

America's Emerging Writers
An Anthology of Fiction

Compiled and Edited by
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Foreword, or How This Series Came to Be

There is a troubling catch-22 that exists in the world of publishing: in order to be published—at least by any of the major houses—you must already have been published. The logic works like this: Publishing houses want to sell books. What easier way to sell books than by publishing authors who already have amassed large followings of readers to whom they can market? Inevitably, this cycle leaves the aspiring author with the pressing question of where to begin. Sure, the dramatic rise of self-publishing platforms has enabled everyone to put their writing out there, which is great, but it does come with its own set of problems. Namely, when everyone actually does put their writing out there, as has happened, the question now becomes: Where are the *readers* to begin? With the oversaturation of the market, readers could spend entire lifetimes buying and reading self-published books and still not find that one author with whom they truly resonate. On Amazon alone, for instance, a new book is uploaded every five minutes, and that number is only set to rise as more and more people take advantage of the self-empowering platforms available to writers today.

The good news is that readers want to discover new talent. This we learned firsthand after beginning Z Publishing in November of 2015. What started as a small Facebook group designed to bring independent writers together on a shared platform of exposure soon transcended into a wave of newfound appreciation for independent writing. Within a few short months, Z Publishing had amassed tens of thousands of followers across social media. Once we knew the idea had struck a chord with a growing group of people, we took the next step and launched Z Publishing's own website in March of 2016. Publishing articles from writers of a multitude of genres—including travel, fiction, politics, lifestyle, and poetry—the website garnered more support from readers and writers alike, and our following continued to grow.

Furthering upon our mission to promote the work of talented wordsmiths across the nation, we began a series called America's Best Emerging Poets, through which we showcased our favorite up-and-coming poets on a state-by-state basis. After the success of our first series, we decided to open submissions to prose writers as well. Thus began our Emerging Writers series, a collection of short writings from a wide variety of genres—including literary fiction, mystery, and narrative nonfiction—through which we hope to offer our readers a quick and efficient way to discover new local talent and perhaps entirely new genres that otherwise may have been too daunting to explore.

While working on this series, and as our base of physical retailers has expanded, we've also been able to take perhaps the most significant step forward in our publishing evolution, and we now proudly offer solo-author book deals. To make the selections on who to offer these deals to, we will take into account reader reviews, so if there are any writings within this book that you particularly enjoy, be sure to give them a mention in your Amazon review!

Now that you know a bit about how this series came to be, we'd like to thank you for taking the time to explore this edition of the Emerging Writers series. We hope you enjoy this publication, and we look forward to hearing your thoughts regarding how, together, we can build the publishing house of the future.

-The Z Publishing Team

Crossroads

Mary Senior Harwood

Snow drizzles a fine coating like talcum powder on the icy road. Helen's cigarette mimics the smoke curling out of the farmhouse chimney. She banked the fire to make sure the children would be warm as they nap. Sixty minutes of treasured silence to think without the high energy of one or the low energy of the other. She shivers as the wind whips through her silk hose.

Her husband Reggie left for another trip to Colombia over two weeks ago. He came downstairs with his leather valise and tossed their six-year-old daughter Susie into the air. "Who's my little beauty?" Reggie tipped up his daughter's chin. "Will you miss your old man?"

"Why do you have to go? Stay and play with me," said Susie.

"Daddy has to go away but I'll be back before Santa gets here." He turned to the toddler on the floor. "You, young man, will be the man of the house while I'm gone." Reggie squatted beside the child, who continued to line up toy trucks in red, green and blue order. "Freddie. Look at Daddy." The boy ducked his head. Reggie reached out to stroke the boy's cheek and he drew away from his father's touch. Helen restrained herself from scooping the baby up. Anyone's touch but hers seemed to burn his skin.

"Mother says he should be talking up a blue streak by now. Have you asked the doctor about that?" said Reggie.

"Next time we go. He's just quiet." Helen paused. "Can you leave contact info, love? In case something happens."

"Don't waste money calling me long distance," he said. "Besides, after I get to the mine site, you can't reach me. I should be back in plenty of time for Christmas. If you need anything, give my brother a call. He's not far away."

A taxi beeped. "That's my chariot." Reggie kissed his daughter.

Helen leaned in and pecked his cheek. "Miss you," she said.

Two days until Christmas and Reggie hasn't called or written. But neither has the steel company. No news only means they know no more than she does.

Helen peers through the tree branches that rake the clapboards with each gust of wind. Above is steel gray sky. She is vaguely aware that her toes are numb. One of her boots must be cracked, she thinks. It's been cold and snowy for weeks, the wind moaning through the eaves of the farmhouse. She couldn't take it if one of the kids gets sick again. Last week, Helen bundled both children off to the doctor when Susie complained of her third sore throat since Halloween.

"Say ah, young lady," said Dr. Pettigrew, not even forty, yet prematurely gray and lined from his stint as an Army doctor. Helen supposed he found peace in the simpler ills of children than he must have faced in the fever of war in Europe.

"Looks like strep again, Mrs. Randolph. We'll try another round of penicillin. She didn't have any rash last time?" Helen shook her head. "Good." He looked down at Freddie, playing with his trucks. "And how are you, my fine fellow?" Dr. Pettigrew crouched beside the boy. "Can you tell me your name?" Freddie played on as if the doctor were not in the room. The doctor snapped his fingers next to Freddie's ear. The child startled and drew into a ball on the floor. "He's almost three, and not talking, correct? How is he with other children?"

“He started babbling several months ago then just stopped. We live out in the country so there aren’t other children, just his sister.” Helen felt herself babbling. “He’s a good boy, never any trouble.”

“I’d like to talk to you and your husband about your son,” he said.

Margaret bit off ‘So would I,’ and said, “He’s away on business and beyond reach. His office can send a telegram if it’s urgent but travel takes several days.” She caught an edge of pity in the doctor’s eyes. “Anything you can tell my husband, you can tell me.”

Dr. Pettigrew called out, “Nurse, come here please,” and a woman, head to toe white and starch appeared. “Please take the children to the waiting room. Mrs. Randolph and I need privacy.”

The nurse reached out for Freddie’s hand but was beat to it by Susie. The little girl whispered to her brother, who stood up and followed her from the room.

Dr. Pettigrew considered Helen before speaking. “I can’t be completely sure without tests, but I believe your son,” he paused. Helen wanted to shake the words from him. “Freddie is an unusual child, as I’m sure you have already gathered. By this time, we expect children to reach certain developmental stages, like talking, socializing, and bowel control. I recommend sending him for tests. If the psychiatrist confirms what I fear, treatment for defective children like Freddie usually involves institutionalization. But I must say, that it is unusual for such a young child. Even if tests show mental retardation, I recommend keeping him home for the time being, where he is comfortable.”

Helen heard almost nothing past ‘defective.’

“Doctor, with all due respect, my son is not retarded. He’s just shy and sensitive. I won’t subject him to prodding and tests, which you can see would be very disruptive to him, until, at the very least, his father returns. So yes. As you suggest, I will take my son home and provide him with the warmth and comfort he is used to.” She picked up her purse and gloves. “I believe it is time for us to go.”

Since the doctor’s proclamation, Helen finds herself looking at her son through a new lens. He is different from his sister and from his cousins, who all spoke in full sentences by two. The only glimmer comes when you ask Freddie number questions. How many trucks do you have? How old is Davie? And he holds up two fingers and then flashes a third with a smile because he knows his birthday is only a month away.

Helen gazes down the ice-covered road to the frozen, leaden blue lake, one of the colors she loves to paint. It’s lonely when Reggie is gone, but it gives her a few moments to be the artist she once dreamed of being. But Reggie is the artist in the family, he reminds her. Engineering pays the bills, and painting grounds him. He will return from his trip, start a new painting, and shut her and the children out for days on end as if he hadn’t, in fact, come home.

Pain shoots into her hand. Her cigarette has burned a hole in the index finger of her glove. She drops the butt, looks at the farmhouse, then down the ice-covered dirt road. The children will soon be awake. What would happen if she just starts walking?