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Summer 2002

Review of *Quilting Lessons: Notes from the Scrap Bag of a Writer and Quilter* By Janet Catherine Berlo

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Horton, Laurel, "Review of *Quilting Lessons: Notes from the Scrap Bag of a Writer and Quilter* By Janet Catherine Berlo" (2002). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2314.

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Quilting Lessons: Notes from the Scrap Bag of a Writer and Quilter. By Janet Catherine Berlo. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. Illustrations, notes. x + 143 pp. \$20.00.

This series of personal essays documents the author's reflections over a two-year period in which she, an otherwise successful and prolific scholar and writer, found herself in a state of professional paralysis. Unable to complete a major manuscript on Native American women artists, Berlo submersed herself in her own creative expression, making quilts. "Eleven months were almost exclusively non-verbal and nonlinear, filled with color. Yet they also were filled with confusion over the loss of my scholarly work. For during the months that the quilter emerged, the scholar disappeared. From being a productive writer and researcher I was transformed—seemingly overnight—into someone who lives and breathes for patchwork."

After almost a year of "quilt madness" Berlo sat down to write, but instead of her unfinished book, she produced the introduction and framework for the present volume of essays. Arranged in order of their inception, some deal with earlier events, producing some minor chronological confusion for the reader but reflecting the nonlinear process of the author's experience.

At her best, Berlo's writing captures the intensity of the *physical* and *emotional* dimensions of the creative impulse. "When I wasn't quilting, I wasn't alive. On most days, I felt that I literally needed those vibrant hues in order to breathe. . . . My body craved the colors and the kinetic act of cutting and piecing, cutting and piecing." Essays about childhood and family relationships are more sentimental and unreflective. Admittedly a perfectionist,

driven to produce and excel, Berlo gradually realized that her life lacked balance and that “quilt madness” was a necessary antidote to a psychically unhealthy way of being. “From this total immersion in patchwork quilts, I emerged transformed as a writer. . . . My unconscious chose to shut down the writing sweatshop entirely, in order that these lessons might take place.”

Some readers may point out that the documentation and conversion of her experience into a marketable book is evidence of Berlo’s continuing need to exert intellectual control over her life, thus justifying her departure from academic pursuits. However, only someone able to step back and observe herself in the midst of confusion could have given us this very personal, often insightful narrative.

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