Big Little Magazines

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Review of:

Joe Hagan. *Sticky Fingers: The Life and Times of Jann Wenner and Rolling Stone Magazine* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 547 pp

Amy Hungerford. *Making Literature Now* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), xii + 199 pp

Ian Morris and Joanne Diaz, eds. *The Little Magazine in Contemporary America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), xx + 236 pp

In the spring of 1967, Beatlemania and the summer of love were in full flower. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was released in the U.K. on May 26th and in the U.S. on June 2nd. It was also at this time that a novella by Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot* 49, first released the previous spring (and itself containing several allusions to The Beatles and their songs), was coming to signal—through multiple re-printings and a growing readership—a new direction for contemporary literature in America. Amidst this flourishing counter-culture of psychedelia and postmodernism, Jann Wenner had an idea for a new magazine.

So he drove to the home of the legendary Bay-area, music critic Ralph Gleason on Ashby Avenue in Berkeley, California, and pitched it to him. "How about a magazine?" asked Wenner. "Like the *Melody Maker* and the *Musical Express*, but an American one that would be different and better and would cover not just the records and the music but would cover the whole culture" (Hagan 78). Gleason not only agreed, but also put up $1,500 for it and committed to write a column for the magazine entitled "Perspectives" (90). *Rolling Stone* incorporated in the state of California in October of 1967, and the first issue rolled off the presses on the 18th of the same month (94). Fifty years later it is still going strong.

In at least one sense, the origins of *Rolling Stone* magazine are not very unique: ambitious, idealistic person has a vision to found a journal that will fill a gap in the existing media and goes about pursuing it. In another sense though, at least from the perspective of the world of "little magazines," its level of success and impact is almost unparalleled. While the vast majority of similar efforts either never get off the ground or go on for a few years and then run out of steam, of those that do survive, fewer still thrive, and only a handful such as *Rolling Stone* turn into anything like a critical juggernaut and media empire.

Born in 1946, Wenner was only 21 years old when he founded the little magazine that arguably not only elevated rock criticism into a "serious" genre, but maybe also "made" what we have come to consider "classic rock music." From the voice of the counter-cultural world of San Francisco in the late sixties to the center of American politics in the 1970s and the founding of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio in the 1980s, Wenner took a counter-cultural little magazine to the pantheon of American culture and publishing. In *Sticky Fingers: The Life and Times of Jann Wenner and* Rolling Stone *Magazine*, Joe Hagan magisterially charts the birth and ascent of this little magazine, and its legendarily ambitious editor and publisher. Photographer Annie Leibovitz, film director Cameron Crowe, and journalist Hunter S. Thompson among

many other writers, critics, and editors built their careers on the foundation of *Rolling Stone*. Its impact on American music, culture, and politics is ubiquitous, and clearly warrants this long and meticulously researched study.

For a fan of classic rock music, especially The Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the story of *Rolling Stone* magazine and its role in shaping this musical genre is an eye-opening one. Hagan covers in great detail the economics, politics, and aesthetics of this little magazine. But as the founder and continuing editor of a journal myself (*symplokē*), and now also the publisher and editor of another (*American Book Review*), the story of *Rolling Stone* magazine is even more interesting, particularly regarding the moral dilemmas Wenner faced as editor and publisher along the way.

Little magazines are instrumental in shaping literary and cultural values and tastes. However, in spite of growing interest in the study of book and publishing history and culture, rarely have we had the opportunity to read about the genesis and evolution of a little magazine in the kind of historical detail allotted to it in Hagan's volume. Such detail is usually relegated to individual book publishers and presses—not little magazines and their editors.

Wenner's ruthlessness as an editor and publisher, as portrayed in Hagan's book, is a path that few would be willing to take, let alone maintain for so many years. The story of his interview with John Lennon encapsulates his professional temperament in a nutshell. Using his personal friendship with Lennon (who was also on the first cover of the magazine) to secure a long interview after the breakup of The Beatles, Wenner promised him that he would only publish part of it in the magazine—and never publish the rest. Later, when Wenner saw an opportunity to profit from the publication of the interview in its entirety, he took it— but without Lennon's consent and over his repeated objections. Lennon was furious and never spoke to his "friend" again.

While this happened relatively early in the magazine's history, the pattern of deception for professional gain continued over the course of Wenner's career. For example, when he asked Paul McCartney in the late 1980s to give the induction speech for Lennon at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, McCartney said he would only do so if Wenner would see that he was himself inducted the following year. Wenner promised him this and McCartney delivered the speech, but it would take three years before he was inducted—and McCartney, justifiably, felt he had been deceived.

Much of the book also details the biases underlying the stories and music reviews done in the magazine—not to mention how and why individuals came to grace its "celebrated" cover. For those like myself, who have used and enjoyed the *Rolling Stone Record Guides* since the early 1980s without much thought about their biases, Hagan's book will decisively end that innocence: the illusion (if there ever was any) of their critical objectivity will be long gone after reading this book. *Sticky Fingers* openly documents the music and musicians favored by this little magazine—and the reasons underlying the favor. My favorite example of journalistic bias (and "logrolling") in the magazine is heavy rock bands like Led Zeppelin being offered what came to be known

as the Rolling Stone "package deal" (294): in exchange for unlimited backstage access by young rock critic Cameron Crowe they would get positive press in the magazine—otherwise the magazine would more than likely either ignore or pan them.

Perhaps it is not fair to compare the stories of the twenty or so little magazines represented in Ian Morris and Joanne Diaz's edited volume, *The Little Magazine in Contemporary America* to Hagan's account of Wenner's now not-so-little-magazine, especially if one subscribes to the neoliberal mantra, "the market is all." Sales of Rolling Stone magazine dwarf the sales figures of all of the magazines discussed in Morris and Diaz's volume.

But nevertheless, in many ways, the story of Wenner's founding of a little magazine dedicated to the counter-cultural music and culture of the late 1960s is cut from the same cloth as the stories and memories recounted by the editors and publishers in Morris and Diaz's volume. Small budgets, limited distribution, and topics of appeal to only a select audience are the common story of little magazines in America—and the essays in Morris and Diaz's volume deliver them on cue.

The major difference then between Rolling Stone and the magazines discussed in Morris and Diaz is that the former is the rare example of a little magazine that hit it big. Still, stories about the genesis and evolution of the little magazines that remained relatively little through the courses of their respective histories are important to share because literary and cultural impact is not only determined by sales figures, but also things like literary innovation and cultural diversity—things that little magazines often deliver in spades even if they don't yield huge sales figures.

Divided into five parts dedicated to roughly four little magazines each, this book is well organized. Part 1, "The Editor as Visionary," contains brief publisher statements about BOMB, the *Ontario Review, McSweeney's*, and *n+1*. For example, Morris and Diaz adapt a couple of pages from Dave Eggers' introduction to *The Best of McSweeney's* that he wrote on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the magazine in 2013. "Art is made by anarchists and sorted by bureaucrats," writes Eggers (36). Arguing against the "bureaucratic" notion that *McSweeney's* has a "house style," Eggers points out that the magazine has consistently balanced "experimental" writing "with more traditional storytelling" (36). "Issue 3, for example," says Eggers, "included a story by David Foster Wallace that we ran on the journal's spine, but also featured a 25,000-word essay about Gary Greenberg's correspondence with Ted Kaczynski" (36). "This balance," concludes Eggers, "has held true ever since" (36).

What is interesting here is that Egger's evidence against a "house style" for *McSweeney's*—publication of an "experimental" work by Wallace and Greenberg's correspondence with the "Unabomber"—sounds a lot like the normal contents of *Rolling Stone* which regularly featured "experimental" writing such as the "gonzo" journalism of Thompson alongside accounts of American music, literature, film, politics, and culture. For example, Jason Diamond recently published an article in the magazine with the subhead "Ted Kaczynski was a madman who killed and maimed innocent people—but did some of his worries come true?" ("Flashback: Unabomber Publishes his 'Mani-

festo,'" 17 August 2017). And the connections between Rolling Stone and Wallace are many, including Wallace's 1996 interview with Rolling Stone reporter David Lipsky, which became the basis for the film, *The End of the Tour* (2015, dir. James Ponsoldt). Though the interview was never published, Lipsky wrote "The Lost Years & Last Days of David Foster Wallace" for the magazine after the writer's death, which won him the National Magazine Award in 2009.

Comparing *McSweeney's* to *Rolling Stone* shows that the line between the content of a "little magazine" and a "magazine" (or even a "big magazine") is a blurry one, perhaps distinguishable only by the relative success (or failure) of the magazine in terms of sales, longevity, readership, and cultural impact. A case can be made that in these terms, while both of these magazines started out "little," today there is nothing diminutive about either of them (while Hagan establishes this for *Rolling Stone*, Amy Hungerford arguably does the same for *McSweeney's*, as I discuss below).

In part, the "bigness" of these two little magazines can be attributed to the "vision" and drive of their founding editors. "What a fuckin' editor," says Hunter S. Thompson of Wenner. "He's crazy, but he's got a dream" (Hagan, back cover). The same might be said of Eggers, but it is hard to determine this from the 2 pages (or technically 2 1/3 pages) allotted to this "visionary" editor in Morris and Diaz's collection, especially given that his chapter is by far the shortest in a volume where the majority of the entries are 10 or more pages in length with the longest by Bruce Andrews (co-founder of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*) weighing in at 18. With all due respect to Andrews, who has a lot of interesting things to say about his journal, it might have been better—given the importance of *McSweeney's* to contemporary literature—to split the combined pagination more evenly.

Also, in spite of only the first part of Morris and Diaz's volume being expressly dedicated to "visionary" editors, other selections in the volume provide plenty of material to make a case for their inclusion in this section too (a compliment to the journal editors in the volume, rather than a knock on the editing of Morris and Diaz).

In succession the parts are entitled, "Politics, Culture, and the Little Magazine" (featuring comments on *Callaloo, Women's Review of Books, Bitch*, and *Asian American Literary Review*), "Innovation and Experimentation: The Literary Avant-Garde" (*Exquisite Corpse, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Fence*, and *DIAGRAM*), "The University Magazine" (*Creative Nonfiction, Southern Review, Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *New England Review*), and "Today's Magazines and the Future" (*At Length, Memorious*, and *Poetry*). All in all, the range of little magazines covered is diverse and wide enough even if some of the choices and editorial statements feel less inspired than others. Nonetheless, the former (viz., provide a range of voices) is what Morris and Diaz mainly aim to achieve with this volume, not so much the latter (viz., provide inspiring editorial statements). Giving these little magazines a voice and allowing their editors and publishers to tell their respective stories is a positive contribution to scholarship on print culture in contemporary America, and reason enough for the volume.

What is missing though is the excitement and energy of fresh and inquisitive eyes critically looking at these publications from outside of their operation—as opposed to only views from the inside. I'm not saying that a journal founder or editor or publisher cannot achieve some critical distance on their journal, but the degree to which this is possible is limited. Wenner's own recounting of the publication history of the complete John Lennon interview would probably be much different to Hagan's. And journal editors are understandably less inclined to report on their "package deals" and "logrollings" than third parties. Fessing up to bias and favoritism is not something that comes easy to editors who partake in it—so reporting on it is better left to third parties, if they can find evidence of it.

When I took over editing and publishing *American Book Review* thirteen years ago, I knew very little about its origin and even less about its day-to-day operation. I was an occasional reviewer for the publication, now to assume the role of sole publisher and editor. Over the years, I've spoken to many individuals about its origins and have received conflicting accounts of not only the story but also its founders. To this day, the origination story of *American Book Review* has more in common with *Rashomon* than the ones told by the journal editors in Morris and Diaz.

But more importantly, I quickly came to see how bias and favoritism operated in a little magazine from the inside: authors started to approach me to not just run reviews of their books, but to run *positive* ones. Why? Because this is what they had come to expect from *American Book Review*. And the day a long-time contributing editor of the journal resigned because I ran a slightly negative review of his dear friend's book was the day that I came to truly understand some of the historical stakes and terms of this little magazine—and why they needed to end.

As Hagan's story of *Rolling Stone* makes abundantly clear, bias and favoritism can come to be the modus operandi of a little magazine (even after it gets big): systematically promote the work of your friends and favorites, and deliberately and consistently dump on or disregard the work of your enemies or things you don't like. To think that literary criticism cannot function similarly to music criticism in this regard is to be naïve as to how many little magazines operate. These are not the little-magazine stories shared in Morris and Diaz: to be fair, such stories are not commonly available outside of the circles of individuals who run these magazines.

What is remarkable about Hagan's book is the level of detail he has put together regarding a single magazine—and its editor and publisher. But Hagan, who is a professional exposé-writer (of Hillary Clinton, Karl Rove, the Bush family, Henry Kissinger, Dan Rather, Goldman Sachs, *The New York Times*, and Twitter, among others), is in some ways the ultimate journalistic outsider on this subject in the same way that the journal editors themselves in the Morris and Diaz volume are the ultimate insiders. What happens though if we turn a literary critic with historicist inclinations onto a subject like little magazines? What different kinds of insight might she generate?

Amy Hungerford's *Making Literature Now* in fact covers some of the same ground as the Morris and Diaz volume, with the first two chapters devoted to *McSweeney*'s

literary quarterly and press. Given that "533 different writers appeared in the first 31 issues...—and thousands of others read their work, mapping the social geography of *McSweeney's* distribution around the world" (2)—it is an especially rich little magazine and press from which to gain a sense of "contemporary" American publishing (even though Hungerford prefers "post-1945" or "20th century" to describe the field of the "contemporary") (143). But unlike Hagan and probably all of the contributors to the Morris and Diaz volume (though it is not completely clear from their contributions), Hungerford sees the "social" world and "making" of contemporary literature in a theoretically unique and self-consciously "daunting" way.

Drawing upon the sociology of Bruno Latour, Hungerford believes that

> social connections only deserve the name when they are acted upon, that the social only exists at all when its networks are activated, and what's more, the social actors come in both human and nonhuman forms. Our connections to other people only constitute social organization when we, or nonhuman actors like books, apps, or delivery truck routes, act to change or shape the arrangements in which we live—be they material, cultural, environmental, geographic, psychic, intellectual. (4)

She acknowledges though that this method of inquiry can be "daunting and tedious and threaten to devolve into what one colleague called 'a heap of facts': being *there* to see the conversations that make things happen in whatever field of endeavor we want to understand; raking the archives not for recollection or record but for the actual trace of a social act as it unfolded, and not just one social act but an infinite series of them; cramming them, by force of method, into the book one writes" (4). Consequently, application of Latour's method, termed "Actor-Network-Theory" (or simply, "ANT"), yields for Hungerford a much finer-grained response to questions regarding the making of a little magazine and literature. Simple statements about its production as found in Morris and Diaz are rejected as methodologically unsound when considered outside of the wider network of actors involved in the making of the little magazine. And though Hagan uses extensive interviews and archival research to produce an account of the making of *Rolling Stone*, his book too falls short of the methodological bar set by ANT.

Viewing *McSweeney's* from the point of view of social networks and regarding nonhuman actors such as the technologies of publication (e.g. Aldus Pagemaker as it became Adobe PageMaker) and apps (e.g. the subscription app created for *McSweeney's* by Russell Quinn) yields a much different account of the little magazine than simple pronouncements about it from its editor—even celebrity ones such as Eggers. This allows Hungerford to treat "the subscription" and "the iphone" as "actors" in the story of the rise of *McSweeney's* on the same par as its editors, authors, and readers. It also allows her to widen the social network around this little magazine to include not only its celebrity authors such as Eggers, David Foster Wallace and Rick Moody, but also its "subsistence writers" and "volunteer, part-time literati" (6).

But Hungerford is also emphatic that this method *should not* be applied to just any little magazine or writer. Rather, it should be applied to celebrity little magazines and writers, rather than failed ones. Why? Because stories about failed or briefly-known little magazines and writers

> lack the intrinsic attraction of accounts that focus on the charismatic, the successful, and the well known. Insofar as the failed or only briefly visible writers vastly outnumber the successful ones, and insofar as it doesn't take much in the way of disaster to stop most of us from writing our novel, their stories may lack both interest and individuality; the banality of failure doesn't make for good reading. (14)

To be honest, neither do short accounts of little (and relatively unknown) magazines—particularly when placed beside accounts of celebrated ones—but I digress. The argument as to the value ("good" or "bad") of reading about "failure" versus "success" is not nearly as well developed as her argument about "close" versus "surface" reading. Still, it would be an interesting one to develop at some point.

Hungerford makes a strong case in *Making Literature Now* both against traditional "close-reading," and in favor of what might be called "surface reading." The argument made at different points throughout the book against close-reading—controversial because of the affinity many scholars and critics have for it—amounts to the fact that close-reading does not provide us with much insight into the network in which little magazines or literature function: that is, Hungerford says, drawing on Franco Moretti, "traditional closed reading is blind to the fabric." For that matter, even if we advocated for close reading, to perform it on just the "actual literary production of a single year of the 19th century would take many lifetimes" states Hungerford, let alone the 55,000 novels that were published in 2010 alone (14).

Her point about limited close-reading time comes up most notoriously in the final chapter of the book, "On Not Reading DFW." After she submitted a negative piece on David Foster Wallace to the *LA Review of Books*, aiming to provide some balance to the "Saint Dave phenomenon," the editor responded to Hungerford's argument as to why she does not want to read more Wallace by telling her she needed to read *more* Wallace. Focusing on his personal misogyny, and "[t]he fact that Wallace makes a subject out this aspect of his behavior," she refuses to read any more of his writing—even though he is "intermittently regretful about his behavior toward women" (151). She decided that further reading of Wallace would be a poor use of her time—and wrote an article defending her decision. The editor's comment assumed "that a refusal can't, in the absence of more reading, have an intellectual or scholarly relationship to a professional decision about resource allocation—about what to spend one's (limited) time doing" (160).

Understand, Hungerford is not telling *us* that we should not read Wallace, but rather stating and defending her own position, which of course she is more than entitled to

do. What is more interesting about her refusal (and an editor's response to it) is that she refuses to read Wallace while at the same time serving on a doctoral committee at Yale University, where she is a professor of English and Dean of Humanities, for a graduate student who is writing on recovery culture—and using Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. "For me, the most persuasive of reasons to be interested in Wallace right now is that as Jamison's [doctoral] advisor I want to be in conversation with her, and to be the best conversation partner I can be might in the end require that I read Wallace's novel," states Hungerford (156). "My respect for Jamison as a writer and thinker makes me open to the task" (156).

A similar dilemma is described in the preceding chapter regarding Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, which she describes as "an aesthetic innovation within the history of American Holocaust narratives" (123). For Hungerford, Foer's generation of Holocaust writing is "a field not defined by the original genres and their cultural stature—or by the tighter relational bond of parent and child, with its accompanying filial pieties" (124). It "is defined rather by questions of personal achievement and recognition in a network of values that distill out of the larger batch of new writers a subgroup we might call the bi-coastal young literati" (124).

The literature of this field is not one that often sits well with scholars of contemporary literature for it is one in which "writing remains a prestigious avenue to fame" (124). Or, in the case of Foer, is motivated by a need for "attention" (and for Hungerford, "*Foer loves attention*") (137). Still, in spite of its vain motivations—or perhaps *because* of them, *Everything is Illuminated* was selected by her students to be the final novel in her "American Novel since 1945" course. "I had to read it," writes Hungerford, "and deliver two fresh lectures." "My students' love—produced by and mediated through the literary press, peer sociality, and the classroom—produced, if not exactly more love, then at least more attention ..."—for, of course, Foer (139).

The middle two chapters of *Making Literature Now* focus on the use of the net and apps to produce innovative and interesting ways of reading (or relating with) and making literature. However, the Small Demons web venture she describes in Chapter 3 is now "closed" and the Red Lemonade web site "appears, as of this writing, to be inactive" (170). Still, her account in Chapter 4 of the serialized, exploratory novel for iPad and iPhone, *The Silent History* (in spite of its unfortunate publication as a bound book by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2014)—is one of the highlights of the volume as it persuasively demonstrates how human and nonhuman "actors" can participate in a network that is making literature now.

In spite of their differences in methodology, *Making Literature Now* and *Sticky Fingers* both demonstrate well the impact of little magazines in the making of literature, music—and celebrity. However, the effective and convincing use of actor-network-theory by Hungerford in the cause of understanding contemporary (or "post-1945") literature begs for a similar approach to the celebrated networks associated with *Rolling Stone*. One wonders, for example, how Wenner's publication of Lennon's full *Rolling Stone* interview against his consent appears when considering not just the editor and

the musician, but also a wider network of nonhuman actors, the most obvious being subscriptions, as discussed in Hungerford's account of *McSweeney's*. Other non-human actors that might be included in an ANT account of *Rolling Stone* are MTV and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, both of which play a large role in Hagan's account.

As a journal founder myself, I can empathize with the difficulty of the task charged to the contributors of the Morris and Diaz volume. It is not easy to articulate an engaging account of the origins, aims, and futures of a little magazine. But as Hungerford makes abundantly clear in her book, the material we choose to investigate, the questions we ask, and the approach we utilize to answer them in large part tempers the appeal of the response. While accounts of celebrity writing (or music) networked with little magazines is intrinsically fascinating, copious details about little-known, little-read, and little-celebrated magazines can have a somnolent effect on even the most dedicated purveyor of small press literature and culture.

Hungerford raises the bar on accounts of how literature is made and how we tell the story of little magazines. And as Hagan has demonstrated, albeit in a more conventional form, the cultural and economic possibilities of little magazines can be large, when cultivated and networked by a strong and determined actor (Wenner). In short, Hungerford shows how making literature now involves far more today than simply the artist as sole actor or creative genius. Rather, literature now involves a range of actors—both human and nonhuman—put into a dynamic network of creative possibility. The ways of describing making literature now in Hungerford's book tease us with the possibilities of using a similar approach on other celebrated works and authors. I'm all for convincing her now to take on works like *Sgt. Pepper* and *Lot 49*, if not The Beatles and Pynchon. They're both post-1945—and both much celebrated.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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