

# CutBank

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## Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

"ARE YOUR EARS BURNING?" It was Earl Ganz, director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Montana. He was grinning.

"We were talking about you," he said, "in a faculty meeting."

Whoops! This was during the halcyon spring of 1973. I was seriously untenured, very junior, and there were lots of reasons why my ears might be burning. And plenty of reasons why I wouldn't want those reasons talked about in an English Department faculty meeting.

"We put you in charge," Ganz said. "Dick and Madeline and I, we got you voted in." He was talking about Richard Hugo and Madeline DeFrees, poets and the heavy hitting heart of UM's Creative Writing Program.

"What this program needs," he said, "is a first-rate magazine."

"So," he said, "it's up to you."

Yeah.

When I first came to the University of Montana, in 1969, having lucked into the job Jim Crumley dumped after his first novel was accepted for publication, there was a magazine being published out the English Department. It was called *The Garrett*, edited by Missoula novelist Jon Jackson, at that time an undergraduate English major (having abandoned ornithology). Jon published a story of mine in the fall issue, which featured an elegant cover photo by Lee Nye, the lead bartender at Eddie's Club (now Charlie's). There were copies all over town, and there I was, in print. Hello.

But *The Garrett* sort of died from underfunding a year later – Jackson having decamped to the writing program in Iowa City, where he worked as an editor for *The Iowa Review*. I say "sort of died" because there was some small monies for a magazine, a few hundred dollars, and a couple of ugly duckling Xeroxed issues of *The Garrett* were published over the next couple of years.

But Ganz was right. If we were going to have an actually functional writing program, one in which students might feel they were not forever lost in a back water, we needed a first-rate literary magazine. This was a notion I deeply believed in, having got a start publishing in very “little” magazines myself. It was a step toward the world by a fellow with no credentials at all (beyond Cs in English Comp at Oregon State). Ray Carver, when I met him in Seattle, knew my stories, and “Please Be Quiet, Please” had been in *Best American Short Stories*, 1967, so of course I knew it. We spent hours over way too many drinks and talk of stories and poems and magazines. We felt ignored by the world, and this was ours, a secret, affirmative society.

We were convinced that people all around America were like us, talking about literary magazines, that we weren’t alone in our reverence for the possibilities they represented. I’m still convinced, and have to think, in these increasingly straight-jacketed days, that those possibilities – call them freedoms – are more important than ever.

So, how to get a magazine going? The answer, as usual, lay with graduate students. All I did, as it turned out, was get them started. There were no doubt many who helped, my memory is short on particulars here, but the main organizer was David Long, who has gone on to a distinguished fiction writing career. One spring afternoon Gary Thompson and David and I, and David’s wife, Suzy, sat around drinking beer in David’s living room and cooked up a title. It was Suzy, I think, who thought of *CutBank*.

David and the other editors spent evenings pleading for funds from the UM Associated Students – even claiming that a lit magazine could cast glory on a university, like a football team – and they solicited writing, found art, and helped with the layout. I came back from a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford, and they had a magazine, *CutBank 1*.

“Where the big fish lie.” Don’t know who thought of that.