Section 2

Those Words Just Jumped Out at Me

Reading inspires creative teaching

Episodic Fiction: Another Way to Tell a Story

Pen Campbell and Dan Holt

This article was written by Pen Campbell and Dan Holt about their experiences teaching high school in St. Joseph, Michigan. The article was originally published in the summer 2001 issue of The Quarterly.

Until I encountered John O'Brien's story "Birds," my fiction writing left much to be desired. My tedious and mechanical stories suffered from weak plots, weaker characters, and general verbal dysentery.

I wanted to create seamless movies with my short fiction, but the moments of narrative magic in my work seemed to be floating in a sea of words that trivialized the impact of my stories. That was before O'Brien showed me the way. In "Birds," he tells the story of a man who learned through a lifetime of interaction with birds not to mistreat animals. The episodic approach the story takes gives the reader images but leaves out the narrative bridges, allowing us to connect the dots. O'Brien produced a wonderful mosaic that gave a clear and poignant picture of a changed man. I knew immediately that I had found a fiction approach that would work for me.

I found that by isolating the images and story high points and by forming these into vignettes and linking these episodes with a common theme, my stories became vibrant, sparse, and poetic. My prose suddenly became powerful instead of weak because I squeezed all the excess out of

it. Putting my stories into episodes was like panning for gold, sloshing the creek water about, eliminating everything but the nuggets.

I've used this approach to teaching fiction writing for twenty years—first with my high school classes and now with my college classes—all with continuing excellent results. My college writing students, who have had exactly the same problems with fiction writing that I have had, like the episodic approach as much as I do. Students who are intimidated by constructing the classical story find the episodic form more doable because they can write it in pieces. Each scene is an episode, another step toward a finished story.

This article lays out the specifics of how I, as well as my colleague Pen Campbell, a high school teacher, make use of episodic fiction as a teaching strategy.

~ *Dan Holt, 2002*

As Dan states above, "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 him to be more like a slide show or even a music video. Separate episodes were individual images juxtaposed, to be woven together by the reader into a story. He found the form intriguing and 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," presented on pages 77-83. 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, editor of the *Great Lakes Review*, who promptly published it in that journal.

Since his introduction to episodic fiction, Holt has introduced many others in turn 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 Projects State Network.

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 is 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 episodes 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.

TEN STORIES ABOUT COYOTES I NEVER TOLD YOU

BY DAN HOLT

1. THE WHITE FENCE

When our marriage broke up, I went home and painted the entire corral. I don'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.

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.

II. MORNING RIDE

There were partridges near the barn, and it was still cold enough that I could see my breath. I kneed 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.

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. (*See page 84.*)

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.

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 ages 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 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.

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.

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 grow 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.

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.

"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. (*See page 87.*) 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 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

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?"

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 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 presenting her research as reality through the eyes of a character, she has clearly demonstrated her new knowledge of the topic. And isn't that, after all, why we research—to understand something we didn't understand before?

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.

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."

IN THE END, IT'S STILL STORYTELLING

Getting started on episodic fiction is a little like being pregnant. Suddenly, you look around, and, although you never thought about it at all 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 the nonlinear 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.

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.