



The First Line

A Magazine Report
by Sarah Hogan

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Fact Sheet

Magazine: The First Line

Editors: David LaBounty and Robin LaBounty

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What they Publish: Fiction and critical essays about famous first lines.

Submission Guidelines: Fiction must use first line provided by editors verbatim. Previously unpublished stories between 300-3,000 words for fiction and 500-800 words for non-fiction. First lines, four per year, available on Web site. Prefer e-mailed submissions, but accept snail mail with SASE.

Simultaneous Submissions: No

Response Time: 2-3 weeks after submission deadline

Cost: Single issue - \$3.50; Four-issue subscription - \$12.00

Contributor Payment: Twenty dollars and one contributor's copy

Availability: www.thefirstline.com/where.htm

Mission Statement: "The purpose of *The First Line* is to jump start the imagination--to help writers break through the block that is the blank page. Each issue contains short stories that stem from a common first line; it also provides a forum for discussing favorite first lines in literature. *The First Line* is an exercise in creativity for writers and a chance for readers to see how many different directions we can take when we start from the same place."

Why I Chose *The First Line*

I was instantly attracted to *The First Line* when I found it in Quimby's bookstore last year because of its simple, yet eye-catching appearance. Each issue bears the same old-fashioned typewriter on its cover and it resembles a novella in shape and size, so I felt like I was flipping through a book.

The concept of *The First Line*, that each story starts with the exact same line, intrigued me. I was curious to see if the stories would all be the same and happy to find that they weren't. Though the stories all start with the same sentence, they vary greatly in point of view, subject matter, setting, and voice from there. First you'll have a story about a young man suffering with epilepsy and then, just a few pages later, you'll find a story about wood nymphs.

After a little research, I soon found out that the editors of *The First Line* were very dedicated to publishing both accomplished writers and emerging writers (which certainly got my attention). The originality and creativity of the writers is present in every story, in every issue, and I've yet to find a story I didn't genuinely enjoy reading.

Comparison of Issues

	Volume 9, Issue 4	Volume 10, Issue 4	Volume 11, Issue 1
Writers M:F	2:6	4:3	4:3
Protagonists M:F	0:8	4:3	6:1
POV 1st 3rd	1:7	1:6	1:6
Author Credits Novel: Magazine: First	0:4:1:3*	2:0:1:3*	3:2:1:1*

*Indicates that writer did not provide their publishing credits.

Over time, the editors have shown support to male and female writers equally, with the numbers split down the middle most of the time. I also found it interesting that the ratio of male to female writers did not always match that of the ratio of male to female protagonists. This is largely in part, I think, to the first sentences provided in any given issue. If the first sentence introduces a male character, the protagonist is much more likely to be male, and the opposite is true for female characters.

Though first person stories and third person stories are both accepted, there seems to be quite a preference for third person over time. Again, I think this is due in part to the first sentences provided because in two of the issues I compared, the first sentence was written about a specific character in third person.

Unfortunately, because many of the writers did not provide their previous publishing credits (and were impossible to track down on the Internet), it is difficult to compare author credits, though they seem pretty mixed from what was provided.

Story Reviews

Volume 9, Issue 4 (Winter 2007)

The Red Dress by Laura Loomis is a plainspoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting, told from a subjective third person point of view. Mary is a nun who borrows a red dress from a box of charitable donations during the holidays. She wears the vibrant dress into town and stops into a Christmas Eve dance, where an unfamiliar man asks her to dance. While they are dancing, a friend of Mary's approaches them and informs the man, Paul, that Mary is a nun. After that, Paul finishes the dance and walks away from Mary. She returns home to her "husband" and professes her need to be free.

The imagery and metaphor in this story is so subtle and poetic that I had to read it a few times to really understand its full depth. Mary, a nun, is married to God, and he is the husband she refers to throughout the story, in lines like "everybody wanted something from him, even if it was only his attention." In addition to exploring Mary's relationship with God, Loomis also explores how Mary is treated and viewed by the townspeople with such telling gestures as "he put his arms around her, but stiffly this time."

Sunbaked Sand by Mark Paxson is a plainspoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting, told from an objective third person point of view. For nine years, Mary suffers through her husband Tariq's Ramadan mood swings without causing too much of a fuss, just trying to stay out of his way. On the ninth Ramadan, she informs him that she can't stay married to him any longer. She feels that he has broken his promise to attain citizenship and she has met someone new that she wants to marry. She packs her bags and leaves the house, but Tariq follows her out with a gun. They argue, but in the end, he agrees that they can't keep pretending to be in love with his wife, when in fact, he is gay.

Again, this is a story that has such stronger meaning after a second reading. Early on in the story, Paxson hints at some peculiarities in the relationship between Mary and Tariq, namely that they are married but have separate bedrooms. Details such as Tariq's fear of deportation, Mary's new love interest, and Tariq's homosexuality are drawn out and revealed very gradually, so as to leave the reader constantly on the edge of their seat.

Volume 10, Issue 4 (Winter 2008)

Jacob by Seth I. Feldman is a plainspoken, third person story told in a domestic setting. The story is told from the point of view of Jacob, a sixteen year-old boy suffering with both epilepsy and Asperger's Syndrome. On his sixteenth birthday, Jacob spends the day trying to convince his doctor and his parents to allow him to get his driver's license, which is forbidden to epileptic sufferers. They refuse and he begins to write a letter to the Department of Motor Vehicles, but has a seizure when getting the envelope. When he comes to, he shows his mother a series of notebooks in which he has predicted his seizures with great accuracy.

Though the first paragraph of the story is bogged down with scientific theory and jargon, speaking about the orbit of the earth and the concept of time, it eventually takes on a very empathetic tone. The reader not only sees Jacob's small world, his doctor's office and his bare-bones bedroom, but also feels Jacob's emotion. His outrage at being denied a driver's license, and his vulnerability after having a seizure, are depicted quite vividly.

Happy Birthday by Constance Lang is a plainspoken, third person story told in a fantasy setting. The story is told from the point of view of Delphina, a lonely, old woman, who journeys into Hope Woods to trap five wood nymphs. One-by-one, she employs the mystical powers of the nymphs to help her escape Hope Woods safely and has one remaining nymph when she returns to her cabin. She informs the remaining nymph that it is her birthday and asks the nymph to grant her one wish: to bring her beloved to her. The next day, her lover has vanished and Delphina begins pouring through books in search of a spell that will take her back into Hope Woods.

This story is absolutely beautiful, plainspoken in language, but fantastical and poetic in content. The woman's struggle with loneliness and aging are portrayed flawlessly by Lang's use of imagery and gesture. Readers can see the woman's "arthritic fingers" in the story's beginning and can see the transformed woman nuzzling with her lover at the story's end. Though the story is not a realistic one, any reader can relate to the underlying themes of aging, love and loss.

Volume 11, Issue 1 (Spring 2009)

Adoring Public by Bruce Harris is a plainspoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting, told from a subjective, third person point of view. Herman Sligo is a retired Hollywood hotshot now living in Florida who is still remembered for a short stint on a television show playing the character Uncle Emil. One day, Herman goes to the racetrack, a habit of his, and finds out there is a dog named Uncle Emil. He immediately bets it all on Uncle Emil and watches the race intently as his chosen dog comes very close to winning, but then falls at the last minute and instead, a dog named Adoring Public wins the race.

Though the reader never finds out how long it has been since Herman Sligo left Hollywood, I get the impression from lines like "Hollywood west had long ago been exchanged for Hollywood east" that much time has passed. Herman's distinct bitterness resonates throughout the entire story, first in Hollywood and then, after a significant leap in time in the story, in Florida, which goes a long way in setting the mood of the story. As the title suggests, everything relates back to Herman Sligo's relationship with his fans, right up to the very end when he finds out what the winning dog was named, Adoring Public, a clever use of metaphor.

My Lasting Friend by Alessandro Nani is a plainspoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting, told from a subjective, first person point of view. The narrator, Stephanie is sent to live with her Aunt Margaret and Uncle Emil, a Pakistani, following the tragic death of her parents. From the start, Stephanie takes issue with her uncle's "imprisoning" culture and acts out by breaking pieces of art. In the end, Uncle Emil explains his culture to Stephanie and the two form a close relationship which will ultimately lead her to visit Pakistan to find her cousins.

Vivid descriptions of place, such as the walls "covered by antique bookshelves that stretched from the floor to the ceiling," are juxtaposed with fast-paced dialogue, moving the story along quickly while allowing the reader to see where they're going. In the end, the objects and practices that Stephanie has been mocking internally, are seen through the eyes of Uncle Emil. He tells the story of his family's emigration from Pakistan, a short but powerful story-within-a-story.

Interview with David LaBounty

Sarah Hogan: When a story arrives at the TFL office, what happens next?

David LaBounty: Unlike most literary journals, we have a top-down reading process. I read everything that comes through the mail (from first line to last), assigning each story a number. Stories that score high numbers (and some that fall in the middle of the pack but I feel need another opinion) are then read by Robin [*David's wife and partner at TFL*], which she scores. We compare scores and narrow the list down to a set of twenty to thirty stories that we reread, and we choose 8 to 12 from that bunch.

We are fortunate, in that we rarely receive stories that are not written specifically for us. That drops our submissions to a manageable number (300-350 an issue). I understand why most literary journals have a screening process, but even if that were the case for us, I'd want to at least look at everything. You never know what someone else will miss (or reject even though it may just need a little help).

SH: Once you've selected a story for TFL, how much do you work with the author to strengthen the piece?

DL: That depends. Some stories come to us pretty near perfect. Some just need a little editing, and some need a helpful nudge to get it to where the author meant to go in the first place.

Every once and a while, I take on a story that needs major rewrites. Sometimes you come across a submission that has potential, a great idea that is weakly executed, and if the author is willing to take some criticism, and time, we'll try to get it in to shape for publication.

Unlike some editors, though, we are not the second writers on a story. We do – and this is Robin's strength – act as literary fact checkers. We try our best to weed out the hollow dialog, the sentences that don't ring true, the incorrect statements, and the holes in logic.

SH: In your submissions guidelines, you challenge writers to try writing a four-part story utilizing the spring, summer, fall and winter sentences. How often does someone actually pull this off?

DL: Very rarely. When we went to four times a year, I tried to put a stop to the serial, but I was out voted. So, I purposefully created sentences that couldn't be strung together, which didn't stop people from giving it a go.

We did publish one serial in 2002 and one in 2003, then we went four years before we published another four-parter. In 2007, Jennifer Anthony strung together four stories using sentences I was sure couldn't be connected. She did an excellent job. In fact, the Long Ridge Writers Group is reprinting it in their teaching anthology, *Voices in Today's Magazines*, in August.

SH: What story trends, either in subject matter or POV or setting, do you see too much of these days?

DL: Fortunately (and unfortunately), we see everything. Many writers use our first lines to experiment with subject matter and POVs they never would have tried when working on their own. And we've benefited from many of these experiments.

Also, because we are open to first-time writers, we see the same themes and story trends (and mistakes) we all went through when we first started out. For example, we still see a lot of stories where the author is obviously working through the loss of a loved one. These are usually from novice writers, and rarely well written.

SH: How do your personal biases, such as third person versus first person, affect your selections for TFL?

DL: I try to keep personal biases from the story selection process. I'm not fond of second person, but we've printed several stories that overly rely on the word you. If it's well written, different, and entertaining, then it has a great shot at making it, no matter the genre or POV (or my personal preferences).

SH: At Blue Cubicle Press, you've got TFL, Workers Write! and Overtime all under your wing. Do you ever receive submissions for TFL that you think would work for Workers Write! or Overtime?

DL: Absolutely. A few years ago, a writer sent in a wonderful story for TFL, unfortunately, I could tell he just slapped our first line on it and sent it in. I called him on it, and he admitted the crime. But I kept that story in the back of my mind, and two years later, I approached him and asked if we could print the story in a new journal we were starting, Overtime. That story has become our biggest seller (I Wish I Was Hosey Hitchcock).

SH: Do you think that TFL will ever offer an online component?

DL: We will not go electronic. As a disclaimer, let me just say I have nothing against e-journals. I've been published in e-journals, and I understand some of them are doing good things. However, and here I will try to be nice, e-journals are too easy. They're too insular and, too often, used as a stepping-stone for better jobs, discarded once the editor finds a better offer.

As for an online component, we do offer TFL on Tape, which is the audio arm of TFL, and when we do publish a four-part story, we like to post the sections online as sample of the magazine for potential subscribers.

SH: What has your relationship with booksellers been like over the years?

DL: We have very good relationships with all the stores we are stocked in right now. We have a 95% sell rate in our stores. Booksellers like us because we are cheap and we have a strong following. We are always looking for new stores to add to our list, but we are picky. Some bookstores claim indie status, but really are just baby B&Ns [*Barnes and Nobles*].

SH: You've now got two anthologies out.

DL: For the first anthology, we wanted to highlight some of the stories from the first three years that most people did not have had a chance to read, simply because our subscriptions were in the low hundreds and we were in two bookstores.

For the second anthology, we wanted to do something special for Jeff, one of our founding editors, who went off to concentrate on other things.

SH: Are you already looking at stories from the past couple of years for a forthcoming anthology?

DL: We probably won't do another anthology for a while (maybe 2018 – our 20th anniversary – if we're still around).