

galleycat

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Guest Essay: Tim W. Brown on the History and Future of Zines

When I heard about [Tim W. Brown's](#) novel *Walking Man*, a satiric novel that depicts the life and times of the most famous zine publisher in America, I wondered "what happened to the zine?" Here's Tim Brown's Essay on the history and future of the zine.



Opinions differ about the origins of zines. Some trace their ancestry to colonial times, when a lively traffic in political, polemical and satirical pamphlets occurred. Others have stated that pulp magazines dating from the 1930s were the first zines. True detective magazines, titillating readers with lurid accounts of murders and sex crimes, and science fiction magazines, targeting fans of an exploding literary genre, resembled zines in how they appealed to highly selective reading tastes.

The most widely credited ancestor of the contemporary zine was the "fanzine" first appearing in the 1970s. An offshoot of the fan club newsletter, fanzines published bits of fact and rumor about favorite rock bands in pamphlets mimeographed in editions of fifty or a hundred.

Poets and comic artists soon adopted the methods of producing zines, giving them an outlet for their creative, if noncommercial, artistic energies. The final ingredient in the modern zine recipe was a revolution in office technology occurring during the 1980s: access to personal computers and inexpensive photocopying. Would-be publishers abandoned their Selectric typewriters and mimeograph machines and borrowed or stole PC and Xerox resources from their schools or jobs to produce zines of relatively high visual quality.

Desktop publishing, as the new process was named, enabled anyone with a little cash and basic computer skills to become a publisher. A huge democratization of the written word resulted, and zines sprouted up in every corner of the U.S., discussing every subject under the sun: sex, death, drugs, politics, music, tattooing, piercing, slasher movies, gay and lesbian lifestyles, conspiracy theories, UFOs, feminism, anarchism, defecation, masturbation, you name it. Zines varied wildly in content and format, ranging from sloppily folded and stapled booklets to glossy, four-color tabloids and from grade-school chicken scratch to penetrating journalism.

A list of publications from the 80s and 90s zine heyday ought to re-open the dusty accordion files stashed inside the brain of anyone remotely aware of publishing trends outside established commercial or academic channels: *Angry Thoreauan*, *Ben Is Dead*, *Bowel Movement*, *Bust*, *Cometbus*, *Craphound*, *Crank*, *Dishwasher*, *EIDOS*, *Factsheet 5*, *Fucktooth*,

Hip Mama, Lumpen, Murder Can Be Fun, Pills a Go Go, Punk Planet, Riotgrrl, Rocktober and Temp Slave!

By the mid-1990s creative types began wondering why they should mess around with printing and its capital requirements when a free publishing model was available. Zinesters and their younger cohorts began toying with a new medium, the Internet. Content found previously in zines appeared online via the bulletin board and its successor technologies, listservs and newsgroups. When web browsers were developed, these online publications morphed into e-zines.

Originally static web pages, e-zines swiftly got more sophisticated until the arrival of the Web 2.0 paradigm, which has now made publishing a two-way street. The blog scene was born, and bloggers largely carry the flag of self-expression despite the continued presence of e-zines. Not every zine was the product of one mind; many operated like popular magazines, publishing work by several writers along with expansive letters-to-the-editor sections wherein huge ideological battles were fought. But nothing from the original print zine scene compares to the real-time reader response possible with today's lowest-tech blogs.

Tim W. Brown is author of the recent novel *Walking Man* (Bronx River Press). From 1982-1999 he published Tomorrow Magazine, a poetry zine featuring the work of underground and performance poets from across the U.S.

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