

HYPertext

A Magazine Report
By Darbee Hagerty

Interview with Editor Christine Rice

Darbee Hagerty: Hypertext seems to have it all. Was it your goal to publish such a wide array of art?

Chris Rice: Actually, my goal was to have writers cover musical events and gallery openings and readings and then post those events/commentary immediately. We also began with visual art, humor&satire and poetry categories in addition to interviews, blogs, fiction, and essays. Then I got knee deep in the reality of what it took to publish a magazine and asked myself, ‘What the hell was I thinking?’

Ignorance is bliss because I had much grander schemes for HYPERTEXT. Maybe I’ll get it there some day. Who knows? The idea was to have an interactive site with user comments and feedback. Then the comments started coming in and most of them were straight out of Crazy Town. It would have been a full-time job to sift through those comments because the relevant, responsive, thoughtful comments were lumped in there with dozens of nut-job comments by people with a chip on their shoulder or too much time on their hands.

It seems that the Internet has replaced the radio call-in show for people who—right or wrong, sane or insane—want to voice their opinion. And I wasn’t sure how to manage it, so I simply shut down that aspect of the site.

DH: The interviews on the site are the most interesting to me; who picks the interviewees?

CR: I’m so glad that you find those interesting. I brainstorm with Noelle Hufnagel and my interns Emily Roth and Diamond Dees to come up with those interview subjects. I am particularly interested in introducing new or relatively new artists, writers and publishers in HYPERTEXT. Since publishing has become so profit-based, it’s more and more difficult to uncover quality work. The big publishing companies make money off inane books by celebrities. I mean, by May of this year, you could buy books by Ryan O’Neal, Dan Rather, Sissy Spacek, a handful of Real Housewives, a few socialites, Gregg Allman, Martin Sheen, Billy Bob Thornton and on and on. Now, I’m sure a few of those are interesting (maybe Sissy Spacek?) but, really, do we need a book by one of the Real Housewives? What’s she gonna bring to the party? The interviews are interesting because publishing is hard. And writing is not easy. You don’t just wake up and say, ‘Hey, I think I’ll be a writer.’ You have to write your ass off. It’s really a tough business. So it’s great to hear about success—grand or modest—because there are so many ways of going about it. A dialogue about publishing and writing, especially in the Midwest, is something I’m very interested in continuing.

DH: Did you always have aspirations to run a lit mag or did Hypertext come along as a surprise?

CR: Two years in and I’m not sure if, even now, I have ‘aspirations to run a lit mag.’ It’s a lot of work and it came along as a total surprise.

A few years ago, I went to a Story Week event at Columbia College and the panel consisted of agents and book publishers and they were discussing digital media. An older agent, who only accepted hard copies of manuscripts, began berating the shift to digital, including

email, iPads, eReaders, etc... She suddenly turned to the audience and asked, rather sarcastically, 'I mean, how many of you use eReaders or iPads?' The entire audience of 100 or so people raised their hands. She coughed quietly and changed the subject.

I realized, right then, that content on the Internet wasn't a fad (because Columbia College students are savvy—they know what's what). It was here to stay and it was a great way to deliver stories and information to readers. The distribution model was so much easier than starting a book publishing company (which I still want to do) and a good way to learn the business. So I started paying serious attention to online lit mags: PANK, Rumpus, Narrative, Slate, Exquisite Corpse, La Petite Zine, Evergreen Review, McSweeney's, 2River View, etc.

It's a double-edged sword, though. Many lit mags have scrapped the beautiful books they used to publish for online fare. That makes me sad because there's just something about holding a book. There's nothing like it. If you're like me, you buy tons of used books and there's a history there. There are notes in the margins, coffee stains, the pages are dog-eared. I love books. But I'm greedy. I love the ability to read tons of great content on the Onternet, too. So I'm conflicted.

DH: There are a ton of literary magazines out there, so what sets Hypertext apart from the rest?

CR: You're right. There are 'tons' of literary magazines out there. We're different because we're not competing with the big dogs...yet. I would like to have more time to devote to the promotion of the magazine. I'm not sure that I've figured the marketing and promotion aspects of HYPERTEXT yet.

So, I plan on continuing a discussion about great writing and storytelling in any form. I think there's elbowroom in cyberspace for us. We've been averaging about 1,500 hits a month...not too shabby for a new publication with no advertising or marketing budget. I would like to get those numbers way up in 2013. An actual plan? I'll tell you when I have one.

DH: What's the editorial process like at Hypertext?

CR: Noelle Hufnagel and, pre-baby, Ilana Shabanov and I would read through the submissions. Now, it's Noelle and me and student interns Emily Roth and Diamond Dees. We look for fiction and essays that change the way we see the world, pieces that are carefully written, pieces with characters and situations that matter and that interest us.

Right after we opened submissions, we got a piece that was, literally, IKEA instructions. There was one line of narrative at the beginning and the rest was, simply, IKEA instructions on how to put together a cabinet. We didn't publish that.

DH: How do you juggle the roles of writer, teacher, and editor?

CR: Manically. I'm either all or nothing. In other words, I can't open email or allow any other distractions when I write (I especially can't think about HYPERTEXT). It scatters my attention. That's difficult because we have two kids and two cats and one dog and two jobs and my mom lives with us. I write best very early in the morning or very late at night...when everyone else is out cold. I have to read student work in a place where I can't put my hands on a computer. Teaching is wonderful because the physical act of closing a door in a room with no technology settles and focuses me.

Since I've been editing Hair Trigger for so many years, I have a good sense of what's working and what's not. So, the most difficult aspect of HYPERTEXT was learning Wordpress. I recently switched themes from the original Wordpress theme that Mason Johnson designed. I still haven't had time to populate the BLOG section or get the original HYPERTEXT logo in the banner. I just need a few days to figure it out. I learn through YouTube videos or Wordpress forums. So it's very slow going and a chore for me. It's in no way organic or enjoyable. It's not something I pick up easily. And I don't think I'm very good at it.

DH: In the "About" section on your site you make reference to how "open-ended" your submission guidelines are. Do you find that this description helps the submissions you receive or makes them hard to sort through?

CR: Probably the latter, which means I should revise that, right?

DH: Can you tell in the beginning of a piece whether it's something you'll publish or not?

CR: A good piece is usually strong right out of the gate. That said, there are so many definitions of 'strong.' It's so subjective, you know? Does it have a strong voice? Great idea? Is the narrator engaging? Is it plot-driven? Is it experimental? I've published pieces that I don't particularly 'like' or, in other words, I wouldn't have read unless I had to. But I can still recognize that it is strong work. The best work makes me forget I am reading as an editor. The best writing I devour because it engages me on many levels.

DH: What do you see in the future for Hypertext? And what would you like to see happen in the future with Hypertext?

CR: I see a summer hiatus. I see piles of grant money. I see responding to submissions in one week. I see writers being paid for their submissions. I see cool loft offices with Bunn-O-Matic coffee machines.

Wait. What was the question? Oh, the future of HYPERTEXT. I pitched an idea to teach a HYPERTEXT class where students hit the ground running and manage the magazine. They would assign and pitch stories, write, advertise, promote, copyedit, post, design the website, decide content, etc. That would be fun because students would get hands-on experience and publishing credit. Don't know if it will fly but I'll keep dreaming. Bottom line is this: I need more help. So, if [HYPERTEXT] survives, it's going to rely on me lassoing more folks to work on the magazine.

