At the end of this month, the National Magazine Awards will celebrate great narrative by handing out awards for reporting and writing the kinds of stories that thrill readers with every turn of the page. There are plenty of good candidates, but fewer than in years past. As more magazines default to a visual rather than literary palette, the 4,000-word article has become a relic, first replaced by the 800-word quick take and then further boiled to a 400-word blurb that is little more than a long caption. In most magazines on today's newsstands, words are increasingly beside the point, mere graphic elements that are generally used to frame pictures.

Magazine buyers have always been divided into readers and lookers. But consumers who actually open a magazine at the front and commence reading are becoming an increasingly rarefied demographic group. In a medium that has atomized into niche after niche, the long-form narrative may become just one more fetish, no more or less worthy of a magazine than Sub-Zero refrigerators or B-list starlets.

There are still great articles being written, of course. The attacks in September sparked a burst of long-form excellence, and The New Yorker, Esquire, Vanity Fair, The Atlantic and Harper's are packed with wondrous, where-did-they-get-that insights into the human condition. Some of them are even doing well on the newsstand. Vanity Fair, a magazine that mixes the long and short, adds readers every week, and even daunting bricks of text like those in The Atlantic and The New Yorker are finding success in a very tough marketplace.

Those magazines, however, are a relatively small slice of the glossy pie. The rest of the industry has gotten the picture — and it does not include spellbinding narratives. Celebrity-driven publications like People and Us Weekly are becoming fashion flip books. ESPN: The Magazine, which received a general excellence nomination for the coming magazine awards, has more DNA from MTV than from traditional sports journalism.

And the smaller magazines that serve as a laboratory for publishing innovation — chic downtown magazines like City and Nest — are pushing graphic rather than linguistic boundaries. Mag-a-logs like Lucky, the shopping magazine, do not generate much more text than what would fit on a price tag. The men's magazines that continue to storm the newsstand — Maxim, Stuff and FHM — are unapologetically formatted for people who do not read.

Publications that exalt the visual have always done well. But the vast middles of many magazines — the feature wells, where the reading matter used to be found — have morphed
into annotated photo magazines.

In this world, everything can be objectified and rendered desirable. A $2,200 faucet gets the kind of lavish lighting and styling treatment that used to be reserved for skinny 17-year-old models.

"It used to be that we used to have to fight with the writers and editors to get the pictures in," said one designer who has worked at a number of glossy magazines. "Now the design challenge is to take very little text and making it big enough to convey an editorial experience."

Much of the editorial message is carried in display text, the "deep captioning" that has replaced the traditional profile. Consider this caption last week in a People photo feature deconstructing the fashion choices at the Oscars: "Janet Jackson worked too hard for those abs to hide them, even on Hollywood's choicest night of the year. At the Vanity Fair party, the singer stayed true to her renegade style, donning hip-hugger jeans, coat and sparkly bikini top." In the tiny-speak of contemporary magazine publishing, the caption says it all. Ms. Jackson is still in shape and likes to flaunt it, and she remains hot enough to go places that the reader never will.

The shorthand suffices because the great majority of readers are up to date on the handful of luminous beings that constitute the raw material in most mass magazines, whether the focus is entertainment, fashion, music or sports (or more commonly, some mix of all those things). Celebrities have become the people that everyone has in common, and as long as images give the hoi polloi a sense of intimacy, the readers are more than happy to supply both text and subtext.

There are magazines that run counter to the trend. Teen People can be a deeper read than its parent, and Esquire and Sports Illustrated continue to offer the kind of powerful narratives that give the lie to jokes about the attention span of the typical man. But they are being overpowered at the newsstand by much less literate brethren. And the women's side of the magazine rack lacks literary nutrition, now that Mademoiselle is gone.

"I hear the word `package' a lot more than I used to at women's magazines," said Judith Newman, a longtime magazine writer. "It means that you have to package everything into McBite-size nuggets. It is sad that women writers look to men's magazines as something to aspire to."

With articles in retreat on every corner of the newsstand, much of the editorial message in magazines is carried in the marginalia. Editors who were nourished by Spy magazine, "Seinfeld" and "The Simpsons" — rather than the Esquire of the 1960's — know that they have to come at the reader from all directions.

"What we do is much more like movies than traditional magazines," said Greg Gutfeld of Stuff magazine. "We are utterly of the moment and utterly disposable. If readers of traditional magazines were honest, they would tell you that they don't read more than the first 10 percent of those long articles. We give them the best 10 percent."
The assumption is that readers raised on a media diet in which they are presented with a new image every few tenths of a second are not about to wait 3,400 words for the upshot. The glossy publishing industry will continue to serve as the back fence for mass culture. But in these days of postliterate publishing, few in the neighborhood seem to have time to stop and tell stories.