

JODEE STANLEY, EDITOR OF *NINTH LETTER*

THE CHANGING SHAPE OF LITERARY MAGAZINES;
OR "WHAT THE HELL IS THIS THING?"

I imagine that everyone reading this who's familiar with *Ninth Letter* and our distinctive format expects me to write something along the lines of "literary publishing needs to be more experimental! more design-heavy! just heavier in general—we need more magazines you can hardly lift!" And it's true, *Ninth Letter* is a journal that stands out, literally, on the shelf: oversized, full of color, elaborately designed, packed with inserts, foldout posters, and other gadgets. Some readers adore this; others very vocally do not. The response we most often get from people seeing *Ninth Letter* for the first time is, "This is a literary magazine?" The answer is yes, if by "literary magazine" you mean a publication which primarily exists to publish poetry and prose of extraordinary quality. But it's true, we do things a little differently from everyone else. Our mission, in addition to providing a forum for great writing, is to find ways to utilize graphic design so that it illuminates and enhances the literary experience. When our experiments are successful (more often than not, I hope), *Ninth Letter* becomes a new kind of reading experience. We have been credited with, or accused of, attempting to "redefine" what a literary journal is—maybe we've even made that claim ourselves somewhere along the way. But I don't think redefine accurately describes *Ninth Letter's* goal. What we really want to do is experiment with what a literary magazine can be. In this new millennium of crossed

genres and blurred boundaries in art and media, ever-evolving technology can provide endless opportunities for creative work. Design and writing seem a natural partnership, both in print and online. At least, that's how we see it.

Looking at the bigger picture, and our place in it, I think what keeps literary publishing vital and relevant are editors with visions. Plural. We need new magazines that explore new territory, of any kind—*One Story*, for example, which broke new ground on the far end of the spectrum from where *Ninth Letter* sits, but which is one of the most exciting journals happening right now. Or *Hobart*, which takes a more traditional approach in print and also utilizes the Web to publish great flash fiction. Or the gorgeous new little letterpressed poetry journal *Tuesday; An Art Project*. Or *Zoetrope* and *McSweeney's*, our predecessors in experimenting with graphic design. Beyond the most basic definition of "literary magazine" as a forum for literary writing, the concept of how this forum is created, shaped, and distributed will always be broadening and changing, as long as there's a desire for the stories and the poems.

I don't believe there needs to be a manufactured push toward innovation, though. Literary publishing has always adapted naturally, over the decades, to embrace or at least acknowledge cultural change. Movements and trends will always make their way into literature because that is one of the purposes of writing—to reflect our world, to challenge our perceptions and help us make sense of what's happening around us. Likewise, the venues themselves for new writing will flex and bend, evolving along with the content they provide, in whatever way suits them best.

Experimental publishers, online journals, podcasts, publications produced on DVD, all of these make literary publishing a curious and more exciting place, but there's no danger that they'll

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completely replace traditional publishing formats, nor could they. In a healthy literary environment, the old guard and the new guard in all its myriad forms will co-exist peacefully, encouraging our readers to explore, learn, and take enjoyment from as wide a variety of media as possible. As always, I think, the most important thing for literary editors, both experienced and new, to do is to find a way to express their passions, whether it be in traditional forms and formats, experiments with design and content, new technologies, or something entirely different.