



About the Author

Tamiya Anderson graduated from Pfeiffer University in Misenheimer, North Carolina with a Bachelor of Arts in English and minor in Communication. As an undergraduate, she was a member of the Honors Program and served two years as Lead Fiction Editor, Creative Nonfiction Editor, and Co-Editor-in-Chief of her university's literary journal, The Phoenix. As a writer and editor in the Tar Heel state, her favorite part of the job is connecting with local business owners and sharing their stories. Her work has been published in Our State, QC Exclusive Magazine, Blue Crow Publishing, and The Flexible Persona.

Abstract

The last several decades have seen substantial fluctuations in the publishing industry and its ever-shifting understandings of experimentalism and small press success. Literary experimentation is rooted in a narrative that is heavily impacted by the reception of Modernist little magazines that were constructed, carefully, to expose avant-garde ideas and supply platforms for underrepresented voices in artistic and literary communities. Yet through the years, many critics and scholars undervalued little magazines, and many still do. With the industry's fierce shift towards market-place autonomy, this paper presents two publishing companies—*The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's*—that have fostered changes in fiction, flash fiction, and a variety of sub-genres deemed “daring” or less valuable to a traditionally structured canon. Through closely viewing the unified strength of the small press industry, this shift reveals that success is not simply measured by profit or commercial commodification, but rather by the ways small publishers have managed to withstand continuous fluctuations of the industry. In a case study analyzing the commercial practices of small publishers *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's*, this paper will defend the influence of twentieth-century little magazines on contemporary periodicals, expose reconstructed understandings of industry resilience, and offer a sound methodology for understanding this cyclical, reader-oriented paradigm.

A Case Study of Small Press Success in *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's*: How Valuing Experimental Work and the Avant-Garde Generates Community

Introduction

The publishing industry is in a time of continuous change. Small presses, or independent publishing houses, sustain an independent or fully staffed publishing team that manages a smaller enterprise than big-name publishers.³⁴ As the industry moves in a direction that endures several transitions and developments, this paper works to catalog the efforts of certain small presses in this time of technological, operational, and structural flux. Since the fifteenth-century development of the printing press, the publishing industry has endured several core operational shifts. Market place pressure and the transition to a digital landscape have resulted in the development of power structures that work against experimental publishers who are grappling for a minor stake in the market. Literary experimentation is a practice, commonly used in fiction or poetry, that highlights stylistic variation in written form, structure, or techniques. Often, experimental works are less likely to be published. In recent years, however, loyalty in readership has been the driving force behind a small publishing company's sustainability. As an outcome, the tangible connections that small presses are generating have made them a fierce competitor to larger industry corporations and have redefined success in the publishing industry.

In a case study analyzing the commercial practices of small publishers, this paper will present two publishing companies—*The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's*—that have fostered changes in fiction, flash fiction, and experimental prose. Both were established after the Modernist period, and as such, their recognition is pivotal to understanding how little magazines have impacted postmodern publishing houses. Little magazines in print were twentieth-century

³⁴ Bill Henderson, "The Small Book Press: A Cultural Essential." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, vol. 54, no. 1, 1984, pp. 61–71. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4307694.

periodicals devoted to literary experimentalism and avant-garde ideas.³⁵ Modernist writers who have influenced experimental works of our time used twentieth-century periodicals as a platform for experimentation, and often rebellion. Yet, little magazines were undervalued in the scope of traditional forms of literary publishing. Using *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's*, I argue that literary experimentation supplies a platform for writers in defense of the avant-garde. While those who were published in these magazines were often unseasoned beginners, many of today's well-known writers, including T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, gained notable fame as a result of featured pieces in little magazines. Modernist periodicals, like these two companies, were essential to the development of American poetry, as they fused global relationships between artistic and literary communities.

Today, *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's* depict the unified strength of the small press industry. In a competitive marketplace, building a community of readers and releasing publications in tandem is necessary to assure both become sustainable. Presently, writers Cheryl Strayed, published with *The Rumpus* and Robert Coover, published with *McSweeney's*, embrace the shift that invites reader's contributions, much like Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and Virginia Woolf, who set the baseline for a new understanding of the place of little magazines. Despite criticism, small presses have steadily maintained a community between writers and readers; and with it, a cyclical, reader-oriented paradigm has emerged that has redetermined understandings of industry resilience. With its reconstruction, publication success is no longer measured by profit or commercial commodification, but rather by the ways small publishers have managed to withstand the continuous fluctuations of the industry. By detailing the role of experimentation, this paper will defend the influence of twentieth-century little magazines on

³⁵ John Frederick Hoffman., et al, *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography*.New York: Kraus Reprint Corp., 1967.

contemporary periodicals, expose reconstructed understandings of industry resilience, and offer a sound methodology for analyzing the ever-shifting nature of the publishing industry that extends far beyond the pages of modernist little magazines.

Case Study I: *The Rumpus*

Small presses call for a way to grasp the rapid technological, operational, and structural transformations in the publishing industry since Ralph Emerson's creation of the first modernist little magazine, *The Dial*. A sound approach to conceive of such shifts is to explore presses that have fostered radical change. Similar to little magazines, independent publishers and small presses often stand in the shadows of companies within the industry's "Big 5": *Hachette*, *Harper Collins*, *Macmillan*, *Penguin Random House*, and *Simon & Schuster*. The publishing standards set by these companies provide a sense of structure, tradition, and guarantee excellence. Anything that challenges the top industry standards is often dismissed by the Big 5. Small presses battle this paradigm of tradition in their efforts to publish experimental work coming away with few victories. As contemporary digital publishers rely heavily on the rise and fall of the industry's recurring changes, *The Rumpus* effectively functions in a space of experimental publishing and supports the literary avant-garde.

In 2009, Stephen Elliot founded *The Rumpus*, a digital literary magazine that features essays as well as perspectives on books, music, films, fiction, poetry, and interviews. However, in 2017, *The Rumpus* was bought out by Maris Siegel, who currently serves as editor-in-chief.³⁶ The site operates two subscription-based book clubs and two subscription-based letter programs, "Letters in the Mail" and "Letters for Kids."³⁷ As a postmodern publisher, the literary

³⁶ "What is The Rumpus?" *The Rumpus*, 2019, <https://therumpus.net/about-4/>

³⁷ "The Rumpus Book Club." *The Rumpus*, 2019, <https://therumpus.net/bookclub/>

magazine is devoted to providing its readers with works that feature voices that offer varied perspectives—writers such as Cheryl Strayed—who challenge literature’s canon much like twentieth-century writers during the Modernist period. *The Rumpus* emphasizes its mission by affirming, “we work to shine a light on stories that build bridges, tear down walls, and speak truth to power...We want to change the conversation.”³⁸ With this goal, *The Rumpus* promotes itself by stressing the significance of spotlighting underrepresented voices alongside those of more established writers, emulating the mission of modernist little magazines.

Changing the Conversation

Just as commercial literature is designed to keep readers absorbed in a story, small presses strive to keep readers hooked on experimental prose. Through its digital medium, *The Rumpus* has managed to reach both artistic and literary communities that press toward the idea of pulp. The ability to cater to both audiences is a critically important facet, as experimental writing has become more acceptable in our postmodern literary community. Critics like Kenyon Cox worry that the soul of the avant-garde—innovation for its own sake³⁹—will get lost by members of these communities with the desire to make progress in the industry:

Let us clear our minds, then, of the illusion that there is in any important sense such a thing as progress in the fine arts. We may with a clear conscience judge every new work for what it appears in itself to be, asking of it that it be noble and beautiful and reasonable, not that it be novel or progressive.⁴⁰

Experimental literature, however, is not a form solely adopted by artistic and literary communities amongst *The Rumpus*’ vast audience, but also by a gamut of professional and academic readers. Twentieth-century little magazines share similarities with this twenty-first

³⁸ “What is The Rumpus?” *The Rumpus*, 2019, <https://therumpus.net/about-4/>

³⁹ Louis Torres, “Interminable Monopoly of the Avant-Garde.” *After the Avant-Garde: Reflections on the Future of the Fine Arts*, 165-168. Edited by Elizabeth Millán. (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2016), 168.

⁴⁰ Torres, 168.

century publisher especially as it pertains to the variety of selected works. *The Rumpus* markets itself as a platform that shifts literature onto a community of voices and introduces readers to authors we have “never heard of before”⁴¹—a community that would otherwise not have access to these texts. One way they have built communities is through their feature of Cheryl Strayed’s collection of “Dear Sugar” columns. The goal of the online columns, which were later collected in the form of Strayed’s book, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar*, is to provide first-hand advice on love, life, and the greater complexities of human existence. The book has since transformed into a podcast run by Strayed and the column’s original writer, Steve Almond.

Since 2010, “Dear Sugar” has mobilized *The Rumpus*’ mission to “speak truth to power.”⁴² Embracing the self-help genre in the form of an advice column captures the image of experimentalism as well as the ways in which it is communicated in a new decade. For contemporary literary magazines, publishing genre-bending texts, such as experimental fiction, holds an enduring history. Not only are traditional plot structures unnecessary in these works, but the genre is central to conversations about the reception of these texts and the boundaries they push. According to Ceridwen Dovey, a writer for *The New Yorker*, “reading fiction is one of the few remaining paths to transcendence, that elusive state in which the distance between the self and the universe shrinks.”⁴³ Shortly after the publication of this piece, *The Rumpus* published this quotation to feature in their 2015 column. For the small press, experimental prose doesn’t always allow readers to stay comfortable. It keeps them vigilant, disempowers conventions, and pushes the envelope. With languid prose and outspoken candor, Strayed both challenges and complicates understandings of literary genre. While her column is

⁴¹ “What is The Rumpus?” *The Rumpus*, 2019, <https://therumpus.net/about-4/>

⁴² “What is The Rumpus?”

⁴³ Ceridwen Dovey, *Can Reading Make You Happier?* New York: The New Yorker, 2015.

successful in offering comfort in the darkest pits of human suffering, it also exists as an example of the ways that *The Rumpus* has been receptive to the fluctuations of the publishing industry. Equally, the column is, in every respect, experimental, which upholds the nature of what little magazines have done in years past.

Strayed focuses on the concerns of her readers, including the platforms supplied for marginalized voices. In Strayed's forty-eighth column, an anonymous female writer reaches out to her regarding concerns over "writing like a girl."⁴⁴ In response, the author addresses that while society has come far in featuring the suppressed voices of women and people of color, these voices are still "often framed as specific rather than universal, small rather than big, and personal or particular rather than socially significant."⁴⁵ The dedication to supply this platform is also present in *The Rumpus*' other featured columns, including "Rumpus Original Fiction" and "Rumpus Original Poems."⁴⁶ The columns headline a number of works produced by an assortment of everyday writers who vary in race, gender, and occupation. The platform supplied by *The Rumpus* exemplifies the very mission of both contemporary and modernist experimentalism: to starve, shatter, and dismantle our *ordinary* expectations of literature by drawing specialized attention to a wide array of topics originating from many different perspectives.

Experimentalism in Practice

The Rumpus acknowledges its indebtedness to literary techniques implemented during the twentieth-century. Steve Almond emphasizes the need to publish experimental works in the introduction of Strayed's book, *Tiny Beauty Things*:

⁴⁴ Cheryl Strayed, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018), 53.

⁴⁵ Strayed, 59.

⁴⁶ "What is The Rumpus?"

Radical empathy isn't the fashion of the day. Late-model capitalism works overtime to keep us focused on the product, not the people. That's why we need Sugar so badly right now. You'll see what I mean when you turn the page. Run toward the darkness, sweet peas, and shine.⁴⁷

Almond's introductory message reflects the mission of *The Rumpus* with the inclusion of the tag end of the quotation "Run towards the darkness, sweet peas, and shine." His language suggests an intimate call to readers, much akin to the literary community formed between readers and publishers of experimental works. Modernist little magazines, like Dora Marsden's *The Freewoman Review*, a short-lived weekly feminist review, are isolated from stigmatized conventions of the pre-twentieth-century literary canon. The periodical's spotlight on minority voices is a poignant facet in the mission of little magazines. By choosing pieces that are often cast aside by the elite such as mixed-genre short stories in the "The Rumpus Original Fiction," while showcasing experimental texts like Strayed's that are seemingly untouchable, both *The Rumpus* and past little magazines publish work that some would argue to be illegitimate literary writing. Almond also addressed Strayed's literature when he said: "She is able to transmute the raw material of the self-help aisle into genuine literature."⁴⁸ This genuine literature is still a challenge towards standardized practices of creative nonfiction, as the text inherently rejects traditional conventions of plot structure and aesthetic resonance.

Publishing experimental writings in *The Rumpus* is a piercing transition from the concern that pervades other big house companies. *The Rumpus* works to dismantle the stigma behind unpredictability of the public response to these texts. In the past, this uncertainty has often led presses to avoid publishing these works in their collections. According to Eric White, author of *Transatlantic Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines and Localist Modernism*:

⁴⁷ Strayed, 9.

⁴⁸ Strayed, 6.

As Pound was aware, modernist print culture gave editors the chance to create a physical centre around which a vortex of ink and energy could flow. The little magazine inaugurated new aesthetic principles, or held existing ones in suspension before they were picked up or developed by the next generation.⁴⁹

White's stance speaks volumes to both the significance of little magazines as well as the purpose of publishers, like *The Rumpus*, in the small press industry. First, there is great value in his statement, "modernist print culture gave editors the chance to create a physical centre around which a vortex of energy could flow." White emphasizes the freedom that idiosyncratic texts and forums have offered by dismissing stigmatized notions of the written form. The postmodern print culture which *The Rumpus* works to normalize promotes the importance of publishing such experimental works. Additionally, White describes this development as "new aesthetic principles." This is a peculiar phrasing since what was once viewed as experimental is not always viewed this way. Just as *The Rumpus* is the medium for these writings to reemerge, it was the little magazines that allowed experimental publications to dispense access to the larger public. Moreover, the current principles, "developed by the next generation,"⁵⁰ speak to twenty-first century readers who have displayed a growing interest in the small press community.

The Rumpus integrates twentieth-century methods of experimentation into their vessel of published works as a means to foster a bridge between underrepresented voices alongside more established writers. The magazine has crafted a platform where writers such as Cheryl Strayed illuminate the history of the modernist little magazine by pursuing literature

⁴⁹ Eric White, *Transatlantic Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines and Localist Modernism*. (Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 2.

⁵⁰ White, 2.

unconventionally. The following section will cast light on *McSweeney's*, as they have also championed Modernism's literary avant-garde.

Case Study II: *McSweeney's*

McSweeney's provides the literary community an eccentric outlook on small press publishing. The company has contributed to launching the careers of several well-known authors, while also paying tribute to major, dominant voices in the industry. The recognition of tenured writers past alongside the debut of new ones is the brand of *McSweeney's* publishing and separates them from companies like *The Rumpus*. The following section highlights the history of *McSweeney's* and the long-standing literary community from which they developed. More specifically, the ways that the literary communities of *McSweeney's* emulate the communities formed through the modernist little magazine.

Deep Roots in a New Decade

In 1998, Dave Eggers established the publishing company *McSweeney's*, an independent nonprofit firm located in San Francisco, California. The company manages a daily humor website, while it also publishes *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* and *Illustoria*, a family-friendly magazine that celebrates visual storytelling and DIY culture.⁵¹ Additionally, *McSweeney's* has an augment of book collections created under several imprints such as *Collins Library*, reprints of forgotten classics and *McSweeney's McMullens*, a children's book department.⁵² Over the years, the company has devoted itself to pushing against standardized conventions of the traditional literary canon. On their website they state, "McSweeney's exists to champion ambitious and inspired new writing, and to challenge conventional expectations

⁵¹ "McSweeney's Internet Tendency." *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, 2020, <https://www.mcsweeney.net>

⁵² "McSweeney's Internet Tendency."

about where it's found, how it looks, and who participates."⁵³ Their mission underscores the vocation of twentieth-century writers who sought to protect and advocate for the avant-garde, as it echoes modernist experimental principles. While publishing well-established and respected writers including Stephen King, Sarah Vowell, and David Foster Wallace, new writers and artists can still find a place for their work amidst *McSweeney's*'s various magazines and book imprints. *McSweeney's*, therefore, markets itself by spotlighting the significance of challenging what was once deemed experimental and pursuing the most transcendent form of postmodern literature.

In a column published in 2010, founder Dave Eggers revealed the long-awaited journey that led to the creation of *McSweeney's* publishing. In 1998, he began collecting fiction, essays, and experiments that fell short of finding publication.⁵⁴ Eggers stated, "Because the journal consisted of work that didn't fit in mainstream publishing, I decided to name the journal *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*."⁵⁵ While the name Timothy McSweeney is not his own, the publishing company's name represents a significant history. When he was young, Eggers and his mother—whose maiden name coincidentally was McSweeney—began receiving unusual letters from a man named Timothy McSweeney.⁵⁶ This seemingly strange pattern of occurrences later served as inspiration for the name of Eggers' publishing company and speaks to the eccentric nature of the company's experimental publications today. The collection of experimental writings, like the all-Latin-American-crime lineup in the forty-sixth issue and British novelist Adam Thirlwell's serial translation project, is what has drawn unexpected parallels between modernist little magazines and this contemporary publisher. Its writers therefore wield

⁵³ "McSweeney's Internet Tendency."

⁵⁴ Dave Eggers, "The Real Timothy McSweeney" *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, 2010, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/the-real-timothy-mcsweeney>

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

far more impact in their efforts to undermine reader assumptions by challenging literary tropes and genre rules. Allured by the unique originality of these texts, Eggers took it upon himself to find them a home. This resulted in the progressive powerhouse which continues to uphold the responsibility of twentieth-century forgotten experimentalists.

In November of 2019, the Executive Director of *McSweeney's* Amanda Uhle emphasized how much the company valued their supporters. In the letter, Uhle posits:

In this current climate, where print books and magazines are beginning to feel like rare birds, where traditional publishing is ever more profit-driven, and the cost of paper and printing continue to rise, all of us at *McSweeney's* are steadfast in our refusal to sacrifice the quality of our work. We're able to hold down this fort, to continue breaking and remaking what literature can look like and what forms it can be found in thanks to our donors and readers, who have invested in this experiment...⁵⁷

This sentiment conveys the company's enduring determination which has persisted over the past twenty-two years. Uhle upholds *McSweeney's* mission to advocate for new writing and to challenge conventional expectations of literature that place more value in commercial gain than in the writers that make print culture possible. What once began as an "experiment" is now a company that has disproved the stigmas surrounding the literary canon. As we enter a new decade, *McSweeney's* continues to display artful texts with roots that trace back to the influence of the very artists and writers who set the baseline for literary experimentalism.

Small Press Autonomy

In an article entitled *McSweeney's and the Challenges of the Marketplace for Independent Publishing*, scholars from Purdue University Press deconstruct the ever-present conflict that several small presses battle: autonomy versus marketplace expansion.

⁵⁷ Amanda Uhle, "A Letter From Our Executive Director." *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, 2019, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/a-letter-from-our-executive-director>

Researchers Katrien Bollen, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen argue that this tension is rooted in a dynamic of commodification.⁵⁸ After thorough evaluation, the scholars affirm:

McSweeney's redefines the terms of the debate about the difference between corporate and independent publishing values and practices: the magazine does not so much reject commercial publishers' interest in economic gain as their lack of attention to graphic design and the aesthetic qualities of literary artifacts.⁵⁹

The scholars draw attention to the tension that has built up between small presses and the industry's "Big 5." Though *McSweeney's* does not match the magnitude of these larger companies, they broadcast gripping pieces that notable mainstream presses tend to overlook. One of their best pieces is Robert Coover's *Stepmother*, a collection of fictional short stories that presents a reinvention of fairytale folklore. *McSweeney's* identifies Coover as "a father of modern American experimental fiction,"⁶⁰ as his piece upholds the mission of their experimental platform with linguistic vitality and satire. Embedded in the text are various uses of experimentalism that mirror those used in twentieth-century little magazines. The story addresses a stepmother's dissatisfaction with the stereotypical fairytale conventions of being "wicked." Coover battled the literary idea of "acceptable" twentieth-century literature as he worked to humanize the image of an otherwise "wicked" character. For example, while trying to save her stepdaughter from impending doom, the stepmother cries, "My poor desperate daughter, her head is locked on one thing and one thing only: how to escape her inescapable fate."⁶¹ The compassion shown through a character, whose dark role has been experimentally reversed, depicts humanity in a new, complicated light that challenges the traditional good

⁵⁸ Katrien Bollen, et al, "McSweeney's and the Challenges of the Marketplace for Independent Publishing." Perdue University Press. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2013, pp. 11.

⁵⁹ Bollen, 11.

⁶⁰ "McSweeney's Internet Tendency."

⁶¹ Robert Coover, *Stepmother*. (California: McSweeney's Books, 2004), 1.

versus evil framework in literature. Furthermore, this publication by *McSweeney's* challenges acclaimed publishers who often overlook works that break the conventions of traditional literature.

From tongue-in-cheek columns in the *Quarterly Concern* to experimental books such as Coover's *Stepmother*, works published under the *McSweeney's* brand provide evidence which supports desired marketplace autonomy. In the spirit of taking risks, when *McSweeney's* announced their decision to transition to a nonprofit business, the company stated, "We want to continue to pursue a wide range of ambitious projects—projects that take risks, that support ideas beyond the mainstream marketplace, and that nurture emerging work."⁶² Indeed, this small publisher holds tight to its eccentric literary roots. With a desire to find a place for works that had been cast aside by the publishing elite, Eggers' company was not originally established with the intent of commercial longevity, but he noticed the need to branch out and give a platform to a new literary community that pushes artistic boundaries. Without modernist writers of the twentieth century who have paved the way for contemporary periodicals such as *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's*, the literary canon would wither.

Small presses nurture the development of the bond between reader and writer in the same way the literary community is boosted by *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's*. The following section unifies the overarching bond that has been established by experimental publishers. These publishers not only lift up underrepresented writers but also help them forge a stronger connection with their audiences.

Part III: A Unified Strength

⁶² "McSweeney's Internet Tendency."

The relationship between *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's* presents how significant it is for small presses to establish a bond between themselves and the readers who champion their development. These valuable connections commonly unfold as a result of the strategic use of social outreach by the companies. *McSweeney's* in San Francisco has used its platform to strengthen philanthropic initiatives through the founding of a non-profit tutoring and writing center, 826 Valencia, located in the Mission District of the city.⁶³ Their efforts have resulted in achieving fame for beginners in the industry, including publishing work written by their students. In a similar fashion, *The Rumpus's* connection to their audience has grown from a desire to represent voices that are often unrepresented. The magazine was founded under the belief that "literature is community."⁶⁴ To forge this community, editor-in-chief Marisa Siegal offers free, personal emails through *The Rumpus*'s weekly newsletter. The efforts of both publishers have created poignant connections with their readers, an artistry that most small presses share due to their targeted approach to smaller, tight-knit communities. The development of readership connection leads us to an intricate model of each small press which exposes a solid, unified foundation offered by both publishers to their writers and their community.

Community Building

Navigating the connection between writer and reader offers a sense of unification. Because small publishing houses are more likely to seek out and publish new authors, whereas the larger companies look for authors with name recognition or a notable track record, the need for this connection is intricate. In the twentieth-century, little magazines functioned as a space for experimental writers, such as Gertrude Stein and Joseph Conrad, to publish their work and gain popularity in a modernist society that privileged traditional forms of literary expression.

⁶³ "McSweeney's Internet Tendency."

⁶⁴ "What is The Rumpus?"

Their works represented a common trend of feelings of uncertainty and dissatisfaction with global conditions post World War I. Often they found these feelings reciprocated by their readers and other experimental writers. At the same time, the presentation of these ideas in little magazines threatened the traditional social and literary expectations of what big presses allowed and what they determined must be dismissed. The influence of the communities built by publishing companies that have been labeled “little” and “small” negates their value to our overarching literary community. However, these companies have fostered relationships that promote success in a continuously changing publishing industry.

The debate between experimental literature and standard literary practices holds a controversial history. Discourses such as the reception of modernist writer Gertrude Stein’s nonlinear writing style spotlighted the forging of a progressive community between authors and readers. However, their practices were merely deemed “experimental,” rather than being acknowledged as the new wave of progressive literature which is here to stay. Harriet Monore, founder of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, featured texts on a broad-spectrum of American poets, poets associated with the Harlem Renaissance, and several nonnative writers.⁶⁵ Her magazine’s diverse style and “Open Door” policy, which allowed writers to submit their work regardless of where, by whom, or under what theory of art it was written, speaks volumes to little magazine community-building efforts.⁶⁶ These works expressed common feelings of dissatisfaction through the utilization of simplified language in order to open the conversation to all members of the community. At the same time, criticism of these periodicals persists because the publication of popular, mainstream works are often viewed as more valuable. Yet, this criticism did not halt the production of little magazines that were about to emerge. Dora

⁶⁵ Susan Belasco and Linck Johnson, “Modernisms in American Poetry.” *The Bedford Anthology of American Literature: 1865 To The Present*, 2nd ed. New York: Bedford / St. Martin’s, 2014.

⁶⁶ The Modernist Journals Project. “Periodicals Directory.” Brown and Tulsa Universities, ongoing. www.modjournal.org

Marsden's *The Egoist*, a direct continuation of *The New Freewoman*, ran as a bi-monthly issue from 1914 to 1919 in London.⁶⁷ Magazines that have stood the test of time such as Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, founded in 1912 and still in print today, shamelessly opened a new conversation: "What is lost once small presses become big?"

Today, small house publishers such as *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's* further the legacy of small press resilience that was paved by modernist little magazines. For *The Rumpus*, honoring this legacy not only meant establishing a platform for marginalized voices but also creating a forum where the works of these writers can be discussed. Each month, The Rumpus Book Club sends subscribers an unreleased book to discuss throughout the month. In the weeks following, *The Rumpus* holds an online discussion with the author and readers.⁶⁸ On the other hand, *McSweeney's* became a nonprofit organization in 2014, which resulted in a pressing need for their readers' active support through subscriptions and donations.⁶⁹ During this transition, the company stated, "We believe that becoming a nonprofit will allow *McSweeney's* to sustain itself for many years to come, with the help of an expanded community of donors, writers, and readers."⁷⁰ Widespread interaction with literature is the foundation of each company and represents both an emulation and departure from little magazines past.

Digital Networking

The Rumpus and *McSweeney's* demonstrate a fully established connection to the digital community while still releasing printed collections of their inventory. Their digital presence has opened a new door to writer-reader connections that add a complex, yet accessible layer to both companies' marketing paradigm. Their online communities have also extended to

⁶⁷ "The Modernist Journals Project."

⁶⁸ "The Rumpus Book Club."

⁶⁹ "McSweeney's Internet Tendency."

⁷⁰ "McSweeney's Internet Tendency."

modernist little magazines in places such as The University of Tulsa, which has worked to make twentieth-century periodicals accessible in a new age by providing public access to PDF files of magazines. Matthew Stadler, an author published in *Literary Publishing in The Twenty-First Century*, writes:

Reading is open-ended, provisional, conversational. It's not solitary, but deeply collective. We might be alone with a book, but the book fills our heads with other voices and puts our thoughts into conversation, not only with the writer but with countless other readers, real and imagined.⁷¹

As an online literary magazine, *The Rumpus* rivals the disconnect between physical presence and cyber networking. However, their letter subscription program "Letters in the Mail" has perfectly substituted their lack of physicality. "Letters in the Mail" is a bi-weekly program in which subscribers receive typed or handwritten letters, some including illustrations, comics, or poems, signed by hand by authors."⁷² The company states, "Think of it as the letters you used to get from your friends before email, except now your friends are your writers!"⁷³ As Stadler argues, reading is no longer "solitary,"⁷⁴ due to contemporary presses that network through a digital medium. Similarly, *McSweeney's* has opened its website to submissions all across the globe and their daily humor website works as a tool for further reader-author connections. *McSweeney's* tells their growing mass of readers and writers, "All of the satire and comedy we publish on this website comes from complete strangers such as yourselves." Through the

⁷¹ Matthew Stadler, "The Ends of The Book: Reading, Economies, and Publics." *Literary Publishing in The Twenty-First Century*, 14-31. Edited by Tavis Kurowski, et al. Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2016.

⁷² "McSweeney's Internet Tendency."

⁷³ "McSweeney's Internet Tendency."

⁷⁴ Stadler, 14-31.

agency of this program, writers who are often considered strangers to their readers are made present, which further supports Stadler's argument of reading collectivism.

To keep pace with changes in the industry, the transition to digital platforms for output and marketing enhances proliferate strength in the publishing industry. One of their most significant developments is their utilization of Search Engine Optimization (SEO). SEO places the name and link of a website at the top of a list of keywords provided by a search engine. Publishing companies that have implemented this approach have utilized the digital age as a blueprint for advanced promotional strategy and global outreach. *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's* have incorporated strategies like SEO, transforming digitized media into a means of networking and recruitment with readers and experimental writers through their digital and printed publications. At the same time, the rivalry between physical and digital publications has created a chasm that continues to fuel the age-old debate since Michael Stern Hart's digitization of the United States Declaration of Independence in 1971.⁷⁵ Since then, the onslaught of digitization has been used by larger presses as a marketing approach that aims toward increasing accessibility and promotion. For small presses like *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney's* who thrive on their digital community, this progress emulates an even greater mission to bridge the gap between reader and writer. Both small presses work to advance the same objectives of twentieth-century little magazines and reveal the unified strength of the small press industry.

Conclusion

Literary experimentation faces the twenty-first century in a time of continuous change and challenges. Now, concerns veer toward the question of whether or not contemporary periodicals are able to maintain this experimental path. The philosophy of instituting

⁷⁵ Marie Lebert, *A Short History of eBooks*. Project Gutenberg, 2009. PDF.

experimentalism in modern-day practice presents us with a vivid snapshot of the literary culture built by our community of small presses, authors, and readers. In terms of autonomy, this concern is a continuous battle as small presses strive to maintain the integrity of what charters their companies' worth—the spirit of writer-reader intimacy, and the communities that are birthed out of the ingenuity of experimentalism.

Throughout the last fifty years of publishing, the literary community has seen several shifts, including the transition from the industry's "Big 12," a nickname given to the top twelve trade publishers, to the "Big 5." The twenty-first century introduces a fascinating time for publishing. Contemporary periodicals, digital and print, are moving at warp speed. The drive to write against the "capital 'L' literature" and some of the companies within the publishing world's "Big 5" threatens a tradition that has been defined since the introduction of the first modernist little magazine. As the literary community has witnessed, these changes have often included the transition from profit to nonprofit, as done by *McSweeney's* in 2014. This transition has also resulted in a major shift toward a primarily digital medium, as we have seen in the conception of *The Rumpus* in 2009. Despite continual shifts in the market, there persists a strong appeal to the value of a small press, and the experimental variety that is championed through these companies. Therefore, these houses offer a collective network of patrons for the avant-garde. Undeniably, literature evolves over time and continues to develop each year in the industry. Steve Wasserman, publisher and director for *Heyday Books*, writes, "The history of writing, however, gives us every reason to be confident that new forms of literacy excellence will emerge, every bit as rigorous, pleasurable, and enduring as the vaunted forms of yesteryear."⁷⁶ Wasserman's statement hits at the core of the current and past state of our literary community.

⁷⁶ Steve Wasserman, "The Amazon Effect." *Literary Publishing in The Twenty-First Century*, 32-57. Edited by Tavis Kurowski, et al. Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2016.

The breach between experimentalism and mainstream conventions of the literary canon has, and will most likely continue, to unfold as a sharp division in small press readership. The “confidence,” that Wasserman speaks of, however, can be comforted with the assurance that what was once viewed as “experimental” is becoming slowly accepted into today’s new age. Publishing houses like *The Rumpus* and *McSweeney’s* have supplied a space where these works can be recognized outside of the industry’s schism between established tradition and experimentalism. The narrative of the small press rooted in little magazines of the past continues to challenge the established canon as that which defines literary greatness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Belasco, Susan and Linck Johnson. "Modernisms in American Poetry." *The Bedford Anthology of American Literature: 1865 To The Present*, 2nd ed. New York: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2014.
- Bollen, Katrien, et al. "McSweeney's and the Challenges of the Marketplace for Independent Publishing." Purdue University Press. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2013, pp. 11.
- Coover, Robert. *Stepmother*. California: McSweeney's Books, 2004.
- Dovey, Ceridwen. *Can Reading Make You Happier?* New York: The New Yorker, 2015.
- Eggers, Dave. "The Real Timothy McSweeney." *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, 2010, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/the-real-timothy-mcsweeney>
- Henderson, Bill. "The Small Book Press: A Cultural Essential." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, vol. 54, no. 1, 1984, pp. 61–71. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4307694.
- Hoffman, Frederick John., et al. *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography*. New York: Kraus Reprint Corp., 1967.
- "McSweeney's Internet Tendency." *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, 2020, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net>
- Lebert, Marie. *A Short History of eBooks*. Project Gutenberg, 2009. PDF.
- Stadler, Matthew. "The Ends of The Book: Reading, Economies, and Publics." *Literary Publishing in The Twenty-First Century*, 14-31. Edited by Tavis Kurowski, et al. Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2016.
- Strayed, Cheryl. *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Someone Who's Been There*. London: Atlantic Books, 2018.
- The Modernist Journals Project. "Periodicals Directory." Brown and Tulsa Universities, ongoing. www.modjourn.org
- "The Rumpus Book Club." *The Rumpus*, 2019, <https://therumpus.net/bookclub/>
- Torres, Louis. "Interminable Monopoly of the Avant-Garde." *After the Avant-Garde: Reflections on the Future of the Fine Arts*, 165-168. Edited by Elizabeth Millán. Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2016.
- Uhle, Amanda. "A Letter From Our Executive Director." *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, 2019, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/a-letter-from-our-executive-director>

Steve. "The Amazon Effect." *Literary Publishing in The Twenty-First Century*, 32-57. Edited by Tavis Kurowski, et al. Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2016.

"What is The Rumpus?" *The Rumpus*, 2019, <https://therumpus.net/about-4/>

White, Eric. *Transatlantic Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines and Localist Modernism*. Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.