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A “How-To” Introduction on Pursuing Arts-Based Fiction Research and Writing as a Methodology: A Review of Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels

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Abstract

Research written as fiction can expand the audience pool and reach of knowledge generated in an accessible, familiar and less convoluted format than its more traditional methodological counterparts. Leavy’s (2013) book demonstrates how this is the case. She eases interested researchers into how to plan and execute fiction - based research, and provides examples, useful tips and resources. An issue that is not explored in detail, however, is the advantages for readers of reading texts produced through this methodology over those produced by fiction writers. This issue aside, Fiction as a research practice: Short stories, novellas, and novels is a compellingly written “how - to” introduction to how researchers can explore the rich layers and meanings of their research in a creative format.

Keywords

Fiction, Arts-Based Research, How-To, Qualitative Approach

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A “How-To” Introduction on Pursuing Arts-Based Fiction Research and Writing as a Methodology: A Review of *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels*

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Research written as fiction can expand the audience pool and reach of knowledge generated in an accessible, familiar and less convoluted format than its more traditional methodological counterparts. Leavy’s (2013) book demonstrates how this is the case. She eases interested researchers into how to plan and execute fiction-based research, and provides examples, useful tips and resources. An issue that is not explored in detail, however, is the advantages for readers of reading texts produced through this methodology over those produced by fiction writers. This issue aside, Fiction as a research practice: Short stories, novellas, and novels is a compellingly written “how-to” introduction to how researchers can explore the rich layers and meanings of their research in a creative format. Keywords: Fiction, Arts-Based Research, How-To, Qualitative Approach-

Patricia Leavy’s (2013) *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, And Novels* is a compellingly written “how to” text on how researchers and academics can use fiction writing as a medium to explore and convey their research. Leavy’s background and experiences as a sociology professor, qualitative researcher, and fiction novelist have enabled her to articulate an alternative to traditional academic writing. This alternative is founded on the principles of well-established methodologies such as ethnography, and the existing procedural and subjective overlaps between fiction and qualitative academic approaches to research and writing. Her book shows that the researcher and writer are at the heart of the imaginative conceptualization and presentation of stories and meaning as they are constructed and shared with an audience. Left unaddressed in-depth, however, is how fiction as a research approach offers additional benefits to those provided by regular fiction writers.

Considering the goal and content of the text, the author provides a well rounded review and characterization of the differences between fiction writing and fiction as research practice. She covers the scholarly precedents and benefits of the latter, what to consider and evaluate in the planning and execution of a project, and the pedagogical benefits of the approach from her experiences as a professor as well as that of other scholars (Leavy, 2013, Chapters 1-4, 10). Leavy (2013) further offers tips and questions to consider in relation to plot, characters, contexts, and how to get one’s creative juices started throughout the book (e.g., in Appendix A on “writing prompts”).

How fiction based research comes together is shown in four fiction examples of the types noted in the title of the book (Leavy, 2013, Chapters 5-9). These examples embody several qualitative principles. For instance, written from multiple narrator voices (first, third person); in distinct styles that capture the personalities, social classes and education of the characters; and through insights into their geo-spatial, physical, emotional and mental states and realities, the excerpts encourage empathy and reflection about the life, being, and dynamics affecting those portrayed. By encouraging an intimate relationship between reader and characters, empathy (or the lack of it), and reflection about the characters the authors of the four fiction pieces also encourage reflexivity about the position of the reader in her/his own context and life. Reflexivity and the ability to establish or communicate an empathetic

rapport with research subjects (or fictional characters) are core aspects of qualitative approaches.

The examples in Chapters 5 thru 9 are additionally accompanied by comments from Leavy and the original authors. The latter's comments present personal insights about the theoretical and individual motivations of the authors. Leavy's comments, on the other hand, reflect on proposed evaluative criteria (Chapter 4) on how to look at the quality and effectiveness of a fiction based research piece. Readers interested in additional approaches such as narrative inquiry, poetry or visual representation arts-based research may want to read Leavy's (2009) *Methods Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*. That text presents various methodologies in a similar format to that in Leavy (2013) whereby the author reviews academic literature, provides suggestions on websites and other resources that readers might find useful, and includes several chapters written by scholars or practitioners of the methodologies discussed.

There is one question I still struggle with after reading Leavy's (2013) book, however. Besides the appeal of fiction as an engaging format for students, and the appeal of the format for researchers aiming to engage students and multiple audiences, what does fiction based research provide over fiction for the reader? I come to this question as someone whose undergraduate background was in modern languages and Latin American studies. The way we were trained to read literature and reflect on history, depending on the class, was through the interplay between how context shaped Latin American writers, intellectuals, artists, and historical or political figures. When literature was studied without an acknowledgement of this interplay, the significance of the texts was lost in the aesthetics of their formats, structures, or contents. This loss represents a wasted opportunity to create social consciousness, and activism, about issues that continue to plague the continent (e.g., identity; inequality as a heritage of colonialism; immigration). This would be the case, for instance, if one read pivotal authors such as José Martí, Mariano Azuela, Miguel Angel Asturias, Octavio Paz, or Gabriel García Márquez without acknowledging the socio-political and historical undercurrents and personal experiences that shaped their writings.

On the other hand, reading *Band of Brothers* by renowned historian Stephen Ambrose (2001) made learning about history fun. Ambrose's book is an example of historical research that is not quite a novel, but not strictly a fact and dry textbook. According to him, it is "the personalization" of the individual stories of the members of E Company that "draws" "readers" to the story (Ambrose, 2001, p. 14). Starting with the first chapter one learns the names, backgrounds, hopes and feelings of some of the members of E Company. The "personalization" accomplished by Ambrose of the research participants in the book is what Leavy (2013) describes as characterization (pp. 65-70). Ambrose serves as a third person narrator, and telling the story of E Company during World War II serves as the plot. In the personal and historical details achieved through an engaging narrative Ambrose captures "versimilitude" ("portraying people and settings realistically, truthfully, and authentically"), "getting at particulars," "inner voice and interior dialogue," and "narrator's point of view" as "strategies" that enable a fiction writer to "portray the complexity of lived experience" but in a historical text (Leavy, 2013, pp. 38-48).

From authors who write contextually inspired fiction, to academics who write research in accessible formats and language, fiction as research practice seems to be the next step in the regressive evolution of reaching larger audiences and giving research back to the people it often comes from in a more engaging format. Delving on the difference between reading and writing fiction based research from the reader's perspective may be beyond the purview of *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels* (Leavy, 2013). Perhaps it is because the author addresses the practice in such useful detail that there is an undue expectation that she might cover all perspectives. But if, as researchers, we truly aim to

make academic works part of “public scholarship” to reach out and engage a larger audience outside of the “ivory towers” of academia (Leavy, 2013, p. 22), should we not also address the advantages for the reader of reading a scholarly based research fiction text over other options?

That question aside, Leavy’s (2013) book effectively achieves its aims to introduce fiction as a research practice as a methodology. The approach represents another avenue to communicate the rich and multiple layers of meaning that are gathered and generated in qualitative research. It is an avenue that can be fun for the researcher in the planning and execution of a project (though nevertheless taxing to work on), for the readers who are the consumers of such research in a more accessible format, and deeply personal for both as the researcher and the reader face one another through the fictionalized account. The selfish intimacy that is established between the researcher and the creative process and product, and between the reader who immerses her/himself in the fictionalized account is what can ultimately achieve “critical thinking, consciousness-raising, forging micro-macro connections, and problem solving” as “desired learning outcomes in higher education” (Leavy, 2013, p. 259). This book explores and justifies how that can become a feasible project for researchers.

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