

On Crafting Stories without Commas: Today's Artisanal Writers

written by Guest Contributor | October 26, 2020



scarf by Amy Sarig King

The question before us is bread. The fluff of the flour and the crystals of salt. The warm-water yeast and the well into which she pours it. Her hands are sticky with the wet, the dry, the tepid, the cool, the soft, the just-barely crystals, and now the dough is hers to halve\ fold\ palm, simple as it is, wordless and extricating. When she walks away and then comes back, the dough has risen without her, a story shaping itself.

This cottage loaf is Virginia Woolf's specialty—one small round atop a larger one, her long fingers piercing, top to bottom, to bind them, a knife scoring the edges. She starts the bake when the oven is cold, knobbing the heat on after the risen dough is safe in its chamber. It's best for the crust this way. Best for her.

The art of baking is the art of living, pleasingly fugacious. The bread is Woolf's to give away, and it won't hurt when it's gone. Or it's hers to eat, and it's delicious.

Also: The bread is not words. The bread is a story involving no comma, an enterprise that rises up from muscle, sequence, chemistry, received traditions and harmless risks. There will not be, at the end of it, literary accolades, literary sales, an advanced literary legacy. There will, instead, be bread, and that is the point. The liberation and the salve.

For award-winning essayist and fiction writer [Susan Tekulve](#), the craft isn't bread but jewelry—beaded, filigreed earrings or silver-swishing pendants that she customizes according to the souls of those she knows. Tekulve's jewelry-making practice began during her mother's long illness and continued on in the aftermath of her passing—a form of meditation, she says, a “nonverbal way of creating and storytelling, a form of joy, an assertion of strength and



personality, an order born of chaos.”

Her pieces, now worn by her poet and writer friends across the country, are meant, she says, as talismans, their gemstones “culled from the earth and shaped by water and time.” Her jewelry serves as a link between maker and recipient. Her jewelry is the dialogue.

Sometimes, as with bestselling memoirist [Katrina Kenison](#), the craft connects the crafter both to childhood and to the essential, present now. “I used to do embroidery as a girl,” she says, “and without really even meaning to, I found my way back to it this summer, beginning with a Jessie Chorley template from a little London shop I fell in love with. Most evenings I would retreat to the screened porch glider, away from the news, listening to the night sounds while I stitched away, as if every stitch somehow mended a frayed nerve. It’s turned out to be the most soothing, compelling thing, utterly surprising to me, really. And now I follow the slow stitchers on Instagram and have discovered a whole world of kindred spirits, all of us sewing (healing?) something.”



Kenison cherishes the privacy of stitching, the solitude. She takes comfort, she says, in her “beginner’s mind, the freedom of not knowing what I’m doing, of not needing mastery but simply time and quiet.”

Artisanal writers need tools--physical tools that are also metaphorical tools--needle, cloth, flame, loom, frame, varnish. Artisanal writers value process as both an end to a means and a philosophy. The Printz Award-winning young adult/middle grade author [Amy Sarig King](#) weaves--soft scarves of vibrant hues, bright fabrics bound by hands seeking to hold--and then yield--comfort. There is something, she says, about hand-spun, hand-dyed complex yarn, something "that resembles the truth."

King continues: "Warping a loom is one of the most satisfying feelings there is. A loom's reed determines the tightness of a weave. Hemstitching and wet finishing are how you end the process. All of these relate to writing for me. Wet finishing is the most connected--it's very scary, releases extra dye, puts the project at risk, but without it, the project is a series of threads, and not fabric. Tool needed: courage."



Courage. Because the outcome is uncertain. Because the materials--and not the writer--speak. Because something might break or oversaturate and this kind of not knowing is different from a writer's not knowing. It plays out in real time with sublime tangibility. Craft can have a mind of its own.

Consider the bees hiving in near proximity to award-winning picture book writer and editor, [Amy Novesky](#). She harvests and jars and shares her honey with family and friends--a craft she undertakes despite the fact that she is



deeply allergic to bee stings.

Novesky watches the bees come and go. Language arrives not as sentences but as singular words: Sunshine. Warmth. Buzz. Box. Geometry. Crush. Smoke. Hot knife. Abundance. Share. The experience is mesmerizing, she says--those bees

with “their little legs heavy-laden with golden pollen.” The honey is nourishing. And then there is this, about fear:

“Working with bees helps me practice facing my fears, learning to be present with it, face it, literally handle it... It’s about staying calm, accepting humility, letting go, listening.”

When we make some thing we also make ourselves. Our vocabulary changes, our rhythms, our habits, our preferences and obsessions. Young adult author, language teacher, and songwriter, [Carrie Gordon](#) makes salvage art—repurposed, recrafted furniture that tell redemption stories.



“The pieces I make allow me to tell stories about living bold and out loud, about being flawed and beautiful (as opposed to being flawed but beautiful),” she says. “These are stories of second or third chances at redemption, ideas which reflect strongly in the lives of the characters I write about. And they closely mirror my own experience as someone with a debilitating spine injury from a car accident.”

Gordon speaks of renewal and about the no actual “away” in our throw-away society. She hammers, glues, paints, gilds to honor objects with “renewed purpose.”

Time spent building a harp leg bench out of component pieces is reclamation time. Time spent watching a bee search for, transport, transfer, transform mere dust into honey is time spent learning and relearning the art of gathering. Time spent warping a loom, threading a needle, adding a tassel to a chain is time spent imagining the person who will someday hold new beauty in their hands. A gentleness of mind sets in. Acceptance. And in the midst of all that, perhaps, a different kind of future, written story.

“I weave slowly and enjoy pulling the threads carefully,” King says. “My writing process, often too fast for me to keep up, is slowing to match this. The softness of the fiber reminds me to explore softer stories sometime soon. That’s very literal, but it’s real. Life should maybe feel like silk some days.”

So that the question before us may be a loom. It may be water-colored bookmarks, a lump of deep red clay, a yet-undecorated cake, a bonsai waiting to be pruned, an empty Ikebana vase, a frame of honeycombs, a tapestry of

threads, a pair of knitted mittens. The question before us may be bread. The question may be a story or the story, but within the art that these writers make there is proof of the living moment, lived. Proof that needs no words.

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