

# Best of Our Stories



Volume Two

# Masthead

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## Editor's Note

There was a time in *Our Stories*' history where it did not look like we'd go on much further. By the end of the first volume, which ended in the spring of 2007, I was exhausted and so was our staff. We'd just gone through an entire year of giving free reviews and the staff was growing restless. In the summer of 2007, I decided to create the Emerging Writer Award and hold contests to pay my staff. We didn't know if anyone was going to bother submitting to the journal. As August bled into September we did receive contest entries—a very respectable amount—but as the contest closed, tragedy struck my family. My step-father died in a motorcycle accident, and I didn't think I could go on to publish an issue. Oddly enough, it was *because* of the Emerging Writer Award that I knew I had to keep going with *Our Stories*. About two weeks after I eulogized my step-father, I wrote my "Life is Not Told in Revision" essay and published another issue. As my life has changed, as all of our lives have changed at *Our Stories*, it's the journal that continues to grow and evolve—it has become the thread of the OS family.

In the fall issue, JK Mason interviewed Stacey Richter; it remains one of the finest and most thoughtful interviews we've done. The stories were all extremely powerful, exceptional pieces. I was really happy to give Koehler our first ever Emerging Writer Award, and her story of loss and families seemed to hit me right in the gut at the time. Soderling's story came very close to winning the award that year, and went to my belief that we should eventually have a 2<sup>nd</sup> prize for a story—the sadness of the main character and the southern influence in her writing left us with our mouths open. Hipchin's story has the right environment, and is chock full of details and grace. Thornhill's story is a bit of Hemingway mixed in a modern, fresh tone, and is told with a bold

confidence that made me love it.

For our Winter issue, I turned to Ana Menendez, the great Cuban-American writer. In my interview, we dug into identity and her short story collection and novel; it's my hope that we'll see a new novel from Ana soon. The stories this quarter were all quite remarkable and varied. Berlinquette's story is a quirky war story which revealed the fracturedness of voice in war. Fuerst's story was a holdover from the previous submission period because we'd lost his email address had changed and we couldn't track him down, a similar feeling of the story itself. Stephen's story is a cross between Carver and something modern, like a Palahniuk, and displays amazing control. The story earned Stephen the short list of the Best of the Web for Story South. Weisbord's story imagines the world of a prostitute, told in a realistic and powerful way.

The Spring 2008 issue was another turning point in the journal's evolution as we arranged an interview with TC Boyle. Multiple members of the staff took to this interview: myself and Kendra Tuthil. Kendra took a front seat because Boyle was one of her idols. The stories that quarter included my first solicitation in that Ford's story, whom I knew from my time at George Mason—her story has all the earmarks of a powerhouse, surprising you at every corner. Maroney's story came to us the previous quarter and after a few drafts, cutting down the length, and clarifying some quirky spots, it was gladly accepted. Carper's story had this voice, man, it just shouted to us that it needed to be published and whenever another staff member read it, we knew it couldn't be turned down. Silver's piece had one quirky sentence (which he was glad to revise), but otherwise was perfect as it was received—the story is just truly horrifying and remains one of my favorites in its brevity and un-overstated details. Roberts's story is similar in this respect, as it uses the voice of a main character to create dramatic irony through the entire piece.

We ended the second volume by landing an interview with Junot Díaz, who had just won the Pulitzer prize. I interviewed Díaz with great interest and felt perhaps that his answers were understated or that their tone was off. It was the only interview I'd undertaken where I sent follow up questions trying to clarify the

answers. For example, his answer to whether such a character as Oscar Wao existed, being that “maybe it’s you” seemed to me to perhaps attempt to insult the questioner at the same time as insult his character. I digress. This issue included the work of our second best emerging writer, William Litton, whose story seemed to me to be inspired by Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. The piece is a hilarious undertaking, which kept all our staff laughing. Hummer’s story masters a child’s voice and has such a command of detail that it was difficult not to accept. Germanacos’s story was so sparse, so graceful in its language that you could just tell, without knowing anything about the writer, that there was something very strong about him. Finally, Rosenberg’s story horror of finding a dead body is wrapped so tight, it makes you jump out of your seat.

All of these stories have guts and audacity. Some were stories cut from meta-fiction like Litton’s and others more traditional, modernist pieces. Overall, I’m proud of all of these stories, proud to work with these authors, and am pleased to find them all now in print.



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Fall 2007

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Volume Two  
Issue One

*Best Emerging Writer  
Contest Winners*

Interview with a Master

# Stacey Richter



## Stacey Richter's World

*Introduction to the Interview*

By JK Mason

Assistant Editor

*If you venture into Stacey Richter's world, you'll find it populated by brainless clones, dive bars haunted by hopping leg ghosts, and cavemen running rampant in the city. You'll encounter stomach-punching story openings and some of the best thought-provoking fiction in America today. Stacey is the author of *My Date with Satan* and *Twin Study*. Her stories have been widely anthologized and have won many prizes, including four Pushcart prizes and the National Magazine Award. The following interview will give you a glimpse into the mind of a contemporary short story writer, a writer who takes chances and succeeds. Find out more about her work at [www.staceyrichter.com](http://www.staceyrichter.com).*

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Interview conducted by JK Mason

**First off, thank you for doing this interview with us. We know how busy you are with your new book, *Twin Studies*.**

That's *Twin Study*, JK.

**Oops. I knew that, but last night was a very long night. I think I had way too many pitchers of dark beer. But enough about me. Let's start with an obvious question. How did your career develop? I understand you did your MFA at Brown University. Tell us about your post MFA days, what you were doing, odd jobs, etc. . .**

I wish there was something juicy to say about that. I'm not one of those writers with a history of great odd jobs, like goat wrangling. I did write movie reviews for a newspaper for a while. That was a good job at that point in my life because it was a *job* that involved *writing* and it helped me take myself more seriously as a writer.

I didn't start getting fiction published until I had been out of graduate school for a few years. I won a couple of short story prizes sponsored by little magazines, and then I got a Pushcart Prize, and then I got an agent (who contacted me), and then my agent got me a book deal. It was bizarre. I was incredibly lucky. I think there was a surge in the popularity of short stories then, and I happened to be at the right place at the right time.

**The Question and Answer section on your website, [staceyrichter.com](http://staceyrichter.com), is entertaining and has an organic and delicious literary feel to it, much like your stories do. In one answer, you address the future of the novel, drawing a distinction between “information writing” and “escapist writing.” You seem to be saying that the events of 9-11 shocked Americans into a non-fiction mentality and that the future of the novel, per se, is at risk because Americans no longer wish to partake in fictional escapes. Can you expound on this?**

Oh yeah, that was a rant that seized me one day--and, you know, a rant is not the same as a well-reasoned argument, but that's the fun of having a website. I do think that people are reading less fiction these days. Most people attribute that to the competition of other forms of entertainment, like video games and the internet, and I think that's true to some extent. I know I'm addicted to the internet. But I also have a theory that Americans have become more interested in information since 9/11--news, articles, nonfiction books, even memoirs--anything that qualifies as real, hard, and factual, rather than frivolous, fey, and artistic, because information is a comfort. It's solid. One reason people get addicted to news shows is that it gives them a sense of control, as if they could regulate the world somehow if only they understood it completely. I think people want to know facts as insurance against feeling vulnerable when they're surprised. So, since we're living in violent times, scared by terrorism and engaged in a brutal, senseless war, hard information is comforting. It's a false comfort, but I think it makes people feel a little less buffeted by world events. Anyway, I feel that way sometimes. Whereas a novel--or any good art--is full of ambiguity and surprise and moral decisions,

just the kinds of things that we're overwhelmed by in everyday life.

Furthermore, this thirst for information is so pervasive that it even encompasses our silly entertainments--our escapes now involve things like getting the latest news on Britney's drug/shame spiral, as though that were *news* .

Anyway, that was my rant. I'm not sure if I believe this argument wholeheartedly but I believe some of it. I may have taken it a little far. I think I summed it up by saying that the Bush-Cheney administration is responsible for the decline of the novel.

**In trying to classify the voice of Stacey Richter, I came up with: "First person attitude with a generous sprinkle of magic realism dressed in Paris Hilton pink." In the spectrum of American literature, where would you position your writing, and how well do you think it fits in? Do you want it to fit in?**

It's a tough job for me to position myself in the spectrum of American literature. I think that's sort of like cutting my own hair: I can do it, but it will probably come out a lot better if someone else does it for me. But yes, I do want to fit in. I'd like people to read my books and enjoy them. Mostly, I'd like my books to stay in print, and for that to happen you have to be pretty well-positioned in the spectrum of American literature.

**"The Land of Pain," a story from your most recent book, was published in Willow Springs and won a Pushcart Prize. Somewhere, I read that you classified this story as science fiction, and indeed, it seems that much of your writing is not exactly mainstream literary fiction. Do you think not going with the flow has helped or hindered you professionally, and what advice do you have for other non-traditional story writers?**

People seem to have a wonderful tolerance for playfulness and variety and imagination in short fiction. I've noticed that in recent years a lot of literary writers have been writing stories tinged by other genres--Jonathan Lethem, Rick Moody, Amy Bender, Julia Slavin--the list goes on and on. I think playing

around with genre is probably an accepted part of literary fiction now.

My advice to other non-traditional story writers would be to forget about categories and just write the best story you can. You can figure out what kind of story it is when you're done. Or maybe it will be its own, new thing, and we will all be amazed by it.

**In another interview, you said: “I think that most writers have a sense of being alone with something that has to be expressed. Often that something is not very pleasant.” I agree with you, but can you expand on this and tell us a bit about what it is you are alone with and trying to express?**

I'm not sure that I can get at it in a few sentences. If I could really say it, I don't know if I would feel as compelled to write fiction. I suppose the things I want to express are the emotions at the core of my version of life: loneliness, dislocation, revulsion, amazement, elation, dread, joy. I want to share those things, but I also sort of want to unload them on someone I never have to meet. Writing is so weird. It's an odd thing to sit alone in a room day after day trying to communicate with strangers. There's something about it that defies rational explanation.

**So then, what is your version of “success” in this business?**

The same as it is for any business: making lots of money. Wish me luck.

***My Date with Satan* seems, so far, to have garnered more critical acclaim than *Twin Study*. If you agree with this, what do you attribute it to?**

*Twin Study* has had fewer reviews, but they've been more positive than the reviews for *My Date with Satan*. As far as I can tell, the reasons for this are mostly related to the book business. When *My Date with Satan* came out, it coincided with a swell of interest in short stories, led by the success of Melissa Banks's *A Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing*. I was lucky enough to get in on that then, but now there's not much enthusiasm for short stories. Also, *Twin Study* is on a smaller press than my first book, and that

press was sold just weeks after my book came out, which I think didn't help matters.

**In “The Land of Pain,” a story from your new collection, a woman raises her own clone, about which you write: “There, tethered to you with a piece of coiled plastic, is your lost youth and vitality: a pretty ballerina, arm raised, back arched, foot aiming toward the sky. She’s a poet of the body, ignited with life, and despite the fact that she has no brain, you’re in awe of all she has.” Can you share some of your thoughts on the structure of “The Land of Pain”? First of all, what prompted this story? Symbols mean different things to different people, but for you, what is the clone a metaphor for? How do you think writing this story in second person improves the rendering? For you, what does “The Land of Pain” refer to?**

Well, it's literal for me. I mean, I understand that the brainless clone in this story functions as a metaphor but I didn't conceive of her that way. I'm sorry if I disappoint anyone with this answer. I know I've been disappointed when I've discovered that elements of some of my favorite stories were not entirely made up. I was crushed when I learned that 19th century circus performers often starved themselves for the entertainment of others and that Kafka had not made up his little hunger artist. But I have chronic back pain and growing a replacement clone has always just seemed like a good idea to me. I think getting a new body is an idle fantasy that a lot of people with chronic pain or illness have, the same way people on diets dream of chocolate. So for me, the land of pain refers to pain, physical pain, ouch, that kind of pain. But I hope readers come up with their own interpretations.

As for writing in the second person, I'm going to stick to my guns here and say I find the second person incredibly annoying. I used it because I couldn't figure out how to write the story any other way. It allowed me to dodge my self-pity a little bit, though I'm sure plenty got in there anyway.

**Our Stories is committed to giving writers back something for everything they submit. We give advice to those whose work**

**isn't ready and offer words of encouragement. I'm hoping that you can give us some insight into your own writing process. In particular, can you describe the assembly line for a typical--oxymoron alert--Stacey Richter story, from mixing the raw materials to fixing all the problems to marketing the finished product?**

That's a gracious policy. I always like to start with a conflict, and to have a conflict I usually have to have at least two characters who have a little spark of life for me--something about them has to seem familiar or real. They don't have to be fighting, they just have to want different things. That's really all I need to start a story. After that, I sit down and make it up as I go along. Sometimes I can write a first draft in just a few days, but I usually spend a long time revising, sometimes years. I like to put stories aside and come back to them later so that they look fresh to me. It's not a recipe for instant gratification but it works incredibly well. Problems I might struggle over for weeks can sometimes solve themselves almost magically when I put a piece aside for a while.

As for marketing the finished product, I just try to get my work out to magazines I like.

**I'm going to play detective here. In 1999 your first book came out, and then this year we all quit holding our breath when your second book--with twelve stories--appeared. That's hardly two stories a year in eight long years. Seems possible, but somehow I also see the chalked outline of a novel on the publishing pavement. I'm wondering if, during this apparent lapse in your productivity, you entered the never-never land of the novel and wrote one that was not boringly Pulitzer-like, not traditionally historical, not MFA-cozy and safe. Point blank: Did you write a Stacey Richter Novel that failed to woo the New York publishing market, and if so, can you tell us about it?**

Yes, and that's a good description of it, JK. I wrote a novel about a groupie and her killer doll. The doll is sort of like her evil pet. It's dark and bloody! If you want to read some, there will be an excerpt in the upcoming issue of *Tin House*. I still might manage to