Episodic Fiction
Another Way to Tell a Story

Pen Campbell and Dan Holt

Separate episodes were like individual images juxtaposed to be woven together by the reader into a story. He found the form intriguing and, as writers are wont to do with intriguing forms, decided to try his hand at it to see where it would lead.

About fifteen years ago, Dan Holt read a story that changed the way he looked at fiction.

"Birds," by John O'Brien, was different from any story he'd read before. Unlike a movie or traditional short story, in which elements of the story line are connected by transitions to tell a story in a linear fashion, O'Brien's "Birds" seemed to Holt to be more like a slide show or even a music video. Separate episodes were like individual images juxtaposed to be woven together by the reader into a story. He found the form intriguing and, as writers are wont to do with intriguing forms, decided to try his hand at it to see where it would lead.

At the time, he had two different stories in progress, neither of which was working out: one about a man who, while visiting his parents in Arizona, struggles with the decision of whether or not to leave his wife, and a second story that grew out of a newspaper report about a man whose horse had broken its leg in the desert and subsequently been killed by coyotes. Experimenting with the episodic form, Holt combined these two stories into "Ten Stories About Coyotes I Never Told You." In doing so, he took as a model for his own story one additional element from O'Brien's "Birds" beyond the episodic form itself— that of a repeated motif occurring in each episode.

"Birds" is not really a story about birds. Rather, it is a story about a man coming to a decision concerning himself and the sanctity of life around him. Each of the episodes of the story features a bird, not as a symbol, but more as a repeated motif—perhaps the way Alfred Hitchcock's cameo appearance was featured in each of his movies. Holt used the repeated motif in "Ten Stories . . .," which, despite its title, is not really about coyotes, though one appears in almost every episode.

Pleased with having solved the problem of the two balky stories, Holt sent "Ten Stories . . ." to Stuart Dybeck at Western Michigan University, who had suggested the O'Brien story to him in the first place. Having sent it with no more purpose than to say "Thanks—I enjoyed the story and fooled around with the form; here's what I got," Holt considered the matter closed. Several months later, however, when he received a copy of a magazine in the mail, there in the table of contents he found his name and "Ten Stories about Coyotes I Never Told You." Dybeck had sent the story on to his friend John O'Brien, who promptly published it in The Great Lakes Review, which he edited.

Since his introduction to episodic fiction, Holt has in turn introduced many others to the form: students in his high school creative writing classes, participants in both invitational summer institutes and advanced institutes at Western Michigan University's Third Coast Writing Project, and participants of the 2000 Festival of Writers sponsored by the Louisiana Writing Project State Network.
Ten Stories About Coyotes I Never Told You

by Dan Holt

I. The White Fence

When our marriage broke up, I went home and painted the entire corral. I didn’t know why it was so important, but it was. I had to get home and grab a paintbrush and stand in the Arizona sun and paint the corral. I painted it white; so white you couldn’t look at it for very long.

“Jesus, is that fence white,” my father said.

“Whitest damn fence I ever saw,” my mother said.

They stood, arm in arm, framed by a rose arbor. I wanted to cry, they looked so good. They looked so good standing there that I wanted to cry and maybe paint the fence again. After all, I had the time; another coat wouldn’t hurt.

“That’s true,” my father said. “The chicken coop could stand a coat, too.”

I heard a coyote yelp in the distance.

II. Morning Ride

There were partridges near the barn, and it was still cold enough that I could see my breath. I knead Poco’s belly so that I could tighten the cinch. He blew hot smoke and danced away from me.

The desert was green that December, and the earth was a rust color, especially with the red sun coming over Hat Mountain throwing a tint on everything. At the end of the graded road behind the barn were two wrecked cars. They were rust color, too.

I took my hands out of my pockets when the sun started to warm me up. I thought that it would be nice just to keep riding, deeper and deeper into the desert. I felt so good about the riding and the sun that I wanted to glide in a walking trot all the way to Mexico.

I caught, out of the corner of my eye, just a flash of gray.

III. Coyotes Are After My Mother’s Chickens

I hung around the house, standing in the kitchen, watching Mom wash the dishes. She was talking to me.

“How’s your job? Are you happy? Are you going back to her?”

I was sticking a butter knife into the toaster.

“You know that’s plugged in.”

“What?”

“You know that’s plugged in.”

“What’s plugged in?”

“The toaster, you’re sticking the knife into.”

She was looking out the window over the sink as she said that, and suddenly she stopped pulling glasses out of the suds and leaned forward to get a better look at something in the backyard. She was standing on her toes and then she said “Shit!” and ran to the utility room, grabbing a .22 automatic out of the closet, and ran out the back door.

I followed her and saw her fire three shots at a disappearing coyote.

“I’ll get one of them yet,” she said.

“When did you start saying ‘Shit?’” I asked her.

IV. Chasing an Old Coyote

I was twelve when we caught a coyote in the open, four of us chasing a coyote across a dried-out cotton field. He must have been old or sick because he couldn’t outrun us. So we kept him in the middle of the field and then tried to run him over until he caught a hoof in the side. He stopped trying to run from us and just sat down in the middle of the field. We kept riding around him, Indians circling a wagon train, but he wouldn’t run anymore. I guess he just decided it wasn’t worth it.

V. Poco Throws Me

I was thinking “coyote” to myself when Poco jumped sideways. He was jumping and bucking. I pulled his head up and kept him from throwing me, but he kept jumping, first sideways and then he lunged forward, the bit in his teeth. The leather cut into my fingers.

“Shit.”

Poco wheeled on his hind legs and reared.

“Son of a bitch.”

We went down backward. I jumped to the side; he hit, rolled on his back like one large rocker off a chair.

VI. Cheating at Golf

My dad wanted me to play golf with him on Saturday. The golf course was the only place where he could talk. There was something about sitting on a bench in a lime green cardigan, waiting for two or three foursomes to get off the tee, that really opened him up. He told me the story about the time he and Ed from the shop tried to hit a coyote on the fourth fairway.

I broke 100 that day but cheated a lot. We both did. If there was a tree in the way, we’d move the ball, or kick it out of the rough, or sometimes put the ball on a little tuft of grass so we could hit a wood. Sometimes, we’d even forget a stroke. All in all, we cheated about the same.

“I don’t know if I want to go back,” I said to him while we were waiting to make our approach shots to the eighteenth green.

“What do you mean, you don’t want to go back?”

VII. Screams

He broke his leg when he went down. He kept trying to get up and kept falling down again. His wild eyes looked so large and white. I ran down the riverbed, not wanting to look back at him thrashing in the sand. I didn’t know horses could scream like that.

VIII. Go with God

The Mexicans came out of nowhere, out of the desert, just appeared in the driveway. One had a red rag around his head; the other had a hat pulled over his eyes, and they were both soaked from a shower. I found out later that there were others, whole families, hidden not far away.

continued on next page
Eight Rules About Episodic Fiction I Never Told You

1. The work involves a dynamic character, one who changes in fits and starts throughout the course of the story.

2. Episodes vary in length.

3. Episodes are roughly chronological, but not specifically so.

4. Episodes may or may not be multigenre, but the language is often rich and poetic.

5. A single unifying device runs throughout the story, appearing in each episode.

6. Episodes are not related directly by cause and effect; instead, all are related to a central theme.

7. If a traditional short story is a movie, moving in a linear fashion from beginning to end, an episodic story is more like a slide show or a music video.

8. And finally, to borrow a rule from George Orwell, “Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.”

Following the Rules

First Holt wrote “Ten Stories . . .”; the rules came later when it was time to introduce episodic fiction to his students. In a way, teaching the rules is nothing more than articulating the process of how to take an interesting piece of literature and use it as a model—an effective technique writers have been using as long as there have been stories.

The protagonist/narrator of “Ten Stories . . .” is a man whose marriage has broken up, and his response has been to go home to his parents—and paint the corral. Throughout the story, we share his experiences—though not his thought processes—as he comes to a decision about his marriage. In the end, on his way home to resume his marriage, he views from the departing plane the corral he painted in episode one. At that point, most likely, the title clicks into place for the reader. The “you” in the title to whom the stories are addressed is his wife. These are stories he told her after he returned home.

None of the episodes are very long, and they vary in length from three lines of manuscript to perhaps a quarter of a page. The first three episodes are arranged in roughly chronological order, though one does not precipitate the next. They are not related by cause and effect. Actually, the order in which they are told could indicate simply the order in which they were recalled. The first three are memories about the protagonist’s time away from his marriage. Episode four is a flashback to childhood, and the image of the four boys tormenting the old coyote ups the emotional ante of the story. Episodes five, seven, and nine together are the retelling of a single incident, fragmented by the insertion of episode six, “Cheating at Golf” and eight, “Go with God.” The last episode follows the others chronologically and brings the reader full circle.

Each of the ten episodes is prose, rich with sensory images. All but episode seven, “Screams,” and episode ten, “Chasing Chickens,” contain a coyote—as promised by the story title. Seven is the shortest, most intense episode, and, on one hand, there’s the least room here for the device of the coyote. Then, too, the missing coyote may heighten the tension of this climactic episode, causing us to glance over our reading shoulder for that “flash of gray.” We don’t see the coyote in “Chasing Chickens” either, and as the protagonist flies over the desert landscape, he imagines chickens running in circles—chased, we suspect, by the unseen coyote.

continued from previous page

My father saw them first and walked out to talk to them, his hands stuffed in his pockets. I could see him shake his head and then point across the desert to the west. Mom was holding the .22 and checking to see if it still had bullets. And just like that, they headed across the desert in the same direction my father had pointed, walking under the “Vayas con Dios” sign over the driveway entrance.

“Who are they?” I asked my father when he came back to the house.

“They call them Coyotes,” he said. “They bring people to the promised land.”

IX. Canis Latrans

I didn’t see them until I was almost on them. They were standing like gray plaster statues, so still. I remember thinking that only wild animals can stand that still. I also remember thinking that if I could get close enough, I could see my reflection in their eyes. I picked up a rock and threw it at the largest coyote. He moved just enough so that the rock missed and then he froze again. We stood a little longer: one specimen Homo sapiens, sub species of the order Primate and approximately twenty specimen of Canis latrans facing one another in a dry riverbed in a desert.

Finally, they moved off toward the spot where Poco lay, exhausted.

X. Chasing Chickens

My parents stayed in the departure area until I was in the plane and the doors closed. I looked for our house and found it by looking for Hat Mountain and Winslow Peak, the red tile roof of the house drawing my attention. The empty corral didn’t look white from the air. I imagined chickens running in circles in the backyard.
It's Not Funny Anymore

ANDY MYERS

In the fall, I used to rake the leaves with my grandpa in his backyard. We would go around the whole lawn raking them from underneath the trees, the bird feeders, and from behind the barn. We would also, very carefully, rake them out of the garden he grew so proudly, which was filled with parsley and rhubarb.

We would rake the leaves in rows across the lawn instead of piles. He always thought that method was the best. He held me laughing the whole time we raked, telling me jokes that he had memorized from one of the many joke books he had on his shelves. He always told me the same one about the belly dancer, and I could never remember the punch line.

"Ginny, what’s a four-letter word for Greek cheese?" My grandpa only asked for help on his crossword puzzles when he absolutely needed it. He did the crossword out of the paper, and I would work right along beside him in my crossword puzzle book. He bought the book for me for my eighth birthday along with the Book of 1,001 Jokes and Riddles. I would usually finish my puzzles before him, but his were a lot harder.

On the playground at E. P. Clarke Elementary School, out by the Redwood Climber, I told my friends the joke about the four-legged canoe my grandpa had told me the weekend before. I didn’t tell it as well as my grandpa did, but the guys still liked it and laughed all recess. After that day, I started telling them all of the jokes and stories that my grandpa had told me. All the ones I could remember that is.

Grandma had sent me downstairs to get the Christmas cookie cutters one Saturday morning before Christmas. Normally I hated to go down to the basement alone because my grandma ran a doll hospital and everywhere you looked there were broken dolls and dismantled doll parts laying around. I wasn’t as scared as I usually was this time because I knew Grandpa was down there doing his genealogy studies. The other part of the basement was my grandpa’s library. It was filled with tons of old books and newspapers, mostly stuff relating to our family or the Civil War.

I slowly made my way down the steep linoleum steps and into my grandpa’s study. I peeked around the corner, hoping he would see me and fire off a joke or riddle, but he didn’t. He was sitting behind his old green desk, reading a decayed yellow newspaper. His bifocals were slid halfway down his nose, and he was chewing on a fountain pen; I was shocked at the way he studied that paper. It was really the first time I had ever seen my grandpa not joking or without his usual fun-loving smile. He didn’t seem quite the same.

We met my grandparents at church on a rainy Sunday morning in the early part of April. As my grandpa greeted me he said, "Hi-ya Chester ol’top. Glad to see you back. It's been ears and ears, but I still nose ya." As he said it, he touched every body part he mentioned on me. I laughed all through church and asked him to do it about a dozen more times that afternoon.

“Holy mackerel!” My grandpa exclaimed as I hit the wiffle ball over the fence with my big red bat. It was my first home run of the afternoon. It landed in the Burkel’s backyard. There must have been a hundred wiffle balls we left in her backyard because my brother and I were always too scared to retrieve them.

My grandpa held my waist as I leaned over the fence to corral the ball. I grabbed it; and as he pulled me over, my shirt got caught on the fence. "Wait, Grandpa, I'm stuck," I said. He replied, "No, you’re Myers; I’m stuck." My grandpa’s last name was Stuck. I’ll never forget how much we both laughed.

In the Upton Middle School cafeteria, I noticed I wasn’t the one telling the jokes anymore. It was another boy who everyone thought was hilarious. He told one of the same jokes my grandpa told me. I hated him because of it, but I eventually got over it.

When we opened presents on Christmas Day at my grandparents’ house, my grandpa always wore the Santa Claus hat. He would hand out each gift, and when we were without presents, he would re-supply us. That Christmas, my aunt thought it would be funny to wrap one of my presents in a Tampon box. Evidently the look on my face was the highlight of the day.

A couple of months after my grandpa’s stroke, my mom visited him. She found a notebook with "Don’s Notebook" printed really large on it. In the notebook were some basic characteristics to remember family members by: Andy = oldest, Josh = tallest, Karen = girl. I remember making fun of this notebook to my friends. That’s the one joke I wish I could have taken back.

At the beach last summer, my girlfriend told me she liked me because I was always kidding around. She said I was quick witted. I told her I loved her that day. We were together about every single day after that.

A couple of months ago, I came home after being out with Lori around 12:30 a.m. The usual group of guys were over to spend the night. They were mad that I always went with her and never hung with them; I told them I would rather spend time with a pretty girl than sit around my basement making fun of each other. They all agreed with me, and we had a good time after that.

My grandpa was admitted to the hospital again in September. My mom, brother, sister, and I went to visit him one chilly morning after church. He didn’t look very well. He was dressed in his white hospital shirt and propped in his bed. I noticed a sign that hung over his bed which read "Legally Blind." I guess it was there for the nurse’s sake. I felt like crying as we left his room without even attempting any sort of joke or riddle to make him smile.

continued on next page
In some ways, perhaps the inclusion of the unifying device in episodic fiction is a little like rhyme in poetry—we have to be careful with it and be sure it isn’t allowed to take over or muscle us into bad decisions, especially when we’re just getting started. That’s where the beauty and utility of rule eight comes in. As George Orwell says, “Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.”

So is this a story about coyotes? Is the coyote a symbol, and if so, of what? These questions would undoubtedly come up in a classroom discussion of this story. Rule six says that all episodes should be linked by a common theme. In the first sentence, we have a man reacting to the turmoil in his marriage. We could look at the story as a process, with each episode contributing a piece to the process of the protagonist’s decision. The episodes fit loosely together in this way, not always proceeding from each other, but clustering about the common theme of coming to know what we want to do in our own lives.

**In the Classroom**

One of the attractions of the episodic form is its versatility. While it came to Holt’s attention first as fiction, it wasn’t long before the form began suggesting itself for use in other types of writing as well. It is a natural for personal narrative, and students who have collected freewriting responses to prompts designed to encourage personal narrative are likely to find a rich collection of possibilities from which to develop an episodic piece.

The form is student friendly in other ways as well. The very nature of episodic writing breaks up the task of the whole piece into parts, encouraging students with their “do-ability.” The often troublesome details of transitions and unity of time and place become more manageable when the story is told episodically. The structure of episodes also encourages students to think in terms of scenes in constructing their stories.

As we know, the move from personal narrative to fiction is a short step. Sometimes a student may begin a piece as personal narrative and, with later revisions, turn it into a piece of fiction. Holt points out that encouraging students to search for the roots of fiction within their own realities often yields realistic stories that touch the reader with their authenticity. Even personal narrative, when told episodically, is more likely to be driven by character development than by plot since the episodic story does not consist of a single cohesive chain of events.

An excellent example of such an episodic personal narrative is “It’s Not Funny Anymore,” written by Andy Myers while he was a student in Holt’s creative writing class.

**Following the Rules**

“It’s Not Funny Anymore” follows the rules. The protagonist is a dynamic character, maturing throughout the story. In the first six episodes, the protagonist is most likely between eight and ten, and these episodes have no specific chronology but serve to introduce the grandfather, his humor, and his importance in the boy’s life. At the beginning of the seventh episode, the protagonist has become an adolescent, and his growing maturity in the following episodes corresponds inversely to his grandfather’s growing frailty. Once the protagonist hits middle school, the episodes, which vary in length, are recognizably chronological.

Andy uses effective language throughout the prose episodes, creating clear and moving images. The episodes are formatted without the numerical labeling or titling of “Ten Stories . . .” White space on the page separates one episode from the next. The unifying device of a joke or reference to one appears in each episode. While the unifying

---

**continued from previous page**

Christmas Day a few weeks ago, I saw my grandpa for the first time since I had been up to the hospital in September. I was too busy I always told myself, trying to make excuses for forgetting him. I tried to soak up as much about the day with him as I could because I was feeling absolutely awful for neglecting him. I sat in the living room with him as he tried to pet the dog, trying to carry on conversations.

He didn’t wear the Santa Claus hat this year. Nor did he hand out a single present. He sat in his special chair with his cane draped over his knee, struggling to open his own presents, often times being the butt of a joke cracked by my aunt or uncle. Most of the time, everyone laughed except for me. I remembered when I used to laugh with my grandpa playing baseball, raking leaves, doing crosswords, and I was not about to start laughing at him.

I stopped over at my grandparents’ house the other day to check on them. The three of us talked for over two hours. I could tell that it made their day that I came by. It made my day as well. As I left, I gave them each a hug and told them I loved them. As I grabbed my coat and headed for the door, I turned back and told my grandpa the joke about the belly dancer, the one he had always told me, hoping to get a laugh out of him. I did. He had forgotten the punch line.
Through the Eyes of a Haitian Mother: An Episodic Short Story

KATIE IMACH

Sounds
What scared her the most in the muggy Haitian nights were the sounds—the eerie sounds of the night that bore into her brain and allowed no time for sleep. The sounds that echoed, night after night with their deafening rhythm. They came from so many different places, and yet all had the same story. The story that had been passed on for generations.

Children crying because of lack of food, their stomachs contracting to their full extent. An empty look in their eyes that shows so much agony in one glimpse. A stare that tells of their pain and anguish.

Children crying as they hold their bloody mother or brother in their arms and weep—begging the Lord to make their loved one come back. Such anguish experienced that they close off in their own cocoon, a cocoon of silence which they suffer in.

The sounds of soldiers, with their cocky commands beating down upon the people, the people they are supposed to be protecting, and the ever so frightening sound of gunfire, gunfire, gunfire.

Where are the sounds of laughter? Where have they disappeared to? She tries to remember that precious sound, but it is drowned out by all the others.

Letter to Daughter
Dear Faith,

I can feel that your prayers have been with me. As you have probably heard, the bombing has stopped! The tanks that had come into Port-Au-Prince two weeks ago finally left. Of course, the signs of their presence still remain.

Some buildings have been bombed, many houses have bullet holes in the windows, and wounded people walk the streets, but overall not that much damage has been done. It was a lot worse last month.

As usual, we don't know which party inflicted all this destruction. I don't understand how there can be so much chaos without any ramifications. Aristide tries his hardest, but it's hard to pacify our country. We are all so tired and feel that we can't trust anybody anymore. I want to believe he will make a difference, but I don't want to be disappointed once again.

Do you remember the little boy with big green eyes down the street? The one that was always after Maggie? Well, we attended his funeral today. He got his legs blown off by the terrorists and the hospital was very full, so by the time the doctor was available, he was already gone. His poor, poor mother. This is the second child of hers she lost. The other one she miscarried a few years ago. He was such a promising child—wanted to be a doctor, and would have made our whole community proud.

I'm so happy you finally got out. You have such a great future to look forward to in America. I would have left, but I feel I belong here. My blood is all Haitian, and it doesn't want to depart from its homeland. I don't want to abandon my people, especially at my age. I'd rather have a young one leave because at least they have a hope for a future. Me, I just live from day to day and pray that the Lord watches over our souls.

Take care of yourself and know that your mama loves you. You are making us all so proud.

Love,
Mama

Story of My Life
I cried when my daughter was born tears of sorrow for the life I have brought her into She doesn't deserve this No one does
So alone Sick of the same spiraling circle of events that affects every generation of my country my women My grandmother and mother so strong yet so ignorant to the fact Things don't have to be this way

Poverty...virginity tests...abuse rape...depression... Political instability... The story of my life Scared of walking down the streets at night and during the day scared of my own country punished for being a woman So many responsibilities, so little respect

"Tears from my eyes, made me realize all the pain inside"

Pain that I had swallowed for so long a big lump in the throat that grows and you ignore

I want to be strong I don't let those tears shed freely So tired of crying... too tired to cry anymore

Journal Entry
It happened again last night. I woke up to the sound of gunfire and ran next door to Namphy's house, as I always do. I found his wife there, a small shadow curled in the corner, crying, sobbing, her whole body heaving with sorrow. "They took him away," she said. Namphy was taken prisoner by the soldiers. Why? Nobody knows, but he probably won't return. They never do.

continued on next page
device is more intrinsically a part of the story than Holt's coyote, the story is not about jokes. Each episode relates to the central theme of the protagonist's relationship with his grandfather and the inevitability of change that time brings to that relationship.

**Researching Episodically**

At Lake Michigan Catholic High School, students in Pen Campbell's senior English class spend the year exploring issues of social justice. Throughout the year, they read literature and view films in various genres, examining them through discussion and writing. In late January, students choose a research question to investigate in-depth over the next three months. At the end of the year, they present a portfolio of work that includes a visual piece, a traditional research paper, and either a multigenre collection or a piece of episodic fiction, all of which grows from their research.

As they read, discuss, and study various forms, they respond to prompts designed to help them create characters through which they can voice what they are learning about their research topics. Sometimes, the prompt is a piece of literature students use as a model. Sometimes, Campbell offers prompts that have successfully generated personal writing. Students put themselves in the place of someone affected by the topic they are researching, and through those eyes, in that voice, they respond to the prompt. Writing letters or journal entries in the voice of a character often yields excellent material for the students. After collecting a number of these responses in their daybooks, students have a body of drafts from which to choose pieces for further development.

"Through the Eyes of a Haitian Mother: An Episodic Short Story" grew out of Campbell's student Katie Imach's research on conditions in Haiti. After reading the work of novelist Edwidge Danticat early in the school year, she became especially interested in questions of a woman's life in Haiti. Katie has taken the episodic fiction form in a slightly new direction by using a variety of narrative forms to create her story.

**Following the Rules**

"Through the Eyes of a Haitian Mother" is a multigenre episodic story. In the first episode, prose rich with images, the protagonist is introduced in third person. In the next, we hear her voice as she writes a letter to her daughter, and in the third episode, we delve deeper into the protagonist's thoughts and feelings about her life through a poem. The short journal entry of the fourth episode, with its matter-of-fact acceptance, develops our sense of the dreadful realities under which the protagonist lives her life. The final episode combines the third person prose of the first with the protagonist's voice in a poem that ends in prayer.

These episodes may be chronological, though the theme of story around which all the episodes cluster speaks of an endurance that negates the importance of which event came first. In the same way, the change in the protagonist, which we would expect, becomes secondary to the fact that she endures. Her dynamism is grounded in that endurance, rather than in an overt change or epiphany.

The unifying device in this story is more subtle than in "Ten Stories . . ." or "It's Not Funny Anymore." In each episode, a sound of sorrow or of trouble reiterates the theme of the story. As readers, we may not be conscious of these sounds in the same way we become conscious of the coyote or of the jokes in the two earlier stories. Imach's use of sound is an effective use of sensory images, but if the repeated motif blends so smoothly into the story that it isn't noticeable, does it still have a purpose? Perhaps the question it brings is really about the purpose of the coyote, the jokes, and the

---

**Wonder**

This warm and starry night is eerily silent as she ponders her life and this war, which has never ceased to control and limit her. She has never known peace and wonders what life would have been like under different circumstances.

I wonder what it's like to go to sleep, knowing you'll soon see the light of a tranquil dawn

I wonder what it's like to let your children play outside, careless and free, without worrying you'll never see them again

I wonder what it's like not to hear the splatter of bullets every day echoing through the alleys

I wonder if this will end this insanity
That's all I pray for

---

continued from previous page
Episodic Fiction

sounds. Sometimes, the repeated motif serves more as a cattle prod to the writer than as a beacon to the reader. The challenge becomes fitting the coyote in; rising to that challenge, we tax our writing brains, which is always good exercise for us.

Rule seven says if a traditional short story is a movie, moving in a linear fashion from beginning to end, an episodic story is more like a slide show or a music video. “Through the Eyes of a Haitian Mother” does have that episodic, music video feel, and it also has a feeling of authenticity that is present despite the fact that this is not the personal narrative of the writer. The student author is not a Haitian mother, but in taking her research and seeking to see that research as reality through the eyes of a character, she has clearly demonstrated her new knowledge of her topic. And isn’t that, after all, why we research—to understand something we didn’t understand before?

In the End, It’s Still Storytelling

Getting started on episodic fiction is a little like being pregnant. Suddenly, you look around, and, where you never thought a thing of it before, you begin to see pregnant women and babies everywhere. The same thing happens with episodic fiction. As a matter of fact, a number of people have pointed out the similarities between the episodic form and so much of the non-linear communication that is becoming more and more prevalent in our digital age. Internet sites, magazines, and even textbooks present a mosaic of information on each page, encouraging a randomness of order through which students move with increasing adeptness. B no longer necessarily follows A as a matter of course, and episodic fiction reflects that change nicely.

But, in the end, no matter how you get started with episodic fiction, and no matter how you play with it or what new twists and turns you give it, it all boils down to another form of storytelling. And ultimately, that’s what matters—telling the story. How you tell it—how you get there—is not as important as the fact that you’re telling it. But, as getting there is half the fun, episodic fiction is an incredibly flexible, creative form—and one you and your students will certainly want to try.

Note

While they may not all offer examples that follow our eight rules exactly, the books below may be useful in beginning to think episodically.

Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres, by Tom Romano (Boynton/Cook, 1995). Filled with ideas and examples, this is a book that encourages an entirely new approach to research writing for many of us.

Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age, by Eliza T. Dresang (H. W. Wilson, 1999). Check out Dresang’s Web site and be sure to take a look at the Book Updates and the archived updates for excellent reading recommendations.


In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal, edited by Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones (W. W. Norton and Company, 1999). This is a marvelous book to use for models of short personal narrative essays.

Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories, edited and introduced by Jerome Stern (W. W. Norton and Company, 1996). Another interesting form especially useful in episodic writing is micro or flash fiction. Pieces done in this form are very, very short stories of approximately 250 words and are, in a way, a hybrid of fiction and prose poetry. The book includes excellent examples.


Frenchtown Summer, by Robert Cormier (Delacorte Press, 1999). Cormier’s own memoir in verse.


Out of the Dust, by Karen Hesse (Scholastic, 1999). A young girl’s struggles during the Dust Bowl, told episodically in verse.

Dan Holt, co-director of the Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University and a former Michigan Writing Teacher of the Year, teaches creative writing at St. Joseph High School, in St. Joseph, Michigan, where he is also the advisor for the newspaper and literary magazine.

Pen Campbell teaches ninth and twelfth grade English, speech, and drama at Lake Michigan Catholic High School in St. Joseph, Michigan, and is a teacher-consultant with the Third Coast Writing Project.