EJ @ 100: Celebrating a Century of Publication

Our old friend has reached an impressive milestone, and, wow, does EJ make 100 years old look good! Still up on the latest trends in the field, tirelessly communicating the thoughtful explorations and introspections of English teachers from across the country and beyond, wisely acknowledging the contributions of generations of teacher-scholars, while remaining open to the innovations of the field’s newest members. How many of us can claim to be so with it and so wise at the same time? Happy Birthday, English Journal! This issue is for you.

And when I say “you,” I mean you, the readers. All of us. English Journal is all of us and all the contributions of thousands of colleagues over the last 100 years. To be a reader of a journal as it turns 100 is a cause for celebration and reflection.

Reflecting on the Past, Preparing for the Future

We teach in challenging times, both philosophically and budgetarily. Rather than moving forward as a profession, it may feel more like we are fighting to stand still, to retain effective forms of instruction, informed and compassionate attitudes about students, and experience-driven knowledge of what makes classrooms positive, productive, lively, and livable spaces for successful students and teachers.

But this is not a new situation for English teachers. In fact, NCTE was itself born from controversy—or rather born as a response to controversy: resistance. English Journal’s first article’s first word is “No” (in answer to the article’s titular question, “Can Good Composition Teaching Be Done Under Present Conditions?”). About ten years later, EJ’s editor made a claim about the importance of our national journal that’s eerily contemporary:

We design to make [English Journal] an open forum for all, conservative and radical alike, who have important ideas and can state them well . . . [U]nless we teachers of English take up this matter of experiment in our own field it will be done for us by workers unfamiliar with the actual problems of English, who may secure results which we shall be forced to follow in our teaching although we are convinced that they are wrong. (W. Wilbur Hatfield’s inaugural editorial, qtd. in Christenbury)

We can look back with at least some degree of comfort, knowing that in the past 100 years, there have been many times when progressive English teachers have had to withstand unproductive interference in their work. English Journal has stood
From the Editor

the test of time, outlasting every self-serving or wrong-headed reformer, remaining a stalwart support for English teachers and students. Whenever we feel most put upon, we can turn EJ’s pages to find voices of hope and help from the past and from the present. For every bored and unchallenged student, for every overwhelmed new English teacher, for every exhausted veteran teacher, for every frustrated English department administrator, there is a century of help waiting.

The English Journal banner on the cover of this issue includes a new “100 Years” notation. This acknowledgment serves as a reminder to all readers of the tremendous amount of creative and intellectual energy that supports our work. To honor EJ at the century mark, the “100 Years” will remain on all issue covers for the remainder of my term as editor.

100 YEARS

English Journal Editors

In EJ’s 100 years, there have been a dozen editors. We are privileged that so many were able to contribute original retrospectives to this volume. In those retrospectives, spaced throughout this issue, readers will find insights, backstories, and memories. For those who edited EJ before 1973, their work speaks for them. Fortunately, Leila Christenbury wrote a compelling history of English Journal that includes fascinating information about former editors. I draw a few details here from her work, but I also recommend readers download the full, free document from the NCTE website.

English Journal’s founding editor was James Fleming Hosic, who served the post from 1912 until 1921. At the time, a subscription to the journal cost $1.50 (in addition to the $2.00 NCTE membership fee), and the journal was produced ten times per year. Hosic’s successor, W. Wilbur Hatfield, is EJ’s longest-serving editor, holding the position for more than 30 years from 1922 until 1955. Hatfield provided a steady constancy, allowing the young journal to grow in stature and breadth of influence. In 1955, Dwight L. Burton took over as editor until 1964. A former student of noted English educator Dora V. Smith, Burton was also a professor at Florida State University. Following the 73-year-old Hatfield, “Burton’s editorship was lively and a marked departure from the conservative feel and look of the Hatfield era” (Christenbury). Richard S. Alm, of the University of Hawaii, took the editorial reigns from 1964 until Stephen Tchudi became editor in 1973. As one might expect, Alm’s issues paid marked attention to the social controversies of the era.

All of the editors from 1973 on—Stephen N. Tchudi, Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth Donelson, Ben Nelms with associate editor Elizabeth D. Nelms, Leila Christenbury, Virginia R. Monseau, Louann Reid, and I—have contributed brief editorial retrospectives, sharing their thoughts on their editorships in the history of English Journal. I’m especially pleased that Rona Smith, who has served as EJ’s production editor for more than 20 years, took the time from her busy publication schedule to share some of her insights with us. I’m sure the other editors would agree that Rona has been an important managerial and creative influence.
More in This Issue

A gallery of English Journal covers shows the major design changes the journal has undergone, and the “EJ @ 100” quotes interspersed throughout the issue show what was on the minds of the journal’s first authors.

The most important part of EJ has always been—and will always be—its readers. Don Zancanella has compiled an especially interesting group of reflections from readers on the English Journal article that has influenced them the most. Enjoy some fond memories, recall an article that you should re-read, or learn about one that was written before you were even born that you should read today.

In addition to the historical excerpts and reflections, we have also included a number of original articles that examine various aspects of English Journal’s influence in light of today’s challenges. Readers will find articles on literary criticism, teaching Shakespeare, constructions of students, use of new media, and more. Many of these articles were written by members of the Conference on English Education, made up of English teacher educators. These NCTE members have an informed and unique perspective on the history and influence of English Journal on the teaching of middle school and high school English.

I want to express my gratitude to the many people—authors, former editors, EJ staff, and those who support us—who helped prepare this celebration of English Journal’s 100th year. A century in the making, this issue is not to be missed.

Note
1. We are grateful to Alleen Pace Nilsen for representing Kenneth Donelson in her retrospective on their work together as coeditors.

Work Cited

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EJ 100 Years Ago

Should Students Be Encouraged to Read Pop Fiction?

Current fiction, then, includes all magazines recently issued and all novels that are at present accessible to the ordinary reader. And the first question for us to answer is, What good can a student get from reading these? I feel no hesitation in saying that from the right fiction he may derive almost as much philosophy, quite as much inspiration, as from any other source whatever. From all fiction, except a small residue, he may draw some benefit. In its humblest function, a good story gives rest, recreation, and entertainment. In its highest, it gives an interpretation of life, a sense of the author’s answer to the eternal question, “What is worthwhile?” . . . Here, then, can we but use it, lies ready to our hand a mighty instrument for good. (15–16)

The magazines generally read by students are, in short, those generally read by the public, magazines of good quality—not of the highest literary standard, but a long way from the lowest. . . . We must remember that some popular writers of today are the classics of tomorrow. . . . Today we try to persuade our pupils to read Pickwick and to abstain from the latest humorist. Possibly some of us are now trying to coax our students not to read works that in 1950 will be required by the Syllabus. (22–23)


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