

CONTRIBUTOR'S COPY

The contributor's copy is the coin of the realm in the kingdom of the small and literary press. In exchange for the right to publish an author's work, the editors of a vast majority of literary magazines "pay" the author with one or more complimentary copies of the magazine. While the standard payment is one to three copies, some publishers give their contributors up to ten or twenty copies and also provide offprints of the author's piece. (Those journals that aren't even willing to ante up a single contributor's copy—even if they have legitimate financial reasons for not doing so—are generally shunned by writers with established reputations.) To many new writers, this situation is a source of grave wonder. They had assumed that when they were finally published the financial reward would be commensurate with their happiness at seeing their name in print. Alas, that is not the case, and the disappointment they feel is likely to be compounded by friends' and relatives' astonishment at the paltry compensation literature receives.

Yet, in a sense, this arrangement is beneficial to all parties. Writers have the pleasure of seeing their names in print, and they may attract the notice of more influential editors and publishers (q.v). Moreover, the contributor's copy provides a writer with a window on the literary scene, helping him to assess the current market for his work. The minimal payment

may even seem ironically appropriate. After all, to an author who has invested a great deal of time, energy, and imagination in a piece of writing, almost any financial recompense is likely to seem inadequate. The contributor's copy is, therefore, merely a fitting symbol of the meager value the larger world places on serious art.

For publishers, the contributor's copy is a godsend. It allows them to indulge in the pleasure and prestige of running a magazine without having to worry about paying to fill their pages. The major investments for editors and publishers of print magazines are printing and mailing; for editors of e-zines, the only expenditure is time (see "Electronic Literature"). Still, one might ask why someone would go to *any* trouble at all to produce a magazine when there is no monetary reward. One answer may be that many editors are also writers themselves, and their journals allow them to engage in the mutual (if often unspoken) back-scratching—you publish mine and I'll publish yours—that has become such a prominent feature of contemporary literary publishing.

Though contributor's copies quickly come to seem inevitable to most literary writers, an important question does arise: How much is literature of this sort actually worth? While both authors and publishers might argue that, in a spiritual sense, the answer is "a great deal," viewed from a financial perspective one's response has to be "obviously not much." Granted, magazines whose sole payment is in contributor's copies can usually claim to be more serious than their commercial brethren. Because their modest outlays are often covered in part or in full by universities or government funding agencies, they can focus on publishing work that will be well received by the literary cognoscenti rather than by the general public. Nevertheless, authors who are not affiliated with institutions of higher learning and must earn their living through writing clearly cannot afford to subsist on a diet of contributor's copies, and charges that literary magazines have become effete, out of touch, and self-important are not without merit.