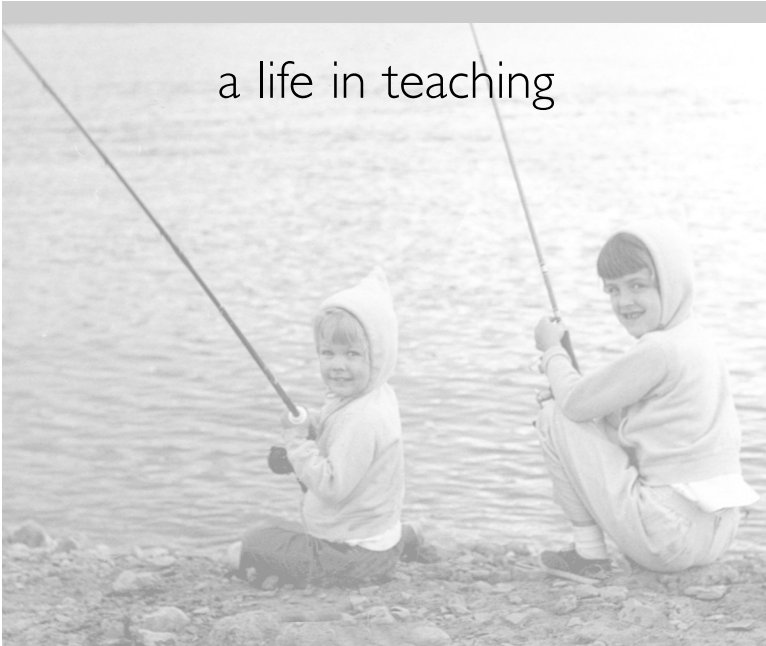




# the greatest catch

a life in teaching



penny kittle

FOREWORD BY TOM ROMANO  
AFTERWORD BY CHRIS CRUTCHER

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# contents

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foreword, by Tom Romano .....	xi
introduction: water and dawn and bait .....	1
beginning .....	5
my first steelie .....	11
Penny .....	17
David .....	22
grace .....	27
stopping at a lunchroom table .....	31
Josh .....	33
Lucas .....	36
our last day of school .....	39
second chance .....	43
just when I thought I knew everything .....	49
Lauren .....	51
no evidence of achievement .....	54
Katelyn .....	58
Emily .....	64
honors: a teacher's reeducation .....	68
Kleenex and marriage and learning to teach .....	76
confessions .....	81
do the math .....	84

a narrative in two voices:	
part I: the traffic cop .....	88
part II: Ken's story, by Ken Fowler .....	92
one large to go, extra cheese .....	94
multigenre marriage .....	99
score .....	105
ending .....	111
afterword by Chris Crutcher .....	115

### Craft Notes

Prewriting .....	119
Using Quick Writes to Find Stories .....	119
Changing Topics .....	120
Watching My World .....	121
Drafting .....	122
The First Try .....	122
Using Narrative Scenes to Develop Structure .....	122
Studying a Mentor Author to Learn About Voice .....	123
Finding the Right Voice for the Piece .....	124
When a Line Sends My Piece in a New Direction .....	125
Staying True to the Story .....	126
Rereading .....	127
Answering a Reader's Questions .....	127
Pondering Different Angles for a Story .....	127
Teachers' Writing Group .....	128
Revision .....	129
Adding Detail .....	129
Compression .....	129
The Use of Metaphor .....	130
Working Through Endings .....	131
Polishing .....	132
Catching Clichés .....	132
An Adverb Hunt .....	133
Reading Out Loud .....	133
Proofreading for Word Proximity .....	134
Letting Go .....	135
acknowledgments .....	137



## foreword

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Once wrote a poem about a friend who died in Vietnam. After I read it aloud to a writing group, one group member said, “That’s what I like to see—write about the tough stuff.”

That’s what Penny Kittle has done in *The Greatest Catch*. The students she writes about—students spanning the K–12 spectrum—you don’t often see on the cover of books about teaching. But these troubled students are among those who have stuck with Penny over the years, the ones who rise to consciousness twenty years after their lives touched hers. Some of these students rejected school values and defied the system they found themselves in. Many of these students were grievously damaged. Some lived with an alcoholic parent or had been abused. Some were bright but stymied by formal educational assessments that arrived at a number but lost the person. Some were coming through slaughter and surviving the only way they could. Some had given up. Some kept slugging. Penny looks at these students as the ones that got away, the ones whose emotional lives were not improved by her care, no matter how hard she pushed, no matter how well she taught. I’ve been there. You have, too.

Despite the obstacles these students faced, despite the things they carried, *The Greatest Catch* is about hope. Many of these students had strength and resilience. And there was Mrs. Kittle meeting them every day in the classroom, putting her heart and mind to work,

seeking to reach every one of them, especially the wounded ones who had constructed walls around themselves, blocking harm, blocking help, blocking hope.

Penny Kittle does this constant reaching out because she knows what the teaching commitment means. Here is a quotation from *The Greatest Catch* that I will place at the top of the syllabus for my undergraduates preparing to teach English:

When you're teaching you're going to see people who cut corners, don't work as hard as they should, or just complain all the time about everything. I believe you've got to do what's right, every single day of your life, even if the rest of the crowd isn't. Teaching is about honor and goodness and mercy. It really is. And no one will be watching you most of the time. You either live up to the calling of the profession or you don't, and most likely no one will ever know but you. But it matters because the kids are counting on you.

I know there are teachers like Penny Kittle all over America. I meet them at writing workshops, presentations, and conferences. I teach them in graduate courses. I work with them as undergraduates before they become teachers. These accomplished teachers and teachers-to-be, though, don't always write their stories of teaching and learning as Penny Kittle has done here. I urge them to do so. I give them plenty of "you oughtas."

"You oughta tell the story of that student."

"You oughta write about that indelible teaching moment."

"That's the first line of a poem you've got there. You oughta finish it."

To aid readers in achieving their "you oughtas," Penny has written "craft notes" for some of the pieces in this volume. She shows how both patience and diligence enable writing to grow. She shows how dramatic scenes can anchor an essay and provide an indispensable structure, "like a life raft in a rolling ocean." Her craft notes, her insight about how to get writing done, will help and inspire you and your students.

Penny knows that writing is about more than spelling and punctuation. It is about more than summarizing and persuading. Writing

is the great tool for developing our intellectual and emotional lives. In telling the story of a high school senior struggling gamely to write about her dying mother, Penny writes, “Writing can help you claw your way through a tragedy. Writing releases pain and often brings hope. Meaning is found. Not answers, but strength to continue.”

In *The Greatest Catch* Penny Kittle has found meaning for her life in teaching, and that gives her strength to continue. She has answers in this book, too, answers that continue to sustain her and compel her to keep reaching. Read Penny’s stories of teaching and learning. Then write your own. I plan to.

—Tom Romano



## my first steelie

---

*Hope burns always in the heart of the fisherman.*

—ZANE GREY

In November the run of fish is legendary in Oregon, and I get anxious to be on the water. I am serious about steelhead. It came from following my father over weathered wood fences through cow pastures at dawn looking for just the right bend in the Wilson River. It came from watching him hook a monster once, fifty-two pounds, and slowly bring her to shore while I stood holding the net. It came from falling in love with a man in college who loved the water as much as I did. I followed him from one elegant spot to the next, but came home empty-handed every time. Somehow it didn't feel that way, though. Time on the water is never wasted time.

Fishing once meant time with my father away from expectations, awkward conversations, and memories of our past. As my education surpassed his, he seemed to pick fights with me, challenging my understanding of local politics or history, leaving me frustrated. On the river he was the undisputed authority, always, and we both breathed easier. He knew the right hook, fly, or line to use depending on the time of year, the rain, or his instincts. I loved the sound of him rooting around in his tan tackle box, a mess of bobbers, weights, flat plastic spools of

colored line, and neon yarn bits. Hooks in tiny plastic cases littered the bottom shelf, tiny capsules of round, grey lead in containers with red twisty tops lay near wire cutters for tangled line, and there was usually a pack of matches, the cover warped from water that inevitably found its way into the box. Dad had a solution to every fishing frustration; he whistled Roger Miller tunes as he tossed things aside.

Fishing is waiting, and although in the rest of my life I'm pretty impatient, I will wait for fish. It is an opportunity to be out in the air, watching the wind in the trees and the ever changing surface of a stream as it gathers in pools or spills around the sides of a rock. You stand in hip waders and feel the tug—the force of all that water against your legs—and you are part of the river, never mind if you catch anything. I've always craved the silence of fishing—the anticipation—the surprise and wonder of a fish swimming by my line and opening its mouth for a taste. In November I hum with that expectation, dreaming of a dark ride down an empty highway in layers of cotton and wool, a Thermos of hot black coffee between my hands.

I can feel fishing in the chill of November, in the clouds that circle my head when I exhale, and in my memories of Jerry. I sometimes think now that fishing saved him, the way it had fed me life when I needed it, but I'm not sure about that. I do know it changed something in both of us.

Jerry had blond, kind of greasy hair that clung below his eyebrows, almost across his tense blue eyes. He was chubby and, I suspect, wore whatever clothes were on the floor from the day before. Jerry was dismissive of adults, uninterested in my conversation. He was in my remedial math class the first hour on that first day of eighth grade. I had naively agreed to leave my fifth-grade classroom behind and take an opening in the upper grades, just to try something new. It was early in my career, but I already loved jumping grade levels like hurdles, feeling yards ahead of my colleagues stuck in place. Jerry, however, was unimpressed from the start. He folded his plump arms across his chest and said with steely conviction, "You can't make me."

Jerry sat bemused in math class and then returned after lunch for remedial English. I was dismayed when he came through my door

again late in the afternoon for homeroom. Someone had ordered up three doses of Jerry a day for me, and I was sure I was allergic. The child who sat doing nothing—no doodling, no spitballs, no talking, and certainly no work—in both math and English, was now going to do nothing in homeroom. How should I play this fish? He didn't move like the others I'd known. I was new to teaching adolescents and I just hadn't accumulated enough stuff in my tackle box yet; I needed more time on the water with a master before they put me out in the river by myself. I asked colleagues about Jerry, but they didn't suggest another lure or more weight on my line—they told me to move on to another fishing hole. They'd been after him for years with no luck.

This was against my nature. Fishermen don't just walk away; they reel in and cast again.

I was friendly, but Jerry ignored me. I approached. He didn't budge. Reel in; snag. I suggested getting started; he smirked. He was fourteen. The school had tried retention already; Jerry was not going to do it. If you tested him, he'd know it all—I was sure of it. There was an intellect below his dull look, but he wouldn't let us see. He'd pick up a pencil and write in miniature letters of perfect grey script an intriguing answer to a question, and I'd think, "Excellent! I've set the hook . . ." but he was either toying with me or just plain bored, because his folded arms returned minutes later.

Our best times were during homeroom, because there was nothing to learn, no questions to be answered, just help if you wanted it and a place to hang out until the final bell rang. Jerry watched me help Trina, with the wild red curls and the spelling deficiency. His eyes followed me when I moved to sit beside his only friend, encouraging him, coaching him, and joking with him. Jerry looked at me when I handed him missing assignment notices from other teachers: little slips of white paper in a pile at his desk, still there after chairs were put up, coats zipped, and students gone, but he silently shook his head when I suggested he get started. Jerry's father said that was just Jerry. He appreciated my interest, but Jerry pretty much did as he pleased; he didn't expect me to change him. Mom had left when the boys were little—before kindergarten—and Jerry had just never had much of an interest in school.

So Jerry and I kept our distance as fishermen space themselves along a bank, close enough to watch, but careful not to get in each other's way. At the end of first quarter Jerry's grade point average was 0.6, his D- in PE keeping him from the cellar. Jerry smirked, then crumpled the report in his right fist, not bothering to aim it for the wastebasket; he let it fall from his hand and roll to the edge of his desk. It felt like my failure as well as his. I was frustrated. With Dad beside me I always felt smarter than the fish; with Jerry I surely wasn't. It was my job to help, so I got a little more aggressive the following week. I pulled up a seat beside him every day to talk. It reminded me of fly casting with my father in the backyard years ago, willing my line to float like his, sending it out again and again and again until darkness forced us inside.

As second quarter began, two things happened at once. Trina started taunting me to match her one-on-one in basketball and I agreed. Homeroom emptied to gather outside in the cool stillness of November, all fourteen of them cheering for Trina as I lunged and darted around her, sinking most of my shots. By the time the buses pulled in I was up by ten. That competitive side has always been a bit of a problem for me; I can be such a jerk when I'm winning. I bugged the bystanders, "Who's next?" and my eyes lit on Jerry. I was talking before I even thought about it, another persistent character flaw of mine.

"Jerry," I grinned.

"I don't play basketball, Ms. Kittle," he said, shaking his head as our eyes locked.

"I know; that's not what I was thinking. We"—I motioned to our homeroom and they closed in around us in a circle—"all know that you're smart. You just won't let anybody see. So I challenge you," and I put my finger out, pointing right at his chest, "to make the honor roll second quarter."

The class roared.

"I have no question in my mind that you can, but there are a lot of people in this school who wouldn't believe it. I want you to: Prove. Them. Wrong." I turned away, sending a jump shot at the hoop, a perfect swish that seemed to seal the deal. Slick maybe, but my insides were churning. Was this the right thing to do?

What he said was, “I don’t care about honor roll,” but what I saw was interest. I had hope. Jerry sauntered off to the school bus and boarded with the rest, taking a seat near the window in the back. I felt an invisible line between us, fragile, but sure.

And then that very next week: fishing class. Big River was right outside our back door and when the principal suggested we pilot elective courses for six weeks I volunteered to teach the kids how to cast. I was bouncing from heel to toe just thinking about it. A colleague with more seniority jumped at my idea, though, and I was left to cover study hall. Yeah, I was disappointed, but I accepted that rookies took the crummy jobs and the older teachers got what they wanted. I went by fishing class frequently, however, peeking in the door hoping someone needed my help. Sitting up front, every single day, eyes on his teacher, was Jerry. Finally we had something to talk about. He brought his favorite flies to show me after school, gradually letting me share my fishing stories and even photographs of my greatest catches. Jerry learned the essentials of fishing quickly, and told me school was finally teaching him something he could use. Our elective courses made all of our work richer, because kids are different on the water or when quietly clicking knitting needles. And so are teachers.

As winter shortened our days, Jerry became more compliant. He brought a new energy to class. He did work during homeroom and the pile of white slips announcing his missing assignments disappeared. Fish on. I hoped he was taking me up on my honor roll challenge, but I didn’t mention it, afraid to put pressure on him, afraid to ruin the casual comfort we had found in talking about silver salmon and the search for the perfect cast. I watched him often that December, and when our eyes met, he smiled. No teeth, but a grin and a softening around his eyes.

I squealed when I held Jerry’s second quarter report card in my hand—his lowest grade was a C in science. We cheered him in homeroom and I promised to make cupcakes in his honor that night. Weeks later at our winter awards assembly the principal recognized Jerry’s rise—the largest grade point jump he’d ever seen—with a nod toward me, his homeroom teacher. Jerry didn’t seem to mind, and perhaps I’d earned a little of the credit, but I don’t believe I was the real magic in what had happened.

I can still see Jerry in a line of students at the front of the stage as the principal leaned into the microphone and then bent over to shake Jerry's hand. Jerry had on a red shirt and jeans, his bangs were still hanging across his eyes, and he looked out at the audience of clapping hands with a smug but cautious pride. I thought his father should see it, but he didn't attend the assembly that day.

When third quarter began, Jerry went back to noncompliance. The grades were not a reward he sought, the things we taught seldom of interest to him. He stopped trying. And it hurt because I knew in the hands of a skilled fisherman he'd probably have come all the way to shore. Jerry failed eighth grade and then ninth. The summer he turned sixteen sealed it. He never returned to school in the fall. I heard he went to work at the paper mill down the road; by now he's probably married with his own children. I wonder sometimes if he's still fishing. I still drool a little when I drive by a bend in the river and see a few scattered fishermen straight and still in the water, their rods in a line against the current, waiting. I slow the car and watch them, tempted to slide along beside them. And yes, I call myself a fisherman, even though these days the closest I get is eating red gummy fish at the movie theatre in town.

Fishing is in my blood for life. Each September I head back to school after Labor Day. I feel the force of all that water rushing by me, standing in my hip waders trying to catch fish. My father's voice reminds me to be patient and learn the ways of the fish first. I try. I even hook a steelhead now and then, holding it on my line just long enough to watch it flash in the sunlight. If I'm lucky, I can keep it on and gradually bring it to shore after a tremendous battle, but too many these days break free and disappear from sight.



## multigenre marriage

---

*It is with true love as it is with ghosts;  
everyone talks about it, but few have seen it.*

—FRANÇOIS DE LA ROUCHEFOUCAULD

*M*y teaching life has always spilled into my personal life. This year love became curriculum, an odd but appropriate match, when the last day before holiday break fell on our twentieth wedding anniversary. It was the romance of a few snowflakes falling on my way to class, reminding me of the night we were married; it was students slurping on candy canes, sitting on top of the desks and not there to learn, obviously. It was me, holding on, counting the minutes until class would be over, and my husband Pat slipping in through the door while I was talking. He stood quietly watching for a bit and then asked if he could have a few minutes with my students. I noticed his leather portfolio in one hand.

“Oh no,” I said. “You’re not going to embarrass me again.”

Emma brightened up, asking, “Are you going to sing?”

He walked to the front as he smiled at her and said, “No, no singing,” but he was taking off his coat. The kids buzzed with possibility; Pat’s serenade on a previous anniversary was well known. He looked at me. “I just need an overhead projector.”

“Sorry, this room doesn’t have one,” I said. I felt a little sorry and a little relieved.

“Well,” and he turned to face the front of the room, where the one I hadn’t noticed sat on the floor, “I called ahead and ordered one. I’ve prepared a multigenre project that I want to share with your students, if that’s okay.” He had to be joking. My husband’s a chemical engineer, a small-business owner, and my best friend in the world, but a multigenre writer? He continued, “See, Penny talks about you guys all of the time. And she’s been talking about these multigenre projects you’re doing, like how Tim was doing his on poop, but he changed his mind.”

Tim laughed.

“So I decided to try to write one for our anniversary.”

I leaned forward, flashing a warning look at him. “On what?” I finally managed.

“You,” and he smiled that mischievous grin that made my heart thunder when we were both seniors at Oregon State University. My students all turned my way. I heard Jon say, “Oh, YES!”

“Oh no,” I sighed, “this is going to be way too much information for this class.” But no one was listening; all eyes were on him. I found a seat at the back of the room on a student desk.

“Mrs. Kittle, did you know he was coming?” Liz whispered down the row of desks.

“No—I figured he was here to pick me up for our trip, that’s all.”

“Look how red she is,” Sabrina called from across the room.

Pat had papers and color overheads in his portfolio and he was arranging them on a desk. “Do you guys mind if I share this with you?”

Well, you can imagine what they said.

And so it began. First a memoir: our first date. It’s funny how writing reveals all kinds of things that haven’t been said. Pat wrote about feeling shy and thinking I was distracted, looking for someone better. *It wasn’t like that at all*, I wanted to interrupt, *I was just nervous*, but for once I just listened. And remembered.

Next was research. He said he knew it was a requirement of our projects and that he had tried to research marriage but it was just so boring, all of those facts and figures. So instead he decided to research Penny Ostrem, the girl I was before we were married. “Then

it was easy,” he said to my students. “It was fun.” I was grateful for this model of a writer’s process shared so naturally with my students.

Pat began with an overhead of me at five years old, standing next to a giant Pooh bear I still have somewhere in the basement. He chronicled my early interests and then switched photos. Blown up on the overhead projector, my wire-framed-stop-sign-shaped-dork-of-the-year-junior-high-school picture spanned half of the wall. Pat filled them in on my hippie attempts of 1974, complete with embroidered shirt, full set of braces, and long, blonde hair. After the laughter dulled a bit, several called out at once, “Are those the glasses?”

“Yes, those are them,” I admitted. I had been working on my own multigenre project for the last few weeks with this class: a project on 1974, the year I turned thirteen. I had told my class about my desperate attempts to be cool: my crush on Elton John; my best friends; the stolen cigarettes we sneaked behind the pine trees that lined the playground at our K–8 school. And yes, how I’d faked poor vision at an eye exam in order to get those glasses because I needed them for the whole “look.”

The next photos were from high school cheerleading and varsity tennis. “Nice shorts,” Krista remarked, grinning into her collar, setting off a chorus of laughs.

“I know,” I said and rolled my eyes. “It was a long time ago.”

“No kidding,” she smirked.

Pat previewed the next slide with a few comments about my undesirable friends I found in college. *No party pictures*, I prayed. Teachers walk that careful line between honesty and being a role model when teaching high school: there is much I don’t tell. But the photo was of me and Captain Hook at Disneyland on April break. Phew. He followed it with our wedding photo and said, “I was so lucky that she said yes,” causing a little sweep of *aaaaahhs* to pass down the line of girls at the back.

There was a history of my teaching career told in captions, and then a poem about our nightly walks in our neighborhood, which he introduced by saying it was the first poem he’d ever written in his life, but that his writing coach, Don Graves, had insisted he give it a try.

“Don helped you?” I yelped.

“Yes, I called him up and told him I needed a writing conference and he let me come up to his house. I had no idea what multigenre was and I certainly couldn’t ask you!” And again—there it was. What do writers do in the process of creating a piece that matters to them? They find other writers to confer with. I couldn’t have scripted this. One teacher’s voice day after day grows tiresome to kids. I love it when they hear my lessons from another teacher, another voice, another writer. And all were listening even as the clock ticked toward the last few moments of class.

Pat saw me glance at my watch and said, “How much time do we have?”

Matt, the one most ready to leave each day, said quickly, “Take *all* the time you need.” I couldn’t help but grin.

Pat’s next piece was a recipe for marriage. He said he’d heard me talking one night about the recipes my students had played with one day: a recipe for an anorexic; a recipe for an adolescent boy; a recipe for fighting cancer. He started reading.

### **Recipe for a Marriage**

Ingredients vary, but according to the Bush administration must include one man and one woman. Some ingredients gel instantly upon contact, while others require significant mixing to achieve the right conditions for marriage.

Place one man and one woman in close proximity to one another, but take pains to keep them separated. Add a dash of flirtation to the woman, and a pinch of shyness to the man, and allow the two to set for a period of time, exchanging furtive glances. Mix the two together in a social situation and observe the reaction. If needed, mix repeatedly in a variety of social situations until the ingredients begin to blend together.

Beating of the ingredients is counterproductive, and always results in a bad marriage.

Once the ingredients have blended sufficiently together, add a large helping of love. They are now ready for marriage.

Preheat oven to hot, add a layer of physical intimacy to the ingredients, and bake at high temperatures. Repeat baking process frequently during early years of marriage.

“Stop!” I called. “No more baking!” The kids were howling.

“Mrs. Kittle,” John said, “you are going to be hearing about this for a VERY long time.” And several others added, “Oh, yeah.” And I deserved it. I had needled John for days after I walked by him and his girlfriend lip-locked in the cab of his pickup truck during the homecoming bonfire in September.

“Let him finish,” someone said. Pat grinned and continued.

After baking, allow to cool, then remove from container and immediately apply support to the mixture or it will fall. Some typical examples of support are sharing of household chores, allowing your partner to pursue their career or schooling, and sharing child-rearing duties.

Frost entire marriage with joy and mutual respect for each other.

The worst part about this recipe is, despite how good the marriage looks, it is never quite finished. Every marriage is a work in progress.

The best part of this recipe is that there is lots of baking involved.

After the snickers and cheers died out, Pat shared his final piece, a letter. I could feel the tears starting as he stood there before my students and said, “You are the complete package, the whole enchilada, the real deal. You are my best friend and the only woman I want to share my life with. Happy twentieth anniversary. Love, Pat.” I managed to join the collective sigh of appreciation from my class and clapped loud and long.

Pat nailed it: the whole multigenre thing. How one subject written about in one form is limited, but when you open up your thinking to write in many different genres, you open up the subject in ways even you, the writer, hadn’t imagined. Your readers experience your subject from many angles and walk away with an understanding, not just a reading. If Pat had done only the research piece, even with entertaining photos, my students would know a little more about *me*, but little about *Pat and me*, which was his inspiration for writing. If they had heard only the poem, they’d have missed the

playfulness that I adore in his recipe. Multigenre allows for complex thinking about our complex lives.

Of course, there's plenty I wish he hadn't left my students thinking about. Two girls came out the door behind us as we left class that day, and Liz said, "Have a nice trip, Mrs. Kittle, and don't do too much baking over the holidays!" which left them giggling while a furious color returned to my cheeks. You can bet that blush won't be the last one.

Our multigenre projects have been a burst of energy during a distracted time of year. It's all about the investment of self in writing: when my students choose topics they care about, they bring excitement and interest to class, even in December. Writing assignments that travel from one frozen style to another handcuff writers. We dictate form and narrow the subject matter for them. We copy templates and determine the font size. Then their stiff prose leaves us yawning and procrastinating about reading their work, and it is rarely their best. Over the last few weeks twenty-six different multigenre projects have emerged in my room: Nicole has chronicled her battle with anorexia; Taylor has pulled together hours of research on LSD; Christina has illuminated her obsession with the UNH men's hockey team; Heidi has mesmerized us with the history of the tango. She promises to teach it to the class during her presentation. I've been waiting to see these final products come together, excited to have them in my hands. I need that kind of energy in my classroom.

When I came down the aisle in white to Pachelbel's Canon in D Major, I couldn't see how multifaceted the years ahead would be—wondrous, rich, and at times, heartbreaking. It was looking into the blue eyes of our son Cam after a long and frightening night of labor; it was trying to call Pat's mom back from a coma. It was Hannah's triumphant first ride on her bike; it was Pat in a tuxedo promising to love me always. Multigenre writing helps me and my students find a way to hold it all. And share.

## CATCHING CLICHÉS

## Polishing “multigenre marriage” (page 99)

Patricia Galloway

**W**ithin a few days of Pat’s visit to my classroom I wrote a draft of that moment. In the first paragraph I had this line:

It was just like Dickens: you know, the best and worst of times.

It was in reference to the fact that it was a great day because the holiday vacation would follow and it was also my anniversary, but it was also horrible to try to contain my students when they just wanted to party. The line nagged at me. I left it in draft after draft, even when I knew it was a cliché. Part of polishing, though, is paying attention to the things that nag you.

I spotted my writing pal Ed reading my piece while on lunch duty and said, “What about the Dickens thing?”

He shook his head. “I thought about that, but I didn’t know if I should say anything. It’s a cliché; it should go.” Aaaaargh. Caught again, then saved by a thirty-second writing conference. I find clichés in my writing all the time. They are weak. Always. In my classroom we’ll spend ten minutes rereading a draft for just that one thing. Then we slice and dice ’em.