

A Little Start-Up Entertains, One Story at a Time

By DINITIA SMITH

At a time when literary writing seems like a dying art, when little magazines are folding left and right, when publishers bemoan the sinking bottom line, here lies a spot of hope. Almost literally a spot. It is called One Story magazine, and it measures only 5 inches wide by 7 inches tall. Founded in 2002 by two aspiring writers, Hannah Tinti and Maribeth Batcha, the magazine's entire content is only one short story per issue, every three weeks, 18 issues a year.

One Story has 2,400 paid subscribers and is breaking even, too, the founders say. Part of the reason is that the labor is free. Payment to writers is \$100 and 15 copies, whereas The New Yorker can pay in the thousands of dollars for a short story. "But \$100 is a nice dinner for two," said Ms. Tinti, 31, the editor. An annual subscription costs \$21 (within the United States). The magazine has no ads and does not plan on soliciting any.

It all started when Ms. Batcha, 33, the publisher, was in a writing group in which members sent one another their stories by mail. "It was a fun way to see a story, by itself," Ms. Batcha said. By day Ms. Batcha is a magazine-circulation consultant.

There are only a few major magazines that publish frequently where writers can send short stories these days, including The New Yorker, Harper's, The Atlantic. Most of the little magazines come out only once or twice a year.

"We were trying to get into the market of The New Yorker and Harper's, the magazines that come out frequently and have a relationship with their subscribers," Ms. Tinti said. Why not start a magazine with just one story in it? The writer could have the spotlight all to himself. And because the magazine was small, people would be more likely to read it. "There hadn't been any little magazines marketed like a glossy," Ms. Batcha said. "I thought I knew how to do it."

Ms. Tinti said: "You see the same names over and over again in the glossies. People want something new. Our format is not as daunting." The magazine would be kind of like a Story-of-the-Month Club.

Ms. Batcha calculated the costs. "I figured there was only so much money I could lose," she said. Submissions would be by e-mail only, to save labor costs and the need for an office where manuscripts must be sent. So no rent either. And a writer could only be published once.

Ms. Batcha invested \$3,000 of her own money and roped Ms. Tinti into helping her. The first issue was in April 2002, and the story was "Villanova or: How I Became a Former Professional Literary Agent," by John Hodgman, about an agent who pursues a famous and elusive science-fiction writer. That issue had a print run of 600 and cost about \$1,000.

Now agents regularly send submissions,



Brian Palmer for The New York Times

Maribeth Batcha, at right, publisher of One Story literary magazine, which contains only one short story per issue, and Hannah Tinti, the magazine's editor, in Park Slope.

the two women say. And writers who did not have agents before, have found them now from having their stories in the magazine. One, Scott Snyder, who published a story, "Happy Fish, Plus Coin," in January 2003, signed a two-book deal with Dial Press as a result. Patrick Somerville's first story, "Trouble and the Shadowy Deathblow," published in October 2003, has been optioned for a movie. Submissions now come from as

and sold T-shirts and boxed sets of the magazine. They also promoted the magazine at the Associated Writing Programs National Conference in Baltimore, the annual conference for writing programs, university presses and literary magazines.

There is a monthly "One Story and Happy Hour Reading Series" at Arlene's Grocery, a bar on Stanton Street, on the Lower East Side. The featured reader gets to choose a special drink for discount.

One Story is no vanity production either. Ms. Tinti and Ms. Batcha say they would never print their own work. But this month Ms. Tinti's first short-story collection, "Animal Crackers," was published by Dial. Each story involves animals. The title one is about a zoo worker who, while washing down an elephant, meditates on the strange, grim fragments he has overheard from his co-workers about their lives. Dial has also bought Ms. Tinti's first novel, tentatively titled "Resurrection Men," about a gang of grave robbers. "Everyone has a dark side," Ms. Tinti said, with a laugh. She is scheduled to read from the book at the Barnes & Noble store in Chelsea on Thursday at 7 p.m.

Ms. Batcha is working on her first novel, about a young woman living in a coal-mining town in Pennsylvania (as she herself did when growing up) where an underground fire is burning. Ms. Batcha says it will be ready next fall.

Meanwhile the two women hope to expand One Story's circulation. They plan to try direct-mail marketing, though that is expensive. Once the magazine's circulation rises to 5,000, they say, they can get a printer's discount. But the two say they would never interfere with the magazine's basic format and publish Two Stories, for instance.

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far away as Africa. The magazine has also published a few better known authors, like Stephen Dixon.

But to give credit where credit is due, Ms. Tinti and Ms. Batcha did not just publish a magazine. Ms. Batcha brought all her marketing skills to bear on the project. First there was a launch party at the Cutting Room, a bar on West 24th Street in Manhattan. Two hundred people showed and paid the admission price, \$5, for one free issue and a six-issue subscription.

Last year the two women took a booth at New York Is Book Country, the city's annual book fair. They borrowed the duck-pond concept from carnivals. Visitors picked a duck with a number on the bottom from a tub of water and got the corresponding number of free copies of the magazine. They gave out decal tattoos that said One Story,