit's Estuary Collective, who epitomize the power (and potential) of poetry, and the urgent need—now more than ever—to prioritize collaboration over competition. And, not least, this is the first issue of Movable Type overseen by its new editorial director, Bethanne Patrick, whose indefatigable love of writing and unparalleled experience will help take this publication to the next level.

In uncertain times, one thing remains immutable: storytelling is crucial and people can—and must—find ways to create, share, and connect. Everything is changing. Nothing has changed.



Be well and stay safe!

Sean Murphy

Executive Director, 1455

Creating (and maintaining) a literary community without an MFA

Courtney Maum

So many things have changed in publishing. There have been positive changes that came out of the #BlackLivesMatter and #PublishingPaidMe movement and there have been difficult changes—mergers, layoffs, paper shortages—during the pandemic.

But one thing that hasn't changed is that aspiring writers must be active and genuinely enthusiastic literary citizens to get anywhere in this industry. You really must support the industry that you want to support you! From buying books from independent bookstores and reviewing

them online, to subscribing to literary magazines and newsletters and following your favorite literary stars on social media, it is relatively simple and rewarding to join the literary community with or without an MFA.

Here are some ideas.



There are a lot of reasons writers don't attend an MFA program: they're categorically opposed to them; they can't afford them (financially and/or emotionally); they don't know that they exist. I was in this latter case. I lived in France for most of my twenties, and by the time I moved back to America and woke up to the fact that most authors

had MFA programs in their bios, I felt too old, too married, and too financially unstable to pursue an MFA.

I was, however, longing for a literary community, and it wasn't initially clear how I could find one outside of an MFA program. I was living in a really rural part of Massachusetts with very few people—



much less writing people—around. A serendipitous part-time job offer in New York City gave me the chance to try to find my kinfolk. In order to get as much out of my time in a metropolis as possible, I decided to attend a reading series for each of the four nights that I would be in New York, and to introduce myself—in person—to one stranger at each reading. I did this for four months straight, and although the positive outcomes I experienced were aided by my extraversion, I’m nevertheless convinced that there are solid, actionable, and affordable things you can do to build a literary community without an MFA. Some of these suggestions are free, others require an investment. For the paid options (attending summer conferences or an online writing class), remember to save receipts for tax time so you can deduct these costs as a business expense.

Attend too many reading series.

You know the musical expression “playing by ear”? At reading series, you can train your ear to help your writing. Take it from someone who survived a writer’s twenty-two-minute “autofiction” revelation about a particular type of oral servicing he once received on a couch: once you hear someone bomb in front of a microphone, you will do anything—everything—to avoid terrible writing. In-jokes, tangents, potentially offensive content, narrative indulgences—attend a lot of reading series and you will be only too happy to remove these malignancies from your work.

Volunteer as a reader for a literary magazine.

Being a reader for literary magazines allows you to keep your finger on the pulse of what people are writing—and not writing—about, and it can be very useful for your creative writing process to be a gatekeeper for a while. Understanding what makes you want to accept or reject a story will inevitably inform the choices you’re making in your own work. Are you trying too hard to be funny? Do you go on tangents? Do your characters do nothing but stare out the window drinking tea? There is just as much to be learned from reading flawed writing as

there is from reading polished work, plus you’ll come away with a new respect for the form rejection letter after you’ve been exposed to a bog of misspelled, uniquely formatted submissions from misanthropes and misogynists who are only too proud to tell you that they couldn’t be bothered with your submission guidelines because this attached thirty- five-thousand-word novella about a man without a girlfriend absolutely needs to be in your poetry journal. NOW.

Attend a summer writing program.

The cons of these are that they can be prohibitively expensive (it’s nearly four grand to attend the ten-day Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference without a scholarship), competitive to get into, and alcohol fuels a great deal of the socializing, but the pros are that you can get nearly a semester’s worth of contacts and inspiration in as little as a week. Poets & Writers has a solid database of writing conferences that you can navigate by event type, location, even financial aid deadlines.

Although there isn’t a writing conference where alcohol is specifically prohibited (yet), the writer Vonetta Young said that the VONA conference (for writers of color) doesn’t provide any conference-sponsored alcohol, and writers Caitlin Horrocks and Tara Lindis-Corbell both said the same thing

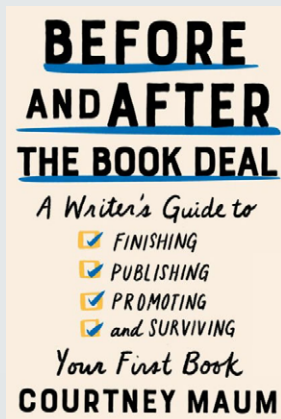
of the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop. Librarian and inn manager Jesica Sweedler DeHart says that food takes center stage at the Orcas Island Literary Festival where most of the events are hosted by a tea or coffee company.

If you need extra support around alcohol, look for programs that have recovery meetings that are relatively easy to get to and attend. “Going somewhere with a strong recovery presence,” suggests the writer Hallie Goodman, “can help you connect with other writers who are feeling a little alienlike as they see all of their peers get sloshed.”

Take an online writing class.

Since the advent of digital technology, there might not be a better boon for writers than the online writing class. Though the classes are online, the students and the teachers are real people, busy ones like you. And with the rising popularity of online writing classes, the standards set for teachers are very (very!) high: as I write, the likes of Arif Anwar, Yahdon Israel, and Leigh Stein are all teaching online, and the talent in the student pool is equally impressive.

Even if you’re not meeting in person, online classes offer emerging writers



Want more on this topic?

Purchase *Before and After the Book Deal* by Courtney Maum at bookshop.org



important social benefits: you might make a friend you can go on to workshop with privately; if you have a positive relationship with your teacher, you can ask them for a recommendation letter at some point in the future. Learning to take—and give—feedback from your peers will also help you gain the technical skills you'll need to be more self-reliant when you are revising your own work. In addition to expanding your personal writing network, online classes can bolster your creativity and imagination, too. Would you try a screenwriting class in an MFA program if you were accepted there for poetry? Maybe not. But with their affordability, convenience, and lower-stakes environment for experimentation, you can try out translation, travel writing, memoir, erotica, and many other genres you might not have had the time—or even the permission—to try in an MFA.

Join (or start) a writing group.

If you haven't had any success finding an existing writing group through the common channels (your local library, bookstore, or good old word of mouth), it might be time to start one of your own. You can post flyers in actual brick-and-mortar places, or use social-gathering sites like Meetup to gauge interest in your group. Remember that your group doesn't have to be stylistically homogenous;

it will serve you as a writer if your comembers have varied life experiences and are working in different genres than you.

Attend AWP.

It's not cheap to get to and it usually takes place in the godforsaken month of February, but AWP (which stands for the Association of Writers & Writing Programs [which should actually be abbreviated as AWWP, but... artistic license?]) is an annual conference attended by thousands and thousands of publishing professionals and writers. A conference as large as this one can feel panic-attack-level overwhelming at times, but there's no better one-stop shopping for all your career needs. At the many parties and off-site readings offered throughout the five-day conference, you can hear new work and socialize with like-minded artists; at the book fair, you can spend hours talking with conference and writing-program managers about the different opportunities they offer; you can network for job opportunities in academia and publishing; you can browse everything from quirky chapbooks to door-stopper bestsellers, and enjoy conversations with the editors, publicists, and interns who brought those books to life. If you're feeling up for it, you can even pitch projects to an editor, and you can flick something grody at the editor from [name of literary magazine redacted] who



Check out 1455's Author Series at 1455litarts.org

has rejected every piece you've ever sent. A word to the wise: AWP lists discount codes on its website for hotel and airline fare. Make sure to use these discounts when you book!

Join a book club if you're not already in one.

Learning to read other people's work, to question it, and to praise it in a clear and concise manner are skills essential to any writer, as is the proper handling of oneself around copious amounts of white wine.

Read.

Duh, right? Not so fast. If you want to be an active member of the literary community, you have to read beyond the kind of work you normally gravitate toward,

in both genre and style. Every fall there are lists about the top ten or twenty books out that year: earmark BuzzFeed's most-anticipated novels, read the National Book Award poetry finalists, set yourself a goal. Subscribe to literary magazines (and read them), and visit the areas of your local library that you usually avoid. Challenge yourself to leave well-thought-out reviews of these books on social-cataloging sites like Goodreads, so that you learn to speak respectfully about other people's work. In an MFA program, you would be thoughtfully critiquing other people's writing on the regular, so don't slack on this skill set.

A quick tip about book reviews, especially online: Do not leave negative reviews of authors whom you might one day want to beseech or befriend. Early in your career, you might not know who these people



are yet, so book-review with caution. As a general rule of thumb, if you have negative thoughts about somebody's creative output, it's best to let them die a silent death inside your mind.

Volunteer at a literary festival

If you can't be invited by them, join 'em. Literary festivals are always in need of volunteers, and they're one of the best ways to stay connected to the writing world. If you offer up your services, make sure to choose a committee that actually suits your career interests: event planning will give you an idea of how panels are organized (with a sneak peak at the kind of topics you can one day hope to talk about yourself), public relations will give you experience writing press releases and interfacing with the media, and hospitality can put you in the same orbit as the authors you admire.

If your volunteer time is limited, festivals, arts organizations, and literary magazines always need extra help during their end-of-the-year fund-raisers.

If you do all these things, or even half of them, while also keeping up a regular writing practice, you're going to find your book people, and they're going to find you. If you still find yourself yearning for

a more codified community after all these efforts, start researching part-time and/or low-residency MFA programs. More affordable, less competitive, and more flexible with scheduling than their full-time counterparts, part-time MFA programs will only need you on campus two to three times a week (usually at times that are convenient for nine-to-fivers), and low-res programs offer long-distance education with site-specific meetups one or two times a year. ■



Courtney Maum, author of *Before and After the Book Deal: A Writer's Guide to Finishing, Publishing, Promoting and Surviving Your First Book*, is also author of the novels *Costalegre*, *Touch*, and *I Am Having So Much Fun Here Without You*.

courtneymaum.com



Call for Storytellers!

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Wanting to Be Possible

Vonetta Young

Every morning, I read a newsletter for finance nerds, written in a uniquely snarky tone that appeals to my Millennial sensibilities. I inevitably wind up laughing out loud at headlines that feel like inside jokes, like “Postal Service Burdened by Such Great Heights,” “WAP Stands for We Aren’t Performing,” and “Let’s SPAC Up for a Minute.” My eyes skip past the stock market data, where the year-to-date numbers glow green with an arrow pointing up.



Inevitably, though, there will also be a headline, in a much more serious tone, about the number of jobs lost: “... It’s Worse than Last Week,” “Lower-income workers have been hardest hit by coronavirus job losses,” “Women accounted for all of the job losses.”

I read these as I sip my coffee with lactose-free milk, a blue fleece blanket wrapped around my shoulders because my office, in the basement of my DC home, is always chilly. My spouse and I bought this place in the summer of 2020, at what we thought and hoped would be the height of the pandemic. With all the space we were looking for and at historic low interest rates, we could not say no to this cozy gut-renovation in Takoma, a residential neighborhood that reminds me a lot of Portland, Oregon, but with more Black people.

With both of us working from home, our downtown condo got cramped during the stay-at-home orders, and even more grating with our heavy-footed upstairs neighbors and frequent protests featuring bullhorns and drums outside our windows. On his way home from the grocery store one day, my spouse helped

a homeless man administer Narcan to another man who had overdosed and watched as the man seemingly rose from the dead. A few weeks later, we woke to a corpse laying at the bus stop outside our building. It was time to go.

I was keenly aware that my spouse and I were sitting in the middle of every point of controversy the country was experiencing.

Black Millennials in our thirties with white collar jobs in corporate law and financial services consulting as well as savings in our bank account, we had the option to leave. But the comfort of our new home, which we filled with furniture from Room & Board and West Elm, contrasted so sharply with what we saw on the news and in the lives of those in our city, I sometimes had trouble sleeping. Was it wrong for us to feel so solid while the world was turning upside down?

As a writer, in times of uncertainty, I turn to words. At the start of the pandemic, when I couldn’t remove myself from the couch for days -- this strange feeling, like grief, gluing me there -- I read, because

that was all I could do. I read Kiley Ried's *Such a Fun Age* and felt breath returning to my body with every turn of the page, thrilled to read about a young Black woman finding her way. I read Ben Hubbard's *MBS* and was so frightened by the thought that someone my age could be so harmful, I could only engage with the book during the day, like a horror movie. I read Catherine Crawford's *French Twist: An American Mom's Experiment in Parisian Parenting* because it seemed frivolous, and it was, delightfully so. Each of these helped me remember that there was a world outside of my own. That there was hope. That there was possibility.

As 2020 dragged into 2021, I found myself busier than I'd ever been. I spoke to my business community about creating opportunity out of misfortune: "How can we better support Black businesses that are struggling right now?" "How can we galvanize more investors of color, who are more likely to invest in founders of color?"

"How can we move past the idea of donating and start investing in people, so the return is to the whole community?"

I spoke on podcasts and panels moderated by top industry figures, using my words to motivate people to action.

I started writing when I was 12, when my parents were separated but not yet divorced. I wanted to disappear because of my curly perm, big glasses, and crooked teeth. In whatever world I wrote about, I could be whoever I wanted to be and could make the characters do what I wanted them to do. I felt in control of my life at a time when I didn't understand anything that was going on around me.

As an adult, I realized that I wrote for the younger me, Black girls who yearned to see themselves in the YA novels they spent their weekends indulging in between episodes of *Family Matters* and *Hanging with Mr. Cooper*.

I wrote for Black women who didn't see themselves in any Candace Bushnell novel. I wrote because I wanted to un-disappear. I wanted to be possible.

In pushing my business community to make necessary progress, I wanted to challenge people with the idea that what is in front of our faces at the present moment doesn't have to be what stays.

I realized later was that I was creating a sense of possibility, the very reason I write.

So, filled with a renewed sense of this drive, I am writing a short story collection. I want to give the world even more possibilities through Black women characters experiencing joy and sorrow as they make good and bad choices and experience the consequences of all of them. Harnessing the discomfort of knowing that so many people are suffering while I live in comfort brings me a new sense of control, putting me on more solid footing in a world I still don't understand. While I may not be able to directly alleviate anyone's pain, I can give them options.

I can write hope. ■



Vonetta Young is a writer and financial services consultant based in Washington, DC. Her essays and fiction have been published in the *Indiana Review*, *Catapult*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Barrelhouse*, and *Cosmonauts Avenue*, among others. She is twice a graduate of Georgetown University.

Twitter @VonettaWrites
vonettayoung.com

Publishing— Not Perishing

Anna Sproul-Latimer

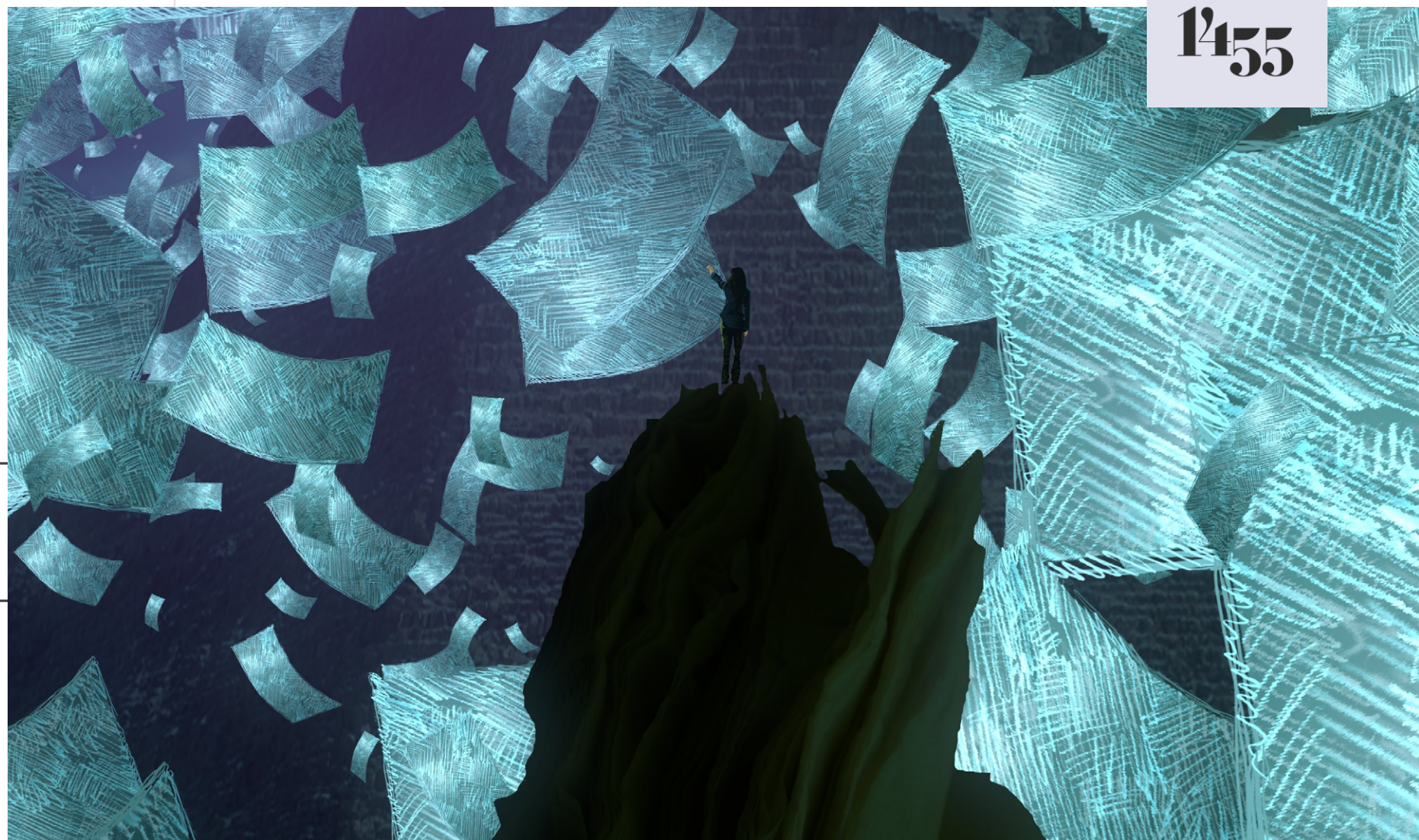
I'm so excited for the next few years in book publishing. Gimme, gimme, gimme. I'm excited as a literary agent but also as a reader, the latter in no small part because I suspect I'll actually be able to read for fun again soon.

Can you imagine? A BRAIN after 5pm? One that can do things other than persevere, seek carbohydrates, and long for sleep?!

I'm also excited because as an agent, I know just how many great books will be dropping in the next few years. Publishing timelines are such that most books sold in 2020 won't come out until 2022 or so, but when they do, watch out: authors have been planting some gorgeous, abundant, nourishing crops, and in time, we'll all be lucky to enjoy the

yield. Meanwhile, if you're an author metaphorically ready to sow your own, fear not: the soil is as promising as it's been in years.

In case you think I have lost it here in quarantine: a "promising" time for writers and their agents is not quite the same thing as a pleasurable one. Ha ha, SOB. No. Rather, to continue the agricultural metaphor, this has been what one might euphemistically call a Time of Publishing



Aeration. Huge change has torn through our landscape: the looming PRH/S&S merger; the establishment of exciting new ventures, from Astra House to Zando and the now-independent Spiegel and Grau, and new Big 5 imprints, from Tiny Reparations to Legacy Lit; and a wildly overdue grappling with the industry's monocultures of race and class, especially at executive levels.

Not to mention the whole "everyone's horribly traumatized" thing. All of us in

publishing—especially those of us who are also caregivers—have had to reprioritize and reimagine our careers for the next couple of years, dealing as we do with crushing disappointment, conflict, and frustration. Simultaneously, we understand that if that's all we've had to endure—just a little crippling depression and stymied ambition, NBD—we are really, really lucky. Five hundred thousand people are dead.

Even as we grieve together, however, I hope that you—like me—look to the future



Aeration is in many ways a painful thing.

with profound hope. Aeration is in many ways a painful thing. Sharp points are stabbing into our assumptions, coping mechanisms, and settled beliefs. Dirt clods are flying everywhere. But this is how possibility comes back into the land the land. It's how a depleted, exploited, leached-out field rediscovers its potential.

Aeration, in other words, is how oxygen gets in. And I believe that is what we are witnessing right now, at least in book publishing: a great oxygenation.

In my experience, acquiring editors' buying habits have changed in a wonderful way. They're betting big on urgent, funny, and

imaginative books and trusting more that "comps"—comparative title sales—aren't telling the whole story in under-established markets. They're less willing to be bored—or to trust that any kind of book is valuable just because more powerful people in their lives have always said so. They want substance. Sustenance. Variety. Color. Nuance. Adventure. Courage. Love. You know: all of the same things we do right now.

Readers' habits have likewise changed for the better. You might have heard the news that print book sales rose 8.2% in 2020, the largest 1-year increase in a decade. They bought TONS of books for kids, in pretty much all categories; tons of books on hobbies, crafting, and games; tons of graphic novels; and a fair amount of literary fiction. Adult nonfiction sales grew in solid numbers as well, especially in categories related to being a better person: emotional development, social justice and awareness, immersive memoir.

What does this all mean for writers? Good things, unless you wanted to write a 2020 travel guide. (If so: oh God, I'm sorry.) Readers and acquiring editors want to learn more about that new candlemaking or rock collecting or metal detecting hobby they picked up in quarantine. They are—forgive me—horny for human connection, romantic and non. Their imaginations are desperate to come out and play. That and/or they need serious,

immediate help processing the ongoing grief and aftermath of the Trump era. In short, readers and editors are raring to go. But that doesn't mean that getting a book deal is now easy. If anything, editors' standards are higher than ever; they're overrun with new submissions and demanding propulsive, wild, bold, urgent, imaginative, and forward-looking work. So this is a time to develop projects carefully before submitting. Nonfiction—all nonfiction—needs an argument, a "why," a clear and transformative value proposition for the reader. Fiction needs loamy, rich world building; complex, fascinating characters; and also usually an interesting plot.

This is not a time to rush, skimp, or tell your agent to kick rocks when she says, "the manuscript is still not quite there yet."

(If you would like to read much, much more than you ever deemed possible re: Neon Literary colleagues' and my advice on submissions and the creative process, allow me to plug our Substack newsletter, "How to Glow in the Dark.") Rather, it is a time to be even more mindful. To take care. Nor does this moment of possibility for writers and agents mean that bookstores are reaping the benefits. Serious disruptions in the printing supply chain, USPS chaos,

in-person event cancellations, and a hard consumer tack toward online purchasing have all created dire peril for the country's independent retailers. If you like those, please remember to buy from them, and also please advocate for unionization, warehouse workers' rights, and antitrust legislation to aerate That One Big Retail Giant.

We're in this painful moment now because linear growth—our anxiety to profit and achieve—has for too long taken priority over thoughtfulness, attention, inclusion, community, and care. We stripped the soil too much. We made the world bleak with our greed. Now that the aeration is well underway, we have a choice in how we start over. And my challenge to all of us—you, but also me—is to help each other not be quite so in a rush this time. Let's make each other feel safe enough to take things slowly.

I'm looking forward to seeing you out there again when we're ready. ■



Anna Sproul-Latimer is a literary agent and co-founder of Neon Literary, an agency on a mission to demystify the publishing industry and establish new markets in fiction and nonfiction.

neonliterary.com

Beyond the Gatekeepers: A Poetry Manifesto

The Estuary Collective, *Detroit*

It was the Summer of 2020. Summer of the #BlackOut Instagram squares. Summer of Solidary. Summer of allies packed so tight and stacked so high there was hardly space left for us.

Summer of blood on the streets and rage in our hearts. Summer of sirens wailing deep into the night and birds chirping at all hours because even they lost the sense of time; Summer of the eels forgetting us, and the streets forgetting us, too. It was the Summer of exhausting yeast and exasperating succulents and nearly every poetry magazine decided it was high time to center non-white voices. Except it had been high time for years, and if the

price of parity is the grotesque carnival of violence we had to witness over the Summer, then the price is too high.

With our worlds reeling and anxiously looking for the horizon, we came together. Four Black women from across the Diaspora with a shared artistic modality: poetry. It wasn't too long before we got to talking about the industry itself, comparing notes, sharing experiences.

With BURN IT TO THE GROUND on our tongues and righteous indignation on our hips, we committed to building something better.

When we look at the poetry publishing landscape, we see something that could be better for everyone. Big publishers lavish other genres with funding but throw scraps at poetry, which creates an unnecessarily competitive environment. MFA programs create a pipeline to publishing through access to resources but they are by nature exclusionary. The poetry community has organically developed responses to these limitations in the form of independent poetry organizations, presses, and publishers. Unfortunately, we observe these organizations mimicking the same flawed structural approach of competition, gatekeeping, and homogeneity.

Let us be perfectly clear: we are not suggesting we have the solution to all the problems within poetry publishing.

What we do have, what we feel all of us have, is the moral obligation to imagine something better. We cannot let the fear of failure stunt us into accepting toxicity. We



have the imagination to create entire worlds on paper; each of us has the skill to transport our listeners anywhere we choose: why can't we choose to envision something better for ourselves? For our craft? For our field?

We see that competition within publishing is at an all-time high.

While everyone has something to say, between competition fees, non-diverse readers, and non-diverse judges, it is mostly white/non-BIPOC voices that are heard. Though there are publications that cater to BIPOC, women, and members of the LGBTQ* communities, publishing as a whole needs to be revamped, and the competitive model needs an overhaul.

Consider the many gates present in a typical poetry publishing contest. Our baby poet needs a working internet connection and a device to get online. They need experience to discern which contests are legitimate and which are scams, experience that usually comes with time and hard knocks. Most competitions and contests charge a "modest" entry or reading fee (and plenty of poetic license is taken with the word modest). So the aspiring poet needs to put together anywhere from \$5 to \$50 (though we've seen higher) to pay for the contest. They also need a bank account or some other way of making that money virtual so they can pay the fee to the publisher.

After all that, our baby poet has to hope against hope that the contest has hired a diverse group of readers who won't confuse their lack of understanding with a fault in the manuscript. That's a big leap of faith. And let's say the readers were either diverse or sensitivity trained and understood they might need to do a little research to get context for a manuscript—they run it up to whom? A homogeneous editorial staff? Another leap of faith.

If faith without works is dead, what do you call faith falling flat after all that work? Look at the previous two paragraphs again. Notice the difference? The emerging writer must meet needs and have faith. Here's the

rub: while all emerging writers have to meet the needs, only some of us have to worry about the faith. We can do better, and the Summer of 2020 taught us that, too.

Last year we saw some of the best in publishing. We saw publishers implement sliding scales and free entries for underrepresented writers. We saw cooperatives and collectives form. We saw resource distribution and mutual aid swell. We know resources are compressed, but we believe we know how to stretch a meal. We can find a way to distribute resources with equity, to remove the economic barriers to access while compensating artists for their labor; we know publishing can be a generative and nurturing experience no matter how the writer comes to the page.

As previously mentioned, MFA programs create a pipeline to publishing through access and resources. Students have access to mentors, funds to cover fees and to attend conferences. There is the trap within academia to view self-published work as lesser than due to the lack of "rigorous" standards. All "rigorous" means in this context, is that you did not get enough approval from other people before you published the work. Self-publishing removes those gates and is thus considered suboptimal or illegitimate.

But consider for a moment what that outlook requires of anyone who wants to be considered a legitimate writer: you must be published, not self-publish.

Therefore, you must either win a contest or be selected for publication by an established publisher, a path which is much smoothed by an MFA program, but that requires the ability to attend a college program (and a graduate one at that), and to do that you need to have graduated high school. And yes, there are ways around all of those things, and yes, there are always exceptions: but why not get rid of the gates?

It is a struggle for BIPOC and other marginalized communities to even enter the academic space, let alone succeed within it. The interlocking layers of money and privilege in the college community create a feedback loop of alienation. Submissions cost money, and the more you submit, the more money you need. The more faith you have to have in your own work. In your own voice. A lot of writers, especially those from underserved communities, do not have the extra funds to spend on "what if." We have funds to spend on the here and now. Credentialing is gatekeeping, and we have to ask: to what end? What purpose do gates serve other than preserving homogeneity?

Residencies are another example of a resource that can lead to getting published, but that is set up in a way that excludes so many potentially amazing writers. Residencies can leave a huge dent in an emerging writer's pockets if not funded by scholarship monies or something to that effect. To complete a residency you first have to apply, the barriers to which have already been discussed under contests. If you are selected, you have to pay for the residency itself, pay for transportation to and from that residency, pay for food while you are there, and pay for anything else you are required to have as a residency participant. That's a lot for any emerging poet without the backing of an academic institution or a mentor. Imagine now, that the emerging writer is not a twenty-something upper-middle-class white woman, but a grown adult with rent/mortgage, utilities, and childcare expenses to pay. Imagine this is a caregiver or the one English-speaking member of a family. Imagine someone who can't live laugh love their way from one interest to the next: how do we make this work for them? In short, as they're currently structured, most residencies are a luxury both to attain and to experience. And yet: residencies give writers the time and space to polish their work, connect them with peers (an invaluable resource to hone and perfect your craft), and allow participants to make contacts across publishing.

We can imagine something better. In fact, we are seeing the beginnings of change in this area: out of the needs created by COVID, many organizations have chosen to radically revision what a residency looks like, and how the experience engages the participant. An unintended consequence of these measures has been a shift in who the programs engage. The bottom line is lack of money creates a huge deficit in the writing, submitting, and publishing process, and unfortunately, disparities don't end there.

On average, BIPOC writers are paid less than White authors for the same genre and lengths.

Lee and Low has long documented the lack of representation in publishing but the industry is only just beginning to reckon with the pay differential across genres, races, genders, and identities--we saw a lot of that process taking root this Summer, too. These disparities are not a mistake, they are intentional practices that disadvantage non-white writers (and readers) and hold up the status quo.

We believe things can be better, and we're not alone.

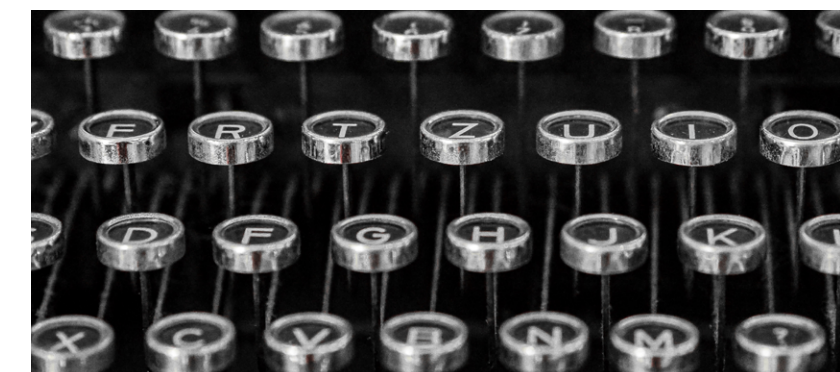
Across the landscape, we see grassroots organizations and collectives led by Black and

other underrepresented voices coming together to provide access to resources, crowdsource funding, chip away at the silo of credentiality. One such example is found in Detroit, where the Kresge Arts Fellowship endows recipients with \$25,000 and a suite of creative supports to bring their art into greater focus. There is no fee to submit to the Fellowship and the only requirement is for consideration that could be considered exclusionary is that all Fellows must be residents of Wayne, Oakland, or Macomb Counties in Michigan and may not be enrolled in a degree-seeking program. What stands out about the Kresge process is that, despite being highly selective, the process of applying is itself extremely generative. Applicants are encouraged to attend free workshop sessions where they can connect with organization representatives, former Fellows, other applicants (and thus artistic peers); by the end of the application process they have a fully developed artist statement, community impact statement, and if they had a project in mind for the funds, they walk away with a fleshed-out project plan. Obtaining the Fellowship is the goal, but win lose or draw, the participants walk away enriched.

The Estuary Collective had the opportunity to launch a first-of-its-kind free craft discussion series this year that lets

participants in on the revision and editorial process. One-on-one editorial sessions, manuscript reviews, workshops, or even line-by-line feedback can be prohibitively expensive for an emerging writer and we wanted to provide an alternative. In this series, a featured author provides a close read of their work, and then the poem's publisher comes in to talk about why they picked the poem for their magazine. Finally, the attendees get to engage the writer and editor with their questions on the process.

Elsewhere, Underbelly magazine provides readers with a beautifully laid out, free magazine that presents a poem's first draft and final form accompanied with the author's notes on their revision process. Sundress Publications is another group leading by example, they care more about the content of the book and what is hidden within, than who wrote it or the credential status they have. Editors read manuscripts (and whatever else comes their way, such as the broadsides)





and decide whether the work belongs at Sundress. The Sundress Editorial team has a range of experiences and diverse identities, which allows for a fair critique from varied perspectives. This, in turn, creates a selection of publications that present a range of voices sharing varied stories.

As members of the poetry landscape, we believe inclusive models like the ones described above, generate opportunity and allow all voices to be heard. Small, independent organizations led by underrepresented voices with a range of perspectives are sharing knowledge, building bridges, and helping to create a better way forward. It is telling (and potentially dangerous) when a publication only accepts or publishes one type of story. It is imperative that stories told by people with lived experience are

platformed over fictions created by an exterior gaze. People writing about groups, races, or cultures they know nothing about is a common issue in publishing and you need not look further than the uproar over American Dirt last year to confirm that. It's time that we as readers and publishers stop confining non-white voices to a singular kind of story. Exploration is not the sole domain of white writers. Or cis writers. Or straight writers. Or anyone.

Exploration, speculation, imagination, lust, greed, rage, joy—all the entire range of human emotions belong to each of us.

Early this spring, Lizz Florival put a call out for a zine focused on eroticism and sensuality that centered Black and POC authors. Her goal was to create a safe space for sexuality for all bodies, especially Black and Brown ones. In our view, this is a form of freedom work. In literature as in life, there are so many barriers between pleasure and our bodies: trauma, over-policing, stereotyping, and unwanted aggressions. One goal Lizz had with this project was to create a process that emphasized generation over selection. In any endeavor, there are bound to be poems that don't fit with the project, but the idea was to put the focus on generating ideas and drafts. To that end, The Estuary Collective collaborated

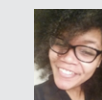
with the Luminaries workshop series to host a generative workshop where participants discussed how pleasure is blocked by our own experiences and social projections.

Lizz's intention was "to reclaim pleasure as ours and our own responsibility."

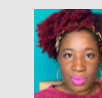
To think of pleasure as empowering and as our right in a world that says it isn't [our right]." In the workshop, poems were studied that ranged from bashful to unapologetic to hedonistic. Following the poem discussions and prompts, the group fell into a communal conversation and, "a barrier was removed where we [existed] as people can simply be and create images around what is sensual and fulfilling in the ways we sense pleasure." Whether the writers ended up in the zine or not became secondary to the experience of sharing in a generative space. The writers got something out of the experience, and the zine creator got what they needed, all while supporting the work of a fellow grass-roots organization, and no one had to pay a thing. Yes, internet connectivity was required and so was an email account—but as we said at the outset, we're imagining something better. We don't have all the answers, and we can't figure them all out on our own, but we have the responsibility to imagine other ways. To revise the current landscape with abandon and figure out what serves us, all of us. ■

THE ESTUARY COLLECTIVE

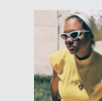
We are **The Estuary Collective**. We believe in collaboration over competition. We build bridges instead of gates. We hold each other accountable and work to make poetry a landscape that is fruitful and safe for everyone. We see a better way forward, and we are not alone. estuarycollective.org



Ashley Elizabeth is a writing consultant, teacher, and poet. Her works have appeared in *SWWIM*, *Rigorous*, and *Kahini Quarterly*, among others.
Twitter & Instagram: [@ae_thepoet](https://twitter.com/ae_thepoet)



Lysz Flo is an afrolatinx, trilingual, spoken word artist, and author of fiction and poetry. She hosts the podcast *Creatively Exposed*.
Twitter & Instagram: [@LyszFlo](https://twitter.com/LyszFlo)



Zora Satchell is a 24 year old Black queer poet who writes about mental illness, family, and friendship.
Twitter: [@madness_press](https://twitter.com/madness_press)



Jeni De La O is an AfroCuban poet and storyteller living in Detroit, Michigan. She was the founder of *Relato: Detroit*, the nation's first bilingual community storytelling project.
Twitter: [@jenidelao](https://twitter.com/jenidelao)

Rethinking the Writing Workshop

Gregg Wilhelm

At George Mason University's first MFA team meeting in the fall of 2019, I suggested exploring a sister program that would be delivered as an online/low-residency model.



To use the parlance of board meetings, that idea was placed in the “parking lot” (lot 49, space treble-X). Imagine the irony when, two-thirds through the academic year, we were an online/no-residency creative writing program, and we remain so as of this writing.

That meeting seems like it took place a decade ago, as do most pre-pandemic memories: sitting around the workshop table, attending live readings, sipping wine with guest authors and students while talking shop over a meal. Our community, indeed higher education in general, will never be the same again.

In this weird, wired new world, what becomes of an arts program like an MFA in Creative Writing?

The dialogue about the “value” of an arts degree, or a liberal arts degree, may be as ancient as the Socratic method itself. When I was in college in the late 1980s, the trend seemed to be toward college education as vocational training: “I’m going to major in accounting so that I can get a job as an accountant at an accounting firm.” After a few generations of accountants and coders (both worthy professions, to be sure), the trend swung back to producing graduates who possessed “emotional intelligence,” nimble and innovative thinkers (design

thinkers) who play well with others (imagine that, teamwork!). Meanwhile, tuition ballooned, higher ed admin bloated, and student debt skyrocketed.

Now what? Another great “reset”?

That’s exactly where the literary artist, as chronicler and interpreter, will rise Phoenix-like with keyboard in talons, breathing fire. That’s why an MFA program like ours remains relevant: we’re here to teach, we’re here to develop, we’re here to connect our students, for sure; however, we’re also here to stoke their artful responses to what the last unimaginable year—unfathomable death, unconscionable politicians, implacable racism—has set ablaze.

But to serve these purposes effectively, I think MFA programs first need to take stock of their own houses. As in so many cases, COVID did not create cracks in our community so much as reveal them.



The biggest challenge of my job has been understanding and managing how the mental health of students impacts their creative and academic lives. Given the amount of time I've spent in the arts and higher education, I know full well how these conditions can be both catalyst and consequence for an artist. COVID exposed how important it is for artists to be in a community that can support not only one's art but one's self. For many reasons, studying and writing remotely this past year was a struggle for some students, and our ability to help was challenged by distance. COVID has reinforced for me the importance of being a listener and connector, and at times an advocate, for our students.

COVID also put a fine point on running a program in an age where most students are "social media natives," not merely digital natives, but users of social media since whenever Facebook started (2004 I think).

It's an age of self-affirmation and a quick post away from the affirmation of others. "Yeah, people literally like me, this I know, for my silo of like-minded friends tell me so."

Then you join an arts program – writer, painter, candlestick maker it doesn't matter – and you hear perhaps for the first time, "your candle isn't burning as brightly as it could" or "your candle doesn't taper toward a satisfying end" or "your wax ain't all that." This can be a serious shock to some students! The constructive criticism of an arts program seems diametrically opposed to today's world of the never-ending affirmation, and too quickly one's reaction can be to go online and flame some folks. Social media is not the (public) space to rant about what goes down in the workshop (sacred) space. Due to circumstances since last March, when you're workshoping in the ether over here it can be easy to rant in the ether over there. It's just a swipe away. Therefore, we developed not so much a policy as a reflection on social media in the context of our creative community.

Lastly, I entered this job with a too nonchalant attitude about "The Workshop," the literary artist's equivalent of a paint-splattered studio, an egg-crate-cushioned recording booth, a mirrored room with barre bars. Certainly, I assumed, artists who have entered graduate-level study, or non-degree students who are welcomed on the basis of their writing sample, understand the workshop environment. Surely, the "Iowa Model" of workshop, wherein the writer being workshoped remains "dead" silent while others ever-so-politely (or sometimes not) eviscerate their writing, is the one true format. (See David O. Dowling's *A Delicate Aggression: Savagery and Survival in the Iowa Writers' Workshop*.) Not so fast, COVID reminded me.

The workshop environment has not been completely static, but it is recently undergoing a thorough and thoroughly needed cultural re-imagining.

With books leading the way like Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, David Mura's *The Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity, and Narrative Craft in Writing*, and Matthew Salesses's *Craft in the real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshoping*, we are thinking about how to better provide workshop experiences that nurture and push our

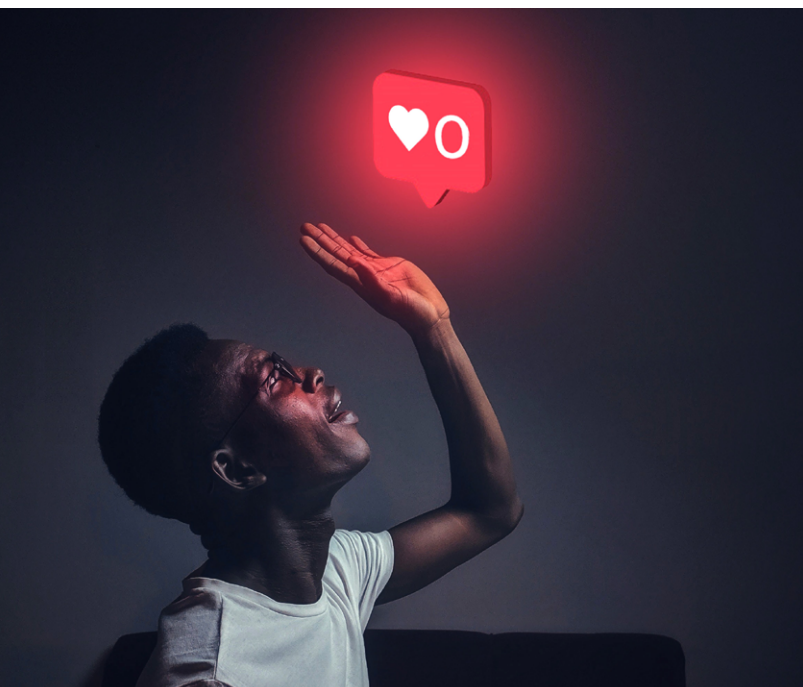
students. So far we have added to our MFA Handbook and other orientation materials a statement on workshop crafted with input from administration, faculty, and students – a statement for our community drafted by the community.

As challenging as the last year has been, I believe that Mason Creative Writing may not have evolved as rapidly toward a vision of more diversity, equity, inclusion, and transparency as it has without the crisis of COVID. At Mason, while building on a tradition that is marking its 40th anniversary, we've also hit the reset button. Virtual events and distance learning will remain modalities by which we practice literary engagement and teach creative writing, but we also can't wait to be together again. These twelve months have inspired a watershed moment, from which our students will go forward to tell the stories that COVID has germinated. As graduates of an MFA program that COVID has impacted, they too have changed. ■



Gregg Wilhelm has been in the literary business – as a publisher, nonprofit arts administrator, and professor – since 1992. He became director of Mason Creative Writing in 2018, and co-founded Watershed Lit: Center for Literary Engagement and Publishing Practice in 2020.

greggwilhelm.com



EDITOR'S NOTE

Hello beautiful readers, and welcome to Movable Type 4, State of the Art.

I'm thrilled to be this publication's Editorial Director, but I could not direct anything without great design, great content, and great vision, all of which Movable Type had before I came on board. My job's the easy one, in a way. Many thanks to Sean Murphy, our fearless 1455 founder and leader; to Morgan Ryan, our incredibly talented designer; and to the writers and artists and community leaders who have already graced these pages.

For each issue I'll attempt to tie things up in this commentary. The idea of anything being "state of the art" brings me back to the 1970s and various men – my father, neighbors, TV figures – talking about their stereos. Having a home stereo that was "state of the art" meant you had all kinds of equipment, none of which children were allowed to go near. It was all so delicate and finely calibrated that even playing too close to the shrine-like setup could mean disaster.

Here we are, a half-century later, and the wall of sound has been shrunk to handheld rectangles. How the mighty woofers and tweeters have fallen!

What "state of the art" means is transitory. At any given moment, any given art might be in the midst of lightning-bolt change – or longterm development. Could anyone have guessed, when compact discs replaced albums, that digital downloads would nip at their heels? On the other hand, every few years pundits announce the death of the novel, yet astounding new voices and forms continue to appear.

As I read through the pieces collected in this issue, it occurs to me that one thing we need to pay attention to is how interconnected all the various "arts" are now: Literary, visual, lively, technical, and so on. Some artists will choose to take it all on themselves. I know, maybe you do too, quite a few authors who are doing a great job with self publishing, marshaling editorial/marketing/sales skills all by themselves or with a few trusted advisers. Others will follow more traditional paths that involve agents, editors, and booksellers. Same goes for painters, musicians, coders.

We have more options than ever, as artists – and we need each other more than ever, as artists. Regardless of the state of our individual art, the state of our collective arts is symbiotic.

Playing for Change is a musicians' foundation whose name nods to the ancient tradition of buskers. Their Song Around the World uses wireless tech to connect musicians in dozens of countries. My favorite is this version of "The Weight" featuring Robbie Robertson, Keiko Komaki, Lukas Nelson (Willie's son!), even Ringo Starr, plus some fabulous studio heavyweights whose names you may not know but whose sounds will captivate you.

If we all carry our share of the weight, what would that contribute to the state of all arts?



All the best,

Bethanne Patrick

Editorial Director, Movable Type

Call for Essays

Movable Type is looking for short, original essays to publish in our Perspectives section. We are interested in hearing from you! We are looking for essays of 500-1,000 words that we can publish in upcoming issues. If you would like to submit your work for possible publication in the next issue of *Movable Type*, please send your original essay with the subject "CALL FOR ESSAYS" to info@1455litarts.org by April 26, 2021.

Check out more from 1455®



The 14:55 Interview

Get a glimpse into what makes your favorite creative types tick—from the writers who inspired them, to the weird habits that accompany the practice of writing, their favorite places in the world, and more. Check out this insightful series on our YouTube channel below.

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