The Little Magazines

PERIODICAL

“Little magazines” is a term referring to a set of literary periodicals published between roughly 1912 and 1939 that are characterized by their small readership, financial fragility, and artistic innovation. Little magazines were the nursery of several literary movements but are most closely connected to the birth of American modernism. They provided a place where writers of new, unusual, and often iconoclastic work could get into print. Those who published little magazines were amateurs and often artists themselves. Their goals were more likely to be artistic than commercial, a distinction borne out by their overwhelming tendency to be short-lived. They were especially important in creating and developing new American poetry and in consolidating and establishing ties between literary communities all over the world, but especially those in the urban centers of Chicago, New York City, London, and Paris.

**Little magazine**, any of various small periodicals devoted to serious literary writings, usually avant-garde and noncommercial. They were published from about 1880 through much of the 20th century and flourished in the United States and England, though French writers (especially the Symbolist poets and critics, 1880–*c.* 1900) often had access to a similar type of publication and [German literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/German-literature) of the 1920s was also indebted to them. The name signifies most of all a noncommercial manner of editing, managing, and financing. A little magazine usually begins with the object of publishing literary work of some artistic merit that is unacceptable to commercial magazines for any one or all of three reasons—the writer is unknown and therefore not a good risk; the work itself is unconventional or experimental in form; or it violates one of several popular notions of [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral), social, or [aesthetic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aesthetic) behaviour.

Foremost in the ranks of such magazines were two American periodicals, [*Poetry: a Magazine of Verse*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Poetry-American-magazine) (founded 1912), especially in its early years under the vigorous guidance of [Harriet Monroe](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harriet-Monroe), and the more erratic and often more sensational [*Little Review*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Little-Review) (1914–29) of Margaret Anderson; a group of English magazines in the second decade of the 20th century, of which the *Egoist* (1914–19) and *Blast* (1914–15) were most conspicuous; and Eugene Jolas’ *transition* (1927–38). In all but the last of these, a major guiding spirit was the U.S. poet and critic Ezra [Pound](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ezra-Pound); he served as “foreign correspondent” of both *Poetry* and the *Little Review,* manoeuvred the *Egoist* from its earlier beginnings as a feminist magazine (*The New Freewoman,* 1913) to the status of an avant-garde literary review, and, with [Wyndham Lewis](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wyndham-Lewis), jointly sponsored the two issues of *Blast.* In this case, the little magazines showed the stamp of a single vigorous personality; similar strong and dedicated figures in little magazine history were the U.S. poet [William Carlos Williams](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Carlos-Williams) (whose name appears in scores of little magazines, in one capacity or another); the British critic and novelist [Ford Madox Ford](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ford-Madox-Ford), editor of the *Transatlantic Review* (1924–25) and contributor to many others; and [Gustave Kahn](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustave-Kahn), a minor French poet but a very active editor associated with several French Symbolist periodicals.

There were four principal periods in the general history of little magazines. In the first, from 1890 to about 1915, French magazines served mainly to establish and explain a literary movement; British and U.S. magazines served to [disseminate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disseminate) information about and encourage acceptance of continental European [literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/literature) and [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture). In the second stage, 1915–30, when other magazines, especially in the United States, were in the vanguard of almost every variation of modern literature, a [conspicuous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspicuous) feature was the expatriate magazine, published usually in [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) but occasionally elsewhere in Europe by young U.S. and British critics and writers. The major emphasis in this period was upon literary and aesthetic form and theory and the publication of fresh and original work, such as that of [Ernest Hemingway](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ernest-Hemingway) (in the *Little Review, Poetry, This Quarter,* and other publications), T.S. Eliot (in *Poetry,* the *Egoist, Blast*) [James Joyce](https://www.britannica.com/biography/James-Joyce) (in the *Egoist,* the *Little Review, transition*), and many others. The third stage, the 1930s, saw the beginnings of many leftist magazines, started with specific doctrinal commitments that were often subjected to considerable editorial change in the career of the magazine. [*Partisan Review*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Partisan-Review) (1934) was perhaps the best known example of these in the United States, as was the *Left Review* (1934–38) in England.

The fourth period of little magazine history began about 1940. One of the conspicuous features of this period was the critical review supported and sustained by a group of critics, who were in most cases attached to a university or college. Examples of this kind of periodical were, in the United States, *The Kenyon Review,* founded by [John Crowe Ransom](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Crowe-Ransom) in 1939, and in Great Britain, *Scrutiny,* edited by F.R. Leavis (1932–53). This and related kinds of support, such as that of publishers maintaining their own reviews or miscellanies, represented a form of institutionalism which was radically different from the more spontaneous and erratic nature of the little magazines of earlier years.