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LITERARY MAGAZINES IN UNLIKELY SETTINGS

*Danielle Ofri**

A single oak tree in an already verdant forest may have little impact, despite its beauty and grace. But place that same oak tree on a bare urban street and suddenly one has single-handedly created an oasis. Setting can be as important as intrinsic quality when it comes to affecting the greater environment.

English departments and, more recently, creative writing programs, historically have been the loci for literary creativity. These institutions have the blessing, or maybe the curse, of a self-selected, interested audience. It is a blessing because there is no need to explain the need for, or the beauty of, literature for literature's sake. But it can be a curse because that audience is of a relatively fixed size, and any new literary magazine is facing the dilemma of selling itself to an audience which already subscribes to other literary magazines. It is almost a zero-sum game, since most readers will only subscribe to two or three magazines. A new subscription to the hot new literary magazine usually means an expired subscription for another.

In the education setting, therefore, it is the English departments that are the verdant forests of literature, and the drier fields of law, medicine, and business that are the bare urban streets. But students and faculty in these areas are still players in the soupy, exhilarating world of human interactions. They are just as hungry for the succor and the complexity that literature offers, but often they don't know it.

In this paper I offer the experience of starting a literary journal in one particular, unlikely setting: a public hospital and medical school. Bellevue Hospital is the oldest public hospital in the country, and perhaps the most legendary. Since 1734, Bellevue has been the signature municipal hospital in New York City. New York University School of Medicine was established in 1841, and within six years began clinical instruction at Bellevue. Today Bellevue is the principal teaching hospital of NYU, so for medical students,

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interns, and residents, Bellevue is the core of their medical education.

There has been a trend toward incorporating the humanities into medical education, but this is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is only in the last decade that such programs have gained legitimacy alongside the more “critical” areas of medical training, such as anatomy, pathology, and pharmacology. Despite the relative sterility of medical education, however, there has always been a strand of the humanities that refused to die. By 1897, Sir William Osler—the patron saint of medical education—was lamenting that “by the neglect of the study of the humanities, which has been far too general, the profession loses a very precious quality.”¹ At NYU, the importance of literature in medicine was personified by Dr. Lewis Thomas. His classic books—*Lives of a Cell*² and *The Medusa and the Snail*,³ among many—illustrate how an understanding of humanities and the written word could help elucidate the thoughtfulness and subtleties intrinsic to medicine. While Thomas held many posts during his tenure at NYU from 1954-1969, it was his role as Chairman of the Department of Medicine at Bellevue Hospital that was most meaningful for those of us who founded the *Bellevue Literary Review* a half century later.

The department of medicine trains students and house staff in the science of internal medicine, which is considered the backbone of medical practice. It is here that students acquire a lion’s share of their clinical experience, learning how to coax medical histories from their patients. It is this elicitation of the patient’s history—the patient’s story—that makes narrative such a key element in medicine.

When I joined the faculty of the Department of Medicine at NYU, I wanted to bring my personal literary interests into my daily academic life. My medical career was based at Bellevue Hospital, practicing medicine and teaching in both the inpatient and outpatient settings. Part of my job was to teach the students to write the standard “history and physical” (H&P) about each patient. The medical student’s mastery of the traditional case presentation is

¹ WILLIAM OSLER, *British Medicine in Greater Britain*, in *AEQUANIMITAS*, WITH OTHER ADDRESSES TO MEDICAL STUDENTS, NURSES AND PRACTITIONERS OF MEDICINE 161, 168 (3d ed., Blakiston’s Son 1932) (1897).

² LEWIS THOMAS, *THE LIVES OF A CELL: NOTES OF A BIOLOGY WATCHER* (Penguin Books 1978) (1974).

³ LEWIS THOMAS, *THE MEDUSA AND THE SNAIL: MORE NOTES OF A BIOLOGY WATCHER* (Penguin Books 1995) (1979).

somewhat akin to the law student's learning of how to brief a case in a legal methods course.

The H&P, while efficient in parlaying some aspects of a patient's medical condition, is notoriously sterile in its language, and routinely distills out the nuanced distinctiveness of the patient's voice. Unfortunately, in parallel, it also serves to drain the colorful individualism from the students' voices, as they strive to absorb the argot of medicine, speaking only in acronyms, mnemonics, and hospital slang. I began asking the students to put aside their carefully memorized H&P's and to write at least one case report in a narrative style, to shun the medical checklist and simply tell the patient's story.

The students initially resisted anything that wasn't going to be "on the test," but gradually warmed to the idea, as they found that the process gave them a chance to meditate on the individuality of that patient. They saw that each patient had a very unique story to tell, and that one pneumonia couldn't possibly be like any other pneumonia, because each occurred in a distinctive human setting.

When Martin J. Blaser, M.D., assumed the chairmanship of the Department of Medicine at NYU in 2000, the echoes of Lewis Thomas were still there. Blaser sought to highlight the role of narrative in medicine to both stimulate critical thinking skills for the students and also to improve patient care.

To promote the burgeoning literary interests in the department, as well as to capture the growing public interest in the humanistic side of medicine, Blaser and I founded the *Bellevue Literary Review*. Bellevue Hospital, as the oldest public hospital in the country, has been witness to over two and a half centuries of human drama. It seemed logical that a journal of prose and poetry touching upon relationships to the human body, illness, health, and healing, should emanate from its corridors. Indeed, it was hoped that it could be a journal of humanity and human experience.

One advantage to being part of the verdant forest of literary magazines in English departments is having a host of experienced editors, writers, and publishers within arms' reach. Being a lone oak of a literary magazine in a medical setting means creating everything from scratch, from organizing an editorial board, to negotiating printing and distribution contracts, to selecting font size, paper weight, and page count. The easiest part of creating the *Bellevue Literary Review* was engaging author interest. Three small ads in writing magazines calling for submissions quickly led to 1000

manuscripts in our mailbox. Clearly there was widespread interest in expressing thoughts about health and healing.

The editorial board of the *Bellevue Literary Review* was completed with Jerome Lowenstein, M.D., as nonfiction editor, Ronna Wineberg, J.D., as fiction editor, Donna Baier Stein and Roxanna Font as poetry editors, and Stacy Bodziak as managing editor.

The idea of a literary magazine in a medical center was intriguing to the faculty, and we easily recruited volunteers to help read and vet manuscripts. Step-by-step, a production process evolved, as we waded from familiar medical turf into these unknown literary waters.

To further broaden the reach of the *Bellevue Literary Review*, we initiated a public reading series to coincide with each issue. Twice yearly, we hold a poetry/prose reading at Bellevue Hospital, featuring several authors from the current issue. These readings are open to the public and regularly attract one-hundred audience members to gather for poetry at a hospital better known in popular culture for its psychiatric inhabitants.

Being a lone literary oak on a bare urban street has also turned out to have advantages. Because of its unusual setting, the *Bellevue Literary Review* has attracted media interest that might not be showered on a literary magazine of equal merit that happened to live in the dense and verdant English department forest. Attention from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *National Public Radio*, as well as other medical and literary venues, helped bring the *Bellevue Literary Review* to the public eye.

The *Bellevue Literary Review* is now entering its fifth year of publication. Submissions and subscriptions continue to increase. It is now no longer a neophyte and now no longer a lone oak. Several other medical schools have begun literary magazines, though most are on a smaller, more local scale. One law school, Duke University, is publishing an actual literary journal, entitled *Alibi*.⁴ CUNY School of Law maintains the online Writer's Forum, where faculty and students can contribute creative writing.⁵ Poetry, fiction, and essay rub up against legal prose, suggesting that, like human beings, all manner of literature can co-exist.

It would seem that lawyers, like doctors, would be intrinsically interested in narrative and story (and perhaps even more desper-

⁴ See Alibi Homepage, <http://www.law.duke.edu/student/act/alibi/currenthome.html> (last visited Nov. 6, 2005).

⁵ See Writer's Forum, <http://www.law.cuny.edu/wc/everyone/forum/index.html> (last visited Nov. 6, 2005).

ate to escape the dreary prose of their daily work). Law cuts into people's lives, dissecting open vulnerabilities that are both frightening and awe-inspiring. Day after day, such hard-driving intimacy takes its toll on the lawyer. Humanities and literature offer a way to put this in perspective, as well as to reflect upon the burdens that may pile up within the lawyer herself.

The *Bellevue Literary Review* has had the honor to publish the poetry and prose of Professor Ruthann Robson, as well as to have her participate in a panel discussion of humanities and medicine. *Studies in the Subjunctive*,⁶ in the Spring 2003 issue of the *Bellevue Literary Review*, is a brilliant and highly unusual essay. It is part literary criticism, part personal memoir, part political commentary, part illness narrative, part feminist exploration. Its premise is the study of the subjunctive tense, one that exists tenuously in the English language, the subject of seemingly hair-splitting grammatical errors and challenges for those who study foreign languages in which the subjunctive resides far more prominently.

The subjunctive is more of a mood than a tense, indicating what might be, what may have been, what could be. Robson's starting point is poet Anne Sexton's⁷ untimely suicide. Robson tries to envision what might have been if Sexton could have been helped or healed. She traces her own growing understanding of Sexton's poetry into an examination of a life not fully lived (or at least significantly shorter than it should have been). Within that, she interweaves the grammatical isolation of the subjunctive itself, how its conveyance of uncertainty makes its use so uncertain. And then into this literary mix she adds the flecks of an uncertain and unpredictable life:

Where you were that morning; in the CT machine at the cancer center; stopping for a bagel, cream cheese, no butter please; sleeping late with a former lover, sweaty with regrets that will soon dry small; on the plane you almost didn't make, feeling lucky to be going from Boston to L.A. for an interview; finishing the carpeting job in Queens before heading to the project

⁶ Ruthann Robson, *Studies in the Subjunctive*, BELLEVUE LITERARY R., Spring 2003, at 114 [hereinafter Robson, *Subjunctive*].

⁷ Anne Gray Harvey Sexton, a poet and playwright from Massachusetts, is known both for her writing and for her depressive bouts. "She used her knowledge of the human condition – often painful, but sometimes joyous – to create poems readers could share. Her incisive metaphors, the unexpected rhythms of her verse, and her ability to grasp a range of meaning in precise words have secured Sexton's good reputation." Sexton asphyxiated herself in 1974, at the age of 45. Linda Wagner-Martin, *Anne Sexton's Life*, AMERICAN NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY ONLINE, Feb. 2000, <http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-01490.html>.

downtown; at the Pentagon cookie shop, selling the last macadamia and chocolate chip; in the student lounge, looking up from the television set to see the same smoke, the same absence; at the veterinarian's office, picking up the dog's ashes; on the ledge, holding his hand, considering a choiceless choice; in the cockpit, between the sky and the ocean, aiming for the skyscraper's promise; on Chambers Street, using a briefcase as a shield; cradled in the stairwell, counting the flights, coughing and crying, dialing the cell phone, battery dead; in a place that will never be forgotten, never remembered, in heaven, in hell, in shock, in pieces, in tears, in a rage, incomprehensible, inarticulate.⁸

For Robson, the subjunctive is the precise tense to contemplate her cancer that was incurable and then curable, her mother's depression and desperation, the suicide of a close friend, the litany of authors with their tragically "romantic" suicides, the irrationality of terrorism. If it were to be different, Robson asks, tickling the subjunctive around her finger, *could* it all have been different?

In the spring of 2004, the *Bellevue Literary Review* published Robson's poem *Perspective*.⁹ The marvelously compact imagery of this poem probes the fears and acceptances of mortality:

the year we were both dying, the plumber
& i, we continued working
certainly, we needed the money
(hopeless medical procedures are the most expensive)
but we also wanted to belong to the world
and believe that things were fixable¹⁰

The poem combines both the mundane and the lofty, gently probing how death highlights the incongruities of life:

oh Larry, i asked, is this really very serious?
sweetheart, he said, his face blank as the ceiling
which terminated his gaze, you of all people
should know this: it's only plumbing¹¹

After a section about the expectations and the cravings of the dying, and the poignant re-examination of parts of her life, Robson ends with:

i can offer no satisfactions, i have nothing
my darling, there are only desires

⁸ Robson, *Subjunctive*, *supra* note 6, at 116-17.

⁹ Ruthann Robson, *Perspective*, *BELLEVUE LITERARY R.*, Spring 2004, at 84.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

those exquisite ropes that lash us
to this astonishing raft of life.¹²

It is on this astonishing raft of life that we tumble along. The confusing turns and unexpected changes of tack leave us panting. Literature can offer a chance to breathe deeply and slowly, to experience resonance and reflection. The very act of writing or reading literature may lash together the disparate planks that constitute our life: the planks of work, home, love, body, and spirit. It is no surprise, then, that literary journals sprout in the most hectic of environments, from the courtroom to the operating room to our own room. It is, perhaps, where they are needed the most.

¹² *Id.* at 85.

