



# The Future for Literary Magazines in Libraries

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## I: Introduction

In the summer of 2022, my partner and I decided it was high time to create a small print-exclusive literary magazine called *Gavialidae*. Our motivations were, I expect, typical of individuals with this atypical urge: for us, the endeavor represented a chance to spend time promoting literary artists, assisting them in editing their work, and creating an aesthetic object which might bear some meaning for being physical. We have been running the magazine for a few years now, of course all the while contemplating opportunities we might seize to place our issues in readers' hands. Because I have worked in libraries before and because I am a current librarian-in-training studying archival work and academic librarianship, the idea of seeking a home for *Gavialidae* in university collections, specifically general collections, came immediately. To this point, our efforts in this particular area have proven largely unsuccessful; and though vaguely imagining why presents no great challenge, I found myself wondering about the range of concerns librarians must juggle when considering whether or not to support an enterprise like ours. Both for personal reasons and a more general curiosity, I resolved to investigate the matter.

## II: Climate

From the outset, I wondered whether or not the general trend toward the digital might suffice as a single sweeping explanation. In a short 2023 essay entitled "The Future of

Libraries: Embracing Change in the Digital Age,” Dr. Christina Bleyer, the Vice President of Libraries and Digital Learning and Director of Special Collections and Archives at Trinity College in Hartford, reflects on the myriad manner in which digital resources are reinventing the makeup and the mission of the college library; her essay addresses broad issues with relevance to institutions all across the country.

In this modern era, she explains, the library as a concept and as a physical space is undergoing a kind of active transfiguration: “The digital revolution has undeniably alleviated the strain on physical storage. With the advent of digital repositories and cloud-based solutions, libraries can now preserve vast amounts of information without the need for extensive physical infrastructure.”<sup>[1]</sup> Large language models are becoming integral in guiding academic pursuits: “AI tools for research combined with access to vast digital archives and databases has made the work more efficient and convenient, enabling scholars to explore interdisciplinary connections and access resources from across the globe.”<sup>[2]</sup> As a response, we see a shifting of needs from dealing with problems of access to those of vetting; librarians face new challenges in establishing the credibility of the sources and of the source-finders. From main collections to increasingly digitized archives, she continues, a larger share of information and art is “democratized ... ensuring that knowledge is not restricted to the confines of physical boundaries or by socioeconomic factors;”<sup>[3]</sup> libraries, as such, can “change the ways that they collect, preserve, and make archival [and other] materials accessible.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Working primarily with digital materials changes the way people think, the way they process knowledge and their conceptions of how knowledge ought to be presented; Bleyer notes that “[this] digital age has reshaped how we process and retain information, with attention spans potentially shortening and multitasking becoming more prevalent ... it has also opened new avenues for cognitive enhancement, such as interactive learning tools and adaptive learning platforms;”<sup>[5]</sup> and she offers an injunction that “[as] we progress into Trinity’s third century, educators and scholars must remain vigilant in understanding how digital technology influences cognition and adapt teaching and learning strategies accordingly.”<sup>[6]</sup> Digitization even presents new problems on the front of preservation, as “technological obsolescence and the fragility of digital formats necessitate robust preservation strategies to ensure the longevity of digital collections,” necessitating that libraries and their parent institutions “invest in digital preservation initiatives and collaborate with archival institutions and technology experts to safeguard digital resources for future generations.”<sup>[7]</sup> Amid so expansive a set of concerns, the book is reserved only the briefest mention. “The physical book,” Dr. Bleyer notes, “once the cornerstone of libraries, now shares its prominence with digital resources. However, the role of the printed book remains vital. While digital formats offer convenience and accessibility, the tactile experience and permanence of books continue to hold appeal.”<sup>[8]</sup>

I highlight Dr. Bleyer’s piece because of the position she represents and because it offers a succinct and convincing look at the range of issues library leaders like her actively contemplate. The library is in the midst of sweeping transitions, with tremendously diverse and attention-demanding fields of expansion. Taking a look at an address like this is useful insofar as highlighting the physical book’s relegation to the periphery, and considering just how much is happening in academic libraries broadly, deepens the sense

of how infinitesimal a space the print literary magazine must occupy in the minds of those tasked with running modern academic libraries.

### III: Hard Obstacles

With so much else in the library world requiring focus, one encounters difficulty in determining the extent to which institutions deem this topic worthy of meaningful consideration. I managed to find a couple of sources which speak to current philosophies in collections development. When I spoke to Jane Excell—she works as the Assistant Director for Collection Development at NYU—she informed me that the acquisitions team does purchase print periodicals; however, they are subject to a much stricter vetting process than are other materials. I quote her here:

*Yes, we acquire print periodicals of many types and it is a pretty routine process for us. We approach it the same way we approach the rest of our collection development: by looking at the needs of our users, fit with NYU curricula and areas of strength, and responsibility to preserve the scholarly record. Acquiring a print periodical does require a higher level of evaluation than purchasing a print book, or even an online subscription (setting aside price considerations), because it is an ongoing commitment that requires more staff resources to receive, process, catalog, shelve and maintain. As a global university with campuses in several countries, we would also tend to prefer an electronic version of a periodical over a print version for ease of access.*

All of these concerns with print periodicals are necessary and unsurprising. The maintenance of these resources is undeniably demanding, and as noted last section, librarians are pulled in so many directions. Most literary journals lack direct overlap with course curricula or meaningful overlap with active scholarship needs; from a collections management perspective, it makes sense to subject very demanding resources to higher scrutiny. Few literary journals will pass this bar, and the preference for electronic versions, while understandable, all but eliminates one of the main benefits of these publications—the possibility for “happy accident” which leads many readers to finding the kinds of writers these niche publications often feature.

Hunter College’s library collections development webpage offers an uncommonly transparent view into their decision-making process; it does not address literary magazines directly but does explain how they go about purchasing periodical subscriptions. “In recent years,” they begin, “the Libraries have acquired online access to over 60,000 journals and magazines. In the face of budget challenges, the Libraries are endeavoring to maintain the journal collection to the extent possible in the interest of user preference and collection preservation.”<sup>[9]</sup> The takeaways at first appear encouraging for periodical publishers, at least insofar as they explicitly prioritize a robust collection of journals, put broadly. They continue:

*This has resulted in the majority of our current subscriptions being online, with back issues either in a stable digital archive like JSTOR, in microform, or as bound print issues. There have been several reasons for the shift toward electronic access to journals. In some cases the Libraries have entered into consortial arrangements with other CUNY libraries. This has enabled us to acquire online access to titles*

*held by other libraries and substantially increase our periodical offerings without incurring additional cost. In these cases we usually cancel the print versions in order not to pay twice for a title. In some instances, online access is offered for free or for a nominal charge with the print version. In other instances, online access to a journal or magazine not previously subscribed to by the Libraries is acquired through our licensing of a periodical aggregator (database). Almost all user requests are now for online journals and this factor is also driving our selection practices.*<sup>[10]</sup>

The costs inherent to maintaining the subscriptions necessary for students and professors are enormous; these effects, perceptible in this excerpt, are felt nationwide. A 2023 budget analysis by the University of California San Francisco, a health and science-centered institution, states that “the average price for a health sciences journal is \$2,752 and for a chemistry journal it is \$7,276. On average, the rate of increase for journal subscriptions in 2023 is 4%”; additionally, they state that “about 85% of our collections budget goes towards journal subscriptions, [so] price increases stymie our ability to add new resources to support UCSF’s teaching, research, and clinical care needs.”<sup>[11]</sup> Other, larger schools have sounded the alarm on a similar issue. A post on the University of Missouri’s library website by Public Health and Community Engagement Librarian Taira Meadowcroft explores the rising cost of science journal subscriptions since the 1980s and how radically these costs have outpaced inflation. For example, a subscription to *Nature*, \$220 in 1980, ought to be about \$354 now; instead, the cost has risen to \$40,292. The explanation they offer is, if overly simplified, revealing of how boxed in librarians are by unavoidable and massive expenses: “Publishing companies are big businesses ... these bigger companies have bought smaller publishing companies, causing a lack of competition and the ability to set their own prices.”<sup>[12]</sup> A 2009 study by Richard Edwards and David Shulenburg entitled “The High Cost of Scholarly Journals (And What To Do About It)” further paints this picture:

*Perhaps more alarming, the increase in journal prices has been enormous and virtually constant. During the ten-year period 1993 to 2003, when the Consumer Price Index increased by about 27%, the cost to Nebraska for the *International Journal of Plant Sciences* increased from \$140 to \$587, an increase of 319 %; the *Journal of Physical Chemistry* went from \$1,168 to \$3,463, an increase of 196 %; and the *Journal of Economics and Business* rose from \$180 to \$493, an increase of 174 %;. According to data collected by the Association of Research Libraries (and available at [www.arl.org/stats](http://www.arl.org/stats)), during the 16-year interval between 1986 and 2001, scholarly journals prices overall increased by 8.5 % per year, while the CPI grew by 3.4 % per year. These differing inflation rates mean that over the entire 16-year period, journal prices jumped by 215%, the CPI just 64%. Journal prices even grew twice as fast as health care prices during the same period. Such increases in journal prices appear likely to continue. In consequence, research libraries and especially university libraries are perpetually in crisis as they struggle to find enough money to maintain their journal subscriptions.*<sup>[13]</sup>

Costs are rising in so many areas, namely the sciences, that do add to scholarship and perhaps relate to curricula. A later paragraph on that same Hunter College explanatory page emphasizes the importance of limiting costs to essentials: “current practice is that

requests for new journal subscriptions can only be honored if the requesting academic department is willing to cancel another journal subscription in its subject of equal or greater cost.”<sup>[14]</sup> There is only one exception to this rule, this being that “[occasionally] we are able to acquire new online subscriptions through the swapping of titles held in a consortial package deal, and the Libraries will make every effort to satisfy user requests.”<sup>[15]</sup>

These are potentially debilitating constraints for literary journals. For most universities, there is a certain baseline periodicals and databases budget that consumes an incredible amount of budgetary real estate; the vast majority of this budget goes to subscriptions for academic journals. The criteria for adding periodicals to collections are stiff. In the face of enormous expenses, and with literary periodicals likely absent from even specialized literature syllabi (their possible niche probably being a student project), the oppositional case is strong.

#### IV: Advocates

The literature is scant on compelling arguments for academic libraries to bolster their literary journal collections. In her article “Literary voices: selecting and promoting small presses and literary magazines in libraries,” Kay Ann Cassell, a librarian at The New School, takes up the cases for magazines and small presses; she argues that these magazines and presses represent crucial spaces for artistic growth and innovation, that they “function as a vehicle for the writer and as a forum for literary innovation.”<sup>[16]</sup> She notes too that publishing widely “in literary magazines is one of the best ways writers can get their work in print and develop the visibility needed to be accepted by a more mainstream publisher.”<sup>[17]</sup>

These spaces are critical too in promoting diversity, as she notes “women and minority writers are [often] first published by small presses.”<sup>[18]</sup> If the rewards for the writers seem obvious, what the library stands to gain is less clear; ultimately, Cassell emphasizes public programming efforts—such as public-facing readings with contemporary authors, speakers series, and literary discussion groups—as ways the library can work with literary magazines and presses for mutual benefit. Literary magazines can contribute to the diversification and deepening of collections; they serve as a possible vehicle for exposing students and faculty to emerging trends and voices in the world of contemporary letters. In this way the literary magazine can bear some similarity to an adjacent, but closely related category, that of the “zine.” *Zines in Libraries: Selecting, Purchasing, and Processing*, a book edited by Lauren DeVoe and Sarah Duff, brings together an array of librarians and scholars commenting on the benefits of adding zines to library collections. As zines are almost by definition indie efforts and are often produced by under-represented groups, they offer another pathway, like the literary periodical, to build out a library’s representation and to get readers in touch with current thought and work in potentially unfamiliar areas. Some specialty libraries, like the Barnard Zine Library, have done incredible work in building a vast circulating zine collection. Similar institutions unsurprisingly are quite rare; their website states that “with Colorado College and Pratt Institute, Barnard is one of the few academic collections that lends zines from open stacks.”<sup>[19]</sup> They provide a list of other zines in America and abroad, most of which are very specialized and small special collections.

Our reasons for *Gavialidae's* print exclusivity were mainly of the romantic variety toward which Dr. Bleyer hints—we love the feel of a book, the heft of it, cherish paper in the hand; and we relish the opportunity to create aesthetic objects, to bring into unified physical life so many distinct voices and artistic visions. Many of the authors we have featured have remarked how rare and exciting it is to have a periodical submission featured in print. This is an experience that's meaningful for many of the people who create literary art; and though they may be on the fringes of mainstream recognizability, their work has the potential—especially in the form of a book one can encounter by chance, to which one can feel a draw and which one can explore unfettered from the unlimited distracting potential of a device—to enrich or interest one, for some time in at least some small way.

In the face of such enormous obstacles, though, it's difficult to make a case that addresses and subsumes the practical realities. The romance of the book can be a beautiful thing, and diversifying collections is widely considered a priority—but is adding magazines the most straightforward way of accomplishing any of these goals while playing inside the lines? Cassell even acknowledges that expanding collections of these materials requires a great deal of work on the part of librarians. Vetting these usually obscure companies requires significant seeking and reading; and, as Jane Excell explained, they create more work once they arrive in the collection. As of yet, I have found a great set of roadblocks and few hints of how to overcome them.

## **V: Conclusion**

My unsuccessful pursuit of convincing libraries to purchase our periodical prompted wonderings about the balance of things—what if any room do libraries have to take minor financial risks on the kinds of inessential purchases which also constitute the ground level and entryway for many writers into a literary career, especially in print form? In the face of the difficult and undeniable realities outlined, the opportunity for literary periodicals widely finding homes in libraries appears to be dwindling, not increasing. One can hardly argue institutions have much other realistic choice; still, there is no harm in examining what may be lost in the scramble toward the future. If you grant that libraries are largely moving their resources, labor, and brainpower into the digital space; and if you grant that acquisitions bandwidth is being stretched by fealty to massive companies which own swathes of important resources, especially in the digital periodicals space; then it probably follows that sacrifices need to be made in other areas. Tracking the extent to which libraries begin to weed through their traditional print periodicals will prove an intriguing area of inquiry, especially in light of the patron preference for digital Hunter College has noted. What level of prestige, if any, will secure a periodical's place in the stacks? How many subscriptions will be canceled, and how many transitioned to digital-exclusive?

I should acknowledge that, though there are many magazines out there, be they literary journals or art periodicals or zines, that might for some small number of patrons enrich a library collection, these never formed much of the backbone of a library's collection. Still, the freedom to add them—the freedom to make the rare decision, the freedom for a librarian to play—does seem somewhat more constrained in this realm today. I see

budgets with massive, important fixed costs which may handcuff creative impulses or the experimentation Kay Cassell envisioned. This modern era in libraries brings with it tremendous promise and many obvious advantages; ultimately, though, it is hard not to see the climate as disadvantageous for the small print literary periodical.

### **Author Bio:**

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