

Nate Pritts // <http://www.natepritts.com>
INTERVIEW :: Coldfront, August 2012

Conducted by Ken L. Walker (May, 2012)



This is the fourth interview in a project to compile a database of information provided directly by independent poetry presses. This time, we are excited to welcome Nate Pritts, poet and founder of one the most important and enduring poetry projects of the 21st century, *H_NGM_N*, and its publishing arm, *H_NGM_N BKS*. If you are a regular reader of this magazine, Pritts and *H_NGM_N* need no introduction. If not, fall through with both feet. By the way: *H_NGM_N BKS* are [two for one in August](#). Thought you should know.

– John Deming

KW: What was the impetus to begin H_NGM_N? Where does the name come from?

NP: There was no one deciding event, or tipping point, that brought *H_NGM_N* into existence. A variety of factors, a multitude of casualties, a bunch of happy accidents. Then there's me – maybe I'm the biggest impetus behind the beginning. I've documented some of this in other places – the actual logistics – so maybe I'll use this space to get a little more theoretical. In most super hero origin stories, the great power (with which comes great responsibility) wasn't just handed over, or a kind of prize in some cosmic game of chance. It was something the person had in themselves all along – a mutant ability, some kind of meta-gene – that was just looking for the right confluence of stimuli to help it manifest. So every single one of us is a hero waiting to be born, waiting to see how we react when the situation turns dire – when the city is threatened, or when the fate of the multiverse hangs in the balance.

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What happens next is what matters. The impetus, the meaning, the way way back – these are crucial, part of the DNA. But where H_NGM_N is going – where are we going? – & what the name will continue to mean: that's what I'm interested in always.

KW: Tell me about the process of making and marketing the chapbooks, the books, the magazine, and any other materials.

This is mammoth. This question. I'm sorry in advance for not answering it with a text book. But here goes:

1) I MAKE the CHAPBOOKS out of words that people send me. In the past they were solicited, now they are only rarely solicited & more often come out of many submissions I get. I work with the author which means that either I design the cover & the guts, or the author does, or someone else entirely that we agree on does. After it goes up online (free for all time), I get low-fi with the file; I print it off, cover & innards, I trim it if I have to, I get one of my four staplers ready, & I make a real live thing.

I MAKE the BOOKS from submissions to our open reading period or when great cultural need dictates that I act otherwise (see also, the REISSUES series of books we produce). Scott O'Connor is my partner in this, my friend & compatriot since junior high school, confidante, compeer & former roommate; he designs the books. He is one of the brains behind the L.A.-based graphic design shop GO Studios, & a writer (whose recent novel *Untouchable* has been getting all kinds of good attention). In the beginning, he did cover & interior layouts, though now he mainly oversees & interprets the house style he established & works on implementing/executing specific covers. Guts are now typically handled by me, by Scott, by Nate Slawson, by Eric Appleby (who is also a designer, a webmaster, a guy in a band(s), a fashionista, publisher of some other different magazine).

2) I MARKET everything in a variety of ways. I send massive email blasts, I attend conferences & book fairs, I speak to classes & participate in panel discussions, I agree to do interviews like this. Even when I am overwhelmed or tired, or would rather just drink a beer. H_NGM_N is a brand, & as such does a little of the marketing for me – people seek out our books & chapbooks. They take a chance on them because we have an established track record. I also ask a lot of my authors. I hope that they do readings, that they keep publishing their own poems & writing, I hope that they are/will continue to be as proud of their work as I am so that it can be assured of getting into as many other people's hands & hearts as possible. In addition to those mentioned above & throughout, let me also make it know to all & sundry that Matt Dube handles the fiction for H_NGM_N, the journal, 100% turn key – he makes it happen & has been a resilient sounding board for me in so many capacities for more than a decade. Associate editors at H_NGM_N = Clay Matthews, Darcie Dennigan, Liz Green, Robert Krut & Daniela Olszewska. They are all essential to keeping me sane, & to keeping things running. They indulge me when I send maniacal mass emails to them, point me back in the right direction when I veer off course, & read their share of subs. I read every submission that comes in – poetry, chapbooks, books – but I rely on individual dialogues to keep me honest.

Maybe one thing to keep in mind as well is that I am a writer with my own books floating around in the world, & I am a person who has been paying attention for a long long time. I try to implement the lessons I've learned. Also, though I have a primarily academic background, I also worked in advertising for a while, both in a shop & freelance, & I teach at a business school. It's safe to say that everything I do, every move I make, is tinged by an awareness of outcomes beyond writing or reading a poem. But there's no business plan, no quarterly report to shareholders. I just try to keep my eyes open, to stay awake.

KW: What are some great rewards/benefits/advantages you've come across since you began?

I can't list them all. It's everything. Everything I do, every single day, is a gift.

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Everything I have in my life that means anything at all is a result of, or tied to, poetry.

KW: You all have published some great people (Laurie Young, Alexis Orgera . . . , etc.) Do you use the magazine as a barometer for the books – what’s the in-between process there?

Thanks! Hopefully we keep pumping out jams that don’t disappoint.

The first two books published were personal projects for me. We REISSUED William Heyen’s out of print LORD DRAGONFLY & we brought out Matt Hart’s second full-length collection WOLF FACE. Every other contemporary single author poetry collection we’ve released has come to us through the open reading period. So, no – the magazine isn’t a barometer necessarily. I don’t solicit full-length manuscripts....& we didn’t publish any of our books BECAUSE the author had previously appeared in H_NGM_N.

It’s probably safe to say that a writer who is interested in being published in H_NGM_N (magazine, chap or book) can use the magazine as a barometer. A writer can see the kinds of work we champion – not superficially, not as a list of names or imaginary styles. But a savvy writer, one who is also a reader – a lover of poetry, a person for whom poetry is essential to how they view/live in/talk about the world – that type of writer can probably pick up pretty quickly the kinds of things that have a shot.

But we are not just a *market* for writing. We’re not a venue. We’re a way of life. Is that too ridiculous?

Well, okay – we’re also a bit ridiculous. All of this is. What’s more ridiculous – or necessary – than a poem?

KW: What do you see as the biggest hurdle/dilemma for independent publishers?

My biggest hurdle might be a pretty easy navigation problem for some other publisher, or completely nonexistent for yet another. Which is to say that there are many hurdles, & I think whether they are big or not has more to do with the type of operation you run (your goals, your method) than any kind of intrinsic value in the hurdle itself.

I have definitely dealt with different situations over the last 10+ years – tried to find solutions or alternate routes, have applied some ideas & strategies – & have gotten through basically unscathed. Identifying the hurdles themselves might not be as important as simply stating – flat out – that there are hurdles. Money, time, the changing nature of what we do / how we do it. I don’t have a good example to point to, because, in this case, any example minimizes instead of dramatizes the conflict. Maybe the biggest hurdle I face is the fact that there are always more hurdles!

I’ve tried to cultivate an omnivorous sensibility – reading & studying & becoming embroiled in anything that is even remotely tangential to what it is I think I am doing – & I’ve worked to combine that with an attitude that would rather work to solve than complain, would rather just start fixing than pause even briefly to decry all the lamentable things that are happening.

Also, let’s not use the word “hurdle” – or even “challenges” or especially “problems.” I love the course & I love the obstacles. Without them, without this playing field, you’d have no idea how fast I can run. We need the constraint just as much as we need the universe it tightens.

KW: What would be a good definition of a “poetry community”? I ask this because I think you are creating a micro-community while being parcel to the larger more over-arching one, a huge part, at that, being connected to other publishers, etc.

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I think that as soon as we try to define a poetry community – or any kind of community, really – we’re doing a disservice to it, we’re giving it a label, we’re closing it off & ending it so as to step outside of it & be descriptive. I’m much more interested in doing what I’m doing, the activity that is H_NGM_N, & maybe someday someone will be able to assess its worth – they’ll point a futuristic data ray gun at it & we’ll get a percentage reading, or some kind of bar chart. It’ll be like talking about unique hits, & “reach,” I guess. But hopefully we all realize that all of those analytics are, at the heart of the heart of the matter, bullshit. H_NGM_N runs on heat generated by the creative fusion of many different things – it’s all the things I’ve learned, & all the things I love, running into each other again & again. It’s the process of that combustion, it’s the happening of it. It’s people reading poems, people writing poems, people with their heads on fire, with so so much to say. A person who buys every H_NGM_N BK in existence is part of that community & so is any undergrad or high school student who has been “forced” to read a poem published in H_NGM_N. They’re both citizens of the polis. They both have all the rights & privileges bestowed thereto.

Listen, I hope I’m doing something meaningful – to people other than me. The work I publish in H_NGM_N – the magazine, in the chapbooks, in the book series – that work means as much to me as the poetry I write myself. So I don’t know from community. But I hope that H_NGM_N, as I’ve said elsewhere, more accurately can be described as a type of attention, a way of being alive. Or maybe we’re kind of like a gang. We have each other’s backs. We’d take a bullet for a member of the crew.

KW: In that case, is there any difference within region – that is, do you see yourselves as an American publisher or a midwestern publisher, etc. What are, if any, the issues of place-basedness?

I never think about this. What are the issues? I don’t know. Though H_NGM_N has a physical location (a coffee shop, my kitchen table), it has never been particularly tied to them in any real way. Maybe because it all started as a ditto’d ‘zine – one which I handed out to people in person, or mailed to them wherever they were – & then morphed into an online journal which could be accessed anywhere in the world, I’ve never identified with any place.

I guess, looking at the writers I’ve published, it is clear that I’m an American publisher. Though we reach everywhere in the world, we don’t draw a tremendous amount of submissions from anywhere but America (we get a good number of subs from Canada, England & Australia, actually – but only negligible numbers of subs from too long a list of other countries).

KW: Are there any poetic, say Modernist or contemporary as a summation, movements that inspire you?

Yes. All of them.

KW: Is there an essential quality to poetry that separates it from the rest of the arts (as in, the craft and practice itself, but, on the publishing side, as well)?

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No. Separates it from—? No.

If anything, there's an essential quality to poetry that makes it the ur-art, the one ring to rule them all. I feel like there's an apocalypse coming & poetry is one of the only things that can save us. We've reached a saturation point with information, raw data, & we're losing context. We don't know how to see ourselves any more, or we don't care to see ourselves anymore. All this structure – online environments & categorical identity schema – is a strategy, a device to get us to give over the only thing that matters: the spark of intrinsic humanity in each of us. Poetry can be, is allowed to be, a record of how we save our souls.

In recent poems I've read, in many submissions that come into H_NGM_N, the core value seems to be entertainment, or surprise. Which makes sense, since it's probably not a generalization to say that our culture has been substituting shock & diversion & entertainment for true aesthetic epiphany or deep psychological revelation for a long time. So that if you need to hit the right emotional pitch in a movie, you blow something up or two people collide & kiss. This may feel transcendent because the right chemicals are firing, but it's shallow in that it's not reaching really into your brain or soul. As a result, we need more & more of it. So we're reading a lot of poems, entertaining & shocking & outlandish poems, because many writers & readers aren't sophisticated enough to recognize the difference – or, whatever – they're just wrapped up in pushing the button over & over again, getting the reward, feeling good. But they aren't pushing themselves. I mean, these types of poems are fine – some of them are great, truly.

But I think poetry – back to your question, in an attempt to isolate this essential quality – is capable of something more. A poet is a revelationist & each line of poetry is the revelation. Or, actually, maybe it's

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the other way around – the poet is the revelation, the lines of poetry are how the revelation gets revealed, put in human language.

You can drive your car to get to your next door neighbor's house – but why? You could walk! You could write a poem about something funny or shocking – but why? You could watch a cartoon or play a video game. If you play a drum, you know what sound to expect – not brassy like a horn or stringy like spaghetti. We're using poetry to accomplish all these very low level things – things that are important & human & fun, but we're not reaching its potential. We're not sounding it out, putting everything of ourselves into it & so we're not getting out of it as much as we could. We're playing games with the only weapon we have left.

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