



Bridging the gap between magic and realism

How a writer made her leaps seem natural

WHEN I WROTE stories set in the dying river town where my Italian immigrant family had found work in the steel mill some years before its decline, I grounded them in a backdrop of economic struggle: one store after another closing, and people losing their jobs, waiting and wondering how to move beyond. As a child, I used to peek into the vacant storefront of a business-supply place to see if the numbers on an adding machine's paper roll had miraculously changed, or if an old Coke machine on its side had somehow stood upright.

But Pittsburgh is a city of rivers and bridges. In my mind, I countered the lifelessness in this economically depressed area by thinking about the golden spans and the flow of the river, the places the current could take my imagination. I needed this escape growing up and figured the characters in my stories did, too, with the stress of their lives. While incorporating dreams and magical leaps was a given, the question was how to make them grow naturally out of my stories rather than seem tacked on.

How could I find a believable way to free my characters from their restrictions—uniform, time clock, layoffs, despair—even for a moment in a day-dream or folktale or bend in the story that creates some surprise, an openness to possibility despite the improbability?

My writing task was to construct bridges between everyday life in a dying river town and those transcending moments in my stories that are filled with life and hope. I knew I couldn't just pull words out of a hat that would

instantly link the two worlds: “abracadabra.” Rather, the magic had to be earned. And if I crafted structurally sound transitions in my narrative, I could make believers out of my characters. They'd make the leap without question or doubt, and readers would follow.

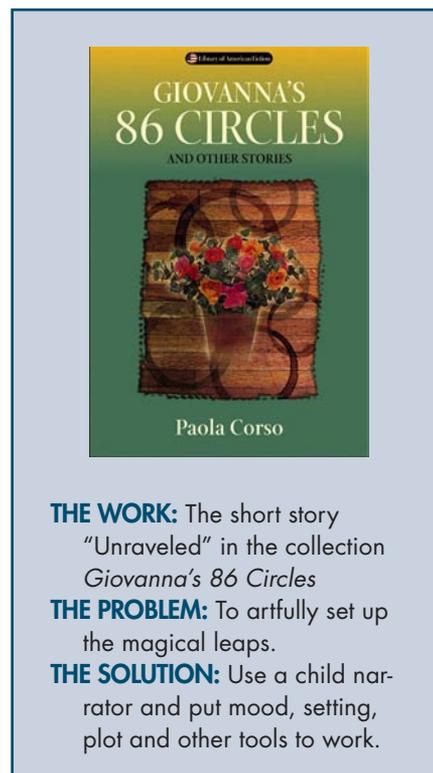
“Unraveled,” a story in my collection *Giovanna's 86 Circles*, posed my biggest challenge because the gap between realism and magic was the widest. In this story, set in post-industrial Pittsburgh, “an old woman [Mrs. Natoli] knits her hopes into the miracle of a grandchild,” in the words of Tamara Kaye Sellman,

writing in *Margin*. My narrator, a 10-year-old girl, wrestles with the facts of life as she watches her neighbor, Mrs. Natoli's daughter, Rosetta, struggle to get pregnant, while her teenage sister finds it all too easy. At the end, the narrator follows a knitter's ball of yarn to the river and finds a baby there.

I laid the foundation for my bridge between realism and magic in a number of ways. First, I used a younger narrator who views her world with open eyes. At the start, she says, “Why Mrs. Natoli knitted in the cellar, poking away with those needles just to let it unravel, was beyond me.” This observant girl tells the story with a sense of curiosity and an awareness that she can't explain why things happen but simply that they do.

Another way I set up the magical leaps was through mood and setting. The narrator spends time at Mrs. Natoli's cellar to watch her knit and unravel a gown for Rosetta, who lies on the couch with tea bags over her eyes, hoping she's pregnant. She sees that Mrs. Natoli, Rosetta and son-in-law Harold rarely leave the house since none has work. We learn that Harold, who conducts experiments in the bathroom wearing goggles, calls himself a science teacher, but that he was a milkman until he smashed the delivery truck. But despite this family's immobility, the narrator is hypnotized by Mrs. Natoli's knitting: “I kept watching her blue ball of yarn spin slowly on the cement floor, a globe that was all ocean and no continents.”

The cellar is not just described as a dank, dark place. The narrator would



much rather be there than playing out in the sun. What makes it so special?

I went back to the basement where the walls seemed to expand, making room for Mrs. Natoli's knitting. I swore I could hear them breathing but tried to tell myself it must have been the wind, though there wasn't a breeze strong enough to budge a blade of grass outside. It made me think that something could grow in there.

And when Mrs. Natoli opens the cellar doors one day to let the sun in, the narrator's hunches are proved right.

My eyes darted through the blackness. I saw a wad of blue wires flowing like veins along beams on the ceiling. Rosetta's organ, which pumped out music loud enough to circulate through the whole house, was curved and muscular. Clothespins on a droopy line hung like discs on a spinal cord. And the angora hairs on a blanket grew long enough to run a comb through.

To help set up the magic at the end, I played Harold's scientific osmosis experiments against the razzle-dazzle of Mrs. Natoli hurrying along her needles because Rosetta is pregnant. Here the narrator pictures her adept neighbor performing knitting stunts like a magician who makes rows suddenly appear or disappear. Her assistants, Rosetta and Harold, blindfold her with tea bags and goggles and hand her tiny needles. They handcuff Mrs. Natoli, stuff her in a hamper and spin it around. When they open it, she's wearing a pair of mittens she knitted with the handcuffs still on.

I take this vision one step further to foreshadow how a ball of yarn can travel. The narrator imagines it blowing in the wind and up the roof and chimney. I wanted her to say to herself that if it could somehow roll up in her daydream, then it could easily roll down the hill to the river at story's end. To reinforce the idea that she could find a baby

along the bank, I present its parallel with the Old Testament passage of baby Moses found among the Nile reeds.

I also use plot to present the possibility, no matter how unlikely, that what happens could happen. So before the narrator discovers the newborn, we learn that as much as Rosetta wants to have a baby, the narrator's sister doesn't but accidentally gets pregnant. This sends the sister up the river to a relative's camp to birth the baby and give it up for adoption. More importantly, the narrator recognizes how unfair the situation is for them both and wishes she could do something about it.

One last consideration is the trick used by such masters of magic realism as Gabriel García Márquez, who employs a confident narrative tone that quantifies details so they come across as

fact rather than fiction. I used this technique in the end when the narrator brings the baby back, and Harold immediately weighs and measures it.

These techniques can offer a viable interpretation of truth if organic to the story. I asked myself, "Is this what my character would believe, given who and where she is and what's happened?"

As I wrote the ending, I realized I was never going to give the cynic enough reasons to believe, yet I could give an optimist reason enough not to doubt. And that's really what magic can be anyway. Perhaps not magic at all but a leap of faith in one's belief system.

Paola Corso

Paola Corso's story collection *Giovanna's 86 Circles* was recognized as one of the best of 2005 by *The Montserrat Review* and was a finalist for a John Gardner Fiction Book Award.

WORKOUT

A new paragraph eases the way

Problem

While drafting "Unraveled," I didn't provide enough of a bridge between Mrs. Natoli's cellar, where the narrator leaves to chase the ball of yarn at the end of the story, and the river where she finds the baby. At first, I jumped from one to the other:

The yarn dropped out of her [Mrs. Natoli's] lap and onto the cement floor. I reached to grab it for her, but it rolled out of my reach over to the cellar doors and toward the backyard. Rosetta began spinning around like a ballerina, as though the force of the yarn sent her in a thousand circles as the gown began to unravel. ... Mrs. Natoli pushed me out the door and yelled for me to stop it.

I let it glide through my hand until I reached the end: the belly button of a baby.

Solution

I wrote a paragraph to ease the transition between cellar and river:

... Mrs. Natoli pushed me out the door and yelled for me to stop it.

I followed the trail of blue yarn past the woodshed where it bounced across a bed of gravel then over dried-up rhubarb. My feet twitched with every stone in my sandals as I followed the blue ahead of me until it disappeared in the shadows of tulip trees. When I got closer to the river, the ground began to spring back from under my feet like a sponge. Beads of moisture trimmed everything green. The yarn was warm and damp now. Pulsing with life.

I let it glide through my hand until I reached the end: the belly button of a baby.

—Paola Corso