

# [PANK]

"To the end of the road, up country, a far shore, the edge of things, to a place of amalgamation and unplumbed depths, where the known is made and unmade, and where unimagined futures are born, a place inhabited by contradictions, a place of quirk and startling anomaly, [PANK], no soft pink hands allowed."



Ray Lumpp  
Literary Magazine Report  
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## Fact Sheet—

Type: Online and Print

Editors: M. Bartley Seigel and Roxane Gay

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Mission statement: Founded in 2006 by M. Bartley Seigel, the nonprofit literary arts collective [PANK] — PANK Magazine, Pankmagazine.com, the Little Book Series, the Invasion Readings — is committed to fostering access to emerging and experimental poetry and prose, from its brightest and most promising writers, to its most adventurous readers, across a variety of delivery platforms.

What they publish: “Whatever you want to share.”

Submission guidelines: One can submit to PANK via Submishmash. They always accept general submissions of whatever length, and sometimes call for submissions for specialty issues, such as "Queer" and "Crime." Occasionally, they have contests, such as "1,001 Awesome Words," and are currently accepting essays for "This Modern Writer," a blog-style publication about writing. They also have a "tip-jar" submission, where one can donate to PANK along with one's submission and receive discounts on PANK paraphernalia.

Description of publication: PANK is an edgy monthly online magazine featuring high-quality prose and poetry, as well as a yearly print issue, novella-eque “little books,” and an immensely popular blog. They seem like a great place to submit experimental works of whatever length, and they provide editor’s feedback: "We do this to provide some insight into what can be a very mercurial editorial process, nothing more."

PANK is a member of the Council of Literary Magazines & Presses (CLMP) and the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP).

Prose per issue/annually: currently averaging 20 works per issue, with sporadic special issues and random posts on the blog—an estimated 250 works per year.

I chose PANK because of the writing.

There is courage in an unflinchingly weird story. I liked the stories I didn't "get" the first time through. When I didn't know how to feel, I felt encouraged to try. I liked the way the stories demanded to be read like your mind was yelling. Like you only have one moment to say whatever it is you're going to say. I liked being kidnapped in the characters. I liked what they forced me to see, to do. I liked seeing them naked, when necessary. I liked the details that returned to me days later. I thought I could hear the author's voices. I wanted to keep reading, listening, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, feeling, panking. I wanted to write a "little book." I wanted to write anything at all, inspired by weirdness.

## Issue Comparison—

Issue	Number of Works	Prose : Poetry	Male : Female Writer	Instances of Sex (In stories I read)
6.14	23	12 : 11	10 : 13	7
6.01	18	13 : 5	10 : 8	4
5.06	21	13 : 8	9 : 12	4
5.03	17	13 : 4	11 : 6	1
4.10	22	17 : 5	14 : 8	0

Having studied PANK’s history, numbers don’t describe them well. This is just a taste. As with all literary magazines, there are certain trends in themes, but the range of stories is still wide. It should be. Authors—emerging or established—submit their wildest experiments here. PANK is read by more than 250,000 people in over 150 different countries. Annually, pankmagazine.com logs 1.5 million page views during 275,000 visits from 150,000 unique visitors. PANK’s acceptance rate for publication is 1-5% of total submissions. PANK publishes more prose than poetry. The stories tend to have more sex scenes, maybe because sex can quickly become awkward and revealing—in real life or in writing—or maybe because I’ve encountered some strange coincidence.

## Prose Reviews—

*Pictures From the Coast of France* (Issue 6.14, November 2011) by Barrett Bowlin is a realistic, first-person story set in the narrator's father's attic, and—you guessed it—rural France. While kissing and drinking old whiskey (and other things!), the narrator and his girlfriend find a Swiss 70s pornographic magazine with the narrator's father pictured inside. He then goes on a journey to find the woman his father fucked. This is basically a paraphrase of the first paragraph. The ending is surprising: the story ends with the “rap-rap-rap” on the woman's door, nothing more.

The first sentence is great. Bowlin's sentences are often long and flowing, but unobtrusively so. This story is filled with unabashed sex interspersed with imagery from the narrator's childhood, but somehow it doesn't really feel dirty—maybe it's post-Freudian. The shifts between past and present feed into the story, answer questions and provide necessity with varied and vivid images, such as, “I... asked directions from raisined men and their apple-core daughters whose ribcages poked through their t-shirts in the breeze,” and, “the brightness caught between the hardwood and the frame of a closed door.” The circumstances and emotional state of the narrator were really the focal point—an attempt to answer question planted in our minds at the beginning—why would you drop everything and fly to France? An interesting structure loops us through a first-person history and, somehow, we end on the fourth floor in a new place.

*Men With Own Tuxedos* (Issue 6.01, January 2011) by Bess Winter is a realistic story that takes place on an independent film set. The story is told in first person, almost conversationally, describing the narrator's task of hiring men with tuxedos to be extras for the “brilliant but impatient” director's film. Via Craigslist, the narrator amasses an army of men in tuxedos, who turn out to be horrible actors and begin crying when they see their female counterparts in velvet gowns. The men in tuxedos are desperate, sad, and faceless, and when the narrator tells them “if they couldn't get happy they wouldn't be paid,” all but one of them leaves.

This story is deceptively simple and funny, though I'm not quite sure I get it. The quick exaggeration sets the tone for the piece—humor surfacing in the sadness, paradoxical complexity through simplicity. “Men who own tuxedos must have terrible luck... Maybe this is what makes them so sad. I pouted, out of sympathy. I took a photo. Those tuxedos must have been expensive,

originally.” This little image of the narrator pouting out of sympathy strikes me, and the idea that the tuxedos were bought for much happier occasions than an independent film is the main point of the piece, for me. They can’t feign their old happiness. The narrator pauses on the last man in a tuxedo standing, “a bald man in a powder blue tuxedo. His shoes were scuffed and his tuxedo was wrinkled, but his face was clean and unlined. He said he thought he could stay and get happy, if we wanted.” And his staying behind is sad, too. Is it possible to take too much out of a piece? To add feelings and tones that aren’t there? This piece is so short, and the first time I read it, I didn’t have any thoughts about it, just blinked and started over. A second read either helped me see it, or helped me make meaning for myself.

*How We Keep It Fresh* (Issue 6.01, January 2011) by Christian TeBordo is a surreal story in an urban setting. Told in first, but constantly addressing a second person (“You put on the sexy French maid outfit. I put on the denim jacket and the horn-rimmed glasses, then taunt you, saying you look more like a Mexican.”), the story streams through a dozen coked-out sexual fantasies until it climaxes (yikes) inside of “a big, boozy girl with wide hips and rosaceous cheeks.” What?

From the start, we’re on a rollercoaster ride. The plot is really just an assortment of instances between “you” and “I” that become more and more depraved, less and less grounded in realism. The story goes off the rails a few times, the funniest instance being, “I knock on the front door and try to compose an alluring smile but I’ve blown a gram and a half of cocaine and my mouth won’t stop twitching. I knock again. I knock and knock and knock. You never answer, because you are somewhere else, jumping out of someone’s cake in the bikini you sometimes wear over your clownsuit.” It makes for a ridiculous image of two lovers. I still don’t get the bizarre “rebirth” at the end, when “you” and “I” crawl inside of the big, boozy girl—are we dreaming?—and “When the doctor arrives, he says it will be a breech birth. What the stupid doctor doesn’t understand is that we have no intention of being born again.” The funniest part of the story is the ending coupled with the first line of the author’s bio—“Christian TeBordo has published three novels.” I wonder what those are like?

*Manage A Trois* (Issue 5.06, June 2010) by Kevin Kaiser is a surreal story in a minimal, dreamlike setting. Told through three instances, respectively entitled, “Beat,” “Call,” and

“Thorns,” the story involves manifestations of love going awry. Whether walking in on beating, bleeding hearts having an affair, voyeuristically masturbating to fornicating unicorns, or having to tell a flower, “This has never happened to me before. I swear,” the narrator, Kevin, ties the story together in a sad, silly, self-deprecating way.

I wonder why this story is spelled this way.

Anyway, the use of personification works well—an exaggeration of character and scene: “My heart beats its way up from behind, frantically palpitates to maneuver in front of me and stop me in my tracks. Inside me, my lungs struggle to hold oxygen, suck it in in sharp gasps. Between breaths I manage to give my heart a piece of my mind.” It’s cute and playful while being morbid and gory, and this tone stays with us as the narrator in the next section watches the unicorns: “I take my penis out of my pants and stroke it vigorously as I continue my voyeuristic vigil. With a grunt, the male orgasms inside the still nonplussed female.” How I love the autobiography of fiction! When the story ends, with Kevin unable to sleep with a violet, “I feel like a real jerk for ever having plucked her. All I can do now is wait for her to wilt,” we feel an arc in the movements. Each episode works, but as part of a thinly connected narrative, the story feels bigger.

*Magic* (Issue 5.03, March 2010) by Jennifer Pashley is a dreamlike second-person story set in a small town. “You” are an Army wife who doesn’t love her husband overseas anymore, who lives with her parents and sick brother, and who is really sad. The story ends with the realization that small towns are the worst, and that, at the very least, “you” and “your” sadness are unique and inseparable—like best friends.

The opening paragraph is brimming with ethos and pathos—heightened intrinsically by the second person—and establishes the model for the story. Conflict riddles this piece to the point where the feelings are hollow: “It’s like you’re in the center of a tight web, like everything you do reverberates out on some other tough string, vibrating... Someday, you think, it’ll kill your husband. It’ll be the string that detonates the road side bomb.” This hollowness is at the core of the piece, and pervades the (sad) sex scene: “You fuck in the parking lot, in between cars, leaning on one of them, near but not under a street light that is yellow... You do it for nothing... You don’t even face him.” But there is some strange recognition that comes upon seeing the “tall



unhandsome one” from the sex scene again, when he recognizes you (the army wife), and you say, “Yeah. That wasn’t me,” and realize that you will have to start going to another bar. Not the happiest of endings, but it feels honest and true: maybe the paralyzing effect of sadness can make the slow-spinning world a little more manageable.

*If A Tree Falls* (Issue 4.10, October 2009) by Jennifer Juneau is a realistic story told through an unreliable narrator in a domestic setting. Haunted by her brother’s suicide after accidentally killing his only son, the narrator moves to Europe to escape her mother, who she calls Sadie. When Sadie comes to town, the narrator is forced to come to some recognition—she literally does not believe it when her mother informs her of her brother’s suicide—and Juneau culminates the story with concrete imagery and synesthesia as she finally, finally comes to terms with his death.

The story begins with that famous who-cares question, “If a tree falls in a forest and nobody is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” and immediately places us in a scene of understated importance. “I went on coloring in my Puff ‘n Stuff coloring book, but I pondered the answer to that question, and what it meant, my entire childhood.” The first time through, I took that as a somewhat childish overstatement, a way to put us in the perspective of a kid. As the piece goes on, the narrator becomes less and less reliable, but in a way that doesn’t feel cheap—it’s mostly her willingness to gloss over the truth. We find later that the narrator’s father died young, not only answering our question of “Why is this narrator the way she is?” but heightening moments from the past, which answer our question again through a trick of memory. Thoughts tend to have a lyrical quality and narrative thread: “All I thought was, *There is a name and a face racing far from somewhere toward me...*” and later, “I thought, *She is but a cough in the distance.*” In the end, when the narrator reveals that *she* is the reason her brother hanged himself, which is why she fled the country—the strength of the piece shudders with the force of that ridiculous twist—she extends a metaphor: “The moment gathered like warm ocean around my ankles. I told myself, *If you want to keep it, you must wade further in...*” and, “How shiftless I’d become in all my dissolve!” The abstractness of the image may or may not have put me in the shoes of the narrator—whose plot is almost too sad to be true—but it gave me something to see, and who knows? There are all kinds of ways to grieve.

Roxane Gay is an editor of two literary magazines, PANK and Bluestem, an assistant-professor of English at Eastern Illinois University, a writer, and a lover of musical theater. She is a very candid social networker, and her website transcends quirk in bold, black and white—and magenta—letters. She seems like the sweet kind of person you wouldn't want to piss off.

So I asked her some questions, mostly about PANK, on the weekend of November 27, 2011.

Ray Lumpp: What was the genesis of PANK magazine and what was your involvement?

Roxane Gay: PANK was founded in 2007 by my co-editor. I came on board the following year, first as an associate editor and then co-editor. I participate in all aspects of the magazine including managing staff, design and layout, online issue production, reading submissions, developing relationships with writers, and really anything else that needs to be done.

RL: Would PANK exist without the Internet? What needs do the online and print components fulfill for the magazine?

RG: Yes. PANK started as a print magazine. Our existence, though, would be greatly compromised without the Internet. Our online readership is significantly larger than our print readership. Our print magazine allows us to create a tangible artifact. Our online component allows us to create a different kind of tangible artifact—one with a wide reach, one that is dynamic, one that is participatory.

RL: What has PANK done to foster such a vibrant and sizable readership?

RG: We support our writers before, during, and after the publication of their work in PANK. We're hands on and believe in working with writers to help them strengthen their work. We publish great writing. We don't take ourselves too seriously.

RL: What is the selection and editorial process like for fiction?

RG: We don't have a complex selection process. If we like something, we accept it. If one of us likes something and the other doesn't, we try to make the best case possible for that work. We also rely heavily on the opinions of our readers to ensure that we don't get into an aesthetic rut.

RL: As a writer, sometimes I wish I could ignore the competitive and business aspects of the publishing world; is the publishing industry healthy for a writer?

RG: The publishing industry is as healthy or unhealthy as a writer allows it to be. You can't confuse writing and publishing nor can your self-worth as a writer be tied up in publishing. That's easier said than done but it is important to remember.

RL: What is the role of the writer in the future of publishing?

RG: Without writers there is no publishing, so the role of the writer is the heart of the future of publishing.

RL: What is your writing process? Is it informed by your editing process?

RG: I don't have much of a writing process. I do a lot of head writing where I think through a story for days on end and when I can't hold it in my head any longer, I start writing and I generally don't stop until I'm done.

RL: PANK's experimental aesthetic ultimately leads to strange and engaging material; is it more often tiring or refreshing when wading through the slush pile at PANK?

RG: We don't even call it a slush pile. We call it what it is—the submission queue. Reading submissions for PANK is largely wonderful. Like all magazines, we see a lot of inappropriate work or bad writing but, having read for other magazines, I can confidently say the overall quality of our queue is really high and there's always a marvel of a story or essay or poem waiting to be found.

RL: For stories that don't get accepted for publication, what does your editor's feedback typically look like?

RG: We are fairly honest, but we try to be tactful, in addressing where a given submission went wrong. We focus on polish, pacing, the believability of the characters, language choices, voice and tone, length, energy, all the things that can go wrong in a story.

RL: Examining "weirdness" in writing often helps establish voice; are you ever unable to relate to the "weirdness" in the submissions you receive?

RG: Absolutely. Sometimes weirdness is incoherent and is weird just to be weird. We like strangeness that holds some kind of purpose.<sup>1</sup>

RL: What are some signs that a piece has a "charge," or purpose, or whatever it is that drives good storytelling?

RG: When I find myself holding my breath while I read something, I know it has that vibrancy I am looking for. It's hard to articulate the signs. You just know it when you read it. I don't switch tabs in my browser. I mute the television. I focus only on the writing. When that happens, when I don't want to do anything but read the submission in question, I know I am reading something wonderful. That charge, that emotional core, it's the thing that holds my interest.

RL: Are we in the midst of the beginning, the middle, or the end of an era in publishing?

RG: We're always going to be at the beginning of something.



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<sup>1</sup> For me, a good example of this was in Bess Winter's "Men With Own Tuxedos," from Issue 6.01.