

# DEFENDING LITERARY CONTESTS

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We all know the downside of contests: a tsunami of unrestrained literary expurgation and the thankless chore of wading through piles of mostly undeveloped writing in the hopes of discovering a few gems in the process. So why run one?

SMALL ART AND LITERARY MAGAZINES need a lot of things to keep them going: strong editorial content, arresting visuals and dedicated readers and advertisers who think the cat's meow utters directly from the top of the masthead. But the one thing all these small magazines need more than anything else is a steady stream of cash. Even the most brilliant and innovative magazine will flop without it.

Small magazines need money. They need constant cash and anyone who has ever tried to keep a small magazine going knows that you look for it under every rock and behind every philanthropic organization, granting agencies included.

All of the various income sources (subscribers, advertisers, grants) are exploited to the fullest and yet the near-insatiable need for cash continues. Small, independent publications need to seek out revenue sources in all their myriad guises ("multiple revenue streams" is how the financial types like to put it) and though fundraisers, bake sales and silent auctions are all legitimate ways to raise a few dollars, they can only sustain the short-term need. Plus, let's face it—baking cookies is messy.

So, when the overworked, yet indefatigable editorial team sits around the table at its bi-weekly meeting to discuss the upcoming issue, or the next season's editorial calendar, the discussion will inevitably turn by the end of the meeting to the topic of money: how much do we have, where is the next injection coming from, and how can we get even more of it?

Failing to invent a method of taxing split infinitives, someone at every meeting will eventually bring up the idea of a contest, an award—whatever you want to call it. At this point the meeting may go silent. Someone may actually groan. We all know the downside: a tsunami of unrestrained literary expurgation and the thankless chore of wading through piles of (I'm sorry, but it's true) mostly undeveloped writing in the hopes of discovering a few gems in the process. Contests: the magazine world's equivalent of panning for tailings. And to the more cynical amongst us, we know what the public perception is: the fat-cat editors were sitting around a table flogging the ole grey mare in the hopes of coming up with new and inventive ways of fleecing aspiring, eager-to-be-published writers and this was the best they could do!

But let's put the rancour-tainted perspective aside. Personally, I think the impulse to host a writing contest is more sincere than that. Or at least it should be. A contest or writing "award" is a great way to promote your magazine while reaching out to a larger audience of potential new readers and writers. Contests are a means of enlarging your literary community. In the process of running a contest, you will have inspired the creative act of writing, put some money into the hands of a few worthy writers and provided the thrill and reward of publication to the "winner" (or winners). Plus you will have brought in some much-needed cash to prop up the ever-needy revenue side of your budget.

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The disgruntled writers who think all contests are blatant cash-grabs will always call foul—"why should I pay someone to read my work? Isn't this entry fee

just a thinly veiled mandatory subscription? Isn't all judging a matter of subjective taste anyway?" Well, not entirely. As judges, I think we all start off thinking we're searching for "our kind" of writing and are invariably surprised when we encounter a piece that speaks to us in a true and original voice, even when many of us have come to believe that the sheer possibility of originality has itself become an impossibility.

Contests then, in the end, may be seen as just another crapshoot in our less-than-perfect world. Are they out-and-out scams orchestrated by mendacious editors preying on the vanity of neophyte writers? No, I don't believe so. They are but one of many ways arts and cultural magazines seek to move money through their cash-deficient enterprises while simultaneously putting their publication on the radar of writers and artists across the country.

Oh, and those underpaid and volunteer editors who remain the central ballast of these precarious entities? Well, they just unwittingly foisted another couple of hundred pounds of reading material onto their already overflowing plates!

Lush Triumphant, subTerrain's annual literary contest, produces hundreds of entries.

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