

Book Review

Somebody Up There Hates You
Hollis Seamon
(Algonquin Books, 2013)

My Foreign Cities
Elizabeth Scarboro
(Liveright, 2013)

Mermaid
Eileen Cronin
(Norton, 2014)

The Biology of Luck
Jacob M. Appel
(Elephant Rock Books, 2013)

So Far
Cristina Negrón
(self-published, 2013)

The Empathy Exams
Leslie Jamison
(Graywolf Press, 2014)

Reviewed by Danielle Ofri

“The slush pile runneth vast and deep; the pages of publication few.”
- *Lamentations of ancient Greek literary magazine editors*

The slush pile represents both the joy and the yoke of publishing. A tantalizingly vast trove of literary yearnings and promise, the slush pile of manuscripts is the starting point of every editorial enterprise. Here at the *Bellevue Literary Review*, we are honored by some 4,000 submissions each year.

From this, we face the daunting task of choosing a scant three dozen stories, essays, and poems for each issue. It is both a luxury and a poignancy to have so much good literature from which to choose. The cold mathematical limitations of page counts (and page costs!) mean that scores of talented writers must be turned away. There is no greater pain for an editor than sending a rejection letter to an author of an excellent story.

We are always looking for diamonds in the rough—submissions for which a luster is glinting, but which still need some molding. A particular joy is to find a piece in the slush pile by a relatively new voice—a piece with promise and an author eager to dig deeper. As editors, we don’t

just want to pick the best pieces of literature for publication; we also want to help further the careers of emerging authors. We are all writers ourselves, after all, and possess personal touchstones of editors and literary magazines who have helped us in our careers. (A special nod of appreciation to the *Missouri Review* from my end.)

It is with particular joy, then, that I sit here with a stack of six recently published books by *BLR* authors, four of which contain the story or essay that originally appeared in the *BLR* and then eventually flowered into a full-length book. For an editor, this is a consummate pleasure.

Hollis Seamon first came to the *BLR*'s attention when we published her story "The Plagiarist" in 2004. This hilarious and intelligent story of an English professor juggling a cardiac arrhythmia, an ailing dog, and a sad-sack student who cannot help borrowing lofty prose quickly became a favorite of mine. I've used it with medical students countless times.

When she then submitted another story, "SUTHY Syndrome," I was prepared to put it aside, since "we'd already published that author." However, the story of two teenagers in a hospice unit manned by the requisite Birkenstock-clad harp player was too savagely funny to reject. In this story, Richie and Sylvie are saddled with "Somebody Up There Hates You" syndrome, stuck navigating adolescence and fatal illness while imprisoned in a world run by obtusely well-meaning adults.

In the full novel *Somebody Up There Hates You*, Seamon has successfully expanded the story, touching on mortality without ever getting sappy. "I shit you not," Richie Casey says, opening the novel, "I'm a totally reliable source." The absurd behavior of that species *humanis adultis* is placed into sharp relief when set against the more rational, understandable actions of their teenaged offspring. I mean, it's completely logical that a wheelchair-bound, terminally ill, teenaged boy needs—*needs!*—to figure out how to get a blow-job before the big dude up there closes the curtain. Some things are non-negotiable.

Eileen Cronin's essay "Breaking Point" percolated in the slush pile for the better part of 2007. The story of a college student trying to hook up with a guy in a disco while on spring break in Florida started off ordinary enough. But when, during the shimmying and spinning, one of Cronin's artificial legs cartwheeled off, the story took a gripping turn. I was captivated by the poignant image of a young woman groping for

her prosthesis, crawling through the hustling, bell-bottomed legs of hormone-saturated college students grooving to the BeeGees as the disco lights hurtled.

But the essay didn't feel fully developed, so the editors sent a rejection note with an encouragement to revise and resubmit, which Cronin did. Though it still wasn't quite ready, the manuscript had that something that shines through the slush, that grabs editors right in the lobe of the liver devoted to oddball obsessions and passions. What transpired was no less than fourteen rounds of vigorous revision, the essay deepening and solidifying with each one. Many authors would be put off by endless tweaks, suggestions, clarifications, nudges, but Cronin was remarkably open to mining the rocky personal depths and the hair-splitting literary niggling.

The final result was a resonant and spellbinding narrative that was included in a special *BLR* issue entitled, "Abilities & Disabilities: The Range of Human Function." The icing on the cake was when we received a copy of Cronin's full-length memoir *Mermaid* and saw that this essay formed the introductory prologue.

Mermaid is a compelling book, describing what it's like to grow up with ten siblings in a working-class, Catholic family in Cincinnati, but being the only one without legs. The challenges aren't always what you might expect, and the book is full of surprises. Cronin delves fearlessly into the emotional thicket of family lore, tribal dynamics, body image, and coming-of-age struggles against family taboos, church doctrine, and a complicated, overwhelmed, depressed mother to ferret out the origins of her disability. If it were something genetic, Cronin might think twice before having children. But if her mother had taken thalidomide, this would "free" Cronin to start a family of her own. Life is messy, however, and questions are easier than answers. The sum total, though, is brave, wry, and spirited.

"So Far," Cristina Negrón's essay about growing up in a large Mexican-American family in Jewish suburb of Philadelphia, immediately caught the attention of the *BLR* reviewers. "A harrowing page turner with bursts of dark comedy," commented one reviewer. "Juggles characters and situations with aplomb. Where do I buy the book?"

The good news is that you can now buy the book. The full-length memoir, *So Far*, opens with the essay that appeared in the *Belleme Literary*

Review, the author reaching the conclusion that she'd obviously picked the wrong parents. Negrón pulls us along as she navigates a complicated web of sisters, family secrets, and mental illness, stumbling unexpectedly into the world of marathon running. Like Cronin, she takes what might be a bleak tale and weaves in grace, irony and hilarity.

Elizabeth Scarborough wrote about the death of her husband Stephen from cystic fibrosis in her essay "No Man's Land." The first reviewer who plucked this essay from the slush pile wrote: "This essay helped me, more than any way I have come up with so far, to formulate complex and difficult thoughts and feelings I have about someone I love mightily whom I have already lost, and about someone I love mightily whom I may well lose, the latter impossibly and unfairly young. That is quite something for an essay to accomplish." The editors agreed, and the essay appeared in the Fall 2012 issue of the *BLR*.

Scarboro's full-length memoir, *My Foreign Cities*, paints the fuller picture of her life with Stephen. She met him when she was seventeen, fell in love, and struggled with the challenge of marrying someone who knows he is unlikely to reach 35. One would expect such a memoir to be depressing to read—it can't get much sadder than watching someone impossibly and unfairly young die a tortuous, inescapable death. However, *My Foreign Cities* is more of a love story than a death story. Most people spend their twenties casting about to figure out their direction in life. Scarboro and her husband—for better or worse—know their direction, and choose to live fully despite it.

There are other notable books published by *BLR* authors that deserve mention. These don't contain their original *BLR* publications, but have themes and styles that resonate with us. Mainly, though, they are just great books from authors we've been delighted to work with, so we are honored to acknowledge them in our pages.

Jacob M. Appel is a creative and agile writer. His charming story, "Coulrophobia" (fear of clowns, in case you were wondering), appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of the *BLR*. Since then, he's written two novels, the most recent of which is *The Biology of Luck*. It's a quirky and fun literary read—there's a book within a book, an insider's knowledge of New York City, an homage to *Ulysses* (protagonist Larry Bloom on a long day of adventure), plus plenty of verbal repartee to feast on.

Leslie Jamison's delicate story "Letters to Michiko" won the *BLR*'s Goldenberg Prize for Fiction in 2008. Her new essay collection, *The Empathy Exams*, probes the profound questions of how (and whether) we should care for the fellow members of our human race. The book caught my eye because it opens with her stint as a medical actor, paid to be a "standardized patient" that medical students learn on. I've observed (and graded) hundreds of medical students in these encounters, and it is fascinating to hear the keen observations of the "patient." The book is wide-ranging, intelligently exploring prisons, reality TV shows, plastic surgery, female pain, drug lords, sentimentality, and poverty tourism.

Literary journals function as artistic cauldrons. They are places for writers to take chances, experiment with style, hone their craft, gain exposure, and develop their voices. As such, literary journals are home to some of the freshest, most exciting writing. The *Bellevue Literary Review* is proud to be part of this tradition, to be a home for both emerging and established writers. If you are a book lover, consider subscribing to (and supporting) a literary journal. You'll be making an investment in your future books. ☞

Danielle Ofri is the editor-in-chief of the *Bellevue Literary Review*. Her newest book is *What Doctors Feel: How Emotions Affect the Practice of Medicine*.