

Shelf Life

Winter 2004-05

Literary journals are expensive — \$12 an issue is not uncommon — but they're also a dime a dozen. Hundreds, if not thousands, of little magazines are published out of creative writing departments, and creative writers' apartments, all over the country. And the mercilessness of the market doesn't keep new titles from flooding it every year. Most fold after a few issues.

But most don't arrive on the scene with Nobel laureates in their pages. For its 1977 debut, *Columbia: A Journal of Literature & Art* got off to an auspicious start, snagging a short story by Nobel Prize-winner Kawabata Yasunari. That piece, "Footfalls," is reprinted in the current number, 40, alongside work by Raymond Carver, Lorrie Moore, Charles Wright, and A.R. Ammons, and other highlights from the magazine's impressive first 28 years.

"I sat down with the senior staff and we read everything that had been published in the journal, and there was some amazing stuff," says Lytton Smith, the current editor in chief and a second-year student in the poetry concentration of SOA's Writing Division. "There were so many things that we would've loved to republish but couldn't because we just didn't have room."

The magazine originated in the mind of Daniel Halpern, former chair of the Writing Division of the Columbia School of the Arts and now publisher of *Ecco*. In the mid-'70s, he wanted to make Columbia's MFA program more student centered. "I explained to the administration that these kids were paying huge amounts of money for, essentially, one workshop," he says. Along with new seminars and "short courses," weeklong master classes taught by such luminaries as Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda, Halpern established a literary annual called *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry and Prose*. From the beginning, he says, the publication was "completely" in the hands of the students.

In 1996 it switched to more or less semiannual publication and acquired its current name, a reflection of its expanded commitment to visual media. Each issue now

features a full-color, 16- page spread curated by an art editor. In most other respects, however, *Columbia* hasn't changed since its founding. Students still assemble each issue with no faculty oversight, an arrangement that makes the magazine's national reputation all the more remarkable.

"It is a coast-to-coast magazine, and a very well-respected magazine," says Smith. "But it's also fundamentally a training ground for Columbia MFA students. A lot of our staff go on to become editors at places like Knopf and HarperCollins."

The editors put in long hours in *Columbia's* little Dodge Hall office, sometimes spilling into nearby classrooms. "Yesterday," Smith recalled, "there was a poetry slush-pile reading going on, and all the classrooms were being used for teaching. So we had five people in the journal office, and five piles of poetry being read. It does get quite cozy at times, but it also kind of adds to the fun and the sense of community."



[Guide to school abbreviations](#)

GIVING
10-1-24
DAY

Tuesday, October 1, 2024

**Today is Columbia
Giving Day!**

Give Now

[All categories >](#)