

CONTESTS

Publication of most literary novels occurs through a process that has become established over the last half century. Aspiring authors send their completed manuscripts around until they find an interested agent. The agent, working through a network of connections, shows the manuscript to editors he believes will find the novel exciting. Eventually, if the author is lucky, a publishing house accepts the novel and—assuming the writer has no celebrity connections—prints anywhere from two thousand to ten thousand copies. The novel is then marketed through traditional means. Copies are sent to reviewers. Advertisements are placed in trade journals like *Publishers Weekly* and large-circulation magazines like the *New Yorker* and the *Atlantic*. Publishers may also arrange readings and book-signing tours. Unfortunately, the author and her novel will most likely soon be forgotten, though that is not always the case.

Despite decades of decreasing sales, literary novels retain some profitability. Granted, literary authors do not post the same numbers as blockbuster authors like Tom Clancy, John Grisham, Mary Higgins Clark, and Sue Grafton. However, proven names such as John Updike, Anne Tyler, Alice Hoffman, Wally Lamb, and Joyce Carol Oates manage to win the praises of highbrow reviewers while also selling respectable numbers of books. Moreover, literary novels can create a buzz and increase sales by

winning prizes like the Pulitzer and the National Book Award. If they are made into movies—even if the movies themselves are not spectacular successes—these novels can find themselves in the front windows of bookstores next to much less accomplished work. Even though Jonathan Demme’s movie was a commercial disaster, its prerelease hype greatly increased sales of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. And Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* would not have entered the national conversation the way it briefly did if not for the film starring Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep, and Julianne Moore.

Therefore, while there are risks in publishing a literary novel, there are also potentially large rewards. The same cannot be said for collections of short stories, even books of related short stories, which have the texture of a novel. Volumes of poetry—with the rare exception of collections by celebrities like Jimmy Stewart, Jimmy Carter, and Jewel—do not make so much as a blip on the radar screens of most major publishers. As Pulitzer Prize winning poet Henry Taylor once said when asked about his relationship with his agent: “Poets don’t have agents. There’s not enough money in poetry.”

So what are poets and short story writers—and literary-minded publishers—to do? In the last twenty years, the answer has been to hold contests. Ideally, a contest to publish, say, a collection of short stories works as follows. First, an announcement is made in magazines that writers read. Normally, a prestigious writer is named as judge of the contest. If the advertising is effective, at minimum several hundred authors enter their manuscripts at \$20 to \$25 per entry. The contest fees of \$4,000 or (sometimes considerably) more allow publishers to finance publication of the book. If there is an especially large surfeit of contest fees, publishers might use the money to publish a second book, conduct an aggressive marketing campaign, or simply pay themselves a stipend for the hard work they have done.

Contests also offer advantages from an author’s perspective. Because writers have paid a fee to the publisher, they can expect to receive a closer reading than they would from an editorial assistant in a large publishing house who has little incentive to spend time with the work of an unproven author. Writers know, at the very least, that their work *will* be read, rather than sit unnoticed in a “slush pile.” And if a writer is lucky and talented enough to overcome the long odds and win the contest (after all, winning a short story contest is easier than winning the lottery), she can be assured of some renown. Everyone who has entered the contest will know her

name; some of those contestants will want to read the winning book. The publisher is likely to announce the winner in trade publications and to mention the contest in all advertising. The final judge will write a flattering foreword and may be able to introduce the winner to other influential people.

With so much going for them, no wonder contests are so popular. And yet their reality is sometimes quite different from their outward appearance. A contest, as its etymology implies, promotes competition. Writers who submit frequently to contests may come to see other writers as rivals rather than as friends. In a contest, the perception exists (despite publishers' "Dear Contestant" letters) that there are not many excellent writers, but one winner in a sea of losers. Furthermore, judges in large contests normally read only the finalists; all other manuscripts are screened by editorial assistants, whose tastes and training will necessarily be different from the judge's. And though contests are supposed to be judged "blindly," judges may well be tipped off that a friend or student has entered the contest. In fact, according to editor George Bradley, in its early years, the judges of the Yale Series of Younger Poets—one of the most prestigious—sometimes openly asked their protégés to send in manuscripts.

While the back-scratching and logrolling that go on in poetry book contests was an open secret, many writers refused to discuss the issue publicly, fearing that their own chances of winning—however slim—would be destroyed if they became whistleblowers. However, in April 2004 the prestige and legitimacy of these contests received a serious blow with the creation of foetry.com. The Web site was created by Alan Cordle, a Portland, Oregon, librarian whose wife, he believed, had repeatedly and unfairly lost book contests to people who were unconscionably close to the judges. Cordle charges that the "celebrity poets" who generally have the final say on which manuscript wins a contest "routinely award prizes to their students, friends and lovers." He argues that this is "cheating. It's criminal. If this was anything other than poetry, the Department of Justice would be involved" (Tizon 2005, A1). To support his contentions, foetry.com lists the winners and their ties to the judges and sponsors of what are generally considered the most prestigious contests. Though not all winners have close connections to their contests, it clearly doesn't hurt to know the judge or to have attended a university that publishes books through competitions.

While foetry.com had been generating a great deal of controversy in literary circles, it reached the wider world when the *Los Angeles Times* made

it a front-page story in June of 2005. Reporter Alex Tizon remarked, “In today’s literary climate, winning a major contest is one of the only sure tickets to continuing life as a poet” (A1). Though Tizon is obviously exaggerating—many fine creative writers continue their careers without ever winning a major literary prize—it is certainly true that without a prize it is difficult to land a tenure-track job in a college or university (see “Teaching Jobs”). And the controversy flared so brightly in large measure because poetry is so aggressive in its condemnation of book competitions. Its mission statement calls for “Exposing the fraudulent ‘contests.’ Tracking the sycophants. Naming the names.” At the bottom of a list of contest winners is the inflammatory rhetorical question: “Is your professor’s poetry career built on academic integrity?” Indeed, Cordle encourages those who have entered contests and lost to those who have suspiciously close ties to the publisher to take every remedy from asking for a refund to filing a fraud complaint with the state’s attorney general.

Not surprisingly, many of those on the winning and judging side of the contests took issue with Cordle’s claims. Probably the most persuasive argument against Cordle is that the poetry world is so small—the number of truly accomplished poets is probably in the hundreds or thousands, rather than the hundreds of thousands—it is inevitable that judges will know, or know of, the winning contestants. Yet for every defender of poetry publishing’s status quo, there are likely many more who would agree with Neal Bowers: “This confirms what anyone involved in poetry over the past 30 years has known for a long, long time. . . . The world of poetry is all about hustle and connection” (Tizon 2005, A33).

Whatever the morality of contests, every issue of *Poets and Writers Magazine* and the *Writer’s Chronicle* is chock full of them. Poetry chapbooks (volumes of less than thirty-two pages) are the clear favorite of publishers (see “Chapbooks”); however, contests also tend to target authors who have not yet published a full-length book. Some contests, like Converse College’s Julia Peterkin Award, offer writers of a winning manuscript cash prizes and the opportunity for a public reading.

Perhaps the most profitable variation on this theme is the contest to select a prize story or poem for a literary journal. While these contests normally charge only half the fee of a book contest, they offer far less than half the exposure for a winner. Advantages for the editors are much more obvious. Even if the top two stories or three to five poems are all published in the magazine, the editors need to devote only a small percentage of the total pages of their journal to the winners. Yet contest fees may provide

enough money to finance publication of the entire issue. As a consolation prize, contestants typically receive a year's subscription to the journal, another clever editorial tactic that boosts exposure of the magazine.

If the authors of this book sound skeptical of contests, it's not because we haven't been on the winning end. Both of us have won contests and been pleased when friends and strangers have recognized our accomplishment. We simply yearn, unrealistically perhaps, for a publication climate that is more communal than individualistic, that acknowledges shared achievement as fully as personal triumph. However, as long as writers continue to hunger for fame, and as long as editors and publishers (q.v.) at cash-strapped university presses, nonprofit presses, and small presses desperately require funds to produce their work, contests are likely to remain a staple of the literary landscape.