

NEED FOR FUNDING PITTSBURGH LITERARY PROJECTS

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Photo taken by Natalie Cohen



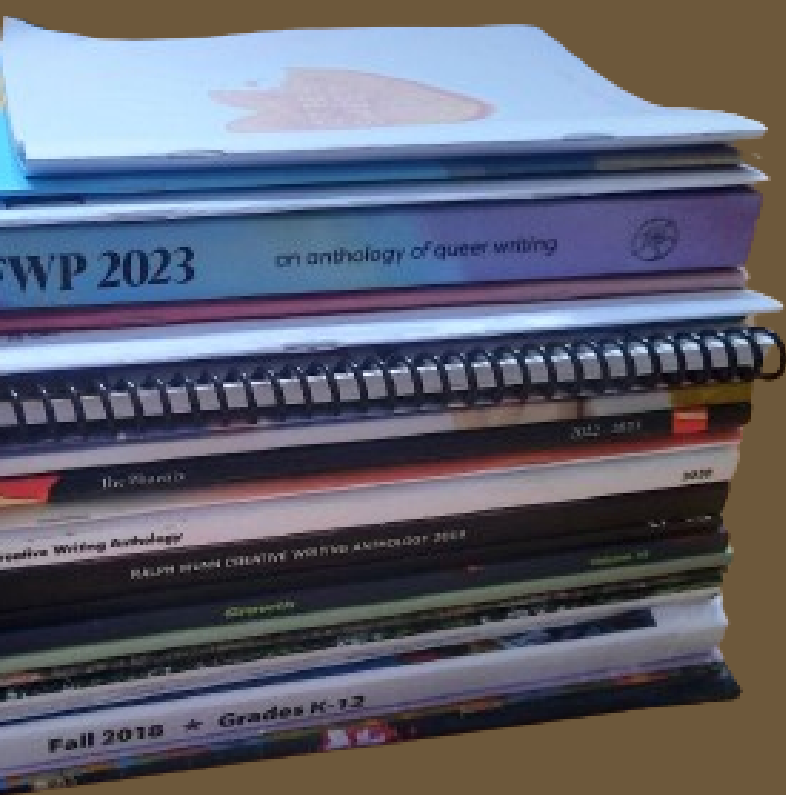


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INTRODUCTION

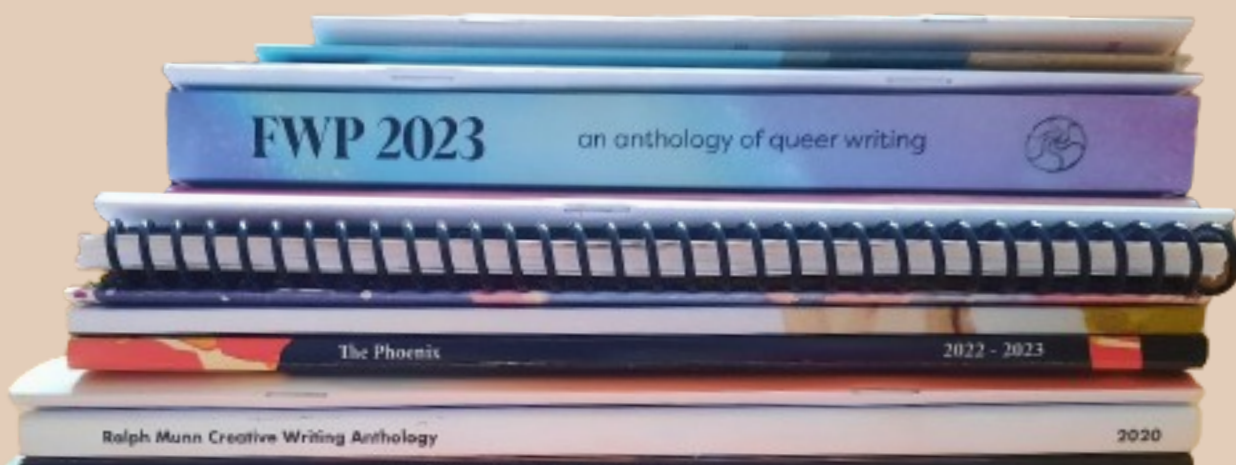
Literary magazines, journals, and publishers (broadly referred to as **literary projects**) lack funding. This problem is not only true for indie Pittsburgh-local projects, but, as demonstrated in the past couple of years, for nationally-acclaimed publications as well.

- *The Believer*, a well-established American literary magazine founded in 2003, announced it would be shutting down production in early 2022 due to the “**financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic**” (Asmelash). The dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Nevada, called print publications such as *The Believer* “**a financially challenging endeavor**” (Asmelash).
- *The Alaska Quarterly Review*, a notable American literary publication in print since 1980, described its financial situation as “**existential**” upon cutting ties with the University of Alaska Anchorage in 2020 after the college “**obliterated a slew of liberal arts disciplines across multiple campuses,**” including their very own literary magazine whose *only* employee was laid off during the pandemic (Asmelash).
- *Fantasy* magazine, a noteworthy sci-fi/fantasy American literary magazine originally founded in 2005 and rebooted in 2020, announced in August of 2023 that it would be shutting down due to “***Fantasy* never reach[ing] a point of paying for itself**” (Yant & Sorg).

These are just a few examples of the detrimental consequences that lack of funding has on literary projects, even those of larger sizes. While many might think that these problems are alleviated when discussing smaller, more niche projects, such as those within the tight-knit Pittsburgh literary scene, this is far from the case. On the contrary, this paper will focus on the adverse impact lack of funding has on editors and writers alike, specifically within smaller, indie projects such as Pittsburgh-local publication *After Happy Hour Review* (also known as *AHH*).

As *AHH* editor-in-chief Jess Simms says, “**There’s some different layers to the question of funding.**” This paper will examine each of these layers, delving into why neither editors nor writers are making enough money to financially sustain themselves and their work. Through invigorated funding efforts from organizations such as The Mellon Foundation or institutions such as The University of Pittsburgh’s Dietrich School of Arts, Pittsburgh-local literary projects in desperate need of funds would not only be able to compensate their hard-working editors, but their talented writers as well. This paper will consider the importance of literary projects, their future, and why this ever-growing industry deserves to be supported.

Photo taken by Natalie Cohen



WHY DO LITERARY PROJECTS MATTER?

Literary projects are important, not only to creators and editors, but to American culture at large. Culturally, literary projects provide accessible art and writing to millions of readers across the country, creating jobs for editors, writers, and artists alike. The 2022 Literary Arts Emergency Fund (LAEF) Impact Report— a historic grant formed by the Academy of American Poets, the Community of Literary Magazines & Presses (CLMP), and the National Book Foundation and funded by the Mellon Foundation — **“demonstrates the unique contributions that nonprofit literary organizations and publishers make to literature and the larger arts and culture sector in the US.”** The LAEF Impact Report finds that this particular subset of literary projects **“in 2021 alone...reached 220.3 million individuals through programs and publications...and employed 2,546 individuals, many of whom are writers.”**



Cover page of The 2022 Literary Arts Emergency Fund (LAEF) Impact Report

WHY DO LITERARY PROJECTS MATTER?

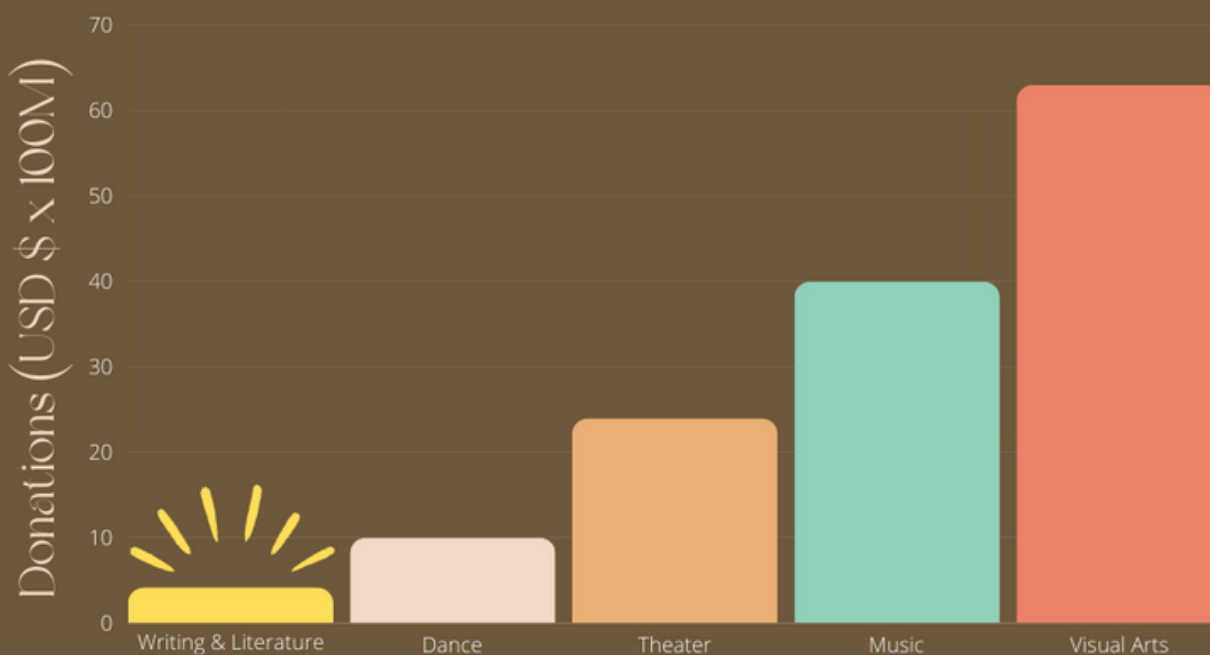
Within the publishing industry, literary projects are also integral to helping build budding writers' careers. Electric Literature editor-in-chief Denne Michele Norris writes in a [2021 editorial](#) that literary journals, in specific, are **“the rigorous proving grounds that early-career writers need... [and] are especially important for writers from marginalized backgrounds. They are the first venues to publish us, to affirm our writing, and to help us...build careers.”** A handful of **“some of the world’s greatest”** American writers and [the literary projects that got them started](#) include:

- [T.S. Eliot](#) in *The Harvard Advocate*
- [Sylvia Plath](#) and [Robert Lowell](#) in *The Sewanee Review*
- [Marianne Moore](#) and [Ezra Pound](#) in *Poetry* (Tuch).

WHY DO LITERARY PROJECTS MATTER?

Literary projects are one of the most prolific arts movements that give a voice to all, no matter how small. *AHH* editor-in-chief Jess Simms says **“The more options there are for people to publish what they say, the better our dialogue is,”** citing this fact as the reason that funding literary projects is so important, even **“little online ones that might just seem silly and publish stories about fish. That voice needs to be heard too!”**

Philanthropic Giving to Artistic Disciplines in the U.S. from 2014-2018



Data from the 2022 The Literary Arts Emergency Fund Impact Report. Made on Canva.

THE REALITY OF EDITORS

To say editors of indie literary projects make a living is a stretch of the imagination. Typically, these editors are barely compensated for their work, if at all.

Behind the curtain, literary projects are often in the red when it comes to finances. M.R. Branwen, editor-in-chief of indie lit mag *Slush Pile Magazine*, wrote in a [2017 op-ed](#) that **“submissions cost — not make — lit mags money”** and that many lit mags are **“entirely staffed by volunteers”** who work **“hours and hours”** to accept/reject submissions, format, proof, and promote lit mag issues.

Despite this grim reality, funding options for literary projects are few and far in-between. Denne Michele Norris writes that Electric Literature, a non-profit, is **“funded by a mix of grants, advertising sponsorships, membership fees, and grassroots donations.”**

THE REALITY OF EDITORS

Even less of these opportunities exist for indie print publications; according to Jess Simms “...you have three potential sources of revenue as a publisher: the people who send you work, the people who read the work, or ad space.” The editor asserts that the “**traditional, capitalist models**” of the latter option, advertising, “**don’t work with small publishing**” due to most projects not wanting to become, in the eyes of their readers, “**a product beholden to advertisers.**” Simms holds that “**if there were more grant funding available or more projects where people were gathering money from people who are passionate about literature and redistributing it to the people putting that literature into the world, that would fill a big gap.**”

Indeed, the only recent example of this type of funding effort is the LAEF whose 2022 Impact Report found that “**nonprofit literary arts organizations and publishers, to a large extent, exist with meager budgets, few staff, and little or no cash reserves.**” These tough conditions under which literary projects exist are, according to the report, “**especially true for nonprofit publishers and those organizations that are led by BIPOC staff and serve historically underrepresented groups.**” Unfortunately, it is a known fact within the indie literary publishing sphere that editors, the people who work the hardest to bring these collections of newfound writing and art to life, are fundamentally underpaid for their efforts.

THE REALITY OF WRITERS

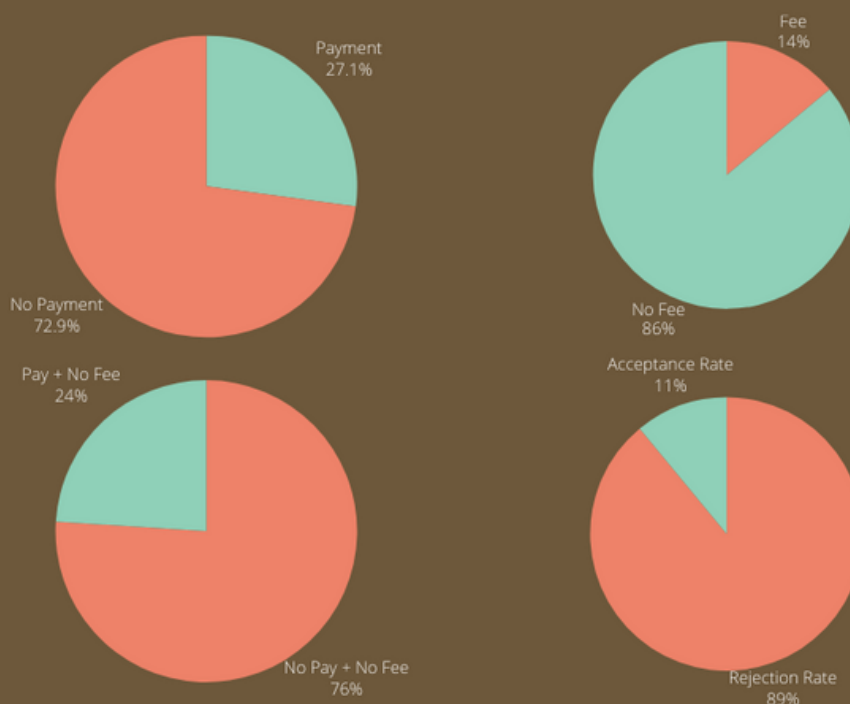
Because literary projects rarely make enough money to pay their own editors, they seldom can compensate their contributors, instead often relying on submitters to pay *them* to merely consider a piece of writing or art for publication which further alienates already-financially-burdened writers and artists. Marc Berley, editor of *LitMag*, wrote in a 2017 editorial that submission fees — \$3 or more fees that writers pay to have their work read and considered by literary projects — **“are now the cost writers pay to do business — the business being the unprofitable venture of paying to get rejected 25 or more times for every acceptance. When acceptance pays only a few hundred dollars, or zilch, ends don’t meet.”**

AHH editor-in-chief Jess Simms, as a writer herself, empathizes with the plight of fellow writers, stating, **“Most people who edit journals are also writers, so it’s nice to get paid for putting hours and hours into a story or a poem. *After Happy Hour* would like to start paying more because \$10 is *just north* of insulting, especially for someone who writes a 7,500-word short story and is like ‘Oh, great, \$10, thanks...This took me 6 months to write!’”** They eloquently add that **“not every writer can afford to pay submission fees and that’s just the truth. Figuring out how to increase the amount you’re bringing in without alienating the people who have gotten you there is a huge challenge.”**

THE REALITY OF WRITERS

Unfortunately, these anecdotes prove true in regards to the statistics. According to Chill Subs, a writer database that houses submissions information for over 15,000 writers and 3,000 literary magazines worldwide, **72.9%** of literary magazines on the platform don't pay accepted writers and only **24%** pay their writers and don't require a submission fee. This sobering statistic coupled with the fact that, across nearly 72,300 submissions, there is only an **11%** acceptance rate, affirms Berley's and Simms's worries for writers as they struggle to make a living from getting their work published.

Literary Magazines Listed on Chill Subs

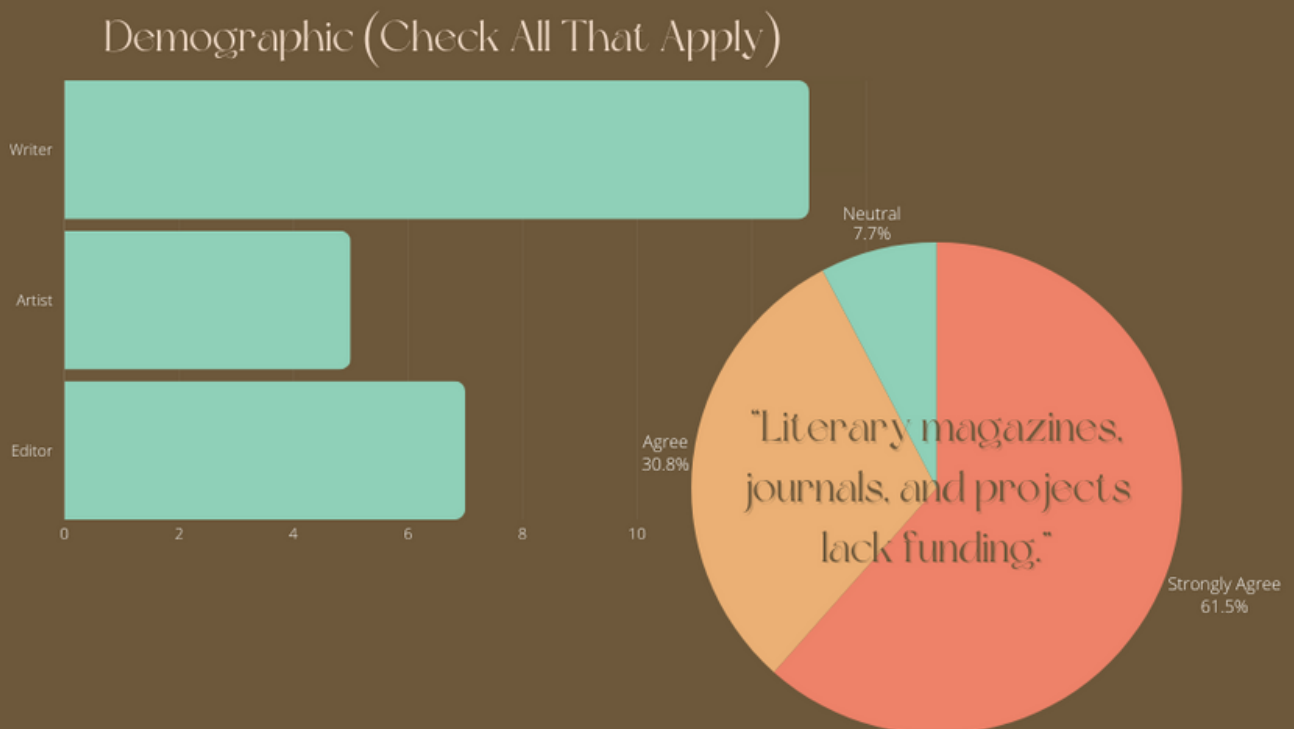


Data from Chill Subs Writer Database. Made on Canva.

THE REALITY OF WRITERS

Sadly, this issue is dangerously normalized among creators and editors alike. In a self-conducted anonymous survey of thirteen youth writers, editors, and artists, 100% of participants voted **“Strongly Agree”** to the prompt **“Writers/artists often don't make living wages getting published by literary projects.”** Needless to say, this only further maintains the severity of this issue and demonstrates literary projects' need for funding.

Anonymous Survey Results



Data from Personal Anonymous Survey. Made on Canva.

HOW FUNDING WILL HELP

Reinvigorated funding for literary magazines has and will continue to help keep these projects afloat, benefitting both editors and writers in the long run. As early as December of 2022, *Bookforum*, an American literature review magazine founded in 1994, announced it would be ceasing publication. Six months later, it announced its relaunch under *The Nation* magazine with a new **“business model”** striving to **“develop a much larger direct subscription base”** (Dwyer). *Bookforum*’s revival is just one example of what a difference a boost in funding can have on a dying literary project, even one so renowned.

It is the responsibility of organizations and institutions with the financial means to help fund literary arts projects, not only because of their status as touchstones in cultural arts, but also according to their mission statements. The Mellon Foundation — whose mission statement is to provide grants that **“build just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking, where ideas and imagination can thrive”** — and The Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences — whose mission statement is to **“create and exchange knowledge that shapes disciplines and interdisciplinary fields within the humanities”** and to **“serve others within and beyond the University”** — are two such examples.

HOW FUNDING WILL HELP

In 2020 and 2022, The Mellon Foundation-backed LAEF “distributed an unprecedented \$7,830,000 to 376 nonprofit literary arts organizations and publishers in 43 states across the US, as well as Washington, DC and Puerto Rico, which were disastrously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.” The grants — which ranged from \$5,000 to \$50,000 — were determined by “financial need and projected loss due to COVID-19; budget size; diversity, equity, and inclusion as it relates to an organization’s staff and board; poets and writers contracted with; audiences served; geographic location; and an organization’s ability to continue offering programming.”

This national fund was a resounding success and could be established — albeit, on a smaller scale — specifically for Pittsburgh-local literary projects in need of financial help. After all, it doesn’t take much to fund these projects; according to Jess Simms, “Talk to any literary journal — if their budget is in the four figures, they are doing *good*. We’re talking hundreds of dollars a year, we’re not talking big budget things.”



Logo of The Mellon Foundation

HOW FUNDING WILL HELP

The Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences oversees a number of student-run literary projects, including *Forbes & Fifth* and *Collision Literary Magazine*. While both of these publications provide incredible opportunities for student writers/artists locally and abroad, neither of these projects monetarily compensate their contributors, an achievement in the interest of not only this college, but other institutions around Pittsburgh.

For instance, Jess Simms says of their alma mater Chatham University, “**It would be nice to see more commitment from some of these institutions of ways that they could give some funding back to the artistic community and [currently] don’t.**” Institutions such as the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences are dedicated to their student writers and artists; thus, failing to fully support their university-backed literary projects — or shuttering them altogether — could result in a Gettysburg College situation in which the PA college was “**lambasted**” by alumni and fans of *The Gettysburg Review* after the 35-year-long project was suddenly ended by the administration in October of 2023 (Alonso).

CONCLUSION

Despite literary projects' cultural and economic importance, they are severely underfunded, preventing editors and writers alike from earning a living from their work. In order to change this grim reality of indie literary publishing, these projects must be financially stimulated by local organizations and institutions that have the means and power.

The Mellon Foundation and The Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences are two such groups that possess the ability to fund Pittsburgh-local literary projects; they have a vested interest according to their own mission statements to help these integral beacons within the literary arts, which not only give platforms to artistic voices big and small, but also work to make writing and art accessible to the general public.

As Jess Simms states, **“We’re in this tricky situation as a country where the way that we distribute our funds and the way that people *need* those funds distributed are so far apart,”** adding that **“the local level is a good place to start”** and that **“a good change to see”** would be editors and writers **“demanding that this [industry] be supported.”** After all, the first steps to making change are recognizing a need, determining who can best fill it, and asking for this need to be filled — it is this latter step that editors, writers, and appreciators of literary arts alike must now take to make this change happen.

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