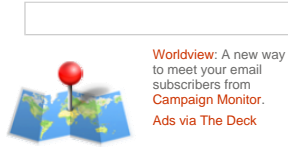

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THE FUTURE OF PUBLISHING

Much Ado About Whatever

by Daniel B. Roberts

Tao Lin and his band of followers at Muumuu House are some of the most vehemently disliked—and discussed—writers on the internet. Critics call them hip. Haters call them frauds. But their fiction may be just what our digital lives deserve.



Old and New, 2010, mischertraxler. Courtesy of the [artists](#).

Author and prodigious online self-marketer Tao Lin has been written about in *New York*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Observer*, *The Guardian*, *Gawker*, *The Stranger* (he graced its cover), and other print and online publications, but chances are good that you've never heard of him. Chances are overwhelming, however, that you've never heard of his web fiction factory [Muumuu House](#) or its writers.

Lin, a 28-year-old Brooklyn novelist and poet who has been a lightning rod for the literary blogosphere, created Muumuu House as an online press in 2008. Since then, Muumuu House has released three books in print (its fourth to come in October) and dozens of poems and short stories online. But very few articles about Lin even mention Muumuu, which is strange, since it's a McSweeney's sort of venture, albeit one made up of lesser-known, less-accomplished writers. It's as though, as a lightning rod, Lin absorbs all critical energy and his literary posse goes unnoticed. This may be deserved, but nonetheless feels like an oversight. Lin is leading a group of like-minded writers that appear to be defining a brand new genre—one very much tied to the moment. Muumuu publishes terse poems and short stories that often read like Gmail chat transcripts. Oh, and they also publish Gmail chat transcripts. The work has a visceral effect on site visitors: it elicits a groan or an approving nod. More often, it seems, the groans.

In addition to Tao Lin, the Muumuu gang unofficially includes Brandon Scott Gorrell, Zachary German, Noah Cicero, Megan Boyle, and 20 other contributors. They are Lin's literary army. Save for [an early *Nylon* spread](#), the mainstream media's lack of interest in Muumuu outside of Lin has in a sense functioned like a self-fulfilling prophecy, as though, since their work often reads like blogs and Twitter feeds, it should only be discussed in blogs and Twitter feeds. Perhaps that's fair, since most of what's on the Muumuu site is eerily similar. If you cover up an author's name, you won't know who wrote what.

But there's plenty to be found online about Muumuu House, much of it hateful. [Refinery 29](#) called Brandon Scott Gorrell "a Bret Easton Ellis for the Gmail chat generation." Online mag [Coldfront](#), however, in reviewing Muumuu writer Ellen Kennedy's poetry collection *Sometimes My Heart Pushes My Ribs*, wrote: "This book reads like the worst of blogs. I appreciate that there is an Internet generation, but let's not confuse poetry with, 'this is what I'm thinking right now, if I put it on a page it will become profound.'" And Twitter is not always kind to Lin himself. "Now that we have Osama, hopefully we can focus on the next worst person on the planet, Tao Lin," tweeted @Sas_quatch. The user @doleitout tweeted that Lin "is the Lady Gaga of writers and I mean that in the meanest, most detracting way." And the Tumblr blogger 3zekiel2517 wrote of Lin's newest novel, *Richard Yates*: "Hands down the worst book I've ever read."

To say the least, Muumuu's work is different from most writing on the web (that doesn't necessarily mean better). I profiled Lin [a year ago for *Salon*](#), and in the process also interviewed many of Muumuu's writers. As time has gone by, I've watched them and come to believe that, for better or worse, Lin is only the beginning of a controversial trend. Expect boatloads of more realist, self-deprecating, lazily provocative writing on the way.



Muumuu *Nylon* photo shoot, 2009. Credit Sabra Embury.

Muumuu first began as an

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Online only outlet for poetry and
 ISSN #1554-1999 About Archives Contact
 Daniel B. Roberts, a magazine editor in New York. He's written about books for NPR, Salon, The
 Muumuu became a print publisher when Lin posted its first book: *Sometimes My
 Heart Pushes My Ribs*, a poetry collection by Ellen Kennedy. In June, Muumuu
 More by Daniel B. Roberts
 published another poetry book, *During My Nervous Breakdown I Want To Have A
 Biographer Present*, by Brandon Scott Gorrell.

The money for printing those first two books came entirely from Lin's personal funds, he told me in one of three interviews. He took a \$6,000 check he had received from overseas royalties of his short story collection *Bed* and used it to pay for printing 1,000 copies of Kennedy's book and 2,500 of Gorrell's. Meanwhile, Lin didn't have what you'd call a day job, but he wasn't making quite enough money from writing to pay the bills. Instead, he scrounges here and there through online sales of Tao Lin merchandise or other stunts. At the moment, he says, he's living off a \$6,000 loan from a stranger he met on Twitter. Yes, it sounds absurd.

The Muumuu House mission statement, in its old incarnation (in April it suddenly became skinnier and a bit more serious), was not at all shy about the fact that Muumuu is, essentially, a network of people who write the same way, and that you can probably get published there, too (if you have a Twitter account they can peruse, and a blog wouldn't hurt). "To submit to Muumuu House," it instructed in typical Tao Lin deadpan, "find a person published by or associated with Muumuu House and read their writing. If you like their writing, make comments in their comments sections or message them expressing your feelings in a natural manner. Eventually someone will read your comments or messages and find your internet presence and maybe communicate with you. If that person likes you to a certain degree they will maybe tell other people about you, causing a further amount of people to maybe communicate with you. After an amount of time, if communication is sustained with various people, other things may happen, including maybe being published by Muumuu House."

Muumuu writers favor a terse, stripped-down style that seems less elegantly minimal à la Lydia Davis (a writer that Lin and Brandon Gorrell both name as a major influence) and more, well, lazy. Take a look at a recent poem posted at Muumuu, part of a three-poem series by Gorrell, called "Yesterday I was Heavily Depressed."

you emailed me the next morning
 saying you guess you missed me
 i walked to my hostel with a seriously worried expression on my face
 and a slight idea of sarcasm
 and sat in white, plastic chair
 only to make a sandwich later
 sensing the negativity of loneliness
 and the fact that tomorrow would be different

Here's another by Gorrell, called "The Bleakness of Standing in an Empty Kitchen," from the same series:

imagining my face lit by a sunset that's almost over
 and walking into the living room
 trying to logically convince myself of something
 i miss you so much
 the same way the temperature makes me feel afraid
 your gmail status makes me worried about the future
 in a giant house with central heating
 in a giant bed
 eating chocolate

Poems like these bring about a dividing line inherent in Muumuu's appeal: the value of the mundane. Either you thought, "This is sentimental, lazy, and shows no real effort to make it poetry" or you nodded your head in agreement with the tone, and concluded, "Wow, this is a dead-on, lovely representation of the world I experience."

"I don't think Tao meant to round us all up," Brandon Scott Gorrell told me over Gmail audio chat, "but I think that's what naturally happened, we sort of gravitated toward each other."

This isn't news (just read Lorrie Moore), but sadness can be

It doesn't seem like it was an accident. In fact, it looks more like Lin did round them all up. Some, perhaps, just

32 COMMENTS

effective, particularly at provoking nostalgia.

happened to write like Tao Lin before they met him, but others make it no secret that they have aped his style.



JOEY CAMIRE

Jul 22, 2011 The authors involved with Muumuu are young, relatively unknown to the larger literary world, and seem in their writing vaguely depressed. In their fiction and poetry, nothing much happens to their characters. And they all write like Tao Lin. Miles Ross, a Muumuu online contributor, told me frankly over Gmail audio chat, "I pretty much just tried to imitate what Tao reconsider why I'd had so much trouble in the past trying to write for similar groups. A little bit of ego refortification. So. That. Thanks for this. how they broke into the web lit scene, and that now they've branched out and refined their own style.



They also confessed to favoring sadness over joy. Noah Cicero wrote in an email to me, "I've never felt feeling meaningless and alone." To be fair, Cicero is not quite like the others, he was something of a cult author long before Lin came along, though I use "cult" here lightly. Cicero isn't a cult favorite like the movie Heathers, but a cult favorite at the recognition level of, say, Sift & Olly. Cicero's book The Human War, which one Amazon reviewer called "white trash existentialism," came out in 2003 before Lin had published anything. But he has now apparently been absorbed into Lin's gang.



LAUREN WILFORD

From my interviews and from the writing itself I concluded that sadness—and here I should explain that I mean not just sadness but more truly a sort of apathetic malaise, a mindlessness to the point of being in Brecht's East of Eden Blow of a truck in-bjsthe prevailing theme between these authors in addition to the unaffected style. But the is also a sense of humor on every work. It's a very dry wit, though it's mainly a scolding and gloomy as to most often go unnoticed. There is an obvious, if exasperating, intellectual sort of mischief at play, for example, in a Lin stunt that's become well known: his poem "The next night we ate whale."



JASON

Jul 22, 2011

Terrific article. Really well reported and fun, and fair, which is important. Im not sure why these writers piss so many people off. they seem innocuous. Thanks for the story



TYRANT

Jul 22, 2011

I'm sorry, but the editors mentioned in here who insist on anonymity, by the very fact that they do so, come across terribly, pretty much like the most giant pussies. How sad, how embarrassing for them.

"The next night we ate whale" is the final line of a "memoir poem" Lin read aloud at the New Museum in Manhattan on October 30, 2009. Lin has performed the poem at many events (watch the faces of the audience in that video—it's priceless), and when he does, he repeats that final line hundreds of times. The official, printed version of the piece, which Lin sells at some events for \$3, repeats the line 30,000 times.



ANONYMOUS

Jul 22, 2011 Prior to the final line, the poem tells about a family catching various sea creatures. The mother catches the snapper, the father catches a crab, and she kills herself (or will) the year catches a whale. Then, the family eats the seafood in the order in which it was caught: "The next night we ate snapper. The next night we ate crab," and so on. But after Lin says "the next night we ate whale," he repeats the line a second time: "The next night we ate whale." Everyone laughs a great deal. Except then he says it a third time. And a fourth. Laughter dies and an apparent pall descends over the audience. But what's fascinating is that they do not look bored. They're putting up with this. Then again, what can they do? Laughs resurge, briefly, around the seventh time, but after the first two, when people do not laugh at all. Lin fidgets a little while he's reading it. He continues to look down at the book as though he needs it to see the text, though the remainder of the poem has him repeating that same line, presumably until he feels like stopping. It's annoying, but nonetheless pretty funny.



ANONYMOUS

Jul 22, 2011 I'm very interested in what people do when they feel lonely and



BEACH SLOT

nothing less than Cicero's. But after reading made Thackeray sound whining to its best attempt at an open mind, I began to see what Cicero meant. This isn't news (just read Lorrie Moore), but sadness can be effective, particularly at provoking nostalgia. The despondency that many of the Muumuu writers zero in on occasionally makes for strong prose—never thrilling, but sometimes beautiful. Sure, most of it leaves me skimming, bored. But occasionally, some pieces strike a real moment of clarity. House. Good work Daniel.

One example comes from a Miles Ross story, "Bad Smelling Person in Nautica," on Muumuu's website: it's about a homeless man on the subway. Like the title, the story lacks punctuation where sorely needed. It's long, bland, and unexpressive, like a lot of Muumuu writing. But at the end, Ross surprises us by making the experience personal:

Jul 22, 2011

On the street I thought, "My life is sort of like that smelly guy's life in that there is I bet the author of this article could do with me & people that said small good & bad people are occasionally funny on one is funny. The end of the story is a broken metaphor. I figure out what is wrong, hopefully I get fixed soon."

It's actually quite moving, isn't it, and even kind of clever. The entire story has been a mild account of an upsetting, awkward event—an account told as though the speaker didn't care and was completely unaffected. But on my first reading, by the time I reached the word "fixed," I almost cried. That, or almost threw a brick through my computer screen for being annoyed by something I enjoyed this day to like a little bit for a composition. Of course, there's an art to writing simply, but my meaner side wanted to assume that wasn't the case here and that it was cranked out quickly, robotically.

Another gem is Ellen Kennedy's poem "Sometimes My Heart Pushes My Ribs," from her eponymous collection:

HAMMISH

Jul 23, 2011

I am going to make boxes and put things in them and then write your name and address on the boxes, then bring them to the post office to be mailed to you

okay?

Like with Ross's story, the poem mostly reads as cutesy and boring. But that single "okay?" at the end makes the poem tender and meaningful. It has the subtlety and casual charm of a Billy Collins poem.

"but chances are good that you've never heard of him"

Then there's this, from Zachary German's novel *Eat When You Feel Sad*, published by Melville House in February 2010 (Melville, a small Brooklyn publisher, has published both Lin and German and keeps close ties to the Muumuu crew): The protagonist, Robert, has just broken off with Kelly, a girl he was seeing, and she responds with disappointment. Here's what Robert tells himself, as justification:

AUDREY ALLENDALE

I don't like her clothes and I don't think she's—I don't want to introduce her to my friends, the ones that I don't have yet but will be more like me, vain and judgmental and stuff. Good job, Daniel. Solid reporting and actually felt touched by your open-mindedness.

German is being funny, sure, but Robert's thoughts also strike me as crushingly true. This, German suggests, is how guys in their young twenties think. It may be pathetic that this represents a part of our current culture, but that doesn't make German wrong.

SAM PINK

During my reporting last October, I drove to Connecticut to see Lin do a reading near Wesleyan University. When I introduced myself afterward and asked to interview him (it would be our first of three meetings), he asked, of all things, "How did you get here?" in the video, at around 2:07, it looks like the guy in the undershirt is fanning himself with a really small arm, but it's the person behind him in the distance. it made me laugh a lot. the small arm thing.

Minutes later, I found myself behind the wheel, driving from Middletown to New Haven, with Lin in the passenger seat. During the ride, I did most of the talking. Each time I got a few words out of him it felt like a triumph. Lin was awkward, but bearably so. He was (and is) a perfectly nice guy, but seemed to nurse a debilitating shyness.

TAO

Jul 23, 2011

@sam damn, i've never noticed that, seems really funny.

Lin became very excited, however, almost comically so, any time I mentioned the other Muumuu writers I had already interviewed. He wanted to know everything that was said; he was almost giddy about hearing reactions to his work (on

MUUMER

Jul 23, 2011

Alfred and The Doctor, 2010, mischertraxler. Courtesy of the artists.

Twitter, Lin retweets not just



compliments but disses, too) and to his activities. On paper, it sounds like vanity, but in person, it's more a sense of wonder, the yearning to view himself through a window. Every time I shared something that one of the other writers told me, Lin said, "Really? Like an incredulous child. But he rarely added his own thoughts."

Lin just came from a Whole Foods, now I am in Starbucks. I feel really fucked at this moment. After some pushing, Lin told me about his daily routine. In the morning, he said, his house, God's word, Daniel. There is a large amount of tweeting and in the afternoon, usually including iced coffee, organic fruit, "green juice." Then he goes to New York University's Bobst Library where he writes for five hours, which is looking for pills in Target. Britanny is inside a Target. I'm inside a Starbucks. This is real. judging by his public web activity, includes a large amount of tweeting and Facebooking. During the rest of the time, Lin said, he's mostly online in his apartment. (He has since gotten married to Muumuu, but Megan Boyle was not a bad, damn, activity have changed.)



As he has written his many books, he begins to think that his writing is not as good as he thought. When he found out that he had written these at a high quality, the activities Lin and his peers do online—hours of blogging, tweeting, commenting, and emailing—suggest that they are tirelessly working to advance their name and their art. If you consider it art. Some people do; poems by Kennedy and Gorrell were republished online by the Poetry Foundation.

For now, it seems unlikely the literary establishment will ever take Lin and his friends seriously. When Lin's latest novel, *Indy*, was reviewed by the *New York Times*, it seemed like a breakthrough for him and Muumuu, negative review or not. (The review was indeed negative, crushingly so; Charles Bock reflected that "Each time the characters said they wanted to kill themselves, I knew exactly how they felt").



There's an exciting discussion about this over at http://www.reddit.com/r/technology/comments/ix6zr/critics_call_them_hip_haters_but/ that I'm in touch with insisted on their dislike (and on anonymity). "I'm not interested in Lin..." and I'm not really sure I could be swayed," an editor of a book review wrote, calling him a "fake." Another editor, who runs a major New York culture blog, told me of Lin and the Muumuu crew: "I've been a victim of their campaigns of publicity for years... I think their nihilism is just idiotic."



Perhaps these writers are just pals with similar artistic goals and styles. Noah Cicero rejected the label of this being a "movement" when I asked him. "I don't know if we have invented anything that hasn't come before. Fuck how you feel, I guess my feelings just match the tradition of writers that don't feel like writing normally." Cicero joked, "We obviously aren't fans of John Updike and Cormac McCarthy." In his view, "We are a generation living in a world where McDonald's, Nike, and cell phones are considered beautiful things."



German, Gorrell, and Cicero want their books to reflect the feel of their days. Their stories entail people hanging out, chatting, partying, doing a lot of nothing. Many readers are not getting poems, but the Muumuu House writers give their audience a direct representation, in fiction, of the lives they already lead. Their poems and stories are directed at a very small social subset, and are probably interesting only to that specific group of people, and only right now. One day, though, they may begin to interest the rest of us as well.



Yesterday I sat outside and read this feeling adrenaline moving around in my brain or torso or somewhere. I really liked reading this. also, I recently discovered that maybe a year or so ago I sent an email to a person named daniel who I don't know and who isn't this 'daniel,' saying his article about muumuu house sounded really sweet and I'd like to gchat/answer his questions...heh...



in the video, at around 2:07, it looks like the guy in the undershirt is fanning himself with a small arm, but it's the person behind him in the distance. it made me laugh a lot. the small arm thing.

Spencer Koelle is also one at 4chan that at the moment seems perhaps more 'serious' i.e. no comments asking to see Muumuu writers naked. Mostly seems like a 'debate' about Thought Catalog. Why have the Literary establishment NOT accepted Tao Lin? Clearly he is their god, and this Muumuu affair is the culmination of all their vapid self-indulgence, pretentiousness, and idolizing irony over sincerity and satire over substance. Tao Lin is the demon-child of the Literary Culture's new religion, and he's such a damn funny or baggery.

As for the values of "sadness" and "mopey feelings," I must quote Doctor Who. "Sad is the people."

Megan Boyle of stuff is why I feigned illness and tried to trigger my gag reflex before sprinting