A Look Inside the System of Competition
What Really Happens After You Hit Submit
BY JOEY FRANKLIN

During my last year of college, I decided to enter a few creative writing contests. I figured I could use the deadlines as motivation to push some rough drafts into final form, and I might even make a little money in the process. So I conducted a bit of research on the Poets & Writers website, made a list of contests with upcoming deadlines, and scheduled an appointment with a professor to get advice about my work. At the meeting I sat in his office and watched him read my manuscript. He leaned back in his chair and adjusted his glasses, making small “hmm” noises every so often, and tapping the desk with his pen.

“Well,” he said, finally. “A few more revisions and I think this is ready.”

“Great,” I said. “Back to the keyboard, and then off to the post office.” (This was before most contests started using online submissions.) I stood and shook his hand. “Who knows,” I said. “Maybe I’ll even win.”

My professor laughed. “Win?” he said. “Don’t worry about winning. Worry about making the deadline.”

Such practical advice from a seasoned author who knew a thing or two about the fickle reality of contest submissions and the importance of prioritizing the things you can control over those you can’t. I didn’t win anything that year, but I did finish a lot of work, and I received some valuable feedback. Winning would have been nice, but my professor was right. Meeting a deadline should probably be considered a victory in itself.

And yet the lure of the contest is undeniable. If getting published is an external validation of the somewhat questionable choice to become a writer, then winning a contest judged by an established author can feel like the ultimate vindication for all that time dedicated to one’s art, especially if there’s money and publication involved. And there are so many contests out there—more than 450 in the Poets & Writers database alone. From regional competitions with little prestige and modest payouts to national prizes offering five-figure awards, and all sorts in between, there’s seemingly a contest for everyone. It sounds so easy. (Relative) literary fame and (nominal) fortune waiting on the other end of a little hard work, patience, and faith in the system.

But what of that system? What happens when you or I send off our manuscripts and entry fees? Who decides which entries make the first cut, how are the judges selected, what process do those judges use to select winners, and who are these people running all these contests? I recently did some poking around, going behind the scenes of several creative writing contests to find answers to some of these questions, and what I discovered is that good things happen when the world of letters conspires to celebrate the best work.

So if you’ve ever had questions about what really happens after you send off a manuscript, or if you’ve ever been skeptical about the value of entering contests at all, allow me to walk you through what I’ve learned about the process. Perhaps we can demystify the system of creative writing contests and at the same time help us all become better informed, and maybe even successful, contestants.

Sorting the Slush

For writers the hard work is over when we drop our entries in the mail or hit Submit on one of those online submission managers—but on the receiving end of all those manuscripts awaits an unsung collective of contest administrators and support staff who do the yeoman’s work of processing all those submissions. A typical literary magazine or press might receive hundreds of contest submissions each year, and for larger contests the number can be in the thousands. And yet that first line of readers is often quite small.

For instance, at Fourth Genre, a biannual magazine of innovative nonfiction
published at Michigan State University in East Lansing, one editor and a half dozen students review about 300 entries for the annual Steinberg Essay Prize. At Omnidawn, a nonprofit publisher located in Oakland, California, a team of five in-house editors reviews about 900 submissions each year for its two poetry book contests. The quarterly poetry journal Rattle, published by the Rattle Foundation in Los Angeles, receives 3,000 entries a year for its $10,000 Rattle Poetry Prize, given for a single poem—and who takes care of that initial read? The editors, Timothy and Megan Green. And at Southern Illinois University Press, in Carbondale, which runs a pair of book contests as part of the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry, all 1,000 entries get an initial reading from the managing editor, Jon Tribble.

At first blush it may seem odd that so few readers are responsible for all those submissions, but setting aside the fact that many of these organizations operate with a limited staff and a shoestring budget, there are aesthetic reasons for this kind of bottleneck. “Our responsibility to the entrants is enormous,” says Michelle Dotter, editor in chief of Dzanc Books, an independent press near Detroit. The press receives about 600 entries each year for the Dzanc Books Prize for Fiction, an annual contest offering a $5,000 advance and book publication, and Dotter gets help from a few dozen initial readers. However, she looks at every manuscript personally. “These are people who have trusted us with their books, and it’s our duty to read carefully and thoroughly to make sure we don’t miss something.”

The Pinch, a literary journal published by the University of Memphis, receives 900 entries each year for the Pinch Literary Awards in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and fifteen student editors read everything twice. “The majority of us are writers here,” says managing editor Mary Cartwright. “We know how emotional and stressful submitting can be.” Cartwright describes the late nights and gallons of coffee it takes to get through all those submissions, but she doesn’t see that as a drawback. “Sure, it is longer hours, more reading, and more stress, but in the end, when you have the winners’ names, it is the best feeling in the world.”

I’ve heard staff at small presses and literary magazines describe this initial work as a labor of love, and that’s a good thing, because the labor is clearly intensive. And while most of these organizations do charge some kind of entry fee—$20 on average—the money almost always goes to paying the judges and funding the cash prize. For literary magazine contests the fee usually includes a subscription, and presses sometimes offer entrants a gratis copy of the winning book. Most of the time, anything left over gets reabsorbed into the operating costs of the organization.

Bailey Cunningham, managing editor of Bellingham Review at Western Washington University, describes how entry fees support more than just the journal’s annual contest program, which includes the 49th Parallel Award for Poetry, the Tobias Wolff Award for Fiction, and the Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction. “Our contests allow us to raise funds to support our print journal, as well as to further build our community of writers, judges, and readers,” she says. Rattle’s contest effectively doubles the journal’s subscription base, so the front-end work for these contests is clearly worth it. Editor Timothy Green says, “Our mission as a nonprofit is to promote the practice of poetry, and our contests work wonderfully in service to that. If they didn’t, I’d cancel them.”

Making the Initial Cut
All these early readers are more or less looking for the same thing—great writing that engages them in interesting ways. At New Ohio Review, a journal published by the creative writing program at Ohio University in Athens, the editors have one guiding question when it comes to choosing finalists for its contests in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction: Is this something that we would publish? But there is another consideration the editors keep in mind. “We also keep an eye out for pieces that we think a particular judge might like,” says editor David Wanczyk. “We stretch our decision process a bit and give that judge some sway in our deliberation.”

Timothy Green at Rattle narrows down his initial Maybe pile in successive readings. “On the first read you’re looking for something that’s gripping and makes you want to keep reading. Then with the second read you’re looking for a poem you still remember from the first round. But in the end the winner is always a poem that grows on you and that you continue to enjoy, or even appreciate more, the more times you read it.”

Some organizations use online voting systems to narrow down finalists. Others gather staff in a room to deliberate over their favorites. Joe Mackall at River Teeth, a biannual journal of nonfiction published at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, describes a particularly magnanimous approach to conducting this initial read. He and his coeditor, Dan Lehman, split up and review about 175 entries each contest period, and, as Joe puts it, “We don’t read to reject. We want a book to work…. I’ll read fifty pages very seriously, wanting to love it, but if it’s not happening by page fifty, I don’t know what more I can wait around for.” He and Lehman bring a handful of favorites to a meeting, and they narrow that down to five or so finalists that get sent off to an external judge.

One challenge in the initial process is how small the literary world can be at times. Particularly for editors who’ve been in the business a while, it’s not uncommon to recognize a lot of names in a pile of submissions. For this reason most journals and presses take measures
to ensure that the review process remains impartial. The organizations I spoke with do the basics of prohibiting author names from appearing on manuscripts, but many of them do more. “We have a lot of checks and balances,” says Lucia Brown, the senior external relations manager at the Feminist Press at City University of New York. All first-round readers work in pairs and make joint recommendations. And all reviewers submit written reports. At Omnidawn, identifying information is stripped from every entry, but if readers still recognize a manuscript in their pile, they’re required to pass it on to another reader. The Pinch takes its blind submission policy so seriously that even if a name appears on the last page of a manuscript, well after the point at which a reader would typically form an opinion, the entry is disqualified.

Initial readers are charged with selecting good work, but they also help maintain the integrity of their respective contests, and a major part of their responsibility is making sure final judges receive manuscripts untainted by conflicts of interest.

Turning Things Over to a Judge
The work of initial readers may be time-consuming, but final judges have the harder job—picking one winner among a number of strong candidates. And because that process can be highly idiosyncratic, contest organizers must select judges they trust. For some this means working with previous winners, former editors, or other friends of the organization. For others this means choosing judges with a well-known body of work that will excite and encourage potential submitters. And for some it means controlling the process as much as possible by keeping all the judging in house.

Abigail Serfass, managing editor of the Kenyon Review, the eighty-year-old bimonthly published out of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, says there is value to having a judge with a name writers will recognize. “But I’d say we’re not generally casting about for anyone,” she adds, “Our judges always have some connection to us—whether we’ve published them or we’ve worked with them in the past.” Previous judges of the Kenyon’s Short Fiction Contest include Melinda Moustakis (2018), author of Bear Down, Bear North, winner of the Flannery O’Connor Award from the University of Georgia Press and one of the National Book Foundation’s 5 Under 35 selections in 2011; Lee K. Abbott (2017), the award-winning author of seven story collections; Jaimy Gordon (2016), who won the 2010 National Book Award for her novel Lord of Misrule; and international best-selling author Ann Patchett (2015). On the other hand, Timothy Green at Rattle is skeptical about the value of celebrity judges, which is why he and his wife, coeditor Megan Green, handle the contest judging themselves. “For every writer who is excited by a certain judge, another will be discouraged and not enter based on the judge’s aesthetics,” he says.

Michelle Dotter at Dzanc feels strongly about enlisting judges who work in a variety of styles. In the past three years her judges have included Carmiel Banasky, who Dotter calls a “master of psychological tension”; John Domini, whose work has “strong notes of humor;“ and Lindsey Drager, an “extreme experimenter” who “twists language into wild new shapes.” To Dotter this variety is an essential element in Dzanc’s evaluation process. “By working with judges from vastly different styles, we know we’re getting unique and balanced perspectives on each submission, and it’s always a pleasure to see what they select.”

Whether famous or relatively unknown, for many judges choosing winners comes down to gut reaction. Poet Maggie Smith, who has judged a number of contests, calls the process “an intuitive, subjective enterprise.” “I don’t have a system,“ she says. “I just read each manuscript and expect to find something that wow me.” She may sort the manuscripts into piles, but the criteria is fuzzy—less yes, no, and maybe and more “whoa, meh, and hmmm.” Karan Mahajan, whose most recent novel, The Association of Small Bombs, was a finalist for the 2016 National Book Award, describes his judging process as instinctual; he tends to favor innovation and urgency over technical precision. “When I’m making a call between manuscripts of similar quality, I’ll go for the one that’s bolder, riskier, more original.” Poet D. A. Powell, who figures he has judged nearly every poetry contest out there, says he’s looking for “a fresh voice or fresh vision or a new vocabulary or a new way of making poetry happen.” But he also considers a manuscript’s place in the current literary landscape. “I don’t want something that’s already overrepresented in society, and I also don’t think poetry should be about only seriousness and academic value. I appreciate outsiders.”

The judging process is decidedly idiosyncratic, but for many of these contests, such idiosyncrasy is important. As Dotter explains, “There isn’t one right way to be a brilliant writer, and exposure to judges with vastly different styles and methods expands the range of possibility for writers at all levels.”

Celebrating the Winners
Once judges have made their decisions, contest coordinators have the happy job of informing winners of the good news. In the case of contests that offer book publication or a spot in a journal or magazine, contracts are signed, and manuscripts receive their final edits. Often this means a basic copyedit, but some contests allow for more substantial revision. At the Feminist Press, Lucia Brown says, “Developmental editing is always part of the process, but every winner is different. We meet with the author about where they feel the manuscript is and what
they want the book to be. Then we help them get there." At River Teeth, winning manuscripts go through standard copyediting, but Joe Mackall says he has "worked pretty seriously with a few memoir winners." On the other hand, at Omnidawn, while winning authors can make revisions, significant changes are discouraged. And Abigail Serfass tells me that at the Kenyon Review "contest manuscripts come more or less ready for press."

Once the final editing process is complete, a few deserving writers receive both an award check and the pleasure of seeing their work in print. Thankfully, though, that’s not the only good that comes from these contests. At Bellingham Review the editors take pains to recognize the excellent submissions that don’t make the final cut. "We consider all work submitted to our contest for general acceptance," says Bailey Cunningham. "We want to combat the idea that the winning submission is the only piece worthy of being out in the world." This year Rattle published one winning poem, but it also published eleven finalists and is planning to publish another sixteen in the fall.

And even when organizations can’t publish the runners-up, some still offer substantial feedback. At the Pinch, contest administrators send out a judge’s citation to all their finalists. Likewise, at Dzanc, runners-up receive detailed feedback from judges. Contest coordinators at the Feminist Press send personal e-mails to their finalists, and other coordinators I spoke with describe reaching out to contestants whose work impressed them, even if they weren’t finalists.

Of course there’s something to be said for the cold rejection as well. The temptation might be to give up on a manuscript, or hurl off an angry e-mail to an editor (please don’t), but many of the contest winners I interviewed describe rejection as helpful. Kelsey Ronan, who won the 2018 New Ohio Review Nonfiction Prize, tells me that her piece had been rejected several times before she even entered the contest: "I was convinced it was the best thing I’d ever written, and yet it got turned down everywhere." For Ronan, rejection fed her desire to revise and improve the piece and helped her produce a prize-winning essay.

George Harrar, who recently won the short story contest at Gemini magazine, has perhaps the most impressive rejection story I’ve ever heard. He wrote the first draft of his winning story nearly twenty years ago, and over the decades it was rejected twenty-seven times, including by three contests. "I would send it out to a half dozen places. It would come back, I’d look at it again, revise, and let it sit for a couple of years. Then I’d pull it out again and resubmit." Rejection helps Harrar see his blind spots. "You have to go back and look at your manuscript and say, ‘Well, there’s got to be a reason a half dozen publishers didn’t want this.’"

For many of us the real reward for entering a creative writing contest will not be money, publication, or even a free year’s journal subscription, but rather the invaluable education that comes with finishing a piece of writing, and the particular clarity that comes only from rejection.

But what about the big prizes? The career makers? The ones that come with real money or real prestige, or both—the Pulitzers, the National Book Critics Circle Awards, the PEN America Literary Awards, the National Book Awards, and other big prizes? How do they work? These contests are entirely different beasts, often run by national arts organizations, staffed by well-known professionals from around the country, and funded by endowments, memberships, government grants, and donors, or some combination thereof. These are not contests that authors enter on their own behalf. Instead, books are nominated by publishers, presses, editors, critics, and others in the publishing industry.

Every year the National Book Foundation convenes a panel of twenty-five librarians, critics, writers, and other professionals to select winners of the National Book Awards in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, translated literature, and young people’s literature, and submissions are accepted directly from publishers. The National Book Critics Circle (NBCC), a membership organization composed of nearly eight hundred critics, authors, literary bloggers, book publishing professionals, students, and friends, offers awards in six categories—autobiography, biography, criticism, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and all nominations come from publishers or members of the NBCC board. Winners are then chosen by a separate panel of experts. A similar process takes place for the Pulitzer and a handful of other larger literary prizes. And while winning one of these awards would be a boon to any writer, these honors fall into what my old creative writing professor might call the “things I can’t control” category of literary aspiration. For most of us there’s only one thing to do—focus on making our work good enough for the contests we can enter, and leave any worry about the big prizes to the folks who make all those nominations.

For writers, entering contests can be a nerve-racking gamble that offers only a minute chance of success. For administrators, running a contest can be an immense amount of work that provides only a bit of publicity and perhaps an ounce of literary goodwill. For judges, making a final decision between a few strong manuscripts can be an excruciating dilemma. For all the stress involved in the contest process, no one’s making much money—not even the
Winners on Winning

We asked six writers who recently won contests—from single-piece awards to book-publication prizes to life-changing fellowships and grants—to discuss how winning (and losing) has affected their careers and to offer advice for writers thinking of entering contests.


On Winning: Any time I’ve won an award, whether for an individual poem or as an emerging writer, it has felt like the poetry gods were conferring a blessing on me. And though the money has materially changed my life, it’s the affirmation that is the true gift. It has also changed my ability to carve out spaces that serve my work. For example, the support from the Rona Jaffe award allowed me to pursue longer residencies, which afforded me solitude, shelter, and nourishment that deeply impacted my writing.

On Losing: I wish I could show you my Submittable page, chock-full of rejections. Most writers, dare I say all, experience more rejections than acceptances. This is part of the terrain of being a writer. My attitude toward rejections is that they are invitations to send out more work. I acknowledge my disappointment and then get back to writing. Strange as it may seem, rejections are generative for me.

Advice: Focus on the decisions you’re making with regards to work and time and whether or not these choices serve your larger goals. Or, put another way, try to make more and more choices—even tiny ones—in service of your life as a writer.


On Winning: Aside from the monetary award—not an insignificant feature—winning contests provides greater exposure, which can have a big impact on your career, the size of your audience, and the distribution of your work. I think contests can be interesting barometers of what people are feeling and what they’re not. I mean that in both senses: the moods experienced by today’s writers in these catastrophic times and also what the reading public is interested in reading and what they want to see reflected in what they read. I look at contest wins and losses as a way of “reading the room.”

On Losing: The majority of contests entered are not won. I don’t think things like, “Well, what did I get wrong? Why didn’t I win?” Who knows? The readers thought something else was better. I don’t sweat it and keep doing my work the way I want to do it.

Advice: Most contests come with publication, so be discerning. Don’t submit to a contest you wouldn’t be honored to win.

SOPHIE KLAHR of Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, winner of Bucknell University’s 2019 Philip Roth Residency in Creative Writing.

On Winning: Receiving the Philip Roth residency allowed me to dive back into a book I’ve been working on for years, on and off, a research-heavy work that seems to require lots of time to pace around and dream. The accompanying stipend allowed me to do a few nitty-gritty tasks that I haven’t been able to afford, namely paying off a credit card and fixing an increasingly dicey car.

On Losing: Just in the last seven years I’ve submitted to around thirty contests, won two of them, been a finalist for four others, and been nominated for five prizes. That’s a lot of rejection on record, which isn’t even close to the number of rejections I’ve received from regular submissions. No rejection or acceptance has ever changed my writing practices—I do my work, and step back.

Advice: Let go of the results. A rejection isn’t always a no; it can also be a “not right now” or a “not yet.” Just keep writing poems (or stories or essays) that you feel have integrity.
sums up the value she sees in contests: “[T]hey can be a place to stand on equal footing with submitters who have higher publication credits, and to connect your work with judges you admire. And they’re a wonderful way to support your favorite literary journals while also pursuing publication.” In the end, a good contest is only incidentally about prize money or publication, and the real benefits extend well beyond any winner’s circle.

and when they find their true form, offer them to the world. The rest will fall into place.


On Winning: Winning has widened my visibility. In addition to all my other reading, I read every magazine I receive as part of the subscriptions included in contest entry fees—so winning may not have changed much, but submitting has certainly widened my reading, and so impacted my work.

On Losing: It’s such a crapshoot. Rejections have to be water off a duck’s back if you’re going to survive. I’m always interested in the work of the winners and finalists. I’m often blown away. Sometimes that’s daunting, sometimes inspiring.

Advice: Read over your work—or have another writer look it over—and look and listen for the work that marries precision of detail to discovery, honest work that earns the reader’s emotions. I also highly recommend using contest deadlines to spur new work, especially if you have no other deadlines in your life. Try to work on something every day. I also try to write toward discovery. To write toward surprise.


On Winning: Winning the Walt Whitman Award has completely changed my life. On a personal level, it marked a meaningful vote of confidence from Joy Harjo, the prize judge. Knowing that a poet I admire so much believed in my book gave me courage and renewed my faith in myself and in my work at a time when I really needed a positive sign from the universe. I used to have the sense that I was writing poems into a void, or writing something that ultimately would matter only to me or to my closest friends. Winning a book prize has changed that because I’m gaining an audience of strangers, some of whom are writers I deeply admire. It’s thrilling, but it’s also unexpectedly intimidating. I guess the stakes for speaking are higher when you know someone is listening.

On Losing: I think I was rejected at least once from every contest I later won, and in many cases I was rejected multiple times without ever winning. I trained myself not to take the single-poem rejections personally, but sending out the book was different. Every time the book was rejected, it felt like a sign of a serious flaw. I was very hard on myself. It was a harrowing process.

Advice: Submitting to single-work contests can be a good way to skip the wait for a dream journal that has a slow slush-reading process, since contest submissions tend to be evaluated on a shorter timeline. Even if you don’t win, a journal will sometimes pull from contest submissions for publication. On the other hand, constantly submitting to contests can be expensive and ego-bruising, so it’s good to be choosy and not burn yourself out.

MEGAN GIDDINGS of Bloomington, Indiana, winner of a 2018 Barbara Deming Memorial Fund grant and the 2016 Atlas Review Chapbook Contest.

On Winning: Winning the Barbara Deming grant gave me two things when I really needed them: confidence and time to write. The money allowed me to take time off from work without having to do a desperate scramble to pay my bills or feel guilty that I was putting my writing over life stability. And I wish I could say I’m a person who is patient and assured in her abilities, but as embarrassing as it feels to admit, I needed the validation a lot.

On Losing: I’ve entered several contests I didn’t win. When I was getting started, it had much more of an effect on me than it does now. Then I would go through the story and try to read it as harshly as possible, trying to edit as much as I could. Now I try not to edit when I’m thinking at all about my career; I try to edit when I’m thinking about the story itself. I was lucky enough to have a teacher tell me to always be loyal to my work. Not blindly loyal, but to want the best for it, to push myself. Thinking about winning more things, putting a brief burst of other people’s attention ahead of the writing, will only hurt me in the long run.

Advice: For grants give yourself time to refine and edit. As much as I wish I could just say, “Money, please,” I had to edit and edit toward explaining why I needed money and what my work was about. For literary magazine contests, read the magazine first. Edit and edit. Remember that even though $1,000 sounds great, you still have to pay taxes on it.
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