

## THE *MY NAME IS EARL* APPROACH TO NOVEL WRITING

by Jason Kapcala

Often, novel workshops and lectures focus on linear design—a long-form unidirectional structure that moves in a straight line from opening to conclusion. This approach to novel writing is predicated on traditional notions of narrative: a lead character starts with a desire or goal, embarks on a quest to attain or achieve that desire or goal, and is met with a series of escalating challenges along the way, each of which she knocks down like dominoes in her path, until she reaches her climactic finale. Our lead may ultimately succeed or fail, but either way, she is changed by her experience, made more complex through her struggles. It's an effective approach to novel writing, but not the only approach. The “episodic novel” structure offers us an alternative that is less rigidly dependent on the south-to-north-to-south-again shape of the Freytag's triangle.

Of course, we need look no further than the television sitcom *My Name is Earl* to see this approach in action.

The premise of *My Name is Earl* is simple. Earl J. Hickey is a petty criminal who cares only about himself, and he is not above using, manipulating, or deceiving others to get what he wants, especially when he's drunk. One day, Earl purchases a lottery ticket and ends up winning \$100,000. This is the most money Earl has ever seen in his life, and in his excitement and haste, he runs across the street and is struck by a car, at which point the winning lottery ticket is swept away on a gust of wind and is lost.

In the hospital, under the influence of morphine, Earl learns about the principle of causality we refer to as “karma” while watching an episode of *Last Call with Carson Daly*. He comes to believe that losing the lottery ticket and being hospitalized is karmic retribution for all the bad things he has done. In fact, Earl believes that this may only be the beginning. Fearing for his life, he makes a list of his misdeeds—every bad thing he has ever done, every person he has ever wronged—and he makes a commitment to penance. Upon finishing his first good deed (probably ever), Earl finds the missing lottery ticket and interprets this as a sign: karma is now rewarding him for doing the right thing. So Earl, with the (sometimes-reluctant) help of his friends, continues to use his newfound wealth to perform more good deeds—each subsequent episode offering Earl another chance to scratch an item off his list of transgressions.

This establishing shot is the first important element in the episodic novel. A premise is set up in chapter one, a motif around which the remainder of the narrative will revolve. This premise is similar to Earl's to-do list, and it may be defined explicitly (“The ten people I have to apologize to before I die”; “the five enemies I need to get my revenge on”) or ambiguously (“I must make amends for all of my wrong-doings”; “I must go on as many first dates as I possibly can”). In either case, the premise defines the nature of the events that the protagonist will have to undertake before reaching the end of the novel. What separates this approach from the traditional

linear approach is the autonomy of each event or episode—each item on the list carries equal weight and no one item is dependent on another. They do not build on one another in a serial cause-effect manner. They are not tied to sequence.

This structure is similar to what author Madison Smartt-Bell refers to in *Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft, and Form*, when he talks about Modular Design: “Modular design replaces the domino theory of narrative with other principles, which have less to do with motion (the story as a process) and more to do with overall shapeliness (the story as a fixed geometric form).” The application of this modular structure to novel writing should be fairly obvious—if you establish a premise like Earl’s list, you’ll never get lost. Each chapter deals with a different plot episode. Not sure what should happen next? Go back to the premise.

Of course, on the sitcom, Earl’s list of misdeeds is filled with ridiculous and zany mistakes—the kinds of trouble that only someone like Earl could cause: faked my own death to get out of a relationship, made fun of people with accents, stole beer from a golfer, stole a hot dog cart, never paid taxes, teased a bearded girl, made a lady think I was God—his list goes on. It’s a charming and humorous premise, brilliant in its simplicity, solid in its shape, generative in its potential—after all, we never get to see Earl’s list, and so there is no limit to the number of past transgressions that he may have to atone for, no limit to the number of characters he may have to revisit, each crazier than the last. On this premise, the show could literally have run forever if it had to. (It didn’t—*My Name is Earl* lasted four seasons and ended on a cliff-hanger.)

Similarly, the episodic novel writes to its internal structure. The author may tack as many individual episodes as he or she wants onto the plot. When the number of episodes is exhausted, the novel ends. This does not mean that the events are haphazard or arbitrary, however. In an episodic novel, the characters should not simply bumble their way from one anecdote to the next

without larger purpose or cohesiveness. As viewers, we remain willing to invest in Earl's quest, despite its naivety and his simplistic understanding of karma, only because we see value in his mission. Sure, we may not believe in karma, but we *do* believe that we are often the source of our own problems, and that good deeds frequently come back to us in positive ways. These themes undercut what could otherwise feel repetitive or halting about this structure.

Ultimately, there is direction. As with a linear plot, the lead character of an episodic novel will either reach her goal by completing the mosaic she has been tasked with creating, or she will fail to reach her goal. Either way, when the list is done and the premise is exhausted, she will find herself changed by the experience. This resonance may be accomplished in a closing chapter that bookends the novel so that its conclusion doesn't feel abrupt or unsatisfying. Had *My Name is Earl* ended on its own terms, it almost certainly would have seen Earl finish his list in the very last episode. The result of that would have been interesting. Would he be left satisfied or empty? Would he make another list? There's no way to know.

According to the show's creator, Greg Garcia, the show would have ended with evidence of Earl's positive impact on the world: "I always had an ending to Earl, and I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to see it happen. . . . He runs into someone who had a list of their own, and Earl was on it. They needed to make up for something bad they had done to Earl. He asks them where they got the idea of making a list, and they tell him that someone came to them with a list, and that person got the idea from someone else. Earl eventually realizes that his list started a chain reaction of people with lists and that he's finally put more good into the world than bad. So, at that point, he was going to tear up his list and go live his life. Walk into the sunset a free man. With good karma."

I am currently using this episodic structure to write a novel tentatively titled *The Mourning Afters*. In this story, a failed rock singer Kev Cassidy returns home to the town of Emberland, Pennsylvania, for the funeral of a former bandmate. Kev abruptly left for California ten years ago in an ill-fated bid to become a rock star, and this is the first time he has returned to Emberland or spoken with any of the former bandmates he unceremoniously left behind. The plot hinges on Kev's need to make amends with those he has hurt (a decision he arrives at after God—as played by Aerosmith's Steven Tyler—speaks to him in a dream). The equation is simple: number of bandmates = number of episodes. I just have to figure out, in turn, what atoning gesture each bandmate is looking for.

Scratch that—Kev has to figure it out.

As with Earl Hickey and his unfinished story, I don't know what will happen once Kev has attained forgiveness from the last of his bandmates—I haven't gotten that far yet—but I will be excited to find out. What I do know, at this point, is that if I ever get lost, I have a built-in structure that will help get me pointed back in the right direction, while still allowing me the kind of freedom from pre-destination that every novel needs.