Inside This Issue

Alumni editors muse about their lit mags

By Clara Jeske
A Pushcart Prize for a poem. The joy of publishing new writers. The pride in claiming nearly two decades of continuous publication. These are reasons that PRWR alumni who’ve founded and edit literary journals continue to champion literary art.

We asked the editors of Five on the Fifth, Ligeia, and jmww about what they’ve learned and how they’ve succeeded on their journeys from PRWR to publishing. To read their answers, continue to page 3.

Welcome back, Collins
Kristina Collins, 2009, returns this Fall to teach exposition course

By Clara Jeske
Kristina Collins was raised by her grandparents, both of whom were unable to finish high school as they worked and cared for their families. Consequently, they struggled to read.

Watching her grandfather then learn to read as an older man instilled in Collins a lifelong passion for literacy and the written word. “Literacy has always been in my heart,” she says. “It’s very empowering when you can read and write.”

Collins, a 2009 PRWR graduate, will return this coming Fall as an adjunct instructor to teach PRWR 613, Theory of Exposition. She also works as the Literacy Division Director of Loyola University’s Clinical Center. The literacy clinic serves children from kindergarten...
Kristina Collins (cont.)

through eighth grade, matching them with students in Loyola’s reading specialist master’s program who offer tutoring and workshops in vocabulary, phonics, reading comprehension, and more.

It’s very empowering when you can read and write.

PRWR 613 will be a hybrid course, part online and part in-person. Collins plans to teach contemporary writing by authors such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, bell hooks, and D. Watkins, and relate the writing to principles contained in classical rhetoric. These literary writers build on rhetorical techniques that date back as far as Aristotle, and Collins hopes their writing will help students find new, accessible ways to study age-old concepts.

“I hope to bring a pragmatic approach,” she says of PRWR 613. Exposition, she says, is the art of explanation. In her class, she wants students to examine how writers explain their experiences of the world and to examine writing through different critical lenses. The “theory” part of the course, she says, will focus on specific techniques authors use to explain themselves.

Prior to teaching elementary and middle school, Collins worked with adults who were earning their high school diplomas. When she began teaching children, she says, “that passion bloomed.” She takes pride in empowering youth through reading and writing.

“LGBT voices, female voices—I want people to see that intersection point,” Collins says. Writing does not exist in isolation but is intertwined with an author’s sense of self, she says, and she will encourage her students to think critically about the roles identities play in literature.

“I love teaching, I love writing,” Collins says. “The power of the written word is incredible.” The aspects of that power she most wants to explore with students? “How do we create language and writing,” she says, “and how do we interact with them?”
**Five on the Fifth**

Mahdis Marzooghian: editor-in-chief, class of 2015

Mary-Anne Nelligan: co-editor in chief, class of 2014

**Founding year?**
2015

**Give us three words to describe your magazine’s aesthetic.**
Nelligan: Simple, clean, and refined.

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**How did your time in PRWR help you get a start in publishing?**
Nelligan: As writers ourselves, we really came to understand and experience the challenges of getting published. The PRWR program not only prepared us for that but also offered resources and guidance to help us.

Additionally, the PRWR program—especially the workshop classes—helped shape us into better, more experienced writers and editors. Ultimately, we wanted to create a space and a community where other new writers could get their work published and feel welcome. It was frustrating as a new writer to deal with the submitting and publication process, and it was really difficult to find a space that made us feel welcome as new writers. Getting rejected is hard enough. So then we thought, “Why not create that space ourselves?”

Who has that time?
We also try to be as welcoming and encouraging as possible to new writers. Some lit mags can be intimidating to submit to, especially for a new writer who’s never been published before or hasn’t been published often. We’ve published a number of pieces by really outstanding new writers who’ve told us FOTF is the first place that published them, and there’s no better feeling or accomplishment than that.

"Why not create that space ourselves?"

**What advice do you have for PRWR students about the publishing world?**
Nelligan: We suggest that all PRWR students who are interested in being published join a writers group that meets and workshops regularly. It’s so important to be around individuals who support your work and actually help to make it better. We’d also suggest that you not get discouraged after receiving rejections and to not take it personally!

Also, before submitting to a magazine, briefly take the time to become familiar with the type of work that specific magazine publishes in order to see if your work fits with their vision. This way, you can keep a running list of go-to magazines you can submit to every time you have a piece ready to go out into the world.

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**What types of work and genres do you publish?**
Marzooghian: We publish 5 pieces in the following genres: general fiction, flash fiction, science fiction/fantasy, horror, and nonfiction on the fifth of every month. Hence our name.

**What about Five on the Fifth makes you most proud?**
Marzooghian: Our response time. We try to send out acceptance and rejection emails to writers pretty quickly and don’t make them wait for months to hear if their work’s been published.
Ligeia
Matt Lee: fiction/nonfiction, class of 2020
Sean Sam: fiction/nonfiction, class of 2019
Ashley Wagner: poetry, class of 2020

Founding year?
2019

Give us three words to describe your magazine’s aesthetic.
Wagner: Eccentric, gritty, gothic.

What types of work and genres do you publish?
Lee: We publish poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, interviews, reviews, and artwork. We gravitate towards genre-bending work, literary slipstream, magical realism, experimental lit, etc.

How did your time in PRWR help you get a start in publishing?
Lee: Ligeia wouldn’t exist without PRWR. The three of us met during our time in the program. Between faculty, students, and alumni, there’s a huge network of writers we were able to connect with. Professor Vanasco gave us loads of invaluable guidance as well. She helped us flesh out a lot of our ideas when we were first conceptualizing the project.

Sam: Jeannie Vanasco has been our spiritual advisor. Probably, the most important part is the other students. Get to know them, and you can do great things together.

What about Ligeia makes you most proud?
Lee: Besides getting to publish some of the best writers in the game, I think one of our proudest achievements has been seeing Ligeia contributor Esther Ra featured in the Pushcart Prize XLV Best of the Small Presses anthology. Seeing our name next to The Paris Review was a trip.

Wagner: I’m just proud that people really seem to like it. We were initially concerned that the magazine wouldn’t make it, would fizzle out within the year, but our worries were proven groundless in a fierce way. Submissions have skyrocketed from our second issue to now. You can see that just in the sheer number of pieces we crammed into Issue 6.

We have amassed quite a number of fans and repeat submitters...We are part of a tight community of small literary magazines that promote each other and uplift their writers’ successes. Readers really do seem to enjoy the content we are creating and hosting. It’s incredible!

What advice do you have for PRWR students about the publishing world?
Sam: The important people in the publishing world are not smarter or more capable than you. The majority of great writers will never be recognized on the street. Publishing is about connecting with people who have secret egos but also nervous conditions and pitiful upper body strength. Don’t be afraid to reach out to them.

Wagner: Connect with people! Writers and publishers really aren’t as elusive as they may seem. Most everyone’s on Twitter. Say hello!
“jmww
Jen Michalski, founding editor, class of 1996

Founding year?
2004

Give us three words to describe your magazine’s aesthetic.
Weird, introspective, accessible.

What types of work and genres do you publish?
Flash fiction (< 1500 words), fiction (< 3000 words), poetry, creative nonfiction (< 3000 words), interviews

What did you take from your time in PRWR that still pertains to your work in literary publishing?
I really enjoyed the workshop element of the program. Part of starting jmww after I graduated was as a result of missing the weekly camaraderie, talking about each other’s writing, and exchanging opportunities. I also liked that my professors were down-to-earth and were generous with their advice and time.

What about jmww makes you most proud?
I’m proud of a lot of things! Our longevity, our outreach to students…the awards that writers we’ve published have received for that work, our place in the publishing community. Mostly, though, I’m proud that I could do it. As a writer, I tend to be introverted, and the thought that I created this journal out of nothing, really

(back in the day, very basic HTML and an Excel spreadsheet for submissions), and that we’ve published so many stories, in print and online formats, attended so many conferences…and been instrumental in other writer’s lives—it still feels very surreal to me. The lesson of course, being—if I can do it, then anybody can.

What advice do you have for PRWR students about the publishing world?
Don’t be afraid to ask for advice—the worst someone can say is no, and if you ask from a place of sincerity and humility, most people will be more than happy to help. Also, rejection is very real, and it’ll never stop, regardless of what level you’re at in your career (unless you’re Stephen King, maybe). It’s important to have not only a thick skin but also a good support system, whether it’s a spouse or a family member or writing group. I’ve gotten rejections that took days to shake the sting off, and it’s good to know that someone out there knows how that feels.

Finally, be generous with your time in the community. The person who only wants advice, who only wants their work read and published, who only connects with other writers when they need a favor—most writers can see that person a mile away and adjust accordingly.

Don’t be afraid to ask for advice—the worst someone can say is no.

Your participation in the community should be a joy and selfless, not transactional. We are real people, and we’re reading and discussing your stories, and although we can’t respond personally to every submission, we do try to include a bit of feedback when we reject a piece. But know that every story is read and discussed by at least two editors, often more. We’d love to see your work!

Jen Michalski
Reiner's new book challenges traditional models of masculinity

by Briana Richert

As Andrew Reiner read *A River Runs Through It* on a crowded airplane, his fellow passengers stared uncomfortably when he began sobbing at an emotional scene.

“I thought, ‘I’m not going to wipe my tears away,’” says Reiner, who was in his twenties then. “‘I don’t think I should be embarrassed by this.’”

Reiner, who graduated from PRWR in 1992 and is now a TU professor, says this moment made him realize his “personal crusade” to challenge the social stigma against men expressing their emotions. Later, he says, this crusade gathered momentum with the birth of his son, Macallah. Reiner says he considered how he might raise an emotionally stable young boy. He pushed himself to look deeper into his perception of masculinity.


Reiner published his first article on healthy masculinity in the *New York Times* in 2016, five years after Macallah’s birth. “You always dream that you’re going to have this piece published, it’s going to go viral, and suddenly all these doors are going to start opening for you,” says Reiner. “And that was what happened.” Journalists started contacting him for quotes about masculinity. Literary agents reached out about pursuing the topic as a book.

To formulate ideas and build his expertise on the subject, Reiner spent six months researching similar work and interviewing experts on masculinity. He interviewed nearly 200 people, including groups of boys and men in different stages on their path toward healthy manhood. But Reiner says the real magic was in the writing.

“Although researching is great,” says Reiner, “it’s when you do the writing that suddenly all these things are percolating up, all these insights and all these observations that you didn't necessarily know were down inside of you.”

As a Towson University professor, Reiner says, he used classwork as a way to build a foundation for the book. In the Honors College seminar he created, “The Changing Face of Masculinity,” Reiner holds an open dialogue with his students. He says that listening to student perspectives helps him understand perceptions of masculinity and how they might progress.

While he was a PRWR student, Reiner says, he tried to absorb everything his professors had to offer. “That for me was invaluable in terms of learning how to really develop the technical chops, the nuts and bolts as a writer and editor,” says Reiner. “Had I not gone through that program, it would have taken me much longer to get to the point where I was after only two years in the PRWR program.”

After two and a half years of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic made publishing the book bittersweet. Reiner says he was disappointed that he couldn’t experience an in-person celebration or book tour. “But on the flip side of that,” he says, “it’s really helping me become a lot more resilient as a writer. Because one of the things I’m learning, by the seat of my pants, is that there’s always going to be something to throw a curve just when you think you’re where you need to be.”

Since the book’s release, Reiner has published five more articles on healthy masculinity. He also starred
An artist's reflections
The trials and joys of animating The Illustrated PRWR

By Briana Richert

It’s Fall 2020, and I’m in the first meeting of my graduate assistantship. From the confinement of my four-sided Zoom square, I offer to create an animated video interview series for PRWR.

It’ll be fun, I think. It’s a way to transcend the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cartoons don’t need to wear masks or stay trapped in restrictive, poorly-lit Zoom boxes. This would also merge my film background with PRWR. It would provide a happy return to video-making after the depressing final semester of undergrad—my canceled senior film, my diploma in the mail. But my only attempt at digital animation ran a mere one minute and 16 seconds. Could I jump from that to a whole animation series?

The project receives the green light, and I give it a shot.

I find a picture of the first interviewee. The picture becomes a reference to guide me in creating the perfect design for the project. With the drawing app on my iPad, I test many ideas, from realism to Picasso-like cubism. The final design looks messy, almost childish. I paint it with gouache and watercolor brushes and outline it in pencil. “I like that one,” says my sister, who possesses a stronger artistic eye than I do. “It looks like a book illustration.”

And so, The Illustrated PRWR begins its slow creep into existence.

The audio file from the interview runs 50 minutes. I have to cut it down to less than 10. Taking a deep breath, I press play for the first time, then I listen to the conversation multiple times. I scan for phrases or words that might translate into visuals. The interviewee says, “redesigning these technologies,” and my brain concocts an image of an iPhone reimagined as Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man—da Vinci’s ideal design of the male body. It all depends on where the words take my imagination.

I assemble a coherent story from the audio, patching questions and answers together like a puzzle without a guiding image. Then, I make a rough visual storyboard. After that, I animate. I add color to the drawings, then create duplicate illustrated frames, adjusting them slightly to simulate motion.

healthy masculinity.

What Reiner takes away from this experience into his future projects, he says, is hope and optimism. “It’s okay to have really paralyzing doubt,” he says. “The important thing is that you get up the next day and let those doubts go...I’m going to go back to it again. I’m going to give myself permission. I’m going to give myself a chance.”
Illustrated PRWR (cont.)

It’s tedious but somehow tranquil, like an adult coloring book with added responsibility. I stare at the finished stills and play through the seconds-long animations. Even though I don’t think of myself as much of an artist, they make me feel like one.

My eyes are bloodshot from hours of screen time. After completing an animation sequence, I realize I forgot to add a layer that distinguishes the animation from its background. I curse the names of Walt Disney and Steve Jobs, titans of animation and animation technology. My technology is juvenile compared to theirs. I’m a self-taught animator with near-zero knowledge of the complicated software that would probably make this situation less complex and annoying. Instead, to add the layer, I use my simple drawing app with an animation assist feature. But I have to go back and color each frame—about 60 of them—with the distinguishing layer.

With the animation done, I start editing. I hope the visuals fit well with the audio and internally cry when they don’t match the pacing. I mimic the audio as I go along because I remember it word by now. My edits play to the rhythm of the words and the music I add in at the end. After many tiresome cuts and maneuvering of scenes, the video is complete. But then I realize that I forgot to draw a mouth on the animated character in one sequence. I debate whether anyone will notice, then eventually push myself to add the detail.

I watch the entirety of what I’ve created, the elements of the process all combined. Seeing the inanimate images I brought to life feels amazing. Sharing the inspiring stories of PRWR feels even better. Despite the miserable parts, I want to make another video immediately. The process is frustrating and meticulous but also creative and fun. And, to a degree, I now appreciate the limitations that made this possible.

To watch Dr. Halycon Lawrence battle Alexa’s listening bias in The Illustrated PRWR, click here.

Dr. Portolano retires after 18 years of teaching at Towson, embraces writing career

By Briana Richert

Throughout her Towson University career, Dr. Marlana Portolano taught any undergraduate course she felt qualified to teach and nearly every core PRWR course.

“I loved tailoring what I knew and what I could offer to what the varied student body and PRWR needed,” says Portolano. “We have creative writers, we have business writers and medical writers, and people who are trying to figure out what’s out there. I felt that I really knew my student body.”

Portolano is retiring after the Spring 2021 semester. During the 18 years that she taught at Towson, Portolano made many contributions to the College of Liberal Arts. She served as PRWR’s interim director from 2006-2007, and she also directed the Humanities Master’s program—now the Global Humanities program—from 2010-2016. She established the Accelerated Bachelor’s in English and Master’s in Professional Writing program and worked as an advisor to the students involved. Portolano also created a student-run publishing house called Patapsco Valley Press as part of her PRWR 617 Editing class.

“Dr. Portolano’s editing class
Portolano looks forward to teaching as an outdoor educator in a master naturalist program with the University of Maryland’s agricultural extension. She says she hopes to combine writing with her hobby as a naturalist to teach a nature writing program. She also wants to set up a writing retreat for Towson graduate students and alumni at Still Point Mountain Retreat, her co-owned cabin near Harper’s Ferry.

“Being able to teach grad students, both in the Professional Writing Program and in the Humanities program, made the most of what I had to offer in my background,” says Portolano. “It enabled me to grow and to make it applicable to those students. I felt like I had found my passion spot at Towson University.”

Portolano (cont.)

expanded my framework for thinking as an editor,” says PRWR alum Tyler New. He was in the class in 2015 when Patapsco Valley Press put together Amid the Roar, an anthology of creative writing by TU alumni authors. “I’m happy I was able to take classes with her while she was teaching. We’re Facebook friends, so I look forward to seeing her enjoy her permanent sabbatical.”

While her editing class was a fun, interactive experience, Portolano says her favorite course to teach was PRWR 611, Rhetoric: the Pursuit of Eloquence, which fit her specialization in the history and theory of rhetoric. She earned her Ph.D. in rhetoric from The Catholic University of America in 1997 and has published many journal articles on classical rhetoric. Her first book, The Passionate Empiricist: The Eloquence of John Quincy Adams in the Service of Science, explores classical rhetoric in 19th-century science and American government.

Portolano’s second book, Be Opened!: The Catholic Church and Deaf Culture, moves away from her background in classical rhetoric and into the history of Deaf Catholic culture and the rhetoric of sign language. She says this book is the highlight of her career. It connects to her Catholic faith and her immersion into Deaf culture and sign language following her adoption of her Deaf daughter, Lena.

“That was kind of a turn in my career that I didn’t anticipate,” says Portolano. “I suppose many academics think that they’re going to continue publishing in their area of specialization for the rest of their lives. But something else came along, and it linked with my home life, my personal life, and other vocations that I had outside of my university life.”

In retirement, Portolano hopes to write more on her interest in disabilities, culture, and religion. Her next project, she says, examines Pope Francis’ writings on disabilities. She says she is also working on a memoir/religious reflection on her experience with adoption and “the feminine face of God.”

Additionally, Portolano

Portolano in 2003, her first year teaching at Towson