

Innovators in Lit Profile: *The Sun Magazine*
by Ivy Rutledge

Tim McKee is the Managing Editor of *The Sun*, a literary journal published in Chapel Hill. I made a visit to Chapel Hill recently, and he was kind enough to show me around the *Sun* offices and give me a behind-the-scenes look. Housed in a beautiful Victorian on a quiet side street, the office felt calm and humble. Just outside of Tim's office upstairs hang three white boards that organize the pieces being prepared for the three issues they have in process. Looking at the list, I asked about the way that each issue has subtle repeating themes that run through it. Tim pointed out that two of the main features of each issue, the Readers Write and the Interview, provide the pillar for the theme, and then the other pieces pull the issue together, which is one of his favorite parts of his job. The other main part of his role is to read and edit the submissions that come into his office. By the time they reach him, they've been through three other readers and have been culled quite a bit. In looking at his submission piles, the largest is the ones that have yet to be read. The next shelf down is the pile to be rejected, the part of his job that he says he is never fond of doing. Then underneath is the smallest pile: submissions that have been read and commented on and are ready to go on to Sy Syfransky, the Editor and Publisher. I also had a chance to peek into Sy's office. But before the quick tour, Tim was gracious enough to sit and talk to me in more depth about the magazine's history, aesthetic and future.

Ivy Rutledge:

I'd like to start out with a few questions in regards to the history of *The Sun*. The magazine was started in 1974 with a regional focus, *The Chapel Hill Sun*, but shifted to a broader audience as your readership grew. Can you talk about the growth of your publication in those earlier years and the impact it had on the way you did business?

Tim McKee:

I can as best as I can, because I wasn't here then; in fact no one here now except Sy was here then. From what I know, it grew slowly but steadily in the 70s. It started with Sy on a street corner, selling it for a quarter and trying to get local bookstores to carry it. He was selling it to his friends and his peers and extending his reach. His friends were reading it, their friends were reading it, so it was very word of mouth, which meant that it was a pretty small circulation.

I believe in the early 80s he got a grant—I think it may have been the North Carolina Arts Council—to do a direct mailing, and he somehow rented a mailing list of some other journal or catalog. The magazine back then was a little more New-Agey and holistic; it had that 1970s flavor, so I don't know what list he got, but he basically sent out a cold solicitation for subscriptions. That's what this grant money allowed him to do. Up until that point, he was not really even paying himself, not really paying writers, and he had other paying jobs. So there was no way he could afford to print; it seemed crazy to him that that might work. But he got the grant, he got the money, and he sent this letter out. He has described how he started coming into the office several weeks after the direct mail solicitation had gone out, and he'd have ten one day, fifteen the next day, and for a several week period he was just

shocked that he was getting these cards back. He kept getting subscribers. So that direct-mail campaign really sparked a boost in circulation, and direct mail really remains one of our bread-and-butters. Sy really believes in it, partially because it was successful, and it keeps working, so he's been very faithful to it. We still send out our letters and brochures, and they vary. We try different things, but it has a return rate of about 5 or 6%. We send out tens of thousands, so statistically, one might say, "That's not great." But we don't know how else to reach that 5%.

IR:

So that was the tipping point, really, from friends and family to a broader audience. What is your current circulation?

TM:

70,000

IR:

Let's talk more about your readers. Here's a quote from SS's notebook, issue 434:

"My mother's parents wound their way to Chattanooga, Tennessee, only to be driven out by the Ku Klux Klan, which reviled Jewish shopkeepers as much as it did their African American customers. And here I am, the Jewish editor of a magazine published in the South, free to print whatever I please, no crosses burning on the lawn, no thugs breaking down the door, no one calling me a goddamned Jew, at least not to my face."

It's said that the flip side of freedom is responsibility. What kind of responsibility do you feel to your readers?

TM:

That's a good question. I think we very much feel responsibility to readers, because we're not beholden to advertisers or foundations or corporations. We can do what we want structurally, but I think it takes three forms: One is doing our best to not offend our readers with something that would be sexist, racist, homophobic, country bashing. We try to have that lens when we're editing, and I think we do a pretty good job at that. It's impossible to do it 100% perfectly because one, it's complicated. What is offensive? And then two, people can get offended about something unexpected. Sometimes we learn that after the fact. Someone from Asheville wrote us and was very upset that in a Poe Ballantine essay there was a character that I think was described as a "country bumpkin" or "redneck" or some negative term for a rural white person, and this really bothered this person. And we missed that, but once it was pointed out to me, I saw that it really was offensive language. It was an image, so it really wasn't the point in his piece, so it wasn't necessary. We learn, but try our best there.

That said, we also aren't into overly protecting our readers. Part of the way we feel we serve them is by not offending them, and at the same time, we feel we serve them by pushing their

buttons a little. There's this piece called, "I Am Not a Sex Goddess," written by an older woman who worked with someone who was very overt with her sexual life, and they were both in their 50s or 60s, I think, and the writer said, "Well, that's not me." There was this very graphic conversation about sexuality and age, and so people just really ... they cancelled their subscriptions, they were offended. It was like, "Sorry, if you like the Sun, and you can't ..." It was like, in our minds, not sensationalistic. Maybe not something people talk about in every day dinner table conversation. But it's an important topic, so we were willing to take the heat.

And the other responsibility I think we have is to protect the privacy of people very religiously—more so than usually the writers themselves—in pieces of writing. When you see the name withheld in the Readers Write, sometimes that's the writer that has asked for that, but most of the time it's us. The reason when people use a pseudonym in a piece is that it's usually us. We're careful because there's a legal aspect to this, but there's also an ethical one. One, we want to do our best to not get sued. If someone has damning information about someone else in their piece and we're publishing it, there's that potential. But usually it's not legal; it's more ethical. We assume that a person that a writer is writing about is going to see a piece, which seems to bear out almost 95% of the time. The writer says, "Oh, blank isn't going to see this. They don't even read." They see it. So we have to say that to our writers: that we'll see it. And they disagree with us, and we say sorry, but we'll see it, and so will other people that know them. So if you're outing a serious infraction that's not public record, even if we think it was a terrible act, we have to think along the lines of "Oh, you're revealing that your father sexually abused you, and that's really serious. We don't want to undermine the seriousness of that by saying that we need to be careful about what we reveal." So sometimes the writer will show these things to the person, other times they'll do a pseudonym, other times we'll edit around the problem, and then other times they'll change—if it's not inherent—they'll change an identifying characteristic. So that's something that is a constantly another lens that we have to run through our minds as we're working on an issue.

IR:

How does that inform your selection of content? When you're in an editorial meeting and your selecting content, how do you factor in these responsibilities with what you choose to print?

TM:

I think the criteria of what we publish is about the writing itself. Is the writer using words effectively to elucidate rather than obscure what they're saying? It's surprising to me as a reader how often times I don't understand what a writer is trying to say, so we're kind of allergic to kind of show-offy literary tricks for the sake of displaying form. Direct communication. Definitely pieces that have an arc to them, where there's some sort of transformation that goes on, even if it's a painful story: we want to see some sort of experience with that pain, as opposed to telling us this relentlessly bleak tale. We're also allergic to sanitized conversations. If it's small talk, it's not for us. So, we like the pieces that almost get a feeling like a window on a conversation that you're not supposed to be hearing.

Again, not in a sensationalistic way, but more because we feel like the conversations are helpful for humanity to be having. And the more of us that are in on those the better, because we're going against the dialogue that is very limited publicly, in our opinion, in terms of people being able to talk about pain and healing and change.

And we like writing to be simple. Most of our poetry in some ways is quite simple. We don't want our readers to have to go to dictionaries, go to Wikipedia, scratch their heads, complicating what is going on. I think some publications don't mind making the reader work a bit more, and that I understand, there's a fine line there, and there are sometimes pieces where we'll allow something when we're not quite sure what's going on, but it's kind of pleasantly mysterious versus maddeningly unclear. And a really good writer can walk that line.

But I'd say most of the things we get in are maddeningly unclear. They're not organized well, so it's kind of like the writer is vomiting on the page, which has its merits. But as a reader, it's kind of like, "Whoa! I can't make my way here." That's one extreme. And the other extreme is where they've cleaned it out so much that there's no heft to it. And it's hard to get that sweet spot; those are the pieces we take. We take about 1% of what we get. We get about 1,000 submissions a month; there are about ten acceptances.

IR:

How about the Reader's Write? What's your volume there?

TM:

It depends on the topic. Anywhere from 80 to 500. I'd say the average is 220.

IR:

You stopped selling ads in 1990 and became a nonprofit. What was the immediate impact?

TM:

I think we've always been a nonprofit, but stopping the ads was a decision that Sy made. He ended up writing this letter that we do once or twice a year where we ask our readers for donations. That took the place of ads as a revenue stream, so we would not quite make it if it wasn't for those letters. Just from our subscriptions and our book sales, I think we probably get about 80% of what we need. But that extra 20% we get from fundraising from individuals.

IR:

What kind of innovation has been required not only to sustain the publication but also to grow and change along with the readership and the shift in the publishing landscape?

TM:

We're slow on change, and I think it's partially that we have an old-fashioned belief that people still like sitting in a comfy chair in their favorite spot and holding a printed work in

their hands. So we feel like if we continue to deliver the most potent monthly magazine that we can, that we're going to continue to be successful. Our circulation has obviously grown over the years: 70,000 is big compared to most literary journals. But it stopped there. Since I've been here—five and a half, six years—it's hit a ceiling. But, that's okay with us. There's no mandate that we need to keep growing, so we basically say, "Why fix what ain't broke?"

That said, the internet obviously is changing everything, so having a good website versus a sub-par website was important. Sy had to be pushed in that regard, but he was willing to listen. What he doesn't want to have happen is that the work and energy gets taken away from putting out the magazine. And across the aisle there is our new Digital-Media Director, Dave Mahaffey. He started about two years ago. We are probably two or three months away from having our digital edition ready. It's going to be basically the magazine opening up into online computers and devices into a reader, and you click through it, so it reads like a magazine, digitally rendered.

We're excited about that; I think we're going to get some new subscribers that way. One group is international subscribers. The cost of international subscription rates now is pretty prohibitive, just to fill it costs us a lot of money. We have some Canadian, a few Israeli, a few Brits; we're international in a way, but just here and there. But this digital issue is going to be available no matter where you are. That's my first hope. My second hope is with digital natives who are generally between 20 and 34, maybe who have just moved, or who have never really gotten big into print. They just wouldn't get *The Sun*, because that's not what they do. So, to me a digital offering to them might be able to get some younger subscribers. I think among the people that will move from print to digital—because we're not actually offering a price incentive for them. We're charging the same amount, if you want either. If you want both it's a little more. But, there will be some ecologically-minded folks who would prefer to not get the paper. I think they'll shift over.

We're hoping that it means more readers. And Sy's dream: he would wish that not many people would switch over and not get the magazine in the mailbox. Considering who are 70,000 readers are—and we don't have demographic data on them, we don't have ads, so we've really never studied it—but anecdotally, I think it's going to be a very small percentage that do do that. Even those who do do that, it's not necessarily a negative thing. He has to be convinced of it, because he's seen the proven loyalty to the print magazine. He hasn't seen it to the digital version, so we'll see what happens. That is part of the reason we did not discount it, which in a way will be a natural limit on how popular the digital distribution is going to be. The costs are much lower than the print version. There are *some* costs involved, so conceivably the profit margin we get from the print issue, if we applied that to the digital issue, the end price on the digital issue would be well below print. There are many magazines that have done it that way. Our research shows that magazines that have done it that way are ones who are almost wanting their print to die or are reading the writing on the wall. And so they are kind of like migrating people over by giving them an incentive that speeds up the process. There are a lot of publications that have equity, though, on the two. And in some ways it's simple: it's the same magazine, it's the same value, it's a

different form. There will be some who are going to say, “I can’t believe you aren’t cutting me a break, when I know that it costs you less.” And we’re willing to take that heat. And if we have to explain why, it’s that we’re really attached to the print publication.

IR:

What is the traffic on the website now?

TM:

You can ask Dave that as we’re leaving. It’s pretty popular, because we offer excerpts and some full pieces, but obviously we don’t want to give away the full issue. So in that way, it’s probably a frustrating reading experience.

IR:

Well, I’ve tracked down a print copy after reading a piece online more than once.

TM:

Right, it serves as a teaser. We don’t really have anything that’s live and changing on there, no blog attached, no comment threads, there’s nothing interactive. So it’s really more just like an ad, our storefront, and we can sell things through it. But I think once the digital edition is there, it’s not going to change our website that much, but it does make us a little more with the times. And their goal is to actually archive all of our 38 years, and to have that accessible to subscribers, to the digital subscriber. Or you can subscribe to the print issue, pay the extra ten bucks to be print and digital. This is going to be an expensive process for us, digitizing so much, but ideally our website would have that: you’d have a password and be able to go in and search, you’d be able to find what you’re looking for. Obviously, most readers have some version of this in their house, but it can be hard to hunt and peck at times, so it makes sense to have that resource, the digital.

IR:

Tell me about the events and workshops that *The Sun* hosts.

TM:

We started them about ten years ago. We do two or three a year, and they are not big moneymakers for us. They impact directly about a hundred people every time, so it’s a fairly small effect. The reason we do it is because we enjoy it. The staff goes, and the writers that we pay to go there, and it seems very transformative for the participants. I know it deepens the respect for the magazine, because they don’t really know what we’re like. They know what the magazine is like, but they don’t really know what *we’re* going to be like. And it’s validating, because the same spirit that runs through the magazine runs through the retreats. I’ve seen very powerful catharsis and epiphany in every retreat that I’ve been to, and I’ve been to every one since I joined. Besides the fact that they’re in beautiful places. It’s like taking *The Sun* on the road for a little bit and creating a safe space for people to write, and to write about tough stuff, to feel safe to do that.

IR:

Tell me about one of your most exciting moments or experiences here at *The Sun*.

TM:

I think when we realized—and we wrote about this in one of our fundraising letters—when we realized that we made a mistake, and we printed a prisoner’s name. That was very exciting because it was a Friday, pretty late in the day, and we got a call from a prison advocate. They were relaying this message that we made a mistake, and that the prisoner had asked for his name to be withheld, that we not print his name. So we immediately pulled the original letter, and sure enough: someone had made a mistake. We now have a process in place to prevent that. The reason he’d given was that he was probably going to get his ass kicked in prison if that was revealed. It was exciting because the issue was just getting picked up by the truck to take it from the printer to the post office that day. Within minutes I called our printer and asked them where it was, and he said “Actually I just got a call and UPS is on its way. All the magazines are on the dock.” And I said, “Stop them.”

So, we investigated over the next few days all the plausible different ways to change this mistake, and those varied in cost. Everything from hiring a team of temp workers to cut out the corner with his name, to experimenting with different kinds of alcohols and solvents. We just decided to reprint the whole thing. It cost us \$34,000. But, number one: it was our mistake, and we try hard to put out an ad-free publication. Number two: someone had asked us to do something we failed to do, so it was not just a typo. And then number three: this could have led to harm to a human being. The fact that this human being was a convicted criminal—as our research showed us—of pretty brutal crimes, that it wasn’t some nice guy who was in jail because he shoplifted, that added an interesting element to the conversation, because of course it was like “Why are we ... ?” And ultimately that didn’t matter to us. I think that proved what *The Sun* is, in that we try to show each other’s humanity to each other, and we saw his humanity above all. So it didn’t matter that he was a murderer. He wrote us this incredible letter afterwards, because he read about it. He was blown away that we cared. That we went that far to honor the agreement. So, that was exciting.

IR:

What advice do you have for literary entrepreneurs? Grad students, writers, anyone getting started on a writing career?

TM:

Well, I can say what makes for a good editor. It’s the macro and the micro, and they’re both critically important. Knowing the ins and outs of language without question, and that takes reading a lot, writing a lot, knowing grammar, having a good vocabulary, knowing style rules—not necessarily having those all memorized, but having the extreme command of the language. What you see in those pages there: half of the things we’re slugging out are things about language rules and style. So, here, the editor has to be able to get into a piece of

writing and edit it and make it better. Or find mistakes, if they're proofreading. I can't emphasize that enough, it seems so obvious, but I think that people tend to get lazy, thinking that they can get by with knowing language pretty well.

And then the macro part, which I think is harder, but to be a good macro editor you have to be extremely curious and interested, and experientially encountering a lot of different truths, stories, perspectives, and some of the things that a good micro editor will catch. That same editor will read a piece and not have a good macro editing sense: story or tone, flow, something that might be offensive. So it's like being able to take a step back. I think macro editors are good listeners, and I think they're people who push themselves to keep learning about the world, whether it's literal travelling or watching a variety of movies or being a voracious reader of a variety of publications.

So that would be my two pieces of advice: to not get so bogged down in learning that you're missing the bigger picture, but to not trivialize how important, really, the tools are. And my experience is that most editors don't have both of those in the package; really good editors have both. If you're only good at one, that can be fine but will limit the role you play. I can think of someone here whose lack of bigger picture thinking can be frustrating. That person is immensely skilled at the trenches of the works, and that's fine, that's what he does here. But if he was going to be moving up, not having that side, the macro, that'd be a liability.

IR:

How would you describe the literary community here in NC?

TM:

We're not really part of it. That's not meant to be some sort of rude, flippant remark, but because our focus is human; it has nothing to do with region. Because our writers are scattered, it comes out for us when we have an event, and we think about what North Carolina writers have published. It's nice to have some; I think they're more numerous than any other state. But in some ways we're kind of unknown around here. I sometimes get people thinking I work for the Durham Herald-Sun, and so it's funny, because if we go to the right place we're like rock stars, people are like, "You work at the Sun!" We went to a conference where that was happening. But I'll go to a restaurant here where people just don't know me. So once we went more national, we haven't had a reason to have a North Carolina focus.

IR:

What are some other publishers or literary entities you find inspiring?

TM:

Orion, I find to be a good magazine. *Harpers*, I think has really good writing in it. *The New Yorker*. Online I think Salon.com is interesting. *The Rumpus* is kind of newer. I think *McSweeney's* is an organization that has a lot of solar systems within it; they're doing really good work. Those would be the ones.

IR:

What do you wish existed in publishing that hasn't been invented yet?

TM:

The devices that people read are getting better, and it's both scary—the way they might replace the book—but also welcome, because I don't like reading on the screen. Obviously, I do a lot of it for my job, but here's some submissions I have to read. That's the best place I have to read, and I have to be in the right mood where I'm not feeling too critical, or let's say I have to be grounded. When I'm doing that stuff, I'm grounded in the way that I need to be for that. So, sitting there with a better device that is still a computer is an improvement. I don't use a tablet or Nooks or anything like that, but if I did and I felt like I still had that peaceful feeling, then I'd be okay with that.