

Conducted by Kit Frick

Feature Article

*For this week's feature,
Sapling talked to Nate Pritts, creator
and editor of H_NGM_N journal and press.*

Sapling: H_NGM_N publishes / has published books, chapbooks, and two journals, *H_NGM_N* and, in the past, *Combatives*. Can you tell us a little about how H_NGM_N came to be and the changes the press has gone through since its inception?

Nate Pritts: I printed the first issue of *H_NGM_N*, a ditto'd 'zine, in the fall of 2001, though I had been leading up to it for a few months. I moved from Syracuse, NY, to Lafayette, Louisiana in August of 2000 & was completely shocked by how removed I felt—not because Lafayette was some kind of backwater (though I perceived it to be) but just because I was removed from my home. I was struggling to find a place for my own poetry—& any poetry that got me excited—in the contemporary scene. My friend Matt Dube & I started a small press—Lazy Frog Press—partly to fulfill a PhD course requirement & partly because we wanted to see if we could, sometime around February / March of 2001. Then, luckily, I got a development grant that enabled me to go back home to Syracuse, to study the Ted Berrigan archive at Syracuse University, where all the papers concerning his journal “C” were located.

So all of this stuff—desperate loneliness that was physical as well as aesthetic, tangible support & friendship, evidence that starting a journal could be done by anyone with the gumption to see it through—sort of coalesced. Before I could talk myself out of it, I solicited a bunch of poets & churned out the first issue, 250 copies, & gave them away to everyone I knew & everyone I didn't know.

From these beginnings, when I literally had no idea what I was doing but was filled up with a desire to do something, we've definitely gone through a lot of changes. I guess I might characterize this change as a continuous exploration. I'm constantly trying to figure out new ways to connect people to poetry—print 'zine, online journal, chapbooks, full-length books. *H_NGM_N* started as a journal, maybe 30 poems typed between cardstock. Now it's a kind of umbrella of activity encompassing all the publishing projects we're working on.

Though also, hopefully, *H_NGM_N* is a variety of attention, a declaration of a particular way to think—not a school, not a mode—but a kind of space where certain things are allowed to happen aesthetically.

(I'm aware this sounds unnecessarily mystical, but the truth is that I don't often think about what *H_NGM_N* means to me. It's everything, it's an extension of the way I interact with poetry. I hold up these poems, through these methods of distribution, & I implicitly say they are worthwhile, crucial. I'd be super interested to hear what other people think about *H_NGM_N*...)



S: How did the press's name come about? Is there a good story behind it? A bad one?

NP: My decision-making process is fraught with barely justified intuitive leaps—hunches, really—that actually mystifies me sometimes. I remember Frank O'Hara saying that you “just go on your nerve” & the end of Updike's “A&P” has always meant a lot to me, the whole bit about how “once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it.” But you asked me the story of how H_NGM_N got its name. I knew I was going to start a journal, & I knew my own aesthetic pretty well (I've gotten to know it better, clarified & defined it & changed it), & somewhere in my mind was the idea that poetry should be playful & determined & of serious intent. I felt that poetry should be dynamic & self-fueling—that language could build up & create new language, that a poem could literally build itself while you were reading it. So some of that seems packed into the valence of the name H_NGM_N & was probably all in my mind at the time.

But really what happened is that I saw a marginal doodle in a book I borrowed from a professor of mine—the H_NGM_N logo we still use today—& it just clicked. I left out the letter “A” in the name partly because I appreciated the joke of it & partly to emphasize the fact of language as a constructed artifact.

I guess you can tell me if this is a good story or a bad story! I've never once wanted to change the name of the press, which means something. I mean, maybe it's flexible enough to have encompassed all the changes it has undergone during the past 10+ years. Or maybe, hopefully, it's bigger than what I do as editor. It's an established brand.

S: What can you tell us about the press's philosophy and what you look for in a really great manuscript?

NP: This is a hard question. It's hard to quantify what I'm looking for because as soon as I create some kind of aesthetic definition for something, I'm no longer interested in it. The best manuscripts we receive—packets of poems for the journal or chapbooks or full-length books—do something I couldn't have known how to ask for. They are tangible & confident expressions of actual feelings / thoughts—the messy process, or the unexpected result. The poems feel FULL, have HEFT & DYNAMIC ENERGY. I can't really say much more than that. I hope it's not a cop out to say that I know it when I (see it) read it. I can feel it in my head & in my heart.

S: What's your editorial process like? That is, how does the H_NGM_N staff go about selecting manuscripts and content for the journal? (I imagine your job may be quite different when approaching the journal, as opposed to considering chapbooks and full-length manuscripts.)



NP: It is different, but the unifying element is me. With the exception of the fiction section of the journal, which is handled ably by Fiction Editor Matt Dube, I read everything that's sent to in. In terms of the journal, I read the submissions & then send them in batches to the associate editors for their perusal & opinion. Once I've gotten some information from them, I read the poems again & make a final decision. I do rely on the good sense & smarts of my editors quite a bit & it has happened that a poem I'm not taken with will still appear in the journal because someone else fought for it. For chapbook & full-length submissions, the process is similar; I read everything & occasionally rely on my associates. For example, last year during our open reading period for full-length manuscripts (which is going on now through February 28th!), I read through everything & ended up with a list of about 10 serious contenders. I circulated a few of these, asking for comments, & then made my final choices.



how like foreign objects
poems

Alexis Orgera

It's important to me that I'm the one, ultimately, who is making these decisions but I welcome other voices telling me about poems I missed, poems I need to read again seriously.

S: As founding editor of H_NGM_N, what is the hardest part of your job? The best part?

NP: There's nothing hard about this job. I love it! I suppose I could complain about how there's not enough time in the day or how I wish H_NGM_N had a donor drop thousands of dollars—but that's not really anything about my job. I get to read

poems, find pieces that are extraordinary, & then I've got this contraption that allows me to share them with lots of people. The best part of the job? All of it. I could just write a job description...

S: In addition to the standard wisdom of purchasing a copy of a H_NGM_N book and following the submission guidelines, what advice would you give to writers who are interested in submitting a manuscript to H_NGM_N?

NP: I think the important thing to remember is that writing a poem is only a small part of what makes engaging in the practice of poetry energizing & worthwhile. Many writers seem to exist in this kind of sequestered & vacuum-sealed environment where they hunch over notebooks recounting their experiences & insights. That's nice, but the spirit of H_NGM_N (as I've tried to elucidate) stems from an inclusive sensibility. So, in addition to writing poems (which is, after all, essential to poets), you also need to read lots of poems. I don't mean "read poems from H_NGM_N to find out what we like" which is the kind of axiom that reduces poetry to a target. I mean—read everything, read voraciously. Also, attend poetry readings (which can sometimes be mind-numbingly dull, yes, but which definitely get you out of the house & help you connect with people who care about the same things you care about). Start a small press or magazine, or volunteer to help a small press or magazine. In short, maybe what I'm saying is that JUST writing poems doesn't make you a poet. Having a degree definitely doesn't make you a writer. But, & this is probably not the kind of practical advice you were looking for, if you are interested in submitting a manuscript to H_NGM_N: you should be a WRITER—someone who is invested in the field of contemporary writing, someone who cares about it all, lives & breathes it, someone who is involved in it beyond their own written work.

S: If you were snowed in inside a log cabin with only three books of contemporary poetry for a week, what books would you want to have with you?

NP: Living in Syracuse, I'm often snowed in, but luckily I'm surrounded by more than three books! You specified

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“books of contemporary poetry” & immediately the first three books, the first 20 books, I think of are not contemporary poetry. Sure there are amazing & necessary things going on in poetry right now but there’s also this tendency to ape & emulate the current as a way of seeing yourself in it. Wear what everyone else is wearing; listen to the music everyone already has in their ears. So I’ll turn your question upside down & ask everyone else—find three books essential to you that ARE NOT CONTEMPORARY POETRY, books that foster & initiate that vibrant spark inside your skull. Step two: snow yourself in.

To find out more about H_NGM_N, visit: <http://www.h-ngm-n.com/>.

For more about Nate, visit: <http://www.natepritts.com>.

Nate Pritts is the founder & editor of H_NGM_N, an online journal & small press. Currently, they are in an [Open Reading period](#) for full-length manuscripts.

He is the author of five books of poetry, most recently [Sweet Nothing](#) which *Publishers Weekly* described as “both baroque and irreverent, banal and romantic, his poems [...] arrive at a place of vulnerability and sincerity.”