

### Conceptual Collections Can Bridge the Aesthetic Gap between Story and Novel

Typically, the instructor of a fiction writing class will use some sort of anthology of stories as models for the budding spinners of yarns. These texts will often have chapters that focus on a specific component (e.g., characterization) followed by works to use as illustrations (e.g., “Bartleby the Scrivener”). There is no question that this approach, which makes use of stand-alone stories, has instructional value. The most serious student writers know, however, that they are on a path that should ultimately lead to a longer work; nearly all fiction writers aspire to the novel. From a pedagogical standpoint, though, a link is missing. That is, students study stand-alone stories, and they study novels—but they don’t study how that aesthetic gap is bridged. There is virtually no instructional time allotted to the metamorphosis from short-story writer to novelist. It’s not uncommon for young writers to be encouraged to write novel chapters in fiction workshops, but the “how to” is frequently missing from the equation.

An effective way to try to bridge this gap is by using a story collection that is designed by its author as a *conceptual* novel; in essence, such a collection features stories that can stand alone but that also work together in a coordinated narrative arc. Viewed together, these collected stories develop themes, imagery, characterization, and so forth in ways similar to a full-fledged novel while underscoring the function of these elements in the individual pieces. One such collection is Adam Braver’s *Mr. Lincoln’s Wars* (2003), which purports to be a novel in thirteen stories. All the pieces involve Abraham Lincoln, either directly or indirectly, and tend to take place during the final days of the Civil War.

Discussing his creative process, Braver said, “[A]s a new idea developed or new way of thinking about things developed, I may have started to go back to other stories and included that level of consciousness . . . [T]here was more of a collective consciousness that was going on between the stories and that was evolving as I was writing them” (p. 29, *Quiddity* international literary journal, fall/winter 2008/09). He added, “[E]ven though they are short stories, collected or clustered, they are constituting a novel: There is a story that’s ultimately being told that’s not dependent on action, reaction, action, reaction . . . but a thematic arc that goes all the way through” (pp. 30-31)\*.

In a conceptual novel like *Mr. Lincoln’s Wars*, creative writing students see how themes evolve over narrative time, how symbolic images transform, how the dynamics between characters become more complicated, and so forth—all within the construct of the short story, a form with which they have hands-on experience. In sum, by studying the aesthetic workings of a conceptual novel, the leap from independent short story to unified novel may not seem so far . . . nor so mystical.

Of course, Braver’s work is just one example. Other such collections include Susan Minot’s *Monkeys* (1986), and Michael Chabon’s *A Model World and Other Stories* (1991). In both these collections, the stories feature the same cast of characters operating in a fairly confined geographic space and time; yet each story can stand on its own (and was published independently).

\* Audio of Adam Braver’s interview is available at <<http://www.sci.edu/quiddity/issue01-2/braver.html#>> — listen to the nodes for questions 4 and 5 in particular.