





Project Litmag

A SPECIAL SECTION
ON THE ART
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OF LITERARY
JOURNALS

Saving the Short Story

One Story From One
to One Hundred

IT'S not your standard award-winning literary magazine. It isn't affiliated with a college or university writing program. It is not funded by an endowed trust or owned by a media company. It doesn't publish poetry, essays, reviews, or art, and it doesn't run any ads—not even for MFA programs.

What *One Story* does have is a remarkably simple and singular design: Published in a five-by-seven-inch, saddle-stitched format, with a single-color cover and one three- to eight-thousand-word short story inside, it resembles a pamphlet or a script for a one-act play more

Publisher Maribeth
Batcha (left) and
editor Hannah Tinti

BY KATHERINE HILL
PHOTOGRAPH BY PIETER VAN HATTEM

than it does a literary magazine. But smallness is *One Story*'s selling point, and nearly four thousand subscribers have been hooked, paying twenty-one dollars a year to get a new story in the mail every three weeks.

Publisher Maribeth Batcha and editor Hannah Tinti—both fiction writers—built the project from scratch, and this past winter they published their landmark hundredth issue, a baseball story titled “Beanball,” by award-winning short story writer Ron Carlson. In just six years, *One Story* has made an indelible impression on the literary landscape, launching the careers of dozens of new writers and providing an alternative to thick, glossy quarterlies. Readers—and writers looking for a place to publish—welcome each issue's spotlight on a single story and author, not to mention *One Story*'s unpretentious packaging and portability.

Though the magazine breaks even, what it really runs on is zeal. Batcha and Tinti—neither of whom receives a salary—work weekends and are always thinking about ways to expand the *One Story* community. The founders seem fairly laid back, but as Tinti says, “We really have kept this thing going by the seat of our pants.”

Batcha came up with the idea for *One Story* after receiving her MFA from Columbia in 1999. As a post-graduate, she had joined a long-distance writing group in which members mailed single stories to one another. “It seemed to me that one short story in the mail was such a nice thing to get,” she says. At the time, she was working in circulation at the now-defunct magazine *Lingua Franca* and had discovered that it didn't cost much to mail a small amount of printed material in bulk. She began to wonder if a literary magazine could

work this way—one story at a time. With her professional experience, she knew she could handle the business, but she realized she'd need a strong editor to oversee content.

Enter Hannah Tinti, who Batcha knew from the New York writing scene. A fellow short story lover, Tinti had earned her MFA in fiction from New York University, where she was fiction editor of the program's liter-

ary journal, *Washington Square*; previously she'd read submissions for the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Boston Review*. Together, Batcha and Tinti mourned the loss of *Story*, the prominent literary magazine that had published two of Tinti's stories, including her first, before folding in 2000. “We couldn't believe another venue for stories was gone,” Batcha says.

Though both women wanted to see the void left by *Story* filled, for a long time it was just something they talked

FIVE TIPS FOR SUBMITTING YOUR WORK

1 Get the magazine and read it cover to cover. Better yet, get your hands on a few recent issues and read them—thoroughly. This is the best way to familiarize yourself with the magazine's aesthetic. Focusing on your genre of choice, look for any particular qualities the stories, essays, or poems share that might also be present in your work. (Reading sample issues can also give you something specific to mention in your cover letter.) Scan the contributor notes to assess the authors' publication backgrounds. Does your background seem similar to theirs? Finally, take a look at the masthead for the specific editor to whom you should send your submission, and be sure to spell his or her name correctly.

2 Write a cover letter that's short and sweet. It's good to include something that shows you're familiar with the magazine and the type of work it publishes (see tip 1). It's also worthwhile to mention why you're submitting your work to a particular magazine. A sentence or two of biographical information is appropriate, but keep it short—and relevant.

3 If you submit simultaneously, let the editors know. Include a sentence in your cover letter that informs the editor your work is under consideration elsewhere. And if your work is accepted for publication, immediately let the editors of other magazines who are still considering your work know. (Nothing will burn a bridge faster than withdrawing a submission that an editor had already accepted for publication.)

4 Follow submission guidelines exactly. By doing so, you show that you did your research and that you're a professional. Not following the guidelines can give overworked editors a reason to disregard your submission before they've even read it.

5 Follow up professionally. Most magazines include their response times in their submission guidelines. If you haven't received a reply within that window, write a short note inquiring about your submission. But be polite. The editors could be backlogged and may just want to take the time your submission deserves. Remember: Writers who submit their work far outnumber the editors who read it.

KATHERINE HILL has written reviews for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Believer*, *Bookforum*, and *Publishers Weekly*. She lives in Philadelphia.

about. It wasn't until 9/11 that they began to work in earnest on a plan for *One Story*. "That event was a trigger," Tinti says. Like most New Yorkers, she and Batcha felt unhinged in the fall of 2001, deciding finally, as Tinti puts it, that "anything you've always wanted to do, you do it now."

In an April 2007 entry on *One Story's* blog, she explains what lay behind their decision: "It's hard to even remember now, what people were feeling right after the towers fell. Some people had sex. Some people joined the service. Some people quit their jobs and moved out to the country. And some people, well, they started literary magazines. It seems kind of silly, and insignificant, and very obviously nerdy, but doing so, I think, was a hopeful act. A tiny step towards living."

It was also a step toward building a community around the short story form. Tinti and Batcha invested three thousand dollars of their own money and worked out of Batcha's Brooklyn apartment, with her husband, computer programmer Devin Emke, serving as a live-in Webmaster for one-story.com, the magazine's companion site. Friends helped out with design: Matthew Fetchko created the logo, while Sam Potts provided the magazine's overall look and simple cover layout, with its rotating title typefaces and colors.

For the inaugural issue, Batcha and Tinti asked mutual friend John Hodgman—now immortalized as "PC" in Apple's ubiquitous Mac versus PC ad campaign—to submit a story. Hodgman agreed to be the guinea pig, and in April 2002, his wry, genre-bending story, "Villanova or: How I Became a Former Professional Literary Agent," was published under a gray cover as *One Story's* first issue.

Next, they sought out readers. A launch party at a midtown Manhattan bar drew two hundred people, each of whom paid five dollars for a six-issue subscription. Media attention soon followed: *Time Out New York* ran a short feature, and then *O, The*

Oprah Magazine featured Batcha and Tinti in a section on female entrepreneurs. They now jokingly refer to the sunbathed portrait that accompanied the article as their "wedding photo." More coverage followed, culminating in a 2004 feature in the *New York Times* that increased subscriptions by nearly a thousand. "What it showed me," Tinti says, "was that there was a hole in the marketplace, and we ended up filling it."

For all the talk about the death of the story, *One Story* has amassed a sizeable audience, and not just among writers. Most readers have gotten referrals—often along with gift subscriptions—from subscribing family members or friends. Those who have renewed their subscriptions may do so to support the magazine's mission, but they also appreciate the intimate, unintimidating format. Rjae Easton, a computer programmer in Stow, Massachusetts, has collected every single issue, finding the stories high quality and diverse, as well as "easy to consume."

IF READERS have embraced the magazine, writers have been ecstatic. Word of mouth traveled fast, and *One Story* was bombarded with submissions soon after its launch. For the first six months they came by e-mail ("the longest six months of my life," Batcha says); then Emke launched his Submission Manager system, which allows writers to upload submissions directly to the Web site. With help from the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, Submission Manager has since been licensed to other journals, including *Fence* and *Ploughshares*. *One Story's* screeners, mostly New York City MFA candidates, sift through more than one hundred stories a week and between six and seven thousand a year.

Tinti is choosy. She's accepted many agented stories but rarely solicits them. "I never want to get into a position where I have to publish something because I've asked for it,"

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she says. The stories she does publish vary in style and subject, with several in translation. Though the magazine has showcased established writers like Brock Clarke, Kelly Link, and Kate Walbert, a full 10 percent of *One Story* writers have made their publishing debuts in the magazine. Writers have been equal numbers male and female, and their stories for the magazine have tended to be on the longer side, with almost novelistic plots. The one quality Tinti feels their works share is that they're "meaty," capable—as they must be to be published in the *One Story* format—of standing as works of art on their own.

In keeping with the singular theme, a writer's work can be published in *One Story* only once—and Batcha and Tinti are determined to make that one time count. To start, Tinti edits with care. "I can be relentless at times," she says, and her goal is always perfection. "She goes right to the place in the story that doesn't feel true," says Rebecca Barry, author of "Midnight Soup" (Issue 17), who also solicited Tinti's help on her first collection, the *New York Times* Notable Book *Later, at the Bar* (Simon & Schuster, 2007). Debut writer Sam Allingham was impressed by and grateful for Tinti's deep attention to his story "Bar Joke, Arizona" (Issue 97), which went through two edits. "I don't even look at the old version anymore," he says.

For each story, Tinti also posts an author interview on the Web site and an introduction to the writer's work on her blog. As Laura van den Berg, author of "What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us" (Issue 102), points out, the magazine's format frees its staff from having to make decisions about which authors and pieces to highlight. Each one is highlighted in turn. Thus, she says, "the benefits for all their authors are huge."

Many agents subscribe, and with each issue featuring a single writer, they're quick to query the ones they like. "*One Story* tries hard to seek out

new talent, and for an agent that's especially appealing," says Julie Barer of the eponymous Barer Literary agency, who represents *One Story* writers Will Allison, Emily Benz, and Kevin Wilson.

One Story stories have been recognized with Pushcart and O. Henry prizes, and have been included in editions of the Best American Short Stories, the Best American Nonrequired Reading, and the Best New American Voices. Paul Yoon's first published story, "Once the Shore" (Issue 58), was selected by Ann Patchett for *The Best American Short Stories 2006*—and it also launched his career, leading him to an agent and a book deal. *Once the Shore*, now the title of his first collection, is forthcoming from Sarabande Books in 2009. "I would say that *One Story* is solely responsible for any good fortune to come my way," Yoon says. Tinti and Batcha look with pride on Yoon's continued success.

"We feel very close to all of our writers," Batcha says. In February, when *One Story* celebrated its hundredth issue at Pianos, a bar on Manhattan's Lower East Side that also hosts its monthly reading series, more than thirty writers showed up. "We gave them each a name tag with their story title on it," Batcha says. "It's become a community of friends."

As the centers of that community, Batcha and Tinti seem more like short story shepherds than entrepreneurs. Both lead hectic lives, juggling the magazine, family obligations, teaching and consulting work, and, of course, their own writing. Tinti's acclaimed story collection, *Animal Crackers*, was published by the Dial Press in 2004, and her follow-up novel, *The Good Thief*, comes out from Dial in September; Batcha just completed her novel, "Pennsylvania Power and Light."

"As creative writers, you want to be a part of a community," Tinti says. "It's a way to keep writing. You need to sur-

round yourself with people who are excited by the same things as you."

Going forward, Batcha and Tinti aim to increase their subscriber base to fifteen thousand—*Story* magazine's circulation at its height—and they're considering book ventures and a conference in New York City devoted entirely to the short story. One day, they hope to publish a graphic story.

And, after six years and more than a hundred writers, the magazine has taken steps toward permanence. With revenue from Submission Manager, *One Story* has leased an office in the Old American Can Factory, an industrial complex in Brooklyn built in the nineteenth century that's been converted into affordable space for over a hundred artists and creative organizations. *One Story* shares a first-floor unit—aptly numbered A111—with small press Archipelago Books.

In early 2007, the magazine was granted status as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, which permits it to apply for government funding. *One Story* now receives support from the New York State Council on the Arts, and soon it will have a board of directors. Though neither has any plans to leave *One Story*, both Batcha and Tinti admit the nonprofit designation gives them the comfort of knowing the magazine will live beyond them. ∞

One Story in Focus:

Circulation: 4,000. **Frequency:** Every three weeks. **Looking for:** Short stories. **Reading period:** September through May. **Number of submissions:** 7,000 per year. **Simultaneous submissions:** Yes. **Response time:** One to four months. **Payment:** \$100, plus 25 contributor's copies. **Editor's tip:** "Make sure that your first page and last page are flawless." **Editor's warning:** "Do not submit more than one story at a time." **Contact:** *One Story*, The Old American Can Factory, 232 Third Street, #A111, Brooklyn, NY 11215; www.one-story.com.