



A Magazine Report  
by  
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Fiction Writers and Publishing  
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## Fact Sheet

**Magazine:** *Blackbird*

**Web Address:** <http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu>

**Address:**

*Blackbird*

Virginia Commonwealth University Department of English  
PO Box 843082  
Richmond, VA 23284-3082

**Email Address:** [blackbird@vcu.edu](mailto:blackbird@vcu.edu)

**Founded:** 2001

**Founder and Current Editor:** Gregory Donovan

**Frequency:** Biannual

**Paid/Unpaid Staff:** 1/8

**Non Profit:** Yes

**Unique Visitors Per Month:** 20,000

**What They Publish:** Fiction, Poetry, Nonfiction, Videos, Readings, and Interviews

**Submission Guidelines:** Send submissions to [transom@vcu.edu](mailto:transom@vcu.edu) with cover letter, including all contact information, in the body of the email. Subject "Editor, Fiction." Attach the work as .doc or .rtf. Send mail submissions to the "Editor, Fiction" at the above address in a page-sized manila envelope with a SASE. Simultaneous submissions are accepted if noted. No multiple submissions and do not send more than three per reading period. Expect six months for a reply.

**Reading Period:** September 15 to April 15.

**Contributor Payment:** Some money.

### **Why I Chose *Blackbird***

I was first attracted to *Blackbird* by the name. It shares, as you should know, its name with a Beatles song. But that's only what caught my eye.

I began searching the movement of the website and found that they encouraged readers to return every two weeks with special features. These included readings by authors and poets, or readings of plays by full casts. The magazine is also set up to be read in several ways. One way puts the reader in the hands of the editors: they create a table of contents, which shows the way they may wish the magazine to be read. The other ways allow the reader to choose the order by type of work, whether it be fiction, poetry, nonfiction, or gallery.

The material in the magazine is of a very high quality. All has been worth reading thus far. But that was only the beginning. I found myself amazed by their editorial policy, which encourages writers to experiment with what they know. They want work that will stand up to many readings and still prove to be a worthwhile story.

### Editorial Policy

Following is the editorial policy of *Blackbird*. Several editors, who started the magazine, had a meeting in the beginning where they decided what would make up this policy. They wanted something intriguing but also left room for all kinds of writing. I found it to be very engaging because every artist must learn where they came from before they can truly experiment. I included the policy because it shows how high the quality of work is in the magazine.

While online media are still experimental tools for literary publication and no one can be certain exactly what kinds of differences they will make in linking writers and audiences, it is our assumption that one fundamental editorial principle applies in this realm as it does in the print realm. That sole principle is excellence. Writing published by this journal will be the very best available, and it is the first responsibility of the editors—by selective solicitation, and by intelligent winnowing—to make certain that this is always the case. Each issue of *Blackbird* will be permanently archived online. We are also committed to the principle that writers should be paid for their work.

While it is true that excellence can be differently defined and construed, our primary definition will be this: Beyond simple obvious criteria such as “well written in a variety of technical senses,” and “original in terms of subject and style,” excellent writing challenges traditions in profound ways, and is radical insofar as it is aware of its own origins in tradition and seeks to expand the boundaries of the realm of discourse of which it is a part. The editors are committed to seeking out such writing and to encouraging and challenging writers to produce it.

~ *Blackbird*

### Comparison of Issues over Time

|   | Volume 1 Issue 1 | Volume 3 Issue 2 | Volume 5 Issue 2 |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Prose:Poetry  | 5:15             | 6:22             | 7:27             |
| Prose Writers M:F                                     | 3:2              | 3:3              | 3:4              |
| Protagonists M:F                                      | 4:1              | 3:3              | 3:3:1*           |
| POV 1 <sup>st</sup> :3 <sup>rd</sup> :2 <sup>nd</sup> | 3:2              | 3:3              | 4:2:1            |
| Author Credits<br>Novel:Magazine:First                | 4:1:0            | 4:2:0            | 3:4:0            |

\*Third number represents a protagonist with unknown or changing gender.

The results of this comparison really surprised me in how equal the genders were. Not because I am biased but in today's world one always expects something to turn up, something that is socially unacceptable. The male to female ratio is equal and has remained so over time. Often authors wrote in opposite gender points of view and the totals still came out equal. This only makes me wonder if that is a conscious choice by the editors.

The thing that is not surprising for a magazine of this quality is the background of the authors. It is full of authors who have previously published. I don't think I came across a single author who hadn't been published previously. There is a varied level of those who were published. Some have novels and some have only been published in magazines. The trend though, as is seen in the chart, is to move towards writers with less works.

This movement towards less experienced can be attributed to the fact that the magazine is relatively new. In the beginning they were seeking writers who would not only have stronger work, but also would bring in many readers.

## Story Reviews

### Volume 1 Issue 1

*On the Bus* by Manuel Martinez is a plain spoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting. It is told through a subjective, close-up 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view. The narrator and his friend, Walter, are riding on the bus. Several black guys are sitting behind them, at the back of the bus, tormenting them and getting high. A fat white chick gets on the bus and joins the black guys. His friend gets off the bus, and he gets harassed some more. The narrator then tells about his life, before ending the story “wanting to disappear from here, go anyplace where I can’t get mixed up with the guys in the back.”

The story is powerful and moving because you, as the reader, understand what the narrator must be going through in his life. There is this struggle of class that goes beyond race. He wishes that he wasn’t part of this neighborhood, but he is. He knows how to deal with that kind of person because he lives with them, but he refuses to be like them. This is all revealed in the end. First Martinez paints the picture and then he works out how this kid is going to be different.

*Miniature Man* by Carrie Brown is a plain spoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting. It is told through a subjective, close-up 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view. Gregorio, who has set up a museum of miniature men in a miniature village that took up a three-story home, has his hands crushed by a piece of marble several days before he opens his museum. He visits the narrator, who is a doctor and his cousin, to be fixed up. Gregorio must deal with his new problem, which is harder for the family than him. His nephew comes to visit and they film his miniature world. In the end, the narrator is impressed by the world he finds because they were all Gregorio’s inspiration.

This story is striking for several reasons. One is that a woman wrote this story from the perspective of an old man. She delivers his thoughts and motivations perfectly. The description of the world is also very strong. “The camera's eye, coming in close to the little scenes, had the effect of removing all scale from the images. I had not expected that...It hovered close beside the windows of the houses; inside, a woman bent over a baby in her lap before the glow of a fire, and a man sat at a desk, lost in thought, a scroll of paper before him. There was a man on a hillside, his hands on a white beehive, fields of lavender flowing away beyond.”

### Volume 3 Issue 2

*At the Terminal* by Bryn Chancellor is a plain spoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting. It is told through an objective, close-up 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view. Francie is traveling home from meeting an internet dating partner, Clive, for the third, decisive, time. She is craving a cigarette because she’s recently quit for Clive, who dumped her. A man in a wheelchair refuses to give her one with a simple “no.” She steals one from him and then tries to make him be nice to her, which fails. But this attempt teaches her, in the end, that she is afraid to live.

The strength of this story lies in the struggle between the two main characters. Francie wishes so much for someone to be nice to her that she torments a man in a wheelchair in the hope that he will start being nice. He is hard and fearless. This makes her see what her own problem is. The man in the wheelchair is quite the powerful character in himself. The author has

created a man whose only purpose is to help Francie, but she's kept that fact hidden from the reader quite well. The main character is also quite pathetic, who only redeemed herself in the end with a realization.

*A Ford in a River* by Charles Rose is a plain spoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting. It is told through a subjective, close-up 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view. The narrator visits Susan, his daughter, in a psychiatric ward of a hospital and plays Scrabble with another patient, Jimmy, a boy who tried to kill his mother. The narrator works in a pharmacy. His wife refuses to let Susan return to the home from the hospital. They can spend the money to send her to another hospital or let her come home. It is time for Jimmy to leave the hospital, but no one will take him in. In the end, he must be charged for pointing a gun in his mother's face, that's the only way his mother knows to fix the problem.

The point of view is what makes this story. It is told from a father's point of view. He wants to bring his daughter home from the psychiatric ward. We don't know why she's in there. We learn about what happened with Jimmy through him. We also learn how Jimmy is dealt with through the narrator. We learn that the mother cannot take Jimmy back because she doesn't trust him, but his father won't take him either. The only thing his mother can do to save him is to send him to jail because it's cheaper. From another point of view the story wouldn't work in the same way.

## Volume 5 Issue 2

*Some Girl* by Genanne Walsh is a plain spoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting. It is told through a subjective, close-up 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view. The story is told by a girl who has lost a lover in the war in Iraq, Lance, who was also her neighbor. She tells many memories she has of their growing up and about their families. Their lives were always interconnected. His father dies and something comes between the two families. His mother hates her now. In the end, she comes to the eye of the storm by telling his mother that Lance is dead.

This story starts out very strong with the line, "His mother couldn't remember my name." This is a very strong hook. There is much left to the reader's imagination in the details of Lance's life, an estranged aunt, a tree called the "Infamous Willow," and how his father died. These are effective in pulling the reader through the story, but leave the reader wanting more in the end also. It is a strong story that will be better the second read, as more details are uncovered.

*The Guest* by Ahmad Saidullah is a plain spoken, realistic story set in a domestic setting. It is told through an objective, far-away 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view. Huma is singing strange songs, and her mother believes she is possessed. Her father takes her to a psychiatrist, who says she is just under too much stress. She is 28, too old to marry, but they try anyway. The treatments do not help, and her mother takes her to several different witch doctors. They do not help either. Finally, her mother and a priest beat her spirit guest out of Huma. In the end she does not improve, and they send her to an asylum.

The story begins with a strong hook, "Huma had gone mad. Or so Mrs. Siddiqui feared." This pulls the reader in immediately. The ending is well crafted. Huma should be cured, at least in the eyes of her family, but that is not the case. She actually suffers more because of their foolish notions. The meaning of this story is well hidden in that ending, and crafted to the point that the reader gets it without being beaten with it, as Huma is.



## Interview with Gregory Donovan

*What is a typical day like for you, as an editor?*

Almost all of the correspondence I get is through email. When we began we required submissions to be sent by mail to let people know the seriousness of *Blackbird*. After a few years we realized that was a foolish notion, especially after the primary print journals started accepting email submissions. We expect to stop accepting postal mail submissions some time in the future. I spend a lot of time, sometimes up to four hours a day, reading emails, which doesn't include submissions. That is purely business emails and university correspondence.

*What is your editorial process at the magazine?*

The majority of fiction is unsolicited manuscripts. Most of the staff of *Blackbird* are M.A. and M.F.A. students at Virginia Commonwealth University, making up the interns. There are also several volunteers from the area. The interns and volunteers read through everything, while the senior editors at least glance at everything. There are several meetings each month where the interns and volunteers advocate for particular pieces they found to be quite good. The senior editors then read those manuscripts. This double check system allows us to make sure nothing slips through the cracks. We are looking for a wide variety of work and also innovative work. The innovative work can slip through traditional systems where there may only be one person reading. All the senior editors, myself, Mary Flynn, and Susan Williams, must agree on what pieces will be accepted.

*In your editorial policy you said you are looking for excellent work, meaning that it took what came before it and expanded upon that. It knows where it's coming from rather than just fumbling around in the dark. Where did you come up with this policy?*

In the beginning there were a number of editors who had considerable experience editing. Mary Flynn had been the editor for *New Virginia Review*, and she continues to be the executive director for a literary arts sponsorship non-profit organization with the same name. They no longer print that journal. We had William Tester, a fiction writer, who had extensive experience in New York publishing, with both print magazines and book editing. We also had T.R. Hummer, who until recently was the editor for the *Georgia Review*, and previously edited the *New England Review* and the *Kenyon Review*, among other things. All of us got together to discuss what would make up the editorial policy. We wanted something that would be interesting reading and provocative but not too narrow.

*What sort of work best characterizes what's in Blackbird?*

Each person will characterize that taste on what they have experienced in their own life. I can imagine there are a few very seriously avant-garde writers that think that our journal is traditional. I can think of quite a number of well established writers who think that our journal is quite forward looking and adventurous. You see how that reflects more on the person who's looking at it than on what we're doing. I think what we're attempting to do is to offer our readers

a kind of snapshot of what's going on in the best of literary activity. We're publishing more and more work from around the world, both work written in English and work that's translated.

*How does having the journal online benefit the readers?*

We have readers visiting from all around the world. The first person who subscribed to the journal's newsletter was from the Czech Republic. Immediately, we understood that we had an international readership because we're an online journal. We've also had correspondence from people in foreign countries, who are American or British, who say how glad they are to have access to *Blackbird* because they can't get literary journals sent to them because they're in just too remote of a place or it's too expensive to even consider it. That's really our intention, to have a journal that rivals the quality of any of the well established print journals, such as the *Kenyon Review* or *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Sometimes people ask me if we have something against any print journals because we're online. We don't. We're simply taking advantage of the fact that you can reach a lot more people if you're online. The costs we save with mailing or certain printing costs we devote to paying the contributors and to making the journal free.

*When you first started the magazine, you said you weren't sure how the magazine would influence the link between writers and readers because of its being online. How have you seen this interaction work out?*

The very well established writers we solicited when we started the magazine were skeptical because they didn't know what to think about it. They had many questions, like what would happen to my work if the magazine ceased to be. Would it disappear? This happens with some small online journals. As time has gone on, we've been able to answer some of these questions. Many of the writers who were skeptical of being online have now acquired computers for themselves, and they're getting emails from people reading their work. We've joined a system of international digital archiving called LOCKSS. That's an acronym that stands for "Lots Of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe." It's a program that was begun by the libraries at Stanford University. It is a digital archive of online literary journals that's stored in computer resources all over the world. That's a way of protecting *Blackbird* long after it ceases publication, and also protecting it from political, viral, or hacking interferences.

*How much do you work with the writers on their submissions?*

We are rather old fashion, in that we actually do offer all of our writers some editorial commentary on their work. The more established writers, of course, don't need as much, but we will occasionally ask them if they intended this word there. Or we may suggest that a sentence ends strangely. That's not so much editing as it is copy editing, more proofing. We have with other writers suggested that they cut a beginning, or compress an ending, or take out a section. We don't want to go too far with it, because at some point, if you're doing very much of it, then you're rewriting the story. That's not something any magazine should do because you shouldn't accept that work if you're rewriting the whole thing. You should just send it back and say we like your work but we feel this piece isn't ready for publication.

We have entered into other kinds of partnerships with authors too. We've entered into complex partnerships with them in figuring out how to present the work. If you look at the current issue, there's a story by Caitlin Horrocks. It is done as if it were an essay by a high school student. We realized it wouldn't work if we just put up the words, so instead it looks like typescript pages with amateurish photos added into it. So that's something we can offer writers that would be impossible for most print journals, because they would have to change their typeface and so forth.

Again in the current issue, the selections that come from Peter Orner, *The Second Coming of Mavala Shikongo*, are not only excerpts from the published version of the novel but there are also excerpts that were outtakes. So you get something both from the published version, and something that you couldn't get anywhere else, except from *Blackbird*. That's an unusual presentation of work. So figuring out how to do that, and how to do it so that it was clear to readers involved some complicated thinking in how to menu that and how to present the pages. Those are elements that are different in publishing an online journal compared to a print journal. We also record as often as possible the authors who we publish. That's something that is a special feature of the magazine.

*What is your favorite story? Why?*

*The Miniature Man* by Carrie Brown is one of them. It's a beautiful story that's about the difficulty in making art and what you have to sacrifice to make art. It's my favorite because of its complexity, and because it's also a powerfully moving story. It manages to be both sophisticated and emotionally effective. It's a story with a great deal of wisdom in it.

*How does work shopping a story effect it? Can it make a story flat or does it just ultimately help the author?*

Donald Hall, the poet, has famously named the poem written by so many people taking workshops the micapoem, a generic poem that is competent and reasonably sophisticated but not inspiring. The same thing, of course, could be true for fiction. I don't believe that workshops have done very much that is negative. I think they have the potential to be negative. But for the most part they have simply raised all of the bars. Everybody who tries to publish fiction, who has been through several good fiction workshops, starts out from a position of more knowledge, achievement, and competence. How could that possibly hurt your work? So I think for the most part workshops have helped enormously, and they've improved the overall quality of fiction being written. The danger is they rub away the eccentricity of a truly original or odd person. I don't think there's anyway you can predict if anyone's inventiveness will be curtailed by their being critiqued by others. I think that in the end what workshops do is increase people's competence and makes them more sophisticated in their taste. When it's all done, each writer must put away all those voices out of their head and must find what they have in themselves to do. So it's a balance between originality and competence. Eccentricity of a kind that is so extreme that nobody can enjoy your work because it is too odd to be understood, that's not going to be successful. On the other hand, there might be some people who can just produce a merely competent story but it's not very strong. I don't think that's going to meet with much success

either. Getting into a journal like *Blackbird* is hard but once you do it you really have achieved something. It's going to be a balance of competence, originality, and sophistication.

*Would you say there are a few things that you definitely look for or stay away from in a story?*

One of my teachers was the novelist, John Gardner. He helped to give me the language to articulate my judgments about work. He always said that fiction is a vivid continuous dream, and that writers fail when they fail in the aspect of making it vivid (original, striking, unusual plots, unusual characters). They can also fail in the continuity in the story. That's more on the technical side. You start reading and you hear the machinery clanking or you feel like it's terribly artificial or it just loses your credibility, whether that world is the real world or a fantasy world. If you start to wake up in the middle of the film to notice what other people are doing rather than watching the film, that's a failed moment in the continuity of the film. I think that all of us at *Blackbird* would say we're interested in stories that create a believable world, whether it's fantastic or not isn't the issue. It's whether it's a fully engaging world and if the story follows through on the issues and problems that it raises. That follow through can include truncated endings which allow you to imagine what happens after the story ends. It can include that; we're not saying that the endings have to tie up into a bow. The story has to be responsible to the questions it raises, including a philosophical mystery. Really great creative work always seems to define itself.

*What do you see is happening with literary magazines? Or what do you foresee happening?*

I think people who fear online activities as being destructive to print have it almost exactly wrong. I think they have that backwards. In fact having a magazine like *Blackbird* is drawing many more readers to literature of a high quality than might otherwise find their way there. What they're going to see in the grocery store is highly commercial, unsophisticated writing. Even in bookstores more and more there are blockbuster best sellers being featured, but the real artful work is not so available. I think that online journals are bringing more readers to excellent work. At the same time, the marketing of books online is quite successful too because a person who lives in the hinterlands of Nebraska, where there isn't a really good bookstore nearby, can order whatever they want at Amazon.com online.

*Do you have any favorite journals you like to read?*

Some I've really been fond of are *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *McSweeney's*, *Failbetter*, *Drunken Boat*, *Jacket*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Slate*, *Shenandoah*, *Cortland Review*, and *Octopus Magazine*.