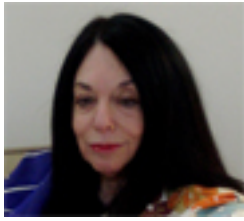


Jill Hoffman
Editor of Mudfish



Jendi Reiter conducted this exclusive email interview with Jill Hoffman, editor of **Mudfish**. This well-regarded journal of poetry and artwork is published by Box Turtle Press, a small press in New York City's Tribeca neighborhood. 2010 will be the 10th year of the Mudfish Poetry Prize, which offers \$1,000 for unpublished poems of any length. This year's deadline is October 30. The final judge will be Mark Doty. Authors recently published in **Mudfish** include Jesslyn Roebuck, Rebecca Foust, Michelle Bitting, Paula Brancato, Michael Montlack, Ronald Wardall, Arielle Greenberg, and Simon Perchik.

Jill Hoffman is the Founding Editor of **Mudfish** and the **Mudfish Individual Poets Series**. She has a Ph.D. in Literature from Cornell University, an M.A. from Columbia and a B.A. from Bennington College. Her first book of poems, *Mink Coat*, was published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston in 1973. Her first novel, *Jilted*, was published by Simon & Schuster in 1993. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for Poetry in 1974-75. She published *black diaries: poems*, with Box Turtle Press in 1990; and *The Gates of Pearl*, a book-length poem, is forthcoming. She has two completed novels, *Topless* and *Stoned*. She lives in New York, and teaches fiction and poetry writing in her home. She also paints. Visit her website at www.jillhoffman.com.

Q: "Mudfish" and "Box Turtle" are intriguingly earthy names for a publishing venture based in the heart of the downtown urban scene. How did you choose these names, and what can they tell us about your publication's aesthetic?

A: The title of **Mudfish**, a journal of art and poetry, derives from the Nigerian storyteller's stool, composed of two interlocking mudfish. I saw a reproduction of it on sale for \$300 in the gift shop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. To me, it represented the magazine's interlocking of art and poetry; and also expressed my penchant for poetry as story, as very concise and intimate storytelling. I like to think of a poem as a miniature novel, and I like to think of the poet as a storyteller.

I had several box turtles in a subterranean window garden; neighborhood children looked for them in the spring. One year they were gone. During the winter we took them inside, into the basement gallery called Attitude Art. But they shunned the sunlight they needed in order to hide; their shells softened, and we had to return them to Lakewood, New Jersey. They were beautiful with orange and yellow hieroglyphics on their domed shells. They moved slowly, like our publication, which, if we hurry, only comes out once every year and a half.

Q: How, if at all, does Mudfish reflect the culture(s) of New York City? (Choice of contributors, themes, aesthetics, imagery...etc.)

A: The magazine is distributed nationally, the submissions come from all over the country. If there was a poem about a mosque at Ground Zero it might catch our attention; but we have no special interest in Mayor Bloomberg's New York.

Q: Are there types of poetry that, although well-crafted, would not be a good fit for Mudfish? E.g. formal, religious, erotic, experimental/"language" poetry...

A: All poetry is made out of language. We publish what we like, what we connect with, without regard to labels. I used to value the juxtaposition of famous and emerging poets, but now we simply concentrate on finding and printing powerful, memorable poems.

Q: Are there particular poetic techniques and topics you feel are over-represented, and conversely, are there others that you'd like to see more often?

A: Again, we don't think in categories.

Q: Alternatives to print publishing are rapidly growing in popularity. Online journals are less expensive to produce, and more convenient for readers on the go. Is there still an important role for traditional printed journals? What unique experiences can they offer the reader?

A: It's good to have something you can hold in your hand, and admire on a shelf. If Mudfish only existed electronically, we would miss out on Paul Wuensche's beautiful covers. Turning real pages is probably something some people will always want to do.

Q: I noticed that there are no contributors' bios in Mudfish, which is not typical for literary journals. Authors generally use these endnotes to promote their other publications and websites to readers who appreciated their work in the magazine. However, some critics of cronyism in the publishing world feel that poems should be allowed to stand alone. (An interesting literary experiment, the journal *The New Anonymous*, takes this notion to extremes by not even disclosing the names of its editors and authors.) What is the reason behind your

omission of bios?

A: Laziness, mostly. But Mudfish is huge, and we try to make it a seamless read, a work of art really, and it would be distracting to make room for 100 or 150 bios.

Q: Describe the contest judging process. Who screens the entries, how many do you typically receive, and how many are passed on to the final judge? Are entries read anonymously?

A: The Mudfish editors screen the poems. They are extraordinarily talented and devoted: Stephanie Emily Dickinson, Matt Sapio, and Lawrence Applebaum in particular. We charge \$15 for three poems and \$3 for each additional poem and give a thousand dollar prize. It always seems that we receive too few submissions to break even. We enjoy an overwhelming flood. The screening process is hard because we can't just look for a winner. Every poem sent to us is considered for publication. Poets are advised not to put their name on the pages. Instead their names and addresses and titles are on a cover page. We all read every entry, write our comments on a cover sheet, and then discuss which individual poems should be published, and which complete sets of poems should be finalists. If we love two or more poems in a set, it qualifies as a finalist. There are usually about twenty finalists.

Q: Have you ever not picked a winner for one of your contests? Do you think contests should refund the fees if no winner is chosen?

A: We've always consummated the contest with a winner, a check, and publication.

Q: How do you publicize your contest and contest winners?

A: Each issue begins with the presiding judge, the contest winner, and the winning poem prominently featured. Following are the second place honorable mention poet and poem, and the third place poet and poem.

Q: Tell us about your recent contest-winning poems: title, author, year, theme, and style (e.g. prose-poem). What made them stand out?

A: The most recent judge was Deborah Landau (Mudfish 16, 2009), who chose a prose poem titled "Pastoral" by Jesslyn Roebuck as winner of the Mudfish Poetry Prize. The title is in contrast with the subject matter, which is incest, and fear of the father, set in a barn.

David Lehman chose Leonard Gontarek's "Email", a kind of modern-day erotic love poem, as winning poem for Mudfish 15, in 2007.

In Mudfish 12 (my favorite cover, pears in a bowl by Paul Wuensche), 2000, C.K. Williams, the judge, chose "The Violence of Fishes", by James Grinwis, which is about the curious habits of fish and people, such as his brother, and a couple fornicating in an alley. Second place went to Allyson Shaw for "Morphine Psalm",

a mysterious lyric celebrating the "maw of poppy". And third place was a prose poem by Margaret Gilbert, called "Sugaring Off", a section of a book-length poem, or novel in verse, whose title derives from a painting by Grandma Moses, about a young girl's adventures in New York after she leaves Alabama.

I sometimes do not agree with the judge's verdict about which of the three (or more) poems from a given finalist should win the prize. I have my own favorites, which I am free to publish. I was tempted to be the judge myself this year, but in the end was grateful that **Mark Doty** would do the honors. It opens up the process.

Q: Which poets do you particularly admire, and what can potential Mudfish contributors learn from reading them?

A: I love Philip Schultz's book, *Failure*. I love *Tar* by C.K. Williams; as well as the work of **William Carlos Williams**; **John Ashbery**; **John Donne**; **William Empson**; **John Crowe Ransom**; **Sir Philip Sidney**; **Sir Thomas Wyatt**; and many many others.

Jane Austen wrote, "She ventured to hope he did not always read only poetry, and to say, that she thought it was the misfortune of poetry to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly." (*Persuasion*.)

I myself tried to give up poetry, the way one tries to give up marijuana; I gave up line breaks the way you would give up joints. Poetry without line breaks is prose, I figured; I started writing novels instead. But to break bread with the good poems that arrive in my mailbox, is a daily feast.