

A New Attitude for a Grand Old Journal

BY JANE CANNON
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR



Being venerated in scholarly circles
is not enough for the staff of
World Literature Today,
they want to be widely read as well.

With an impish grin, Robert Con Davis suggests that a requirement for every University of Oklahoma degree candidate be this: No one leaves the University without a subscription to the new *WLT Magazine*, a sister publication to the venerable *World Literature Today* international literary journal that has been around for more than 76 years now. Been around, yes, but not necessarily read by OU students, or for that matter, by much of the general public.

When Davis took over the top spot as executive director of *WLT* three years ago, he determined to change all that. Venerable as the publication might be, as they say of trees that fall in a forest, if no

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one hears one fall, does it still make a sound? If a journal is well-written, well-respected, oh-so-worthy of the venerable title, but not well-read, where is the gain?

Not one to stand on ceremony, Davis—both a Presidential Professor of English and Neustadt Professor of Comparative Literature—generally is known around campus as “R.C.” No “Dr. Davis” required before a greeting. Taking a cue from OU President David L. Boren, who is none too fond of ivory towers, Davis long since abandoned residence at that aerial height. And if he were to wear an academic robe these days—well, he would be kicking up his heels beneath it. He is that pleased with the new *WLT Magazine*, a shorter, more affordable version of the

already-established scholarly quarterly.

The magazine made its debut on newsstands worldwide last November. And while Davis is only half serious about requiring degree candidates to carry away a *WLT Magazine* subscription along with their diplomas, he is dead serious about

this suggestion: Every incoming freshman should learn about *WLT Magazine* at the time of enrollment.

“OU students come to campus never having heard of *World Literature Today*, and that’s OK. I don’t think it’s OK for them to leave without having heard of it,” Davis says.

WLT, the journal, long has been read by scholars around the world. Known internationally in such cities as London, Paris, Berlin and Rome, it is considered an indispensable resource at the Nobel Foundation in Stockholm and is subscribed to by institutions of higher learning from continent to continent. Still, Davis knows *WLT* is little recognized in its home state.

While its 200-plus pages containing as many as 300 book reviews per issue have been published quarterly at OU since 1927, *WLT* has remained unexplored by the everyday reader. With the exception of literature and modern language majors, most OU students arrive and leave the campus without turning a cover of the internationally prestigious publication.

The journal is a gem, albeit a hidden one, filled with contributions by and commentaries on today’s preeminent writers representing some 70 languages. But, as Davis knows, throughout its rich history stellar editions of *WLT* have remained parked squarely atop shelves of many a library book shelf.

In short, for even your most discerning reader, *WLT*, the journal, is not exactly reader friendly.

Make that *was*. From day one, Davis wanted to make *WLT* accessible, more appealing to a wider, less academic audience, without, of course, offending or losing its already-established academic clientele.

“This was my vision from the beginning to give it much broader appeal, to open it up to many people. I knew I wanted something more befitting the times we are living in.”

Davis began with a redesign process he now terms “magazinizing.” By adding more graphics, stunning photography and livelier writing, he upped the appeal of a tried and true product. “I wanted to put us on the cutting edge of what’s going on in world literature,” he says.



WLT executive director Robert Con Davis, front left, has assembled a talented staff to produce the acclaimed international literary journal and its new companion magazine edition. Pictured clockwise from Davis are Terri Stubblefield, marketing and promotion specialist; Victoria Vaughn, administrative secretary; David Draper Clark, editor; Daniel Simon, managing editor; and Marla F. Johnson, production assistant.



From his first day on the job as executive director of *World Literature Today*, R. C. Davis has been a man on a mission: to broaden the appeal of the venerable journal. While valuing *WLT*'s pre-eminent position among international literary scholars, Davis is determined to attract the educated, lay readership with a more engaging, affordable publication.

publication, but I just liked the sound of a Top 40 list. I thought it had kind of a playful ring to it."

What he discovered is that people were passionate about the list. Its publication sparked a lively debate among readers and a variety of thought-provoking commentaries from those who both agreed and disagreed with the magazine's selections. "It was not meant as a definitive 'last word' sort of list," Davis says, "but rather a list informed by scholarship but chosen with the non-specialist in mind."

Nearly 40 scholars from around the world worked with the *WLT* staff to shape the list, beginning as much as a year ahead of the targeted publication date. The team of advisers included National Public Radio's Alan Cheuse, experts in regional literature such as Hana Al-Shaykh (Arabic) and George Gomori (Hungarian) and such well-known writers as J.M.G. LeClezio (France) and Ilan Stavos (Mexico/USA).

Not content with highlighting the great, established writers of the day, Davis also wanted to spotlight emerging talent, offer fresh poetry, support new movements and initiate dialogue with readers, including the introduction of a Letters section. The result has been a more engaging magazine.

The new *WLT*, the journal, and its spin-off, *WLT*, the magazine, are an amalgamation of old and new, offering not only reviews and commentaries but also more intimate portraits of the writer and his craft, conversational interviews with authors that feature a wide range of topics reflecting both personal and cultural influences that shape a writer's work.

Today's *WLT* contains more columns, a new emphasis on children's literature and added eye-catchers, such as "The Top Ten Russian Writers" list or "The Best of Brazilian Poetry." Indeed, the inaugural issue of the magazine highlighted the Top 40 Most Important Books in the 75-year production history of the *WLT* enterprise. (See Page 30.)

Conceding that the idea of a Top 40 list was "a bit kitschy," Editor David Draper Clark adds: "I suppose we could have had a Top 50 or a Top 75 list, representing the 75-year history of the

The list was designed to provoke debate, excite brain cells, challenge established literary mindsets and stimulate the exchange of ideas. It also can serve as a reading guide for those seeking to broaden their literary knowledge.

Clark, who helped select the list, is happy to debate its choices, believing that debate is the lifeblood of a publication if it is to be relevant in today's world. A native of Oklahoma, Clark has been with *WLT* for 18 years. He says the job is a way for him to be linked to the rest of the world while still maintaining residence in the state in which he grew up and loves.

The newest member of the staff is Daniel Simon, former acquisitions editor at the University of Oklahoma Press, now *WLT* managing editor, who feels he has landed feet-first in a dream job. "I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be right now," he says.

Perhaps one of the most difficult jobs falls to half-time marketing specialist, Terri Stubblefield. Her role, not unlike that of a Hollywood agent, is to promote the magazine, get it out there and get it seen. Sell the new product without compromis-

ing the integrity of the old.

"This is a key position, because we're really breaking some new ground here," Davis says. "In our field, in literature and the study of culture, we are carving out a little space for ourselves. It's a niche market, one that nobody else occupies right now, and it is a huge marketing challenge."

That is because "a puritanical narrowness" exists in much of academic publishing. Academics, Davis points out, do not necessarily like anything too graphic or flashy.

"They shy away from glossy covers and putting words over the pictures. This all seems crassly commercial, initially, to them. And they don't like things like top 10 lists and top 40 lists. But when you actually put such lists in front of them, and do it well, the academics are as excited as anybody. Just about every academic who sees what we're doing likes the product."

President Boren has been one of the enterprise's biggest boosters, Davis notes, and for one very good reason: The direction in which *WLT* is headed is especially inclusive of students.

"He feels very strongly that there really should not be a bastion of research or a professor's work that is isolated from students. Students need to be a part of everything. So we are doing all kinds of things to make ourselves known to students and to contribute to student life on campus."

The office has several student interns, some of them graduate students, some undergraduates; some of them are paid, but many are volunteers. And, Davis notes, *WLT* sponsors three literary awards: the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature; a new NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature, which will be awarded for the first time in 2003; and a student writing award.

The \$50,000 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, often called "the little Nobel" and many times awarded to writers



David Draper Clark, a veteran member of the *WLT* staff who this spring became the journal's editor, saw the recent "Top 40" list of the most important books in its 75-year history as an opportunity to provoke debate and challenge established mindsets, as well as to provide a reading guide for those wishing to broaden their literary knowledge.

who go on to win the Nobel, is given always to a living writer who must agree to come to the OU campus to receive the honor. This, together with the Puterbaugh Conferences on World Literature, an annual event sponsored by *WLT*, affords students the unique opportunity not only to hear distinguished writers lecture but also actually to "hang with them," sometimes for a week or more.

"Students get to meet the writers, go to dinner with them, converse with them and attend classes with them. These visits create this kind of ripple effect of excitement that spreads across campus," Davis says.

WLT, with its small set of offices on the first floor of Monnet Hall, provides "the closest thing to a humanities center this campus has to offer," Davis contends. In fact, he and

President Boren recently met to discuss launching a major fundraising campaign to do just that: Establish a humanities center in Monnet Hall with *WLT* serving as its magnetic core.

"We already don't do anything substantial that doesn't involve a lot of students," Davis says. Leaning back in his chair and making a sweeping motion with his arm, he adds: "And that's as it should be. Otherwise, why are we here? We are, after all, a school."

And that is why the idea of printing off the front half of the scholarly journal and turning it into a glossy-covered magazine so appealed to Davis. "It just made sense. We are really just widening the circle and inviting more people in."

The new magazine—which leaves behind 300 or so book reviews, which are mainly of interest to scholars—gives birth to an attractive, affordable version of *WLT* that is interesting to students and fit to grace the coffee table or nightstand of a few thousand additional book lovers put off by the more expensive, longer version.

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With fewer pages, *WLT* can offer the magazine at an affordable price—\$5.50 an issue or \$20 for a year’s subscription. With the exception of the inaugural issue, which combined the summer and fall issues, *WLT Magazine* is published four times annually on the same schedule as its sister scholarly journal and is available at both large and small bookstores nationwide.

“This is a work in progress,” Davis emphasizes. “We are not where we want to be. I don’t know if we ever will be. It’s too fluid; it’s a constantly evolving project.

“We’ve had to learn to be a magazine. We’re still learning, and we couldn’t do it without the help we’ve gotten,” Davis says.

As submissions pour into the office on a daily basis, the staff easily could get buried in the onslaught if it were not for a faithful team of contributing editors, a group of modern language scholars whose specialties cover French, German, Japanese, Brazilian, Caribbean, Latin America and Russian literature.

“They bring such incredible energy to the project. They’re so smart, so well-trained. They see this as an opportunity, and they work hard to advance the cause of this enterprise,” Davis enthuses. “We could not do what we do without them, because we just can’t do it all.”

Nothing underlined this more than the events of September 11, 2001, Davis says. In the weeks preceding the terrorist attacks, the staff was busy compiling an issue devoted exclusively to the Arabic world and its literature. Appearing as it did immediately after September 11, the edition provided much-needed insight into an area of divergent cultures at a time when all of America—indeed, much of the world—was seeking answers to questions about Arabic culture.

Shortly after the publication came out, OU hosted the 2001 panel of jurors who met to select the Neustadt laureate for 2002, Alvaro Mutis from Colombia. On the last evening at a banquet honoring the jurors and their hard work, a copy of the Arabic issue was placed beside each plate as a gift from *WLT* to the participants.

The response, Davis says, “was very moving. When people saw the Arabic issue, they had a sense that ‘oh, my, this does touch the world we live in. What we do can shape things.’”

By reaching out to a broader audience, Davis says, “*WLT* plays an important role for the times we live in. When the entire world is trying to understand cultural diversity, it is underlined for us that we are one of the important windows to international culture through the medium of literature.”

That, Davis says, “is a very important thing to be doing. The purpose of literature is to give us a deeper understanding of the lives we all share together. To an extent, scholarship and writing about literature create a bridge for readers into worlds they wouldn’t know about or wouldn’t otherwise understand.”

Davis’ sentiments recall the words of Wolfgang von Goethe, whose statement on *Weltliteratur* was chosen as a mission statement in 1927 by *WLT*’s visionary founder, Roy Temple House. The statement graced the masthead of the first publication—then known as *Books Abroad*—and remains an integral part of the publication’s masthead to the present day.

“These journals as they reach a wider public will contribute most effectively to the universal world literature we hope for. We repeat, however, that there can be no question of the nations thinking alike; the aim is simply that they shall grow aware of one another, understand each other, and even where they may not be able to love, may at least tolerate one another.”

Top 40 List on Page 30

Davis sees an important role for *WLT* in a troubled time: “When the entire world is trying to understand cultural diversity, it is underlined for us that we are one of the important windows to international culture through the medium of literature.”



World Literature Today

“Top 40 List” 1927-2001*

Celebrating 75 Years of Publishing Excellence

- (1927) *To the Lighthouse* — Virginia Woolf, England
(1928) *The Gypsy Ballads (Romancero gitano)* — Federico Garcia Lorca, Spain
(1928) *The Tower* — William Butler Yeats, Ireland
(1929) *The Sound and the Fury* — William Faulkner, United States
(1931) *The Turning Point (I strofi)* — George Seferis, Greece
(1933-47) *Residence on Earth (Residencia en la tierra)* — Pablo Neruda, Chile
(1934) *Independent People (Sjalfstætt folk)* — Halldor Laxness, Iceland
(1935-40) *Requiem (Rekviem)* — Anna Akhmatova, Russia
(1941) *Mother Courage and Her Children (Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder)* — Bertolt Brecht, Germany
(1942) *The Stranger (L'étranger)* — Albert Camus, France
(1943) *The Four Quartets* — T. S. Eliot, England/United States
(1944) *Ficcione* — Jorge Luis Borges, Argentina
(1945) “The Day Before Yesterday” (*Tmol shilshom*) — S. Y. Agnon, Spain/Israel
(1948) *Snow Country (Yukiguni)* — Yasunari Kawabata, Japan
(1950) *The Labyrinth of Solitude (El laberinto de la soledad)* — Octavio Paz, Mexico
(1952) *Waiting for Godot (En attendant Godot)* — Samuel Beckett, Ireland
(1952) *Invisible Man* — Ralph Ellison, United States
(1952) *The Old Man and the Sea* — Ernest Hemingway, United States
(1952) *In Country Sleep* — Dylan Thomas, Wales
(1953) *The Lost Steps (Los pasos perdidos)* — Alejo Carpentier, Cuba
(1956) *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands (Grande sertao: veredas)* — Joao Guimaraes Rosa, Brazil
(1956-57) *The Cairo Trilogy (Al-Thulathiyya)* — Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt
(1957) *Voss* — Patrick White, England/Australia
(1958) *Things Fall Apart* — Chinua Achebe, Nigeria
(1958) *The Guide* — R. K. Narayan, India
(1959) *The Tin Drum (Die Blechtrommel)* — Gunter Grass, Germany
(1961) *A House for Mr. Biswas* — V. S. Naipaul, Trinidad
(1961) *The Book of Disquiet (Livro do desassossego)* — Fernando Pessoa, Portugal
(1962) *The Golden Notebook* — Doris Lessing, Zimbabwe/England
(1962) *Pale Fire* — Vladimir Nabokov, Russia/United States
(1962) *The Time of the Doves (La Placa del Diamant)* — Merce Rodoreda, Spain
(1962) *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (Odn den' Ivana Denisovicha)* — Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russia
(1964) *A Personal Matter (Kojinteki-na taiken)* — Kenzaburo Oe, Japan
(1966) *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* — W. H. Auden, England
(1967) *One Hundred Years of Solitude (Cien anos de soledad)* — Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Colombia
(1968) *House Made of Dawn* — N. Scott Momaday, United States
(1972) *Invisible Cities (Le citta invisibili)* — Italo Calvino, Italy
(1974) *The Conservationist* — Nadine Gordimer, South Africa
(1978) *Bells in Winter* — Czeslaw Milosz, Poland
(1987) *Red Sorghum (Hung kao liang)* — Mo Yan, China

*Note: Works from the last decade were not considered to have stood the test of time.

