

ALL THE VIEWS FIT TO PRINT

While many 'teen' publications claim to speak for their readers, one lets readers speak for themselves. Founded 13 years ago, *Teen Ink* magazine has, thus far, printed the works of 25,000 students nationwide.

By Sam Swope

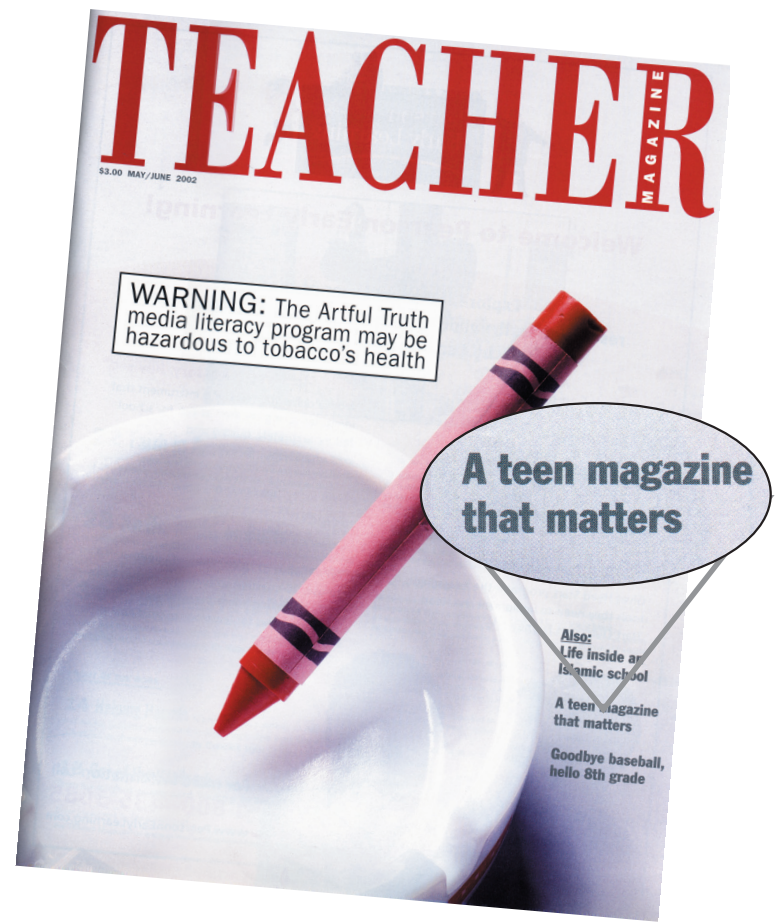
I am a writer who teaches. Over the years, I've taught writing to teachers and students at every grade level, and experience has made me a believer in the importance of publishing student work.

So when I first heard about *Teen Ink*, a nationally distributed, general-interest magazine that features writing by teenagers, I was intrigued but also a bit suspicious.

On the one hand, the idea behind *Teen Ink* was exciting. On the other hand, I'd been burned too many times, encouraging my students to submit to publications only to find that the so-called publishers were fraudulent, charging a fee to read submissions or "accepting" pieces and then asking the kids to shell out big bucks for a copy of the book in which they would appear.

So I decided, earlier this year, to pay *Teen Ink's* offices a visit and see what was what.

Because *Teen Ink* also has published a successful series of books featuring the magazine's best pieces, I smelled money and expected to find the chief executive set up in a cushy corporate office, mouthing platitudes about education. But when I arrived, in January, at a modest brick building overlooking the commuter rail-



way in Newton, Massachusetts, I wondered if I had the wrong address.

John and Stephanie Meyer welcomed me and introduced me to their staff. The big news that morning was that 400 submissions of essays, poems, and stories had come in through the website (TeenInk.com) in one day. The staff was thrilled, a reaction I found remarkable. I'm a devoted teacher, but the prospect of reading 400 pieces by teens (not to mention the 40,000 submissions *Teen Ink* receives on average each year) is my idea of hell.

"You can't possibly read them all," I said, but everyone assured me they did. And when I asked, "How can you stand it?" Stephanie laughed and told me, "What keeps me going is knowing that somewhere in the slush, there's sure to be an amazing piece of writing by some kid who's never had anything published before, and that getting it into the world is going to make a difference." That made sense. No one could do this work unless they felt they were on a mission. Not without going insane.

The Meyers' mission began in 1989, when their own two children were teenagers. They'd been lucky: Both kids were excellent students. As a result, they received lots of attention from their teachers. Most parents would be pleased and leave it at that, but the Meyers worried about their kids' friends and classmates who weren't such high achievers, the ordinary, run-of-the-mill kids who didn't get noticed at school.

As they discussed what they could do to help, the idea

for a magazine was probably inevitable. John worked in publishing, putting out an insurance-industry magazine, and Stephanie worked as a teacher. Wouldn't it be great, they thought, if students could send their writing to someone who didn't know anything about them, someone who wasn't going to mark up their words with a red pen or give them a grade. Someone who would read pieces without preconceptions.

"Besides," Stephanie told me, "there are so many glossy magazines out there aimed at kids, magazines that tell them how to think and what to feel and what to wear and buy, that we thought there needed to be other voices, teen voices, that would offer kids a different viewpoint, a kid's viewpoint!"

So the Meyers made the leap. They quit their jobs, took out personal loans, set up a foundation, and turned their basement into an office. The first step was to mail letters to families in the Boston area, asking kids to submit articles. Then they waited, wondering if anyone would respond. To their delight, within weeks they had enough material for a first issue, and the sub-

missions just kept coming. Over the next several years, what they were then calling *The 21st Century* grew from a local magazine to one distributed throughout New England. In 1998, the Meyers went national and later changed the name to *Teen Ink*.

The failure rate of magazines is staggering, and

that *Teen Ink* has not just survived but grown is a testament to quality as well as a careful marshaling of modest means. Today, about 5,000 teachers in 50 states have classroom subscriptions, receiving 30 copies of the latest issue at the beginning of each month. (There are 10 issues a year.) But half of the subscriptions are either completely free or close to it, with hard-strapped teachers paying whatever they can toward the suggested annual price of \$97. Even teachers who pay the full amount are getting a bargain – it costs *Teen Ink* more than that just to mail the magazines. John told me, "We've never wanted teachers not to receive *Teen Ink* just because of a lack of money."

Where, then, does the rest of the money come from? Some of it, John explained, is supplied by the proceeds of their successful book series (four so far,

I can't think of a single reason a teacher shouldn't subscribe

with more than 180,000 sold) and some is from foundation grants. But most of it is ad revenue.

Teen Ink is printed on newsprint and each issue runs about 50 pages. Most pieces are several hundred words long and the longest, 2,600. The writers come from every region the country, rural and urban, and there's something for every interest – opinion pieces, stories, poems, and articles on sports, politics, family, relationships and more.

As a teacher, I immediately saw *Teen Ink*'s value. Here was an organization that listens to what teenagers have to say, gives them a much-needed place to publish, offers models for kids in many genres, and provides a real-life application for the writing skills I try to teach. *Teen Ink* also gives kids a reason to write for someone other than a teacher.

As a writer, I found most of the pieces good, some merely okay, and a few excellent, worthy of publication anywhere. But because *Teen Ink* is distributed nationally, it's fair to ask if mostly good is good enough. Shouldn't the magazine be held to the highest standards, publishing only the finest writing by teenagers today?

I put this question to John Meyer, who said: "There's a wide variety of students in the middle and they are struggling to reach their potential, too. They also need some recognition, some attention, some encouragement. Our goal is to give as many students a chance to be published for the first time and, at the same time, balance that with the need to have *Teen Ink* be as good a publication as it can be.

"We want every student who reads *Teen Ink* to understand that they, too, have a chance to be published. There are many students from the lowest academic levels who have some of the most insightful and cre-

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ative stories to tell, so we certainly want to give them a chance to be heard."

Teen Ink offers a lot of interesting writing ideas, and the Educator of the Year contest is one of my favorites. When kids write essays nominating a teacher, coach, guidance counselor, librarian, or principal, their subjects have a shot at being one of 200 educators who win either a \$250 or a \$100 award.

My other favorite *Teen Ink* writing idea is an interview. In order to encourage kids to find out about the lives and histories of grandparents, parents, neighbors, businesspeople, teachers, and friends - anybody who interests them - *Teen Ink* not only publishes interviews, but those kids who do a bang-up job have a shot at sitting down with a celebrity. So far, lucky teenagers have conducted interviews with then-first lady Hillary Clinton, Sen. John Glenn, Jesse Jackson, George Lucas, Maya Angelou and R.L. Stine, among others. During a recent session with Whoopi Goldberg, who'd agreed to spend 40 minutes with the kids, the comedienne was so impressed she stayed for an hour and a half.

John Meyer told me: "In most cases, these interviews are pretty darn thoughtful. We're not just talking about their celebrity status and the kind of thing you see in a glossy magazine. The kids are asking substantive questions that relate to teenagers and getting through the teen years and asking advice from these celebrities who relate it to their own experiences."

Because of their attention to the quality of the writing and the sensitivity of the content, *Teen Ink* has gained the trust of thousands of teachers. And without that trust, *Teen Ink* wouldn't be able to touch the

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lives of the 25,000 kids they've published, not to mention hundreds of thousands of readers. John and Stephanie Meyer hope to reach many more kids."

In the end, I can't think of a single reason why a teacher shouldn't subscribe: *Teen Ink* is one of the most valuable educational publications in America today. Although it has an obvious home in the classroom, *Teen Ink* should be seen elsewhere - in libraries, guidance offices, even cafeterias. And if teachers don't have room for it in their curriculum, they could hand out copies to kids as they walk in or out the door, and let the magazine find its natural audience. In at least one school, students pay for *Teen Ink* themselves, and Kathy Thames, a teacher in

Brookhaven, Mississippi, told me, "I would not, could not teach without it, and I continue to pay for it each year out of my own pocketbook."

Teen Ink is not for everyone. Not all students are going to read it. But some, and perhaps many, will.

And who knows where that will lead? I heard a number of stories, large and small, about how the magazine has made a difference in kids' lives, but my favorite was one Stephanie Meyer told me. After *Teen Ink* had published a piece by a boy, a girl from another state wrote a response. That response was published, and the boy responded to the response. Soon, the kids became pen pals, writing to each other directly. Their correspondence lasted a year, and finally, they decided to meet. In the end - cue the violins - they wound up engaged. ■

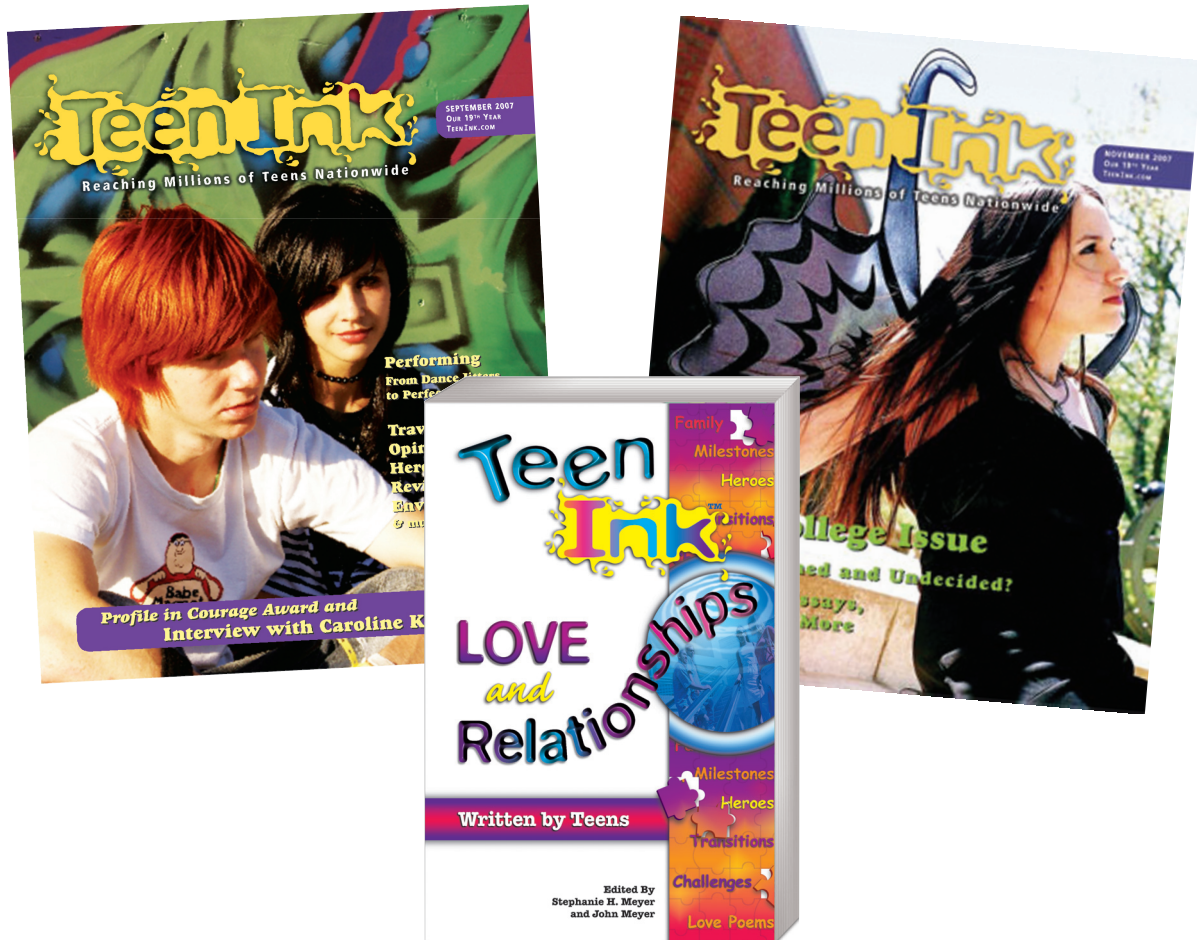
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“I would not, could not, teach without it” – a language arts teacher



- 20 years publishing teens
- 4 million readers per year
- 500,000 submissions
- 5,000 schools receive class sets
- 45,000 teens published
- 20,000 pages on TeenInk.com
- 180,000 *Teen Ink* books sold

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