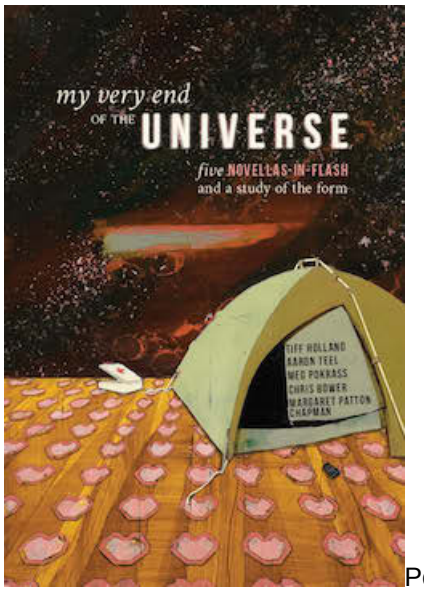
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Essay by Meg Pokrass

Conjuring a Whole Narrative from Scraps

Editor's Note: We're pleased to reprint this essay from *My Very End of the Universe: Five Novellas in Flash and a Study of the Form* (Rose Metal Press, 2014). "Flash novella" may sound like an oxymoron, but Meg Pokrass and other writers in this anthology make clear why a confounding genre can have such impact. It offers "A Brief Crack of Light" (the title of Aaron Teel's craft essay) or "A Truth Deeper than the Truth" (Chris Bowers).



Pokrass opens her essay in the volume ("Breaking the Pattern to Make a Pattern: Conjuring a Whole Narrative from Scraps") with a quote from—of all non-flash books—Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*:

> There is no greatness where there is not simplicity, goodness, and truth.

As a companion piece in the TW Reading Series, we've also excerpted three "scraps" from *Here, Where We Live*, Pokrass's flash novella in the anthology: "Sparkly Plans, Grease, and Luck." [5]

For more about her flash novella and the others in this volume, see the Rose Metal Press page for *My Very End of the Universe.* [6]

If you ask an artist who creates crazy quilts how they come up with their designs, that artist will likely tell you that each finished project originates from an emotional place. Each quilt is different because it is made of many found

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scraps and pieces of cloth in different sizes with no regular color or pattern—the sleeves of an old work shirt, perhaps, or the skirt of a wedding dress. Similarly, the writing of a novella-in-flash involves working with flash fiction fragments and stories by linking them together to form a layered, narrative arc. Working in both art forms demands an improvisational spirit regarding the creation of both content and structure. A novella-in-flash writer and a crazy quilt artist both become familiar with navigating incompletion and juxtaposition.



Both art forms involve delving into the most unlikely places and finding pieces which, when put together, create an untraditional whole. The aim of a novella-in-flash is to create chapters that can stand alone as individual stories, while at the same time moving the narrative toward the larger, overall story arc. Just as a crazy quilt artist takes the time to prepare and stitch each patch, the flash pieces are written and polished as independent stories.

My novella-in-flash *Here, Where We Live* was born out of many of my poems and stories from the last twenty years. I conceptualized the storyline by beginning with older pieces that had been collecting dust in my metaphorical scrap bag. I had written stories and poems over the years involving a teenage girl and her mother—stories that felt in some way connected. It excited me that while searching for and gathering up my old writings, new ideas began to form in my mind about the narrative arc for *Here, Where We Live* and the significant characters began to take shape. As I stitched the stories together, the juxtapositions brought with them fresh energy and new meaning.

Beginning with the two female characters from my older stories, my process for piecing together the structure for *Here, Where We Live* was a little unusual. I had written another novella-in-flash the year before and ultimately decided the entire ending of that book didn't work for that particular narrative. But the ending worked in other ways and became the inspiration point for building *Here, Where We Live*. I began working my way forward from that lost ending. Finding my narrative arc involved imagining what might happen when so much goes wrong in a young person's life; exploring how she might cope with various stresses and joys; and, especially, how she might contain within herself the contrasting qualities of wisdom—born of hardship—and the stubborn immaturity of a teenager.

While writing *Here, Where We Live,* I looked to many of my older fragments and poems to guide me. A crazy quilt may be made of scraps of silk, velvet, wool, cotton, and linen. Bits of a family wedding suit might be sewn next to a patch of fabric from a childhood toy, and both may be next to a just-discovered piece of fabric. Similarly, writing the novella-in-flash involved integrating preexisting flashes and giving them a home surrounded by new neighbors—an entirely unexpected new order that ends up feeling just right.

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If you look at the Beatles's album *Abbey Road*, for example, and notice the order of the songs, you'll discover how each song as been placed before or after the others to create a unique overall effect. With *Abbey Road*, considered by many critics to be one of the best rock albums ever created, each song is individually stunning. Yet, what brings the listener to her knees is the way "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" comes right before "Here Comes the Sun," which is followed by "Because," and on and on. The brilliance is in the way each song is placed—sad followed by happy, followed by funny, followed by strange. You never really know what is coming around the bend, and even when you do know, it is surprising again, retaining—because of its careful ordering—the ability to strike the listener anew. Like songs in an album, each chapter of the novella-in-flash must feel whole and strong so as to enhance the overall feeling and to bear up under repeated readings and rereadings.



Two books that reward this kind of sustained and repeated attention and that influenced my love for this form were written before the term "flash fiction" existed: *Mrs. Bridge* (1959) and *Mr. Bridge* (1969) by Evan S. Connell. A master at showing the reader just enough, Connell wrote linked vignettes in both of these novels, which allows the reader a window into the lives of his characters. Connell's vignettes, though seemingly uneventful, are a mixture of poignancy and unflinching sadness. At the end of each book, one is left with a strong feeling of having known his characters as though one had lived with them, with the order of the stories contributing heavily to that intimate character encounter.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also mention a film that I admire, one that creates the feeling of an entire life, by showing the audience just a sliver. *Cléo from 5 to 7* is a French film made in 1962 by Agnès Varda. The movie focuses on an anxious hour-and-a-half in the life of a woman as it plays out in real time while she waits to hear the results of a medical test that will possibly confirm a diagnosis of cancer. Varda shows the audience Cléo's character by focusing on tiny actions and details. As with effective flash fiction, it is the details that haunt the viewer: We see Cléo walking past shop windows and looking at her reflection in the glass; we see her waiting for a visit from her lover, as if for the first time. We see her driving with a girlfriend and trying to feel carefree, the way she felt before she knew she might have a terminal illness. This brief and compact film addresses existentialism, mortality, the nature of despair, and what it is to lead a meaningful life, and it proves that a work of art does not need to be long to leave the audience contemplating it for a long time after.

To return to the crazy quilt analogy, these means of compressed and fragmentary, almost scrap-like composition remind both the author and reader that life unfolds in minutes, hours, and days; in weeks and years. Some moments are colorful and brilliant, many are normal or even drab, and others are sad and desperate and misshapen. We humans frequently have very little perspective on our own stories while we are living them. The novella-in-flash, divided

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into tiny bits of action, mirrors life this way. I do not believe that life as it is being lived has a “narrative arc”—and if it does, it does not become clear until a person is gone.

Bearing this in mind, each time I experimented with the order of this odd assortment of chapters in *Here, Where We Live*, it felt as though the novella could easily take an entirely new direction. This was tricky. My hardest decisions involved defining what felt true and consistent with the characters I was creating. Only after rearranging the order again and again could I define a desirable narrative arc. Next, it was time to write what felt as though it were missing. This was like writing connective tissue—or seams to hold the patchwork narrative together.



Unique to this form, the novella-in-flash contains frequent pauses when chapters end, with each story chapter being under a thousand words. I’ve come to see these spaces as where the reader takes a breath, which creates a rhythmic reading experience overall. I enjoyed exploring how breathlessly close to ruin both daughter and mother become in this novella-in-flash. I wanted, as the writer, to have them relive the same issues and themes again and again with sporadic progress, like gasping for breath.

Another book that fostered my desire to attempt my own novella-in-flash is *Why Did I Ever* (2001) by Mary Robison, whose stunning depictions of messy lives are rendered imaginatively by working with tiny fragments assembled together that highlight the way ends and beginnings of chapters can be used to create rhythmic gaps like breathing. Robison wrote *Why Did I Ever* on hundreds of note cards over a long period of time. Some scenes or chapters are only one sentence long, whereas others are a few pages. Robison’s white spaces are structurally significant, as they are with my own novella-in-flash, where there are frequent pauses between chapters in which the reader takes a breath and makes the leap from one story to the next, following the threads of narrative mapped out by the author.

After all the patchwork pieces have been found, assembled and reassembled, sewn together with equal parts seams and gaps, only then does the larger quilt or narrative become clear. As the writer, now I can stand back from *Here, Where We Live* and see exactly where each fragment belonged and how each one contributes to the larger work. And my hope is that the reader will feel equally intrigued when reading the novella—wrapped up in a narrative made of overlaid, stitched-together stories.

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Meg Pokrass is the author of *Damn Sure Right* (Press 53, 2011) and *Bird Envy* (Printed on Paige, 2014). Her flash fiction appears in 200 literary journals including *Green Mountains Review, Five Points, McSweeney's,* and *Flash Fiction International* (Norton, 2015).

Meg is currently cowriting humor with Bobbie Ann Mason and was recently commissioned to write an original film with veteran screenwriter Graham Gordy. She serves as associate editor for Rick Barthelme's *New World Writing* and lives in San Francisco with a dog and two cats.

Find out more at Meg Pokrass's website [10].

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[10] http://megpokrass.com/

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