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Accessible, Provocative, and Full of Heart: Lit Mag is Delightful Reading Experience

Review of [Raleigh Review](#), Spring

2015

by

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Rating:



Keywords:

Conventional (i.e. not experimental),

Quirky

Issue 5.1 marks *The Raleigh Review's* fifth anniversary and, my, they grow up so fast. What started as a pet project that distracted editor Rob Greene from his graduate studies is now a little beauty of a biannual journal that has received accolades and honors from Best of the Net and the Summit Creative Awards. This collection of nineteen poems rounded out by three short stories, two reviews, and rich full-color art is slim but never stingy. With a stated mission that seeks to “foster the creation and availability of accessible yet provocative contemporary literature,” this is a big-hearted lit mag that knows how to delight and devastate.

*The Raleigh Review's* website states, “We believe that great literature inspires empathy,” and I'd say the editorial team has been pretty successful in putting together a journal that invites the reader to slip into the shoes of another. Yet the exercise of delving into deep parts of the human experience isn't a simple one, and I found I needed to spend time digesting each piece in this issue before moving on to the next. This issue doesn't shy away from emotional complexity; these are deceptively simple pieces that deliver an emotional punch.

Take, for example, my favorite short story in this issue: “Pinhole Vision” by Carrie Knowles. Here, a young woman named Laura strives to explain her father's blindness to her new fiancé. In brief scenes that flash between past and present, Knowles explores the blind man through the eyes of the daughter. There's the shame projected by neighbors, the disbelief of the father's blindness because of his ability to move around with relative ease, and then the many subtle tensions of the marriage: mainly the father's desire for self-sufficiency paired with his need to be needed. Faced with a fiancé who “wanted her to tell him everything,” can Laura accurately and fairly describe the man who helped construct her emotional groundwork? This was a journey into different ways of seeing and being, and it was elegantly rendered.

There's some great news for poets here, too: the overall number of selections skews more heavily towards poetry than prose work. I've read that the editors favor visceral poems that elicit strong reactions, and it's true that nothing here left me cold. This issue definitely displays a wide variety of form and content, though pieces skirting the outer reaches of the formal or experimental may not find a home here.

This issue was chock full of works that invite second and third readings. I found myself returning most often to E. Kristin Anderson's "Fresh-faced and dirty," an erasure poem that repurposes an editorial piece from *Marie Claire*, and "Still with My Mother" by Lynn Otto. I also loved the pair of poems by C. Wade Bentley in this issue; while these were not light by any stretch, they both contained a bit of sly humor that was refreshing and very welcome amid such serious company.

"Deliquescence" by Ellen Bass was another gem. This poem won me over with its first few lines: "Spring. I'd almost forgotten / how the earth tilts her face, / unsnaps her valise, and all / the rooted greenery spills out." It perhaps rightly ends this fifth anniversary issue with its musings on growth, seasons, and aging — both the joy of watching children grow up and the pain of watching parents age and lose touch with reality. Bass describes the same apricot tree which appears earlier in the poem "diseased / and hacked" in the full sway of previous summers: "the apricots swelling and dropping, / splitting with their ripened weight." The final image of the poem allows us, and this issue, to dissolve back into the memory of the garden as it once was in full fruit.

A potential issue for emerging writers looking to submit their pieces to *The Raleigh Review*: most of the contributors to this issue have at least a few great publications under their belts. Many have already published full-length works (or a few), have an enviable list of clips and/ or have garnered prestigious awards. While the journal's online submissions guidelines do say that "new/emerging voices are often published along nationally recognized, award-winning authors," new voices feel underrepresented in this particular issue. The volunteers that edit the journal did a bang-up job of putting together a great issue, but it would have been even more delightful to see a few more truly "new/emerging" contributors in these pages.

That said, *The Raleigh Review* does pay all of its contributors and promotes them and the local literary community with readings, events and workshops taught by award-winning writers. Oh, and do check out the audio archives at the journal's website, where contributing poets are asked to record themselves reading their pieces.

*The Raleigh Review* is not a light read with its stories and poetry about families in trouble, longing, growing up, growing old and experiencing loss — but it is a delightful one. In light of *The Raleigh Review's* mission to be both accessible and provocative, I could see this journal appealing to a fairly broad audience: MFAs will likely find a lot to love here, but so will more casual readers in search of a great poem or short story to chew on. This is not the kind of work to grapple with because of its mindbending experimentation; rather, here is a collection to soak up.

Overall, this struck me as a very human, very intimate reading experience. The journal's website claims that "more great things keep on happening." I hope they continue to; *The Raleigh Review* is a beautiful, engaging journal with a lot of heart.

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