

Talking River Review: An Oral History

I. HEADWATERS: The Beginning of *TRR*

What do you recall about the origins of Talking River Review?

JAMES HART: I started *Talking River Review* to pad my grad school applications. No, really, that was my base, initial motive. Higher up Maslow's Pyramid I also wanted to do something that would help our writing faculty at the time—Bob Wrigley, Mary Clearman Blew, Kim Barnes, William Johnson, and others—establish a platform upon which they might construct a BFA writing program. We had a publishing arts program then that Jim Hepworth ran, which did some very good things, but it was more of a “college press” that published books, and produced students trained to do just that, rather than a wildcat “literary magazine” staffed by and for writers in the LCSC community. Honestly, many of us bohemians saw Confluence Press as a “business” program at the time, and Jim ran a tight castle, moats up, so to speak. So, we wanted to do our own thing, our way, and we did.

My infancy as a serious writer began at LCSC, thanks to professors Mary Clearman Blew, Robert Wrigley, Kim Barnes, and William Johnson. My background? As Dr. Evil says, inconsequential, mostly, luge lessons in the winter... Seriously, I came to LCSC intending to get a BS in Biology and/or Geology (I like fish and rocks). I like to fly fish while standing on rocks. If the fish aren't there, I set down my rod and look for certain stones. As Mary Blew might say, a good 'ol fly fishing boy (but not from Montana). All I will say is I had no idea what I wanted to do before I came to LCSC and joined the then department of Literature and Languages. I met the folks who would change (I still say “save” though they blush when I do) my life, or at least gave me the tools to do it myself. That's then Director of Writing Mary Flores, and Patricia Keith, and Mary Blew, Bob Wrigley, Kim Barnes, Roger Johnson, Okey Goode, and later, folks like Claire Davis. Chris Norden. That guy changed my whole view of Shakespeare, among other things.

It was my first opportunity to realize the puddle-thin depth of my knowledge, to realize I knew nothing at all, and if I was lucky and worked hard, I might learn how to learn and then maybe know a few, fluttering, contingent things. I do know one thing: attending a small four-year liberal arts college was the second best move I ever made in life. I've been married to the first best for 32 years now. Our son recently graduated from LCSC with a social work degree, we are proud to say. So there.

JASON FALES: My role in producing the first issue of *TRR* was contributing to the poetry board as one of the lead editors. We put out solicitations, received submissions, made our first several cuts of selections, met as a group to discuss the merits of our selections, and determined the final cut we would publish. Then we wrote rejection letters and worked on the layout of the magazine, the order of the works, etc. We also solicited visual art from LCSC art students and

included them in the magazine and on the cover. I was involved in all aspects, but Jim Hart was the editor-in-chief and really did a lot of heavy lifting to get that first magazine printed.

I studied creative writing at LCSC from 1991 to 1995, concentrating on poetry for the last three of those years under the mentorship of Robert Wrigley. Mary Clearman Blew, Claire Davis, and Kim Barnes were also very important to my development as a writer. My background: I grew up in Grangeville, played football, worked at the sawmill there, and drove a muscle car. English and literature were really the only subjects I had talent for, and after I had attempted to walk-on to play free safety for Boise State and had taken classes there for a year, I went home to Grangeville to work at the mill. LCSC was the only school that would accept my credits from BSU in time to start the fall semester, and I signed up for Wrigley's contemporary poetry class. We read Dick Hugo and James Wright, threw in some Phil Levine, and I was hooked.

LESLIE OVARD: I worked on the journal for the first two to three years; I had a great education at LCSC and, coming from a family who knew nothing of college, I was very fortunate. I still use what I learned every day and think back fondly of that time. That the school had a literary journal seemed very natural. I did not understand the gravity at the time, nor did I realize that the voices of western writers were so underrepresented in American literature.

Jason Fales and I took over as co-editors after Jim Hart and Margo Aragon graduated. I was torn between two fields at the time—creative writing/English and science and water quality. I work on writing with scientists now and have pursued both humanities and science masters. My hard science experience still has had much to do with water quality and availability. During that time, I've kept up less with literary journals. What I've learned is that problems are solved or go away, and we still have our humanity eyes and ears that are the filter to the world we are experiencing.

DENNIS HELD: Bob Wrigley had brought me to LCSC as a visiting writer in 1993, and we had discussed the possibility of creating a literary magazine at the college. I was hired as an adjunct to teach four sections of composition at LCSC in January of 1994. In the fall of 1994, Claire Davis joined the faculty, and with Kim Barnes also teaching, there were strong, well-taught writing courses in fiction, poetry and nonfiction. Our intention, as advisers, was to showcase the best work of LCSC students alongside the work of more well-known writers, primarily western writers. We—Bob and Kim and Claire—sent out queries to many of the writers who eventually responded so generously with their work.

My name doesn't appear anywhere in that first issue, except as a contributor. Although there is a suspicious note on the copyright page that says, "Special thanks to Vince in Montana." In my first book, the first poem is titled "Van Gogh in Montana," and that's the source of the reference. I helped behind the scenes on the first issue.

I started working on literary magazines in my first year of college, at UW-Waukesha in Wisconsin: *The Windy Hill Review*. Then it was on to The Evergreen State College and *Slightly West* for two years, a year to catch my breath, then graduate school at the University of Montana, where I was co-editor of the magazine *CutBank* for two years. For whatever reason, I've always enjoyed the process—even the inevitable drama around deadlines and bio notes and whatnot. It was worth it—every time—when we finally had a physical manifestation of all that work we could hold in our hands and pass around to others. And yes, my friends, paper lasts—we can still

read that copy of the 1994 issue of the *TRR*, just as we can still read the notebooks of Leonardo DaVinci. (Now, I admit there might be a small difference in scale, there, but still....)

The journal's "Idaho twist" (definitely not a dance craze) was that, of the 35 or so writers represented in the first issue, about 25 were from Idaho, many of them LCSC students. Most of the work in the first issue was solicited from the writers we knew, and from the student body, since there wasn't a magazine we could show anyone as an example of our work.

ROBERT WRIGLEY: I'd been teaching at LC for 17 years, except for a couple of years on leave, at the University of Montana and the University of Oregon. I had just delivered the manuscript of my fourth book (*In the Bank of Beautiful Sins*) to Penguin. I'll be delivering my next (the 8th with Penguin) next year some time. I spent '94-95 teaching at Montana as the Richard Hugo Distinguished Writer.

Talking River Review was not the first literary journal at LCSC. That was *The Slackwater Review*, published and edited by Keith and Shirley Browning (Keith was a long-time English prof; Shirley taught in the business division). They also founded Confluence Press. The creative writing program was thriving at LC then.

None of this, not *TRR* or *Slackwater* or Confluence, not the fact that, in 1977, I was the first designated creative writing professor in the college's history; not the fact that an LCSC alum (Kim Barnes) has been a Pulitzer Prize finalist (I could go on, as you know); NONE OF THIS HISTORY WOULD HAVE HAPPENED, were it not for the presence at LCSC of Professor Hugh Nichols, who became chair of the Humanities Division, then a dean, then a vice-president or something higher. He believed in literature from top to bottom. He respected writers. He believed that any and all higher education institutions had a moral and pedagogical obligation to offer literary arts both as subject and as practice. Hugh was hired to LC by Keith Browning. These three people—Keith Browning, Hugh Nichols, and Shirley Browning—sowed the seed that made LCSC a genuine literary presence, one of the most important presences in Idaho and the Northwest.

WILLIAM JOHNSON: Mountains and rivers without end. That was my naive view of North Idaho before I knew Lewiston or Gary Snyder's book of that title. Snyder wasn't writing about Idaho specifically, but his poetry nonetheless evokes it. For him place is a web of living connections—history, native culture, ecology, and the new American west. And new is a strange mix. As rivers go, or don't go, the mix is revealing. And rivers, as I would discover, had everything to do with Lewiston and much of the west.

Writing, like the other arts, has a long, even immemorial, history here. In Old English the verb means "cut, scratch, carve." And many of the early "carvings" here border a river, like the petroglyphs, those mysterious stone-pictures at Buffalo Eddy on a bank of the Snake. It isn't surprising that the three literary ventures that emerged at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston—*The Slackwater Review*, Confluence Press, and *Talking River Review*—bear currents in their names.

When *Talking River* arrived in 1994, I was still a poetry apprentice. Thirteen years of learning the craft was a modest, if late, beginning. But *Slackwater*, Confluence, and the teaching of creative writing in those years (I think of Kim Barnes, Bob Wrigley, Mary Blew, Dennis Held, and Claire Davis) allowed writing to thrive and grow, and students caught the bug. Under the guidance of Hugh Nichols, Dean of Arts and Sciences, Jim Hepworth, who took over Confluence from Keith, developed a publishing arts program. *Talking River* became an extension of this,

with the leadership of Held, Davis, and subsequently Mark Sanders and Kevin Goodan. I don't recall just how the spark was lit, but given student interest in writing, faculty support and writing in the air, or better on the water, the magazine was born.

II. TRIBUTARIES: Contributors, Editorial Process, Community Reception

Contributors

How did you become a contributor to the first issue of TRR, and can you talk about where you were in your writing career in 1994?

MARY CLEARMAN BLEW: I left LCSC and took a position at the University of Idaho in 1994, but I maintained links with former colleagues and students at LCSC. It was about at this time that I learned from assistant professor Dennis Held that he had agreed to be the advisor of a new student literary review. Two of the students behind the creation of *Talking River Review* were Jim Hart and Margo Aragon, who recently died. It was Dennis Held who asked me for a submission. In 1994 I had previously published a volume of short fiction, *Lambing Out and Other Stories*, two memoirs, *All But the Waltz* and *Balsamroot*, and was working simultaneously with Kim Barnes on the anthology *Circle of Women* as well as a collection of my own essays, *Bone Deep in Language*. Since then I've published a total of sixteen books, most recently the novel *Sweep Out the Ashes*.

KIM BARNES: I began my college career at LCSC as a pre-med major, but I found myself drawn back to what I loved, and that was language and story. By 1994, I had published several poems and short stories, and Mary Clearman Blew and I had edited *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*. It was during that time I began writing personal essays, which would lead to the publication of my first memoir in 1996: *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in Unknown Country*.

I was delighted to be reminded of these poems ["For Mary in Prague" and "Crusoe in Her Hands" published in *TRR* in 1994], which I find myself fond of all over again. Mary, the friend in the title, has since passed, and I miss her. She was brilliant, and she was haunted by depression. Havel was her hero, and Prague's gray light drew her in. Even then, we who loved her understood how hard it was for her to remain present in this life.

"Crusoe in Her Hands" is still very evocative to me because it is rooted in two Lewiston memories from my childhood: the story my grandmother told of a local butcher whose shop was across from the library, and the hours I spent in that library, reading my way through the stacks. The butcher shop had been owned and operated by the same family for years, and my grandmother rented a meat locker there. I loved going in with her to retrieve packages of the deer meat my family often lived on: the bright metallic smell of blood; the floor covered in sawdust that was swept out each night and put down fresh each morning; the freezers with their icy exhausts of air. I remember the butcher in his white apron blotched with red, and I remember his

knives. When my grandmother told me that he had died—that the knife had slipped, severing his femoral artery, and he had bled out into the sawdust before the ambulance could arrive—I couldn't stop thinking about him and what he saw all those years he worked past dark, looking out the shop window across the street to the library. Did the librarian and books remind him of a life he wanted but could never have? There is a dark undercurrent in the poem that speaks to his need and, in my knowing, his death.

SIDNER LARSON: LCSC had a vibrant writing community when I arrived there in the mid-nineties—Bob Wrigley and Kim Barnes, Mary Clearman Blew, Jim Hepworth, then Claire Davis a couple years later. It would have been in conversation with Jim probably that I became aware of the journal. It has always been a charismatic, caring individual that has fostered such things, in my experience.

My writing career in 1994 was dominated by my PhD dissertation, which was crucial to finish! Then, as now, a school such as LCSC having a literary journal was and is of critical importance. As I have said, although many went on to supposedly bigger and better things, LCSC fostered an incredible cadre of writers. And, it is in places like LCSC that happens best.

CHRIS NORDEN: *TRR* launched when I was in my second year at LCSC, though in fact there was planning and conversations happening underway already when I arrived in 1993. My main points of contact were actually three students who were essentially the founders of the journal, along with Bob Wrigley, who chaired my tenure committee before moving to the University of Idaho, from whose English department he recently retired to be a full-time poet. The three students who wised me up to *TRR* and invited me to contribute were Margo Aragon, Jason Fales, and Jim Hart, all of whom I wound up knowing and staying in touch with for a pretty long time after each of them graduated. In fact, each of them taught at LCSC subsequently in some fashion—probably not a coincidence.

The little poem I included in the premiere issue of *TRR*, titled “Three-Thirty-Six,” is essentially a snapshot of a new professor who is still pretty lost in this part of northern Idaho, having spent the previous six years in a version of paradise (for me, at least) known as Madison, Wisconsin, where I completed my PhD in English and African-American Studies. Obvious enough that the experience of sudden loneliness and loss of connection to a place and a lot of friends I really liked and even loved would throw me back into my own deeper memories of growing up on the East Coast. Every place is home, but every place is also weird in its own ways, doubly so once one's memories begin to distance themselves historically from present-day realities and norms. I immediately liked and connected with many of the students and colleagues I first met at LCSC in 1994, notably Ray Esparsen, Sean Cassidy, Okey Goode, and Mary Flores in Humanities, and Steve Evans and Richard Moore in Social Sciences. The arrival of Claire Davis and now-former colleague poet Dennis Held was probably the point where I decided I would stay and just figure everything out. The poem I wrote for *TRR* is part of that figuring out.

RAY ESPARSEN: I started teaching at LCSC in 1992. In 1994 I was seriously thinking about resources and investigating different places to apply my trade. At that time, I felt so isolated for I was one of three faculty of color. My career in 1994 turned to scholarship more than studio arts.

I became involved with *TRR* [as the first issue's art director] because it personified the idea of collaboration. Writers and artists working together to formulate a literary journal was an electrifying experience. It is imperative to acknowledge that 25 years ago LCSC was in a

drastically different intellectual environment and by extension so was its academic culture. Faculty and students exemplified the metaphor of a single unified body, a charismatic community of creative types working together to orient an atmosphere of well-being.

I would love to proclaim that I have a memory that is unencumbered by the passing of time but that would be a lie. Nor do I mean to say that I've entirely forgotten the experience and joy of working with a community of like-minded individuals. Collaborating with students and mentors on a project that has transcended 25 years is a memory that's not easily dimmed by the lapse of time.

NEIDE MESSER: In 1994, the year of *TRR*'s first issue, I was working full time, raising two teenage boys, and missing my husband, Bill, who was working in North Central Idaho and commuting home on weekends. It was at that time my former teacher, mentor, and friend Robert Wrigley sent a note about *TRR* and asked for submissions. He also asked me to spread the word about the journal. I did both. The poem *TRR* published reflects the stressful goings-on of that time in my life.

TIM SPROUL: Back in 1994, I was interested in LCSC because of my admiration for the work of two great writers there, Kim Barnes and Robert Wrigley. They are, to this day, a powerhouse couple of literary cool.

"Newport Monotony," published in that first issue, is a barroom elegy for fishermen friends we've lost off my hometown waters of Newport, Oregon. It's an ode inspired by the sharp tongued, monosyllabic rhythms of my mentor Robert Wrigley, whom I studied under at the University of Oregon. It's about playing the music of loss, the lilt and crash of the sea, a young man trying to stay afloat in a sea of provincialism and atmospheric hopelessness. Since this poem was published by *TRR*, I've probably recited it from memory a thousand times all over the world, in various states of social engagement or inebriation. Or both. After all these years, it's an elegy still very much alive to me. In fact, I recited it last week in Amsterdam to the musician Cautious Clay, his head bouncing to its rhythms. I'm grateful *TRR* published it and gave it little wings to fly. *TRR* encouraged me, early in my poetry life, to keep digging for poems, stories, scripts, songs, novels, any way to get the words out.

KENT ANDERSON: I'm grateful that [the excerpt from *Night Dogs*] was published in *TRR* because that publication gave me confidence to continue working. I imagine that now I'd think it awkward and unfinished, compared to the way it appeared in the finished novel. [In 1994], I was nowhere, didn't have a clue, far more doubt than hope. The fact that they took that piece of the far-from-realized *Night Dogs* back then helped a lot to keep me going.

RON MCFARLAND: It was my good fortune to have had a couple of my poems accepted for publication in the first number of *The Slackwater Review*, LCSC's literary magazine that ran from 1976 through 1984. In '77 I became Poetry Editor, and in 1981 General Editor of that magazine, a position I held until Robert Wrigley took it over for its final run in 1984. M.K. Browning was the instigator of that very respectable literary magazine, and I like to think we have reason to be proud of our work, as does LCSC!

At the University of Idaho between 1977 and 1987 I was founder & editor of *Snapdragon*, what we then called a "little magazine," to distinguish it from the more ambitious "literary magazine," funded by the English department and library, and bound saddleback style,

as opposed to the perfect bound volumes of *Slackwater* and what could be regarded as its successor, *Talking River Review*. Between 1987 and 1989 I served as faculty advisor for *Paradise Creek Journal* (also saddleback bound) in its brief run. And then came *Fugue* in 1990, which started life as an undergraduate-run, very low-cost, saddleback-bound little mag, the brainchild of one of my students, John Hendee, and his wife Barbara. That magazine, now perfect-bound and a genuine “literary magazine,” has flourished over the years (I jumped off ship in 2011—Alexandra Teague now serves as faculty advisor).

But I confess, I was surprised to see that eleven years had elapsed between the last *Slackwater* and the first *Talking River*. I’m sure I knew of *TRR*’s arrival on the scene right away because, especially back then, I had many friends who taught at LCSC, but I can’t say just who it was who let me know about it, and I don’t recall having been “solicited,” but maybe I was.

WILLIAM JOHNSON: When I interviewed for a teaching job at the small state college here in 1981, I drove up the Clearwater River to Orofino. It’s a lovely stretch, wooded, bouldered, with a smatter of rural acreages, part time farms, backwoods suburbanites, die-hard survivalists, and the Nez Perce Indian tribe. The river holds local histories verging on the mythic, from centuries of tribal culture, the Lewis and Clark intrusion, and subsequent, often extractive, industries of white resettlement and large-scale irrigation, including nine massive dams, from Orofino, down the Snake and Columbia, clear to the Pacific.

I was lucky to get a poem into the inaugural issue. It evoked a conversation I overheard in a café of farmers talking about the price of wheat as a storm blew in. As I look back, I realize what the privilege of living here has given me. In parts of the west like ours the relationship between nature and culture, between landscape and behavior, is still in process, still working itself out. That poem was an early effort to honor people who live and work on the land of this place. I think now I should have worked a hint of river into it.

DAVID DALE: In 1994, I was living on the west shore of Flathead Lake with three sons and my wife. I knew Dennis Held and Claire Davis—we were in workshops together with Greg Pape. I also stayed with them at Bob Wrigley’s place in Lenore, and so I got to know Bob too. I was fooling around with poetry for 20-something odd years before I took classes with my spiritual advisor, Dick Hugo. My first publication was in the early 80s. And that inspired me, of course. While I was driving home from Missoula, I looked at the Mission Mountains, and I wrote my first pretty good poem in about a half hour. I got pretty serious after that.

TRR published my poem, “Wildhorse Island,” in that first issue, which was inspired by the longest island on Flathead Lake; it’s about 10 miles long and 10 miles from Polson. On the north end of the lake, there are several coves where you can get a boat in. It’s a jewel, the Flathead Lake version of heaven. According to Kootenai legend, they swam several of their horses to the island to hide them, and there are still descendants out there, hence the name Wildhorse Island. When we went, we were careful—no motorboat, just a skiff to not disturb the land. It’s unmarked by civilization, like going back one thousand years.

MATT YURDANA: I was in the MFA program at the University of Montana at that time. I felt very lucky. The faculty were brilliant, caring, tough, and genuine, and they made all of us feel like we belonged there. I studied closely with Patricia Goedicke and Greg Pape. Bill Kittredge’s classes were touchstones. The guidance and kindness of Lois and Jim Welch helped me believe that I could write. Pattiann Rogers came through as a visiting professor in my last year, and what

I learned from her I still carry with me today. And I was fortunate to be surrounded by awesome peers like Claire Davis, Kim Barnes, and Judy Blunt who were—and are—phenomenal writers.

It was a supportive and challenging time. Like many young writers, I felt like I was in a constant cycle of excitement and self-doubt. And through it all, there were so many discoveries. I remember hearing Bob Wrigley read his poem “The Bramble” and was blown away by its music and drama and beauty. I think I held my breath through the whole thing! I remember thinking *that is poetry. That’s what it can be.*

GREG PAPE: I think it was either Claire Davis or Dennis Held who first told me about *Talking River Review*. They were both students and friends of mine at the University of Montana. One of them, I think, invited me to send poems. I was directing the MFA writing program at UM at the time. I was overwhelmed with academic work, but also writing poems. I had two books come out in 1992, and I was hard at work on another book. In 1991, James Hepworth at Confluence Press had published my book *The Morning Horse*. The two poems of mine in that first issue of *TRR* represent the bright side and the dark side of writing for me at the time. The poem “Green” came out of a research trip through the Southwest that resulted in lots of poems and good memories. I traveled around Arizona and New Mexico visiting such places as Chaco Canyon, Canyon de Chelly, and Wupatki. I had been a poet-in-residence on the Navajo reservation and at the Hopi Mesas years earlier, so I got to visit old friends and revisit some places I love. The other poem, “The Missionaries of Easy Despair,” a poem I had completely forgotten until you sent it to me, and which I never included in a book, came out of some unpleasant faculty meetings in which, as best I can remember, there was much whining and infighting that made a gloomy winter all the more gloomy. But 1994 was, I think, a good year for literary journals. Much excellent writing was published in small magazines and journals; in fact, most of the best writing shows up first in journals and magazines with relatively small subscription lists. Writers are encouraged by the most modest of successes. It only takes a few real readers to make writers feel like they aren’t wasting their time. So, small magazines and journals, print or online, are crucial to the growth of good writing, which we will eventually call Literature.

CLAIRE DAVIS: I was finishing up work as Director of The Hells Gate Literary Arts Center for the state of Montana. I was also packing up a household for a move to Lewiston where I was to start a new job that fall as an adjunct faculty at LCSC. While I was in graduate school, poet and LCSC faculty member Robert Wrigley was a visiting writer at the University of Montana in Missoula. After he returned to LCSC I heard that he and fellow faculty, along with a small group of students, were starting up a new literary magazine. When they asked if I had a story available, I jumped at the opportunity to submit a piece—I was still a pretty new writer, just a handful of publications at that time.

I’d forgotten all about that story [“The Company of Strangers,” published in *TRR*’s first issue] until you brought it up. I remember, at the time, I was pretty taken with it. Now? As is the case with any art, my writing style, subject matter, and perceptions on life have changed significantly since that time, but I’m still happy with the story. It was a good representation of a young writer, just setting out in the publishing world.

I’d had some success with my short stories in literary magazines. I had work published in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *CutBank*, as well as a Pushcart prize and inclusion in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology* for my story “Grounded.” I’d also won an AWP Intro award for poetry. Even so, publishing was still a very new world to me, and I had just started work on my

first novel *Winter Range*. Add to that the move from Missoula to Lewiston for a job as adjunct and it was a pretty daunting and exciting time. But once in Lewiston, working alongside writers Bob Wrigley, Mary Clearman Blew, Kim Barnes, Dennis Held, and Bill Johnson made for a dynamic writing community. All of us were working hard on the new magazine and publishing program. We saw it as a step toward making LCSC a vital center for creative writing in the Pacific Northwest.

Editorial Process

Where did the name Talking River Review come from?

JASON FALES: Margo Aragon (now deceased) came up with the title for *TRR*. She was a member of the original editorial team. We were leaning on resurrecting Keith Browning's literary magazine, *The Slackwater Review*, so we knew we wanted some reference to the rivers that give the LC valley its power (spiritual and electrical).

JAMES HART: I recall a brief discussion of the petroglyphs along the river above Hells Gate Park as the source of the name. In my mind the name fit this place in many ways, and to us was more than a little homage to the many thousand years of people living here before us.

Can you talk about putting together that first issue?

ROBERT WRIGLEY: Since it was student-generated, you had to have good, talented, energetic and driven students to keep picking up the ball. Writing attracts attention, and it's cheap. No labs, no equipment to speak of; people who mostly do it for love and attract other people who do it for love. But someone's got to be at the heart; someone (and by this, I mean a faculty member) needs to be the wheel that drives the machine made of words.

JAMES HART: Grand Poobah, Loyal Order of Creative Writing Students, Lodge '95, all six or so of us. Me, Margo Aragon, Jason Fales, Leslie Ovard, Bob Johnson, Zack Garner, and a few other folks in looser orbits around us, [comprised] the unofficial LCSC "writing program." Margo and I were "co-editors," Jason and Leslie, if I recall correctly, were "assistant" poetry and prose editors, though both were in the thick of it, as much as we were. I got the job as the project was my idea, and I got the money from the LCSC administration and student government, having intensively lobbied then-student body president Kadduce Addison for the funding.

[The process took] about six months of schmoozing, politics, many, many office visits (I got to know the LCSC Administration very well!) and some personal arm-twisting (that is, my wife, a full-time criminal justice/social work major at LCSC, agreed to use her considerable computer skills to save us design, format, and typesetting costs, as I recall we had about \$2000 for the first issue). I wrote many, many letters/made calls to writers I knew and those I had only heard of, soliciting work. We were nobodies in the field, a non-entity, and small-ball literary journals had/have the life span of caddisflies, so I had to make the case to these folks, some who were well-published, well-known academic poets and otherwise, to offer us some decent work. All with the firm stance that we would not publish just anything because your last book was a

National Book Award finalist. So, we (Jason, Margo, Leslie and I) gathered submissions, read seriously, got together multiple times to make our respective cases about what should get in and what shouldn't.

Then, once we decided that, we had to start designing the first issue, think about cover art, style, fonts, layouts, the basic nuts and bolts of book production. We also had to think about money, as we had a limited amount. We went with UI's print shop as they gave a far better deal than local commercial printers we asked for bids. I think the first printing cost about \$1500 for, oh, I can't recall, 1000 copies? Maybe. I remember we wanted to have several hundred just to send out cold to various presses, programs, writers, administrators, politicians, friends, and families. Every LCSC student who wanted one could get one (they paid for it). It took us about a year from idea to product; the actual publication process described above was about four months or so. The hardest part was writing rejection letters, which I took on, including rejections to several well-established writers who had probably wisely sent their best work elsewhere. (You know, small liberal arts college senior with six published poems tells poet with five award-winning books, thanks so much but no thanks)

[The composition and layout] were pretty basic, as we just wanted to get the thing out before we all graduated; all of us were applying to graduate writing programs, busy with finishing our LCSC degree requirements. We lucked out on finding Kristin Mitchell and her awesome linoleum cuts for the cover and body; she just showed up one day, and I said, "Gold! That was easy! Moving on ..." That cover art was a no-brainer, even I knew it right away. The image behind our/my vision was basically UM's literary mag, *CutBank*, as a model of sorts.

JASON FALES: The process was a bit fitful. We had to get the support of the English department, had to secure some kind of funding, had to prove that it was something more than the four of us would benefit from. Jim took the lead on a lot of that, and we had support from our creative writing professors. We put out solicitations in other literary magazines and notified creative writing professors at all the programs we could. Then we had to find someone to print it for very little money. The local press wanted nothing to do with the project, and we eventually went with the print shop at the University of Idaho. Back then, we received hard copies of all the work. That meant hand-typing it into a document that would become the magazine on an ancient Mac. In subsequent years, we attempted to use Adobe PageMaker and scan stories and poems into a document, but that was hit and miss at best, so we did a lot of it by hand. All the contributors got a copy, several universities were sent copies, and we delivered many copies to bookstores in Idaho and Montana.

LESLIE OVARD: I could tell one of the things that would keep the journal relevant was how it kept up with the times and how it modeled integration of the arts. From the second issue forward, the journal began integrating photography (old and new). I think it moved to incorporating student artwork. Now I wonder about video and digital versions of the journal. I have experienced the reduction of a caring audience who considered words to be the artistic medium. (Maybe I am with the wrong people.) Preparing a manuscript for printing was a challenge that would be taken care of easily today. I remember Claire Davis showing me how to use the typesetting software and "window shades." I remember learning (the hard way) about document control. I remember being turned away at the University of Idaho press because the *TRR* manuscript wasn't ready for printing yet. Once we had the content, it was a challenge getting it ready to print.

We had a very strong community of writers and established voices who were doing what they could to help us succeed. They were the reason *TRR* launched so successfully. I could be simplistic and say that people were really reading for the established writers, who were kind by letting our work appear beside theirs. While I think there is some truth to that, it also gave a credence to the work we were doing as artists. Mary Blew once said it is important that we look around and help others up because someone helped us up. That made certain it went on. I think this is still true of college literary magazines—they are part of a writer’s developmental journey.

RAY ESPARSEN: As art director, the dominant strategy was one of collaboration and consensus. This is to say that we explored how story and image could occupy the same psychological territory. But more important, we took seriously the proposition that we were enlarging and improving the fluidity of the present. We believed that we were strengthening the purpose of LCSC and doing important work and asserting our future through self-control.

[On the art featured in the first issue]: Two students, Barbara Clark and Brandi Miller, were memorable. Barbara Clark was a non-traditional student that painted very precise and complex self-portraits, and I recall that her husband crafted beautiful and masterful handmade fishing poles. The other student was a freshman named Brandi Miller. She illustrated a small plaster of Paris tablet with an image of Adam and Eve kissing; it was wonderful. In retrospect I think Barbara Clark and Brandi Miller were quite unique in that both were able to make objects that exemplified visual literacy and aesthetic reasoning.

DENNIS HELD: I recall one meeting at Jim Hart and Gail Price’s house, at the end of the selection process. I believe Jason Fales drove me out there in that copper-colored muscle car of his. (A 1971 Chevelle?) The decisions had been made, as far as which pieces would be included, in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and the two novel excerpts. There were also seven different woodcuts to fold into the mix. Eventually, we sorted everything out, and put it all on the floor: poetry over here, and the prose over there. We came up with an order that made sense, in which we tried to put about seven poems between the prose pieces. Each poetry section would have something of an emotional arc within the section, something to hold it together; and the last poem in the section would suggest something, a theme or image, that appeared in the prose that followed. (That was the theory, anyway.) The artwork appeared just before the prose. All in all, it came together pretty well, after a bit of wailing and tooth-gnashing.

Many of the copies went to the contributors, and we spread them around on campus. It was always a struggle to recruit subscribers; we offered a year’s free subscription to the authors we published, and many of them kept subscribing for quite a while, so that helped. But for me, one of the most important parts of the process was giving the writers—especially the student writers—a boost at a time that might matter in their lives.

I wrote a long article for *Poets & Writers* magazine about the process of publishing *TRR*. I don't have it at hand, at the moment, but I'll summarize: At first, we solicited work from well-known writers, LCSC students, and anyone else we could think of. The first issue is a testament to the success of that call for submissions. After that, we put ads into writing-related magazines. *Poets & Writers* allowed free or inexpensive ads for years, and that was always the best source of new material. We’d receive hundreds of submissions from those open calls, and while most of it was “not suitable for our needs at this time,” we got a lot of good work over the transom. In 1999, I was selected to represent *TRR* at a Literary Journal Institute conference in Atlanta and

wrote an article about that trip for *Poets & Writers* that appeared in the July-August 1999 issue. That seemed like something of a turning point, in terms of *TRR* receiving national attention.

As for the selection process, as outlined in the article for *P&W*: with support from the dean's office, we grew the publishing arts program to include classes up to the 400 level. Students were charged with taking home pre-screened packets of prose or poetry, depending on the board they served on. Claire did a lot of work running those fiction boards, and I. After some debate, manuscripts were sorted into a yes/no/maybe pile, with most of the better work simply held over as a "maybe." At the end of the semester, there was a final meeting, at which students—steered perhaps by the faculty, but with free rein—chose the final work that would be represented in the magazine. Along the way, there were smaller editing assignments and the like, but most of the real class work done was in requiring students to formulate and articulate their own ideas about what makes a good piece of writing. And I was nervous at first, but we lost very few manuscripts over the course of the *TRR*'s lifetime. It became part of the magazine's unspoken code of ethics, I think.

Community Reception

How was that first issue received, and why was it significant?

JASON FALES: I was at a party outside Missoula when we showed off the first issue. It was a party full of creative writers. David James Duncan was there doling out free basketball lessons. As I remember, the issue was well received, especially by the contributors. We wanted to create a magazine that published student work alongside professionals, and we had done that. It had a Northwest vibe, because most of the contributors were from the Northwest—either running or studying in creative writing programs. I think the mucky mucks in the English program at LC were surprised we got it done and actually published. Their surprise then turned into opportunism, and they created a class around publishing the magazine. Some of us were not pleased with idea of the magazine being usurped, but it meant more money and more stability, and it allowed us to improve the design and layout of subsequent issues. I was young. That was the first of many such compromises I've made in the name of money and stability. It's no way to live, but it makes survival a hell of a lot easier.

At that time, only larger universities were publishing journals—the University of Washington, the University of Montana, even the University of Idaho. For the most part, it was difficult for a student writer to break in and get work published. I think we created a journal that strove to publish student work, and it became important very quickly. We reached out to the extended community of writers we all knew—a lot of whom had been students of Wrigley's or Mary's or Claire's. Some of them had studied with Greg Pape and even William Kittredge. Those writers instantly recognized that we were nurturing community. That's what writing literature is all about, and it's what *TRR* is all about at its core.

I remember meeting Jim Crumley and Bill Kittredge in Missoula and passing around a bottle of Dom Perignon like it was Boone's Farm. I remember going fly fishing with Greg Pape and using a 1/8 oz rooster tail to catch two huge browns out of the Bitterroot. I remember hanging out with Pattiann Rogers, Terry Tempest Williams, Rick Bass, David James Duncan, Barry Lopez—all of whom came to LC to either do readings or to deliver the annual Wallace Stegner Lecture. Because of the LC community, I met Edward Hirsch, who then recruited me to

study at the University of Houston. Wrigley, Kim, Mary and Claire allowed us to join a much larger community of American writers, and those writers often cared for us and our work. *TRR* was a big part of that, because it allowed us to reciprocate, to do some nurturing of community ourselves.

JAMES HART: You know, I was so busy graduating and applying to writing programs and taking the GRE that I just never paid much attention to how that first issue was received. I suppose the fact that *TRR* is still here after 25 years (!?) suggests people liked the work, and the idea of LCSC having such a thing. I had a vague, warm fuzzy idea that we were offering a sort of small gift to the place that made us into better, smarter, more graceful human beings, as much as I was trying to bolster my own resume by doing something so foolish and grandiose.

LESLIE OVARD: My community (writers, students in the writing programs, others who cared about the written word) were very happy to see *TRR* come forth. It was supported by a strong writing community and followed the closure of *The Slackwater Review*.

DENNIS HELD: What did that mean for a school the size of LCSC to support a magazine of that caliber? I may be biased, but I think it meant—and means—a lot, especially to the students whose work is held up in the same regard as that of more well-known authors. As for challenges: I'll leave that to the sands of time to sort out. Ahem. There were always difficulties: with funding, with deadlines, with layout and printing and production. But it was always worth the struggle. My work with the *TRR* is one of the things I'm most proud of, as I look back over my life.

CLAIRE DAVIS: [*TRR*] was an indication of LCSC's commitment to creating a writing program of substance. This was a college willing to put energy and resources to further the literary arts and its artists. In addition, it was the first step toward a BFA in creative writing—a dream that the creative writing faculty, Robert Wrigley, Mary Clearman Blew, Kim Barnes, William Johnson, Dennis Held and myself were working to bring to life. A literary magazine is an ambitious undertaking—requiring enormous energy and long hours for both faculty and students. But in the end, it was the right thing to do. It has been an essential part of the publishing arts program, training students in the art of editing, design, marketing, and publishing. The magazine has also served as a worthy representative of Lewis-Clark State College across the region and nation, and has, in fact, published a number of new writers (some of our students among them) alongside nationally and internationally recognized writers.

RON MCFARLAND: These observations lead directly to the value of such a magazine for an English department, and for the host institution as well, although the latter value is not often enough acknowledged. Especially if the department has a creative writing track, giving interested students an opportunity to develop their critical faculties in a hands-on way cannot be overestimated. Moreover, especially if that magazine maintains high editorial and publication standards, as *Fugue* and *Talking River* have done, it becomes a visible, tangible product in which the school and the program can take pride.

TIM SPROUL: As a literary force, LCSC fights above its weight. Tradition and poetic curiosity flow together at LCSC like the confluence of the Snake and the Clearwater.

III. DOWNSTREAM CONSIDERATIONS: *TRR* and The Future

How has the landscape of literary journals changed over the past 25 years, why are these journals still important today, and where do you see them going in the next 25 years?

CHRIS NORDEN: I don't have very precise answers, except to say it makes a big difference to students to have a journal they can work on and perhaps publish in, especially if it's done professionally and also includes notable and/or famous writers' work alongside good quality student work, as was certainly the case with *TRR*. That the journal is still publishing full-strength is a marvel, and an important part of why LCSC is an outstanding example of what a regional public college can be and do. Worth mentioning is *TRR*'s role in helping to define and indeed create a new model for what Western US writing can look like, more than just the Montana-centric nostalgic emphasis on the good old days, whose-ever those were.

CLAIRE DAVIS: Most of the major presses, the New York publishers for example, tend to publish only the proven writers, and much, if not most, of their selection process is market driven. In that arena, literary merit is not always a priority. The small literary presses, however, have long been the champion of the art, taking risks, fostering not only the mature literary writers, but also affording venues for new writers. It's where people passionate about the art of the word, writers and readers, are able to enter into a world of ideas, and, if they are dedicated enough to pursue the art, join in the dialogue among writers, past and present, that has been going on since the dawn of books.

It seems to me literary journals have fared quite well. Many of the long-established journals are still up and running but are now joined by numerous new journals that produce online editions exclusively. Most journals have adapted to the digital world, accepting online submissions, and a significant number now publish both online and in print as well. I confess, I still prefer the print editions. There's nothing quite like holding the journal in hand and being able to share it with friends and family.

MARY CLEARMAN BLEW: Literary journals typically are short-lived. They take a lot of time and provide little financial reward, and they are hard to keep track of. I myself don't try to keep track, but respond when an editor at, say, *High Desert Journal*, asks me for a submission. They are important because they provide an opening for young and beginning writers to showcase their work and, hopefully, attract the attention of a literary agent as well as other writers.

RON MCFARLAND: The identity of the lit mag has changed considerably over the past 25 years and will likely continue to change, particularly in the direction of online publication. Who would've guessed that so prestigious a magazine as the *Northwest Review*, out of the University of Oregon, would lapse (in 2011, after more than 50 years)? Or that *Poetry Northwest*, long identified with the University of Washington, where Carolyn Kizer and David Wagoner founded

it in 1959, would now be operating under a different aegis? Or that *Shenandoah*, a highly respected literary magazine out of Washington and Lee University (started up in 1950), would cease its hard copy publication and go online? At any rate, I suspect the future of literary magazines will be to go to online only publication, or at least to limit hard copy issues to one a year, probably accompanied by an expanded online presence. I'm seeing a lot of this already. Personally, by the way, I have mixed emotions about the online biz. Old-fashioned boy that I am, I still prefer to hold the book in my paws, but I've had a few poems and prose pieces published online in recent years, and that's okay, too. One problem with the online biz (as I've just called it) is that editors might ease up some when it comes to standards. When you're limited to, say, 150 pages for an issue, you think twice before accepting that 30-page piece of prose or the extra ten or a dozen poems, but if the magazine exists online, you can afford to be, let's say, more generous.

ROBERT WRIGLEY: The internet is eating the world. A lot of the most interesting journals are digital only. I recall thinking that such journals were too ephemeral; I was wrong. Paper rots, burns, etc. The internet swallows and never exactly digests. And of course, along with the military and sports, the arts—all of them—have been leading the way into American diversity and will continue to. And should.

[Literary journals are] like the cave-guy carrying the burning ember in "Quest for Fire." They introduce new voices; they're like dandelions that come up in the cracks of sidewalks and demonstrate that they are more powerful and more beautiful than the sidewalks.

KIM BARNES: What I love about publishing online is how you can send your work out into the world and know by people's response that you have reached them. Language and story are communal, and literary journals are how we speak to one another via our art. They are like communal love letters, gifts and acceptances—a precious and vital exchange.

TIM SPROUL: With a more unexpected interplay between various poetic stylings, confessionals, reportage, visual arts and rap, the literary journal today is a more tasty, cultural stew. Literary journals today feel more connected to the street, a welcome response to the onslaught of digital publishing and social media overload. Literary nerds often bemoan online literary publishing. I get it. I love ink too! I love the toothy feel of nice paper. But digital culture and social media have democratized literature. And that's cool.

I never thought I'd see the day, but I now publish my poems on Instagram, accompanied by photos or video or guitars and drums. I can connect with friends and acquaintances in Europe, Cambodia, even Lenore, Idaho. I get responses to the poems immediately from far afield. I imagine my world of digital oddballs meeting for the first time in a house held together by poetry. With analog and digital platforms working together, we are constantly building and rebuilding poetry anew.

And yet, despite our digitally obsessed, thumb-swiping, ADD tendencies, a poem must stand on its own, steeped in the music of one's own voice. Nothing can replace the physical act of speaking a poem with the body in the presence of another person in a shared space.

NEIDE MESSER: The internet has changed the option for both readers and writers since 1994, which suits many people: More opportunities for publication, broader audience, and more cost

effective. But I still like a book in my hands now and then. I look forward to opening future issues of *TRR*.

MATT YURDANA: I think they're still important because they hold a space for new voices and new perspectives, and I believe that's always a good thing. It doesn't matter if the journal is thematic (for example, sci-fi or jazz-related literature), or if it has a more general appeal, the beauty is in finding that new voice that resonates with you.

I think journals allow for time and space outside of what is normal in our days. Sometimes it's less about approach or aesthetic. Sometimes it's more important to simply read the words of other people who are out in the world exploring or grappling in the same way that you are. I'd like to think that literary journals will continue to find new niches and thrive on new platforms. I don't know what that looks like, but I think accessibility will be important. Maybe shareability will be important? Maybe some will start to blend literature with improv or music or painting? Maybe *TRR* will be a shining example 25 years from now?

KENT ANDERSON: I can only speak to my own experience, and [literary journals] were important to me back then as a way to determine if my writing was good enough to keep on with it. The next 25 years, in every way, is an enigma wrapped in mystery.

RAY ESPARSEN: As is often said the archetypal hero makes order out of chaos. So, it holds true for any institution that transmits literary wisdom or is in the business cultivating emissaries. A literary journal is a concert fortress of strength; it represents an adaptation of sophisticated behavior and tells the community we value intellectual transcendences. The 25th anniversary of *Talking River Review* is the embodiment of faith in cooperative and competitive endeavor.

Looking back on 25 years of academic life gives me angst. Perhaps I believe that for the first time in human history we are transforming the self beyond recognition. Technology, moral ecology, willful depravities and the fundamental trajectory of how to live a meaningful life is collapsing under the weight of blind existential relativism. At present, American polity and its inner anarchy is at odds with the basic functions of a liberal arts education. So, in the long run we are in danger of losing that which eons of history has professed to us, that we are seriously flawed human beings full of discordant opinions, petty jealousies and protracted wars. Despite modernists' nihilist inclinations I believe that we are in a content state of evolutionary perfection. Our capacities to move beyond simple-minded superstition and selfishness is extraordinary. The manifestation of a collaborative education has been and continues to be the only social equilibrium that presupposes an individual autonomy.

The role of art in a literary magazine implies a relationship of objective similarities. Art in a literary magazine is a bridge that connects what is experienced and comprehended and what remains unrepresentable or eternally unknown.

At present, I think the most profound change in literary journalism, reporting and commenting has become a bit circumscribed. The politicization of self-determination, the infusion of nationalism, the idea that books, periodicals, and libraries of information can be reduced to technological acumen is a Darwinian nightmare. Literary journalism greatness is in its ability to relate the human condition to its readers without colliding into the axiom of political correctness.

SIDNER LARSON: I have been mainly involved with university presses the last few years and do hope literary journals are keeping on keeping on; they were so very important to my career. Without the unique, regional platforms, new and important voices simply do not have a place to emerge. Such emergence is also very important in terms of balancing the domination of other publishing platforms by money-related concerns—I sometimes despair at seeing the same writers published in certain venues year after year.

LESLIE OVARD: During the launch of *TRR*, there were fewer literary journals being printed, and those that were, were largely carried on by the passion of their editors (I think of Rick Ardinger and Penny Reedy). When critical editors and audiences went away, so also did the journals that represented their community. Maybe that is what has changed most through the years—the way they represent and are consumed by community. I still buy journals periodically, but for their content (no subscriptions). I relocated and did not establish myself with the writing community here. (Maybe I was spoiled by the caliber of writers I rubbed shoulders with there.) I did some university work on a literary journal and poetry as an art form at ISU, but it was never the same as LCSC. I worked on a literary tabloid for regional writers (with Keith Browning). It ran for a couple of years and the founding members stopped meeting and publishing. It is my impression that this situation still exists.

I believe it is immensely important that literary journals are still in existence. Producing them provides a source of “real world” experience and transferrable skills. They can also legitimize the field for those who choose to go that direction. They provide a professional leg up. They also mirror what we are experiencing as a race.

Because I lived through an era that I feared there would not be an audience, I see that they are here to stay. I also see them as cyclical and mirrors of the times they exist—so maybe more social media posts or video elements can become part of the experience. The journal may be printed in paper form only once per year and the price could increase. It will be benefitted greatly by the quality of stories told, and the invitation to and receipt of the work of established literary voices. Maybe they can be more global. One thing that I sorely miss is the sense of community that I had while at LCSC and on *TRR*. Communities of practice were just getting started 25 years ago and we were just beginning to think of sustainability. These were both ideas we were living already with Native American philosophies and because the writing community was so strong.

DENNIS HELD: To tell you the truth, I'm still pleasantly surprised when I get a hard copy of the *Indiana Review* in my—wait for it—mailbox, as I did this week. (I sent them some work a while ago and get free copies.) I like to hold a book in my hands. And at first, when the Internet was new, I didn't care much for the ephemeral nature of online-only “magazines.” (See what I did with the quote marks there? I was a snob.) But eventually, I came around. In the last ten years, I've published poetry and book reviews at terrain.org, an online-only journal that is a model for thoughtful engagement between readers and writers.

As for 25 years from now: who knows? There may soon come a time when inexpensive Internet access becomes a thing of the past and only the wealthy will be able to use it freely and everyone will have to drop their cell phones in the mud and we'll all have to go back to craft guilds and make our own paper and print books on it what do you know? Everything gets better! Well, probably not, but we can dream.

You kids get off of my lawn!

WILLIAM JOHNSON: *Talking River's* twenty-fifth anniversary [is] the latest venue to reveal what writing and publishing have meant to the college, Lewiston, and the world beyond. I arrived in town as a teacher, with a hand in scholarship. My deep love was poetry, but as yet I had neither the courage nor foresight to recognize what it would ask of me. When Keith Browning, the founder of Confluence and *Slackwater*, asked me to help out with the press, I was surprised to learn he had published chapbooks and full-length collections, mostly poetry, of writers all over the northwest, many of them from Idaho. The small room adjacent to Keith's office became a working press, with light-tables for *actual* cutting and pasting, and a medieval word processor the size of a file-cabinet his wife Shirley cajoled into printing text. I was exhilarated. This was a place where living breathing writers were given a public printable voice.

Living, working, and writing here has been a deep gift. I will always be grateful to the college, friends, fellow writers, and especially the students who made the good things even better. Beyond that, like everything else, talk of origins, of how and why we're here, and what we do, arrives at the confluence of a deeper mystery. As a friend and writer dying of cancer told me not long ago, "There are things more important than writing." If there's a last word in this current, it may belong to the Oregon writer William Stafford, whose poem "Ask Me" ends with cryptic depth: "what the river says, that is what I say."