Publishing in Literary Journals & Magazines

Introduction

Most writers get the attention of editors, agents, and other writers by first publishing their writing in literary magazines or literary journals. (Many literary magazines and journals will offer you a modest payment for the writing they accept, sometimes by giving you a free copy, or contributor's copy, of the issue in which your work appears.) Before beginning the submission process, it is essential to research the market to determine which publications are the best venues for your writing. Your publishing success rests on one axiom: Know your market.

The best place to start is our comprehensive and carefully vetted list of over eight hundred literary magazine and journals [1], where you can find details about the specific kind of writing each magazine publishes and in which formats, as well as editorial policies, submission guidelines, and contact information.

After you've narrowed down a list of magazines and journals that publish the kind of writing you write, carefully take note of the submission guidelines for each, and be sure to follow those guidelines carefully. Submissions to literary magazines do not require an agent.

The World of Literary Journals and Magazines—Determining Which Are Right for Your Work

There are hundreds of literary journals and magazines that publish creative writing, but each has a unique editorial voice, tone, viewpoint, and mission. It’s important to read the literary magazines in which you’d like to publish before you submit your work, so that you can evaluate how good a match they are for you.

Bookstores often have periodicals sections that include literary journals and magazines you can browse through. Your local library may also carry a variety of literary journals and magazines, and used bookstores sometimes sell past issues. Many literary magazines have websites where you can read current or archived content and get a general feel for the print publication. Be sure to peruse recent issues of several
publications to see where work similar to yours is being published. Read contributors’ notes to compare your own background and interests to those of the writers whose work is included in those particular magazines.

Submission Guidelines

When you submit your work, always be certain to follow the guidelines of each publication. Some magazines specify genres or themes in which they are or are not interested. Some accept submissions only during certain months. Some set word limits. Some set page limits or limits on the number of poems per submission. Some specify whether you should include a cover letter or self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE).

Many literary publications refuse to read work that is not submitted in accordance with their guidelines, so it is crucial to know what the rules are and to stick to them. Often, they’re spelled out somewhere in the pages of the magazine; you can also usually find them on the publication’s website or by contacting the publication.

Simultaneous Submissions

The literary world is divided in its opinion about simultaneous submissions—that is, submitting the same poem, short story, or creative nonfiction piece to multiple publications at once. Many literary magazines and literary journals discourage the practice, as it can complicate things for them: If you withdraw a submission from one publication because another has accepted the same work, the one from which you’re withdrawing might already have invested time, money, and staff resources in reviewing the work and might have been interested in publishing it as well. Some publications explicitly forbid simultaneous submissions.

However, because many publications have a long review period—it can take months, and in some cases a year or more, for a literary magazine to accept or reject a piece you’ve submitted—many writers want to submit the same piece to more than one publication at a time. The best practice is to follow individual publications’ guidelines. If they don’t specify their stance, call to ask them, or indicate in your cover letter that you’re submitting the same piece to other magazines at the same time.

If you do send your submission simultaneously to more than one publication, and one of them accepts it, immediately contact the other publications to let them know that you’re withdrawing your submission.

Cover Letters

It’s customary—and sometimes required—to include a short cover letter with each
submission you make. Avoid using the letter as a platform to discuss the merits or themes of the work you are submitting or to summarize your writing as a whole. Instead, keep it simple and straightforward, including a brief bio that lists places you’ve published in the past, if applicable.

Other Resources

Along with our aforementioned Literary Magazines database [1], books that list literary journals and magazines are a good place to begin learning about what’s out there and how to submit to publications that interest you. Writer’s Market, Poet’s Market, and Novel & Short Story Writer’s Market, all published by Writer’s Digest Books [13], give detailed contact information and submission guidelines.

You can also learn more about the literary market from the Council of Literary Magazines & Presses’ [14] Literary Press and Magazine Directory (Red Hen Press [15]), Literary Market Place (Book-mart Press [16]), and The International Directory of Little Magazines & Small Presses (Dustbooks [17]).

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