



Sapling #469

Black Lawrence Publishing



Feature Article

This week **Sapling** talks with **Shanna McNair**, Founding Editor & Publisher, **The New Guard**.

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Sapling: What should people know who may not be familiar with The New Guard?

Shanna McNair: *The New Guard* is a print-only independent literary review that centers on contests in fiction and poetry. We run The Knightville Poetry Contest and The Machigonne Fiction Contest, with final judges who are unique to each volume. We award two prizes of \$1500 and publication to two winners: one prize for a single poem and one prize for a single story. We publish 35+ emerging writers every year from the US and abroad. We proudly publish in print, with the exception of our online feature, BANG!, where a single writer is showcased for a full month. Our mission is to publish newcomers alongside established writers, and to juxtapose tradition with experiment. We also curate a themed letters section for each volume. Past themes include "Love Letters,"

"Letters to Aliens," "Letters to Superheroes & Supervillains" and "Letters to Food & Booze." When I founded **The New Guard** in 2009, my major aim was to create a venue to support emerging writers. I also wanted to have the opportunity to publish poetry and fiction that felt urgent to me as both a writer and as an editor. And I wanted to give something back to my fellow writers, to serve the greater literary community.

The New Guard has a twin site, **The Writer's Hotel** (www.writershotel.com) which is essentially our editorial and teaching arm. The Writer's Hotel NYC accepts writers of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. We call The Writer's Hotel NYC Writers Conference our "Mini MFA" program because we read full manuscripts pre-conference and then meet in Midtown for a week-long conference. Our conference takes place every June and includes workshops, craft lectures, agent pitches and more. And attending writers read their own original work in the city. Finally, we offer a one-on-one virtual writing program called "The Writer's Hotel Private Study". Between **The New Guard** and The Writer's Hotel, I personally get to assist writers in so many ways! As Editor, I've enjoyed our in-house contest cycles and publication and I've seen writers get promotions and get graduate school acceptances; and via The Writer's Hotel, I've seen writers sign on with agents, publish their full-length manuscripts and get book deals. What a team we have—this year we have such amazing NYC faculty members as former US Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera, Meghan Daum, Rick Moody, Cornelius Eady, Richard Hoffman, Jeffrey Ford, Tina Chang and Elizabeth Hand and more, and a whole host of Teaching Assistants and Faculty Assistants are on deck. On site we work with hoteliers at The Roger Smith, Library Hotel, Bryant Park Hotel,

Casablanca Hotel and The Algonquin Hotel in Midtown and reading venue folks at KGB Bar Lit and Cornelia Street Café and Bowery Poetry. *The New Guard* and The Writer's Hotel are only as great as the sum of their parts. Our slogan: *Write better, publish smarter. Get inspired.*

Sapling: How did your name come about?

SM: I was looking at a copy of *Poets & Writers* and the cover article was entitled "The New Guard," to describe four young literary agents. I started thinking about the idea of old guard vs. new—a concept I wanted to kind of blur by creating a new dialogue between the two purported factions. All writers could be considered guardians of the art, couldn't they? So I decided my literary review would merge old and new "guards" and marry experiment with tradition. In the first volume, established writers were published alongside new ones. Our first poetry judge was the late former US Poet Laureate Donald Hall; second was former US Poet Laureate Charles Simic; and we went on to have Stephen Dunn, Tim Seibles and Jeanne Marie Beaumont, among others. In fiction we've had judges Joe Wenderoth, David Plante, Rick Bass and more. We've had phenomenal contributors, too—such as the late Ralph Ellison (his estate allowed us to print a previously unpublished short story), Maxine Kumin, Sharon Olds, Afaa Michael Weaver, James Patrick Kelly, Marge Piercy, Sven Birkerts, Tess Gerritsen, Theodore Deppe and Erin Belieu. Pulling in notable names has been valuable to TNG and to those who are published in the review.

I named the contests for location—*The New Guard* was founded in Maine. At the time, I was living in Knightville, Maine, a neighborhood in South Portland. I named the poetry contest for Knightville and the fiction contest for Portland—the Portland area was once called "Machigonne".

Sapling: What do you pay close attention to when reading submissions? Any deal breakers?

SM: I read for craft, content, voice, message. It's a subjective process, for sure. Because **TNG** is a contest-centered literary review, we can't accept pieces that deviate from our contest rules. So there are deal-breakers, which include sloppy copy-editing and word count or line count overages (fiction must be 5K words or less and poetry can be up to 120 lines). Our team at **TNG** is dedicated and hard-working. I'm grateful to be in their company. We read and re-read during our contest cycles and have ardent discussions about the poems and stories. I should mention that we are members of CLMP. We're grateful for their presence.

Sapling: Where do you imagine **The New Guard** to be headed over the next couple years? What's on the horizon?

SM: In the immediate future, we'll be putting together Volume VIII. Judges were Rick Moody (Machigonne Fiction Contest) and Patricia Smith (Knightville Poetry Contest). Next volume's letters section theme is "Letters to My Younger Self." On the horizon is more **TNG** and TWH. Simply put, I look forward to reading more new writing. And as a writer myself, I strive to write and publish my own material, too. We're all in this together!

Sapling: As an editor, what is the hardest part of your job? The best part?

SM: The hardest part, hands down, is rejecting authors. I absolutely loathe that aspect of the job. I want so much to encourage writers—it is my wildest dream to communicate that in today's publishing market, pretty much all writers have a seat at the big table of success. Writers sending out entries to contests are demonstrating a real artistic urgency—and it is inspiring to me as an editor. But it's difficult to communicate encouragement effectively during a contest cycle.

“Handing down” a rejection is my least favorite thing.

I see a lot of positive aspects as an editor at **The Writer’s Hotel**. Working with writers pre-conference on their full-length manuscripts presents a fantastic opportunity to coach writers toward their own unique voices. Watching a writer grow and become more confident in their own vision and voice is an absolute joy. I also love to work with Scott Wolven, who is **TNG** Consulting Editor and TWH Consulting Director. Scott is an innovative and charismatic editor and instructor—and a special, singular writer. He is an inspiration. It is a gift to work alongside Scott.

Sapling: If you were stranded on a desert island for a week with only three books which books would you want to have with you?

SM: *Jesus’ Son* by Denis Johnson, *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath and an anthology edited by Anne Chalmers called *The Story and its Writer* (4th edition). But I would long for other books. This could easily be another list of three. Three hundred would be an easier call. (What about *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and how will I do without Murakami, Carver, Le Guin—what about The Beats—what about Ben Okri’s *Famished Road*, Nami Mun’s *Miles From Nowhere*—I mean—how to get by without Philip K. Dick and Henry Miller and Amy Hempel? A list of three hundred, at least. I hope I get my own pen and paper on this island!

Sapling: Just for fun (because we like fun and the number three) if The New Guard was a person what three things would it be thinking about obsessively?

SM: The notion of personifying **TNG** takes me in so many directions! I’ll try this as three different versions of TNG-as-a-person, in the spirit of the prompt. First version of TNG-as-a-person: TNG 1 is a worrier who endeavors to make sure all writers have their full say without censorship. Second version of TNG-as-a-person: TNG 2 is a foodie who hosts madcap pop-up dinners, and aspires to join the ranks of such culinary greats as Martin Picard and David Chang and Alex Guarnaschelli. Third version of TNG-as-a-person: TNG 3 is an avid reader whose ardor manifests in a books-for-all philanthropic effort. TNG 3 tours nationwide and passes out books, coast to coast. Reading this back, I am noticing that TNG Three are sort of naïve do-gooders. So let’s throw in a TNG 4, who might bring in a little turbulence and wreak havoc and mayhem—a creature with spark who inspires the others to dream and revel and make art.

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Shanna McNair is Founder and Director of The Writer’s Hotel and Founding Editor and Publisher of **The New Guard** literary review. She writes prose, poetry and scripts and is an award-winning journalist. She has written and directed plays, served as magazine and newspaper and judged writing contests. She was a 2018 Hewnoaks Artist Colony Writer in Residence. She recently served as a RISCA Fiction Fellow Competition Judge and as an Interdisciplinary Study Adviser at Lesley University. In 2011 she was a Writer in Residence at the Thomas Lynch cottage in Moveen, Ireland, following a residency in Dingle via the University of Southern Maine Stonecoast MFA program. She also holds a Creative Writing Certificate from Oxford University via her study at the Dartmouth College Creative Writing Master’s program. She has worked extensively in the visual and performing arts. She is presently at work on a novel, short stories, poems and a novella.

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For more information: www.newguardreview.com and www.writershotel.com

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