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## Fiction Strengthens Research: A Review of Patricia Leavy's Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels

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### Abstract

Arts-based research (ABR) is a form of qualitative research that includes genres such as poetry, music, theatrical scripts, visual art, novels, and short stories. Fiction-based research is one type of ABR that utilizes the strength of fiction to connect with readers and to portray real life and genuine human experiences. The author, Patricia Leavy, wrote a text that thoroughly explains the meaning and evaluation of fiction-based research. In addition, she provides exemplar pieces and uses her eight criteria to assess the research. Lastly, the text explains why fiction is an important pedagogy to use with students. Twenty-first century skills and love of research, writing, and reading are important components to fiction-based research.

### Keywords

Fiction-Based Research, Evaluation, Exemplars, Pedagogy, 21st Century Skills

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## **Fiction Strengthens Research: A Review of Patricia Leavy's *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels***

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*Arts-based research (ABR) is a form of qualitative research that includes genres such as poetry, music, theatrical scripts, visual art, novels, and short stories. Fiction-based research is one type of ABR that utilizes the strength of fiction to connect with readers and to portray real life and genuine human experiences. The author, Patricia Leavy, wrote a text that thoroughly explains the meaning and evaluation of fiction-based research. In addition, she provides exemplar pieces and uses her eight criteria to assess the research. Lastly, the text explains why fiction is an important pedagogy to use with students. Twenty-first century skills and love of research, writing, and reading are important components to fiction-based research. Keywords: Fiction-Based Research, Evaluation, Exemplars, Pedagogy, 21st Century Skills*

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### **Reviewer's Statement**

As current principal of an elementary school and follower of qualitative research, I found myself enthralled by the idea of using fiction to represent research findings. The content and quality of the book inspired me to learn all I could about the author and her intentions for publishing this book. In my doctoral program, I utilized more traditional methods of qualitative research, and this book expanded my understanding of the varied research designs in the broad area of qualitative research. After reading, reviewing, and synthesizing the information in this book, I realize the importance of using fiction in research and look forward to growing in the area of arts-based research (ABR) in my future studies of qualitative research.

Leavy's book is beneficial for varied audiences. I am new to ABR and found this book to be a helpful introduction to ABR and more specifically, fiction-based research. I believe that qualitative researchers who are familiar with ABR would benefit from this book because of Leavy's style of writing and explanation of fiction-based research. She also added lengthy exemplars in this text including two complete stories, several chapters from a novella, and two novels. Lastly, I believe that research programs at the college level should include ABR in their programs, and *Fiction as a Research Practice* would be a great text for professors to use in their classes. Using fiction to represent data in a research paper or dissertation possibly makes the results more engaging and valuable to readers beyond the "experts" in the social sciences.

### **What is Fiction as a Research Practice?**

Qualitative research values depth of understanding, multiple meanings, human experiences, and subjectivity in the research process. More specifically, the area of arts-based research (ABR) includes genres such as poetry, music, theatrical scripts, dance performances, visual art, film, short stories, novellas, and novels. When examining the fiction and nonfiction genres, there is a grey area between the two genres with research classified as historical fiction and creative nonfiction mixing fictional elements with true

events. One of the goals of qualitative researchers and fiction-based research is to truthfully or authentically portray human experience. If readers are able to put themselves in the shoes of others, they are able to develop compassion and empathy. The fictional characters, setting, dialogue, and events in fiction as research come from the data collected with the hopes of portraying real life and genuine human experiences. According to Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (1997, as cited in Leavy, 2013, p. 23), there are similar features in ABR including the creation of virtual reality, the promotion of empathy, and the personal signature of the researcher/writer. The critical issue for researchers using fiction is how the work is presented to readers.

Leavy spends the necessary time reviewing different genres showing the readers how the genres blur between fiction and nonfiction. This section addresses the skepticism that may accompany using fiction as research. For example, historical novels teach many historical events to readers while the reader is empathetic to the characters and their situations in the novels. Even diaries and testimonials that contain narratives merge nonfiction and fiction. The element of fiction allows readers to connect with the reader and imagine living through the historical event. Ethnographers use natural settings to collect data and produce thick descriptions of specific cultures. While collecting the data, the researcher's subjective experience influences what is observed, recorded, and described in the final story. How does a researcher write culture and share the writing with others? At what point is the story considered nonfiction or fiction? Fiction as a research practice helps answer these questions and provides researchers an outlet to share the story of culture with others. Creative nonfiction began in the 1960's to help with engagement while remaining truthful in research reports. Researchers needed the use of literary tools to strengthen their factual writing. Creative nonfiction made nonfiction stories read like fiction to help with the connection of the reader to the true story and to affect the readers in a positive way. After examining the above genres, one can easily see the importance for researchers to have the ability to use fiction to represent their data and to connect with their readers.

### **How Do You Evaluate Fiction-Based Research?**

The idea of fiction-based qualitative research challenges the foundations upon which positivist quantitative research is built, and this section helps researchers understand how to judge, evaluate, or assess fiction-based research. This chapter adds to the usefulness of this book for beginning or advanced researchers by providing specific criteria to use when reading and evaluating fiction-based research. Leavy is very clear in stating that fiction-based research has to be evaluated in its own terms. Broadly speaking, qualitative research is assessed differently than quantitative research. Within qualitative research, ethnography is evaluated differently than a case study. Fiction-based research is a specific type of arts-based research and is assessed by its own measures with more emphasis on writing practices. Let's examine the criteria for evaluating fiction-based research.

Leavy shares eight criteria that readers and researchers use to evaluate fiction-based research. The criteria are not a checklist, and researchers constantly add new criteria as this area of research grows and develops. To begin with, it is important that the author creates a virtual reality where readers experience the data that is represented on the pages. Researchers create this virtual reality by having detailed descriptions of the people and places in the story that feel authentic to the readers. It is important that authors incorporate empirical details that resonate as truthful. In addition to the virtual reality, fiction-based research should sensitively portray human experience where characters appear as people and not caricatures. Researchers decide if a first- or third-person narration best impacts how the story is told and felt by the readers. Additionally, the major architectural design features of fiction are

included in fiction-based research: structure, master plot, plot, storyline, scenes and narrative, and ending. When deciding what structure to use, the researcher decides if a short story, novella, or novel would best suit the representation of the data and the story the author shares with others.

In qualitative research, readers' subjectivity and prior experiences affects the meaning they derive from the data and story represented in the research. It is important in fiction-based research that research renderings allow a multiplicity of meanings to emerge. Readers bring their own unique perspectives to fiction. This presence of ambiguity helps readers to reflect on the story as a whole while including their own experiences in relation to the story. As with all quantitative and qualitative research, fiction-based research contains substantive content. The researcher's goal is to share knowledge about a certain topic by educating, raising awareness, or cultivating understanding. It is important that the story is useful and that readers learn something from the text. Arts-based research pays great attention to the craft of writing and aesthetics to achieve rigor in the area of research. Fiction-based research has rich, lustrous, detailed descriptions. Words are carefully chosen and there is a richness in the language and dialogue of the story. Lastly, it is imperative that readers enjoy reading the story and make meaning from the experience.

Fiction-based research encourages and supports the personal signature and fingerprint of the author in the story. This allows the writer to have an active presence in the story, which encourages writers to commit to certain topics and subject matter. Additionally, it is important for writers to consider the audience of the fiction-based research. When examining the genre of the writing, the researcher chooses a short story, a novel, or a novella. In addition, the story may have a nonfiction component, such as a preface or an afterward. It is important for the writing to disclose the nature of the text in the fiction-based research. Leavy suggests requesting feedback from readers in order to gauge the level of success in meeting the goals of the writing.

Leavy does an excellent job with her description of the criteria for evaluating fiction-based research. In order to make the criteria clear for readers, I included a listing of the eight criteria:

1. Creation of virtual reality.
2. Sensitive portrayals of people.
3. Form, structure, and narrative coherence.
4. Presence of ambiguity.
5. Substantive contribution.
6. Aesthetics.
7. Personal signature.
8. Audience.

Leavy stresses the importance of the writer developing his or her own relationship with the fiction-based research and to enjoy the creative journey.

### **What are the Benefits of the Exemplar Pieces?**

This text provides the reader with two short stories, three chapters of a novella, and two chapters of each novel. After reading and understanding the purpose of fiction-based research and examining the criteria for evaluating this type of research, it is helpful to read exemplar pieces and apply the new knowledge on fiction-based research. Leavy asked each author to write a brief introduction to his or her story, and Leavy ends the story with her own commentary on why she believes it is an exemplar piece of research. In the commentary,

Leavy selects two of the eight criteria to review in relation to each exemplar. This allows the reader to read and reflect on each of the eight criteria in at least one exemplar. I believe this is another reason why college classes and researchers new to fiction-based research benefit from the use of this text. After learning about fiction-based research and reading some exemplars, students and researchers could apply that new knowledge to another fiction-based research piece or to their own original story. This text provides the background needed for the success of original fiction-based research.

### **Fiction as a Pedagogy?**

In qualitative research, no single truth occurs, and truth is dependent on context and individuals' life experiences. According to Leavy, research is not just for experts in different fields. All people benefit from reading and reflecting on research. Fiction-based research expands the audience of readers and increases the possibility of readers connecting to and learning from the main topics addressed in the story. When examining the continuum of research from experimental research in a lab to a poem that addresses the plight of poverty, there is a need for the variety of research. Students will follow the research methodology that best meets their research goals and their interests. Arts-based research, and more specifically fiction-based research, fulfills a need in the broad area of research. It is important that all students connect to research at the college level, and arts-based research opens a new more creative approach to research. Creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication are 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that all students need for success in the future. Fiction-based research provides the avenue for students to utilize the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and educate others about a topic that is important to society.

Leavy ends the text with appendices that help readers and writers to practice the skill of writing research-based fiction. Appendix A offers writing prompts to help spark creativity, learn the use of the tools of fiction, and to help with the discipline of writing. Readers find exercise for transforming their research into fiction in Appendix B. Leavy challenges writers to decide where their writing falls on the continuum between traditional and fiction-based research. Finally, the text ends with tips for getting research published and some recommended resources for future studies in the arts-based research. This is a well-rounded text that is beneficial for new researchers or writers that want to expand their knowledge on fiction-based research. In addition, the resources in this text provide everything a college professor would need to teach a course on fiction-based research. I highly recommend the book *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels* by Patricia Leavy.

### **References**

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### **Author Note**

Dr. Richard H. Rogers is principal of Matt Arthur Elementary School in Kathleen, Georgia. This is his third year as principal following five years as assistant principal at Quail Run Elementary School. He taught at the elementary and middle school level for eight years before becoming an administrator. Dr. Rogers earned his doctorate degree in K-12 Executive Leadership from Valdosta State University. His educational interests include leadership, twenty-first century skills, curriculum ideology, and qualitative research. Dr. Rogers has

presented to future teachers across the state of Georgia in hopes of instilling a passion for students and education. In addition, he serves on committees with Middle Georgia State College. Correspondence regarding this book review can be addressed directly to: Dr. Rogers via e-mail at rickyalicia@comsouth.net or followed on twitter at @drrhrogers

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