Writer at Work  Sharon Oard Warner

A ‘crazy-quilt’ approach to fiction

Sometimes it pays to dawdle and stitch scraps into a collage, rather than powering through the first draft of a linear story.

Do as I say and not as I do. Parents aren’t the only ones who resort to this dictum. It comes in handy for teachers, too. Take me, for instance. In recent years, I have begun ignoring my own advice. Instead of pushing through a draft from beginning to end, as I urge my students to do, I have resorted to dawdling and what I’ll call “premature revision.” This is contrary, of course, to the advice in Bird by Bird, where Anne Lamott, in more profane words than I can use here, famously entreats beginning novelists to complete their lousy first draft.

In her book Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel, Jane Smiley similarly cautions that “the desire to get each scene ‘just right’ works against productivity because it allows you to get in the habit of ruminating upon your self-doubt.” And she’s absolutely right.

My current project is a novel-in-stories about a year in the life of a family, tracking the life of a teenager named Sophie. Although I’ve yet to finish a draft of the whole manuscript, I’ve published four of my “Sophie” stories, three in Prairie Schooner. Instead of motoring through a first draft, as conventional wisdom advises, I instead lingered and revised, finishing one section before starting the next. Along the way, I accumulated a number of scenic “scraps,” and my fourth Sophie story, published in The Laurel Review, made use of these “remnants.” While writing it, I learned a new method for creating fiction.

The stories in Prairie Schooner are linear, meaning that the events are sequential and ordered by cause and effect. Analyze any of the three and you’ll discover that they conform to the Freytag Triangle model of storytelling: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution.

The three also reflect E.M. Forster’s definition of story: a “narrative of events arranged in their time sequence.” To find the story, the reader need only ask this question: And then what happened? To find the plot, the question is even simpler: Why? Forster provides a simple narrative to make his point. He tells us that “the king died and then the queen died” is a story, while “the king died and then the queen died of grief” is a plot.

The Freytag and Forster models aptly describe most stories published in the last hundred years, but not every story is linear. In my fourth Sophie story, I decided to try something different, something Annie Dillard calls “narrative collage.” The result is “Love Child,” a story in which Sophie rocks the worlds of her creative-writing teacher, her boyfriend’s mother and finally her own mother.

In her essay “Fiction in Bits,” Dillard explains that some stories “do not privilege linear plotting or other traditionalunities of character, setting and point of view.” So what do they privilege, you ask? My answer would be dramatic irony. Dramatic irony arises when the reader (or audience) has a fuller knowledge or understanding of the circumstances than do the characters.

Most collage stories, mine included, juxtapose characters, settings and points of view to illustrate the bigger picture. For me, collage calls to mind my niece Haley’s bulletin board. Like Sophie, Haley is 17, and tacked alongside the corsages from proms gone by are photos of birthday parties, news clippings of school activities, and oddly dissonant and disturbing, the programs for two separate funerals. In the last year, Haley has lost two close girlfriends in vehicular accidents.

The collage in Haley’s bedroom is a gestalt, a set of things that, taken as a whole, amounts to more than the sum of its parts. Gestalt psychology emphasizes the whole person, just as Haley wants her bulletin board to reflect her whole life. Gestalt is a useful term in fiction, too, where it helps describe how writers can create fictional bulletin boards, a collage of parts that exist both independently and as elements of a larger entity.
To describe "Love Child," I offer another metaphor, associated with women and with crafts. I imagine the story as a crazy quilt, a whole fiction created from scenic scraps. In the process of writing my novel-in-stories, I have often succumbed to self-doubt, stopping along the way to revise and polish particular scenes and vignettes. Inevitably, as the book grew and changed, a number of these scenes went by the wayside. While richly illustrative of Sophie's life, they no longer fit into the larger scheme of the book, nor were they stories themselves. They were, instead, scraps I wanted to save.

Writers of crazy-quilt stories must concern themselves with both the pieces and the whole; therefore, they often call attention to the parts by giving each a separate title or a number. Nearly always, these parts are separated by blank space.

The quilt metaphor also serves us because a quilter assembles a number of scraps, arranges them into a pleasing pattern, and then, in the case of a crazy quilt, she embroiders along the edges. The colorful and crazy stitches add color and interest, but, more importantly, they unify and help to create a durable surface. In the case of "Love Child," the stitches are a series of brief allusions, one of which is outlined in the sidebar.

In Whitney Otto's How to Make an American Quilt, a novel that reflects the collage approach, she writes that a crazy quilt is "comprised of remnants of material in numerous textures, colors...the stitched-together pieces are of all sizes and shapes. This is the pattern with the least amount of discipline and the greatest measure of emotion." (Emphasis mine.) "Love Child" is such an object, existing only because its author lacked discipline. I hope I've learned something useful from my folly that I'll carry with me when my project is finally done.

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BEFORE AND AFTER

**Stitching a story together

**MY STORY "Love Child"
is composed of three discrete sections with different protagonists and settings, but it is unified by an omniscient point of view and an overriding issue: teenage turbulence. In the first section, Sophie's high school English teacher invites her to read her assignment, a poem about love—with disastrous results. In the second section, a single mother, Laurel, borrows a friend's baby to teach her son, Will, an object lesson—with disastrous results. (Will is Sophie's boyfriend.) In the final section, Sophie's mother has a heart-to-heart talk with her daughter.

To create coherence and foster unity, I embroidered along the borders of each section, sewing them loosely together. To begin with, I numbered the sections. In Section #2, I alluded to #1; then, in #3, I alluded to both #1 and #2.

**Problem

Here's a segment from a draft of Section #2 in which we see Laurel going to great lengths to teach her son a sex education lesson: Babies are a lot of work. But this "scrap" needs to be "stitched" to the one that precedes it, Sophie's encounter with her teacher.

"Damn door," Laurel yells, giving it a swift kick to jar the mechanism loose, thereby unnerving the baby, who begins to shriek as Laurel lifts her. In her unhappiness, Dawn seems both heavier and more fragile, but it doesn't take long for her wails to become intermittent...

Clutching a fistful of golden hair, the baby stares up at Laurel with a sad sort of recognition. This is the woman who disappointed her, who startled her, who's been clutching her for several minutes now without noticing that her diaper is soaked through. Laurel returns Dawn's gaze, but her thoughts are of a ghost baby, her own son's child, little more than a fertilized egg at the moment, but gathering strength and force as each day passes.

**Solution

In the following italicized section, I've done some "stitching" to clarify the reason for Laurel's torment and to refer to the previous section.

The baby seems heavier when she's unhappy, or perhaps it's only her rigid limbs that make handling her so awkward. Laurel is tempted to cry right along with her. It would be easy to simply hunch in the backseat and sob.

The mess at Valley High School, Sophie's poem and the teacher who slapped her, well, that was amusing at first. But then Laurel read the poem—Will left it on his bedside table—and she realized the awful significance of it all. Sophie is pregnant, though no one seems to be registering that fact. They're all so busy tut-tutting over the four-letter word or that poor teacher who may lose her job over it. Not Laurel. Laurel isn't the sort to sob. Instead, she ducks out of the car with the baby in her arms and stands in the driveway, rocking little Dawn into silence.

—Sharon Oard Warner