

Nate Pritts // <http://www.natepritts.com>

INTERVIEW :: Parallax / Idyllwild Arts Academy, November 2012

What Did One Beating Heart Say to the Other Beating Heart? Questions & Answers with Nate Pritts.

Nate Pritts sits down with Ana Garcia and Becky Hirsch to discuss H_NGM_N, his literary journal created to give the beating heart of poems a place to speak.

Ana Garcia: What inspired you to make your own journal?

Nate Pritts: Part of why I started my own journal was that I was submitting my own poetry to lots of other journals and getting rejected a lot when I was younger. And it started to bother me – not so much that I was getting rejected but that a lot of my friends were getting rejected from some of the same journals, and I knew my friends were writing really good poems. I would read the journals we were getting rejected from, and I didn't always particularly like the poems that were in there. So, it occurred to me that, if these journals aren't letting us in, I should just start my own and publish my friends in my journal to provide a location for our type of writing. It helped to get the word out and helped to create a community, but it also helped us to feel better about ourselves. I've never published my own writing in my journal, but, through publishing other people whose writing I knew or who were actually friends of mine, I was able to learn about other journals like mine and find a better place to fit in with my own writing. I started my own journal mostly because I was dissatisfied with the other options.

Becky Hirsch: When you were a teenager, you created your own magazines as a personal project. Did that directly develop into H_NGM_N?

NP: It directly developed into H_NGM_N only because it always made sense to me to do things myself. If I wanted to read a magazine that was all about the different street signs in my neighborhood, I'd just make it. It always made sense to create these things for myself, and I guess I learned a lot along the way. I learned things like how to staple properly, things that seem really easy when you look at them, but, then, when it's actually time to do them there are so many different ways you can mess up. I had been thinking about and learning about those practical things from a very young age, and eventually it came time to do one that was a little bit more serious – I mean, H_NGM_N to me seems like my very first actual attempt to create something that lasted. Most of the time when I would do these things as a teenager it was meant to be just a one shot thing. I would make fifty copies and I would give it to my friends and that was it. I never expected to do a second issue, but H_NGM_N was more serious from the beginning. All of that experience with less serious magazines played into the development of H_NGM_N and made it what it is.

AG: What's the most challenging part of creating your journal?

NP: There really aren't any challenging parts. It's so much fun. I love everything I do, and it's such a gift to be able to do it. So the typical answers to this question have to do

with “I don’t have enough time” or “I can’t find all the work I want to publish” or “I don’t have enough money,” but those are just fun hurdles to me. I don’t think of them as challenges. That sounds almost negative. To me, the whole thing is super fun. It’s exciting to spend an afternoon searching online for poems I’d like to publish or, on a Sunday afternoon, to work out the budget for our next book and realize that we don’t have enough money. I guess technically they’re challenges, but they don’t slow me down. They don’t bother me. I’m happy for them because if things were too easy maybe I wouldn’t enjoy it as much.

BH: It seems like you have a very natural entrepreneurial, but have you ever had to have one of those nine-to-five jobs and work for someone else?

NP: I worked in advertising for a while. I was a copywriter and an interactive developer for an ad agency, which meant mostly that I was in charge of writing and overseeing the design and implementation of websites. I also did video work shooting commercials and audio work doing radio spots for people. I think working in advertising gave me a different perspective on some of these issues. Part of it is also that I’ve been doing this kind of work for a long time. I was young when I started thinking about how to make magazines. I printed a magazine when I was fifteen, brought it to school and gave it all my friends. When I first published H_NGM_N it was the same way. I printed it, I went to a major conference where a lot of writers were, and I handed them out for free. I created a website and tried to find ways to draw people to it. Part of it maybe comes from having worked in more business-like fields but part of it might just come from the fact that I don’t approach this side of writing as a challenge: trying to figure out how to find more people who will read it, want it, get excited about it. That entrepreneurial spirit I guess is a natural part of who I am. I think it’s the same thing that any writer needs to do. You can’t just sit back and think that someone else is going to publish your poems. Maybe they will but what if they don’t? Do you just sit around and wait until somebody tells you that they’re good enough and publishes them or do you start a journal, start a press, meet people, go out there, and, in essence, sell yourself? You need to find a way to make it sustainable for your art. I don’t mean that you sacrifice your art in favor of selling yourself, but you do need to find a way to make those things balance.

BH: A positive aspect of the spread of online journals is that it has made it easier for people to do just that: start up their own literary journals.

NP: For sure. When I started H_NGM_N, it was done on a ditto machine. It wasn’t even black and white. It was purple and white because ditto ink is purple. The first few issues were short, maybe twenty or thirty pages, which I could totally hand-crank myself at night, but then I wanted to publish longer works of fiction; I wanted to publish more poems, and I wanted to publish visual art. The move online came about because I needed a cheap way to still be able to show full color paintings and sixteen page stories. One pro of online journals for me and one of the reasons I moved H_NGM_N, which was initially

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a print journal, online was not only because of ease of access but because of the prohibitive costs of print journals.

BH: In your own work, what is the meaning behind the parenthetical titles of some of your poems?

NP: The poems with parenthetical titles that appear in *Sweet Nothing*, my new book, are taken from a series of letters. Part of the reason why those titles are parenthetical is because those pieces aren't poems; those are actually letters. In the actual story of my life, those are letters that I wrote to a very particular person. And so, when I decided that I wanted to take those experiences and try to write poems with them, I struggled with what to leave in, what to take out, how much to shape my actual experience and how much to leave raw and real, like with a capital R. I won't go into that process because it was mind-numbing and heart-wrenching at the same time, but I eventually got to the point where I had created these poems but they still didn't seem like poems to me in a way that I could put an unadorned title on. So the reason they're parenthetical is because I'm more giving you a stage direction or a sense of what it is you're about to read or a summary maybe. They're not really titles because I feel like you can't really put a title on an actual authentic experience because it's life. Part of why I did it and what I hope someone gets out of it is that questions sense: is this really a letter or is this a poem? If you're asking a question then I've done my job already. It doesn't matter what questions you're asking, just the fact that you look at it and say, "Oh, this isn't just a normal poem. What's going on here? Why did he do this?" That's enough.

BH: So they're excerpts from your original letters that have been edited?

NP: They've been edited only slightly to remove the names of the guilty parties. It's just part of the process of taking something real and turning it into poetry. You write letters all the time or an email or whatever and I guarantee you've written an email or a text message at some point and thought to yourself, "Hey, that's pretty good." But you don't always use it exactly the way it was or maybe sometimes you paste it into something else. That's kind of what I did with these. The letters that I initially wrote were longer in most cases than what gets published in the book, so they're edited partly for length, but they're edited also where I realized I was repeating myself or that there wasn't enough arc and growth and change and in the letters as poems, I think there is an arc which is the reason they're spaced throughout the book. There's definitely a beginning to them and there's definitely an ending, which wasn't there in real life because most of the time in real life things don't have that kind of satisfying arc.

AG: With *H_NGM_N* you've said that you've been successful in providing a home for a particular style of poetry. How would you define that style?

NP: I feel like we're a home for lost and wayward poets. People who can't or would prefer not to find their way in the world anywhere else. The poems that we publish in

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H_NGM_N tend to embrace a sense of process, that the poem itself is a field for working out problems and issues. It's not a place for presenting something nice and neat that's already been captured. I've said before as a kind of mission statement that the poems in H_NGM_N are indicative of what one beating heart would say to another beating heart. I feel like that sums up pretty well what I try to accomplish in my own writing and what I respond to most in other people's writing: stuff that is live and real and emotional and visceral and that talks about things in a way that is human and realistic as opposed to things that are exaggerated and things that are vague. I want it to be like an actual conversation.

AG: Sometimes I feel like a poet should try to write a poem with less of a purpose and more of a motivation.

NP: Yeah, sometimes you sit down with the paper or the screen in front of you with a bunch of stuff in your head that you want to work out. You have a reason why you're doing it, like something happened or you had a thought that caused you to sit down and write. But you shouldn't say, "Oh, I know exactly what the last line is going to be." You just start writing, because the poem itself is the process of figuring that kind of thing out. It's literally thinking on the page. And I think when you come to the page, the more you have with you the more trouble you'll have. It's like the scene in Empire Strikes Back when Luke goes into the cave and Yoda says essentially, "Don't take your blaster in there. You don't need it." Luke brings it and it screws everything up. It causes problems. But if he went in there pure and simple and authentic he would have had a much different experience.

BH: What inspired the series of poems that start with the first line, "All my poems..."?

NP: Those poems are from my collection Big Bright Sun and those poems came to me partly because I had recognized certain strategies and techniques that I relied on over and over again. At a certain point, I would start to build up lots of emotional happenings and thoughts and then I would deflect, and suddenly I'd start talking about birds and trees. I wanted these poems to be this experience, this real process, and I was relying on things too much. So I started writing this poems kind of to make fun of myself, because all my poems do this, and all my poems talk about this. It was a way to exercise some of the stuff I was dealing with in. There are always things we like in our writing and we go back to those things over and over again, so it was reacting against that.

AG: In your opinion, what makes H_NGM_N different from other journals?

NP: I think part of what makes us different is me. No other online journal has me as an editor. Probably many editors are always trying to make sure that people read the content on the website and I'm the same way. I work hard as a writer to get my name on the journal, and as a writer it's the same thing. I don't know if that makes me different

from other editors and other journals, but it's the way I've always worked with H_NGM_N.

H_NGM_N has been around for more than ten years and I feel very confident that will be around for another ten years, which is I think one thing that a lot of journal's editors can't say because either their life will change and they'll have to cancel the journal, or they'll get sick of it and maybe they just don't want to go on that long. We don't give up.

BH: How did you start to select the authors you were going to publish when H_NGM_N first came out? How has that changed over time to keep it open for people you don't know?

NP: We always have and always will take submissions from anybody. In the beginning nobody did submit though, because nobody knew about it, so I'd solicit friends or other writers' whose work I admired to see if they wanted to send me stuff.

After a while, I started to get more submissions in and I never gave a lot of thought to balance it: I would just get some poems from this person, and then we got some poems over the submission line that I accepted. I never thought about making sure it was equal, but it did become apparent to me that the journal was too closely mirroring my own personal tastes and it wasn't challenging me, it wasn't giving me stuff outside of my own normal purview.

I worked with a few other people; I brought in some assistant editors whose main goal really was to help me solicit more widely. So the assistant editors on H_NGM_N, people who help me read the submissions are people whose aesthetics, in terms of writing, mostly don't match up with mine. I like what they do, but they are very different from me. And I've done that on purpose because I want to make sure that the submissions we draw in, and the way we respond to submissions is admitting a broader aesthetic field. We get thousands of submissions every year and I feel like it is important to read all of those submissions. All the assistant editors read them, and I read them myself too, and I make decisions based on that. I still don't have a ratio in mind, of how many online submissions versus how many solicited things, but I do know that I would probably rather take blind submissions than solicited material. There are poets whose work I love, I'll always write them and say 'Hey, I'd love to see new stuff for the new issue,' but in general I like to fill it out with stuff I've never seen before, because that's kind of exciting.

BH: And you've never published your own work in your journal?

NP: No, not my own poetry. I've written reviews about books of poetry, and I've published those. I thought the books were good and I'd just write a review and put it in the journal, but I wouldn't publish my own poems in the journal. I don't know, it just doesn't seem like a thing that I ever really wanted to do. I've read a lot of poems, and I guess that in part what I want for a poem when I write is for it to find an editor that cares

about it, who then presents it to an audience that's their own. It'd almost be as if double-dipping, if I was like: 'I'm an editor who cares about that guy's poems,' but that guy is also me. So I wouldn't do it in my journal, I would however publish a book of my own. And I would do that only because that would give me a control over the entire process. For the book, "Sweet Nothing", the publishing company let me work with an artist to develop the cover; they even let me choose the size of the cover of the book. I wanted it to be a certain size. Not every press would let you do that—I was really lucky. In fact every press I have worked with has been very open.

AG: In the editing part, is there anything in particular that you get tired of?

NP: That's a good question. It used to be that we got a lot of poems that were very experimental. I think initially H_NGM_N got tabbed by some people as a journal for experimental poems and that meant we would get a lot of poems that didn't have that sort of emblematic quality that I was talking about, of being one beating heart talking to another beating heart. They were poems that were more interested in sound than in meaning, more interested in space rather than shape, and I feel that they were misunderstanding what my aesthetic was for the journal. That doesn't happen lately—we've been around long enough, and we've established our presence deeply enough that most of the thousands submissions I get are good poems. I feel like people are doing a good job of understanding what kinds of poems I publish and submitting to me if they think they fit in.

BH: How much interplay and influence is there between H_NGM_N and other journals, like Inter|rupture?

NP: There is quite a bit of interplay between other journals that I could name. Inter|rupture is one of them, Curtis—the editor—and I have been friends for a while and he's a sweet guy who runs a great journal. We talk a lot about issues that we're facing. Another journal, called Forklift Ohio, is run by two really good friends of mine: a guy named Matt Hart who is my favorite poet and my best friend for a long time, and then Eric Appleby who puts the journal together physically, and he is a great guy. We are all sort of a missing page creatively in terms of the project that we are doing. Forklift, similar to H_NGM_N and probably similar to Inter|rupture, are not necessarily just publishing concerns, they are also trying to front more of an idea about how poetry can, or should or could work. We do not have secret meetings, but there definitely are journals that have similar aesthetics and the editors mostly know each other, and definitely hang out and talk. There are other journals that I feel very close to in lots of ways, but I think that's important because otherwise I can feel really lonely. Even if I can look at H_NGM_N, I can tell like: "Oh, we got two-thousand hits this weekend, that's awesome," it is still me sitting in my office by myself, clicking on my MacBook. So there are a lot of editors out there that I can relate to and connect with. On the H_NGM_N website, we used to have a links page with links to different journals that we liked, but then it got to be weird. So suddenly if I put a link up there to someone's

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journal, it was as if I was implicitly saying that I agree with them, or that I side with them, or I'd put everybody up, but you are always going to forget somebody. So I got rid of the links page. We do have now a partner's page, and if you click on that there are logos and links to presses that yes, we share aesthetic considerations with, but they've also done something for us or we've done something for them. So, it's more than saying that these are journals I like, but also journals that I have actually done things with, so the partner's page gives a good sense of how the word spreads out.

AG: So you do consider other journals as part of a community rather than competitors?

NP: I never think about it as competitors, I think we are all kind of doing the same thing. It's true that there are times when I feel competitive, like I'll see something that Curtis does in Inter|rupture and I'd wish I had published that person first. I can get really excited about those kinds of things, but I never wish that a certain journal would fold and go away and never publish again, because it's great to have all these journals out there, doing good things and helping to spread the good word of creative writing in general, and poetry in particular, but there's definitely a sense of trying to top yourself. The new issue that Curtis just put up has great design and they occasionally publish art and it looks awesome—it's great stuff in addition to poetry. It pushes me to want to do better, to make H_NGM_N more, just more. It's a good thing, because it helps us to move forward instead of stagnating.

BH: Do you have a scariest moment in writing?

NP: Scariest moment in writing? No, actually having Sweet Nothing come out was a scary moment for me because, if you read parts of Big Bright Sun it is a little bit more performative. I was trying on purpose to be funny in some poems, I was trying to be more energetic than in other poems, but mostly I was acting, I was making stuff up. Some of the things in Big Bright Sun are real, but for the most part they were literary unaesthetic challenges I was setting myself and trying to beat. However, Sweet Nothing is mostly autobiography, it's my life. These are failings and problems and difficulties that I experienced, so I wouldn't say it was my scariest moment but that it was the moment when I felt vulnerable.

BH: Do you have any favorite books?

NP: Yes, I do, but there's too many to name, I read so much. There are probably fifty to a hundred books of poetry that I return to over and over again that I really love. There are writers who I love a lot too, but I hate listing things because I'll always forget somebody that I should have remembered. One thing I must mention, is that you have to read. As a writer you should be reading all the time because it's like research. Even though I have favorite books, I don't always read those favorite books; I read everything I can get my hands on and that helps me to grow and learn as a writer, as a thinker and as a reader. So rather than listing favorite books, I'll just say to read every book.

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AG: When you read other people's work, do you feel inspired by them for your own writing?

NP: Sometimes I do. It is part of the difficulty of being an editor: sometimes I read poems and I can see some things that are wrong, or the things that I would have done differently and I'm not really able to throw myself into the world of that poem because I'm too busy being critical. However there are poems that when I read them I get so excited and so fired up that I have to write something too. Maybe it is because of what they wrote about, or it is because of the way they've written. Something will click though, and there's just some quality to that work that I love the most where I get so inspired and excited that I have to run off and write something of my own.

Link:

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