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Spark: Why I Wrote a Novel Designed to Teach the Research Process

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Abstract

I'm a sociologist specializing in research methodology. I'm also a novelist. When my latest novel, *Spark*, was released, people remarked that it seemed inevitable for me to combine my two passions. I agree. In some ways this is probably always where my work was heading, although it necessarily took a long time to get here. I'd like to share why as a scholar I turned to fiction, the inspiration for *Spark*, and my hopes for the book.

Keywords

Research Methodology, Arts-Based Research, Writing, Fiction, Teaching, Pedagogy

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Spark: Why I Wrote a Novel Designed to Teach the Research Process

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*I'm a sociologist specializing in research methodology. I'm also a novelist. When my latest novel, [Spark](#), was released, people remarked that it seemed inevitable for me to combine my two passions. I agree. In some ways this is probably always where my work was heading, although it necessarily took a long time to get here. I'd like to share why as a scholar I turned to fiction, the inspiration for *Spark*, and my hopes for the book. Keywords: Research Methodology, Arts-Based Research, Writing, Fiction, Teaching, Pedagogy*

I'm a sociologist specializing in research methodology. I'm also a novelist. When my latest novel, [Spark](#), was released, people remarked that it seemed inevitable for me to combine my two passions. I agree. In some ways this is probably always where my work was heading, although it necessarily took a long time to get here. I'd like to share why as a scholar I turned to fiction, the inspiration for *Spark*, and my hopes for the book.

Spark didn't happen in a vacuum, but rather was the next step in a progression. In order to explain how this novel came about, I need to go back about a decade. I had been collecting qualitative interviews, primarily with women, about relationships, identity, body image, and related topics. I was conducting and sharing my research in the traditional ways I had been taught, presenting findings at conferences and publishing peer-reviewed journal articles. Over time I became frustrated with the limitations of traditional methods and specifically, traditional representational forms. Was this kind of writing any good? Was anybody reading this stuff? I quickly concluded that I was wasting my time. The journal article format rarely inspires good and engaging writing, certainly not by literary standards. It's a contrived, formulaic format, overly reliant on jargon. Moreover, peer-reviewed journal articles and conference presentations are totally inaccessible to the public. No one outside of academia is reading this stuff. On top of which, they're also poorly read within the academy, shockingly so, with most academic articles having only a few readers. Some journals even count authors and editors among readers because they're so desperate to make it seem as if there's an audience. Research should be beneficial to the many, not the few. I knew there had to be another way.

As a methodologist, I was immersed in the literature about new and "emergent" methods, which is how I stumbled across [arts-based research](#) (ABR). [ABR](#) exists at the nexus of the arts and sciences. It involves researchers in any discipline adapting the tenets of the creative arts in order to address research questions. An arts practice may be used during project conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, interpretation, and/or to represent research findings. Arts-based research practices can be used for traditional research goals, such as producing new insights, description, exploration, discovery, problem solving, and advancing applied research. ABR is also useful in ways traditional approaches may not be, including crystalizing micro-macro connections, evocation, provocation, raising critical consciousness or awareness, cultivating empathy, unsettling stereotypes, and contributing to public scholarship (that which is accessible outside of the academy). ABR made sense to me.

Having loved the craft of writing, including creative writing, my entire life, I turned to fiction. I penned my first novel, [Low-Fat Love](#), which explored women's attraction to men who withhold their support, self-esteem, and settling in life and love. The response forever changed

me. Not only was the book widely read both inside and outside of the academy, but readers engaged with the novel on deep levels, often relating it to their own personal stories of “low-fat love.” After hearing from countless readers, I was hooked on fiction. I wrote more novels and coauthored a collection of short stories all based on my interview research, sociological themes, autoethnographic observations, and imagination.

Fiction allows me to get at issues that are otherwise out of reach and to make my work more engaging and accessible, including to relevant stakeholders outside of the academy. Fiction also makes lasting impressions, and there’s neuroscience to support that (please see my piece “[Our Brains on Art](#)” for a synopsis of this research). The response to each of my novels has shown me how powerful this form is for reaching people, prompting self and social reflection, and making lasting impressions. Readers have told me that my novels have stayed with them for years. I’ve never heard that about my journal articles.

I’ve written many nonfiction and fiction books and the differences are clear. When writing fiction, it’s about both what you can do as a writer *and* how a reader will approach the work. As a writer, there’s freedom to explore topics and different points of view in a way that’s tricky or impossible with nonfiction. For example, fiction allows for the representation of interiority—what a person is thinking. That alone provides endless opportunities to show the gap between what people say and do versus what they think and feel. Interior dialogue exposes characters’ vulnerabilities, and those are the things that connect us, so fiction is uniquely able to promote empathy and compassion. Fiction also stimulates critical thinking and imagination. By using literary devices such as gaps in the narrative, metaphors, similes, and symbolism, fiction invites readers to fill in the blanks in ways nonfiction rarely does. Here you can start to see how it’s not only about what fiction affords writers, but also about the experience of reading fiction. Readers approach fiction differently. It’s usually seen as a leisure time activity—something people take pleasure in. People’s defenses and tendency toward rebuttal are dialed down. That’s a very different frame of mind than when reading academic nonfiction.

While I’ve used fiction to communicate sociological themes since my first novel, I had yet to try to tackle one of the topics nearest to me—the research process. As a methodologist and proponent of fiction as a research practice, of course I thought about whether or not it was possible to write a novel about methodology. Despite my interest, which over time grew into a secret longing, I had no idea how to do it. The problem was that the novel would have to work simply as a novel that anyone could read. It would have to operate on more than one level because no one outside of a university setting is interested in learning about the research process. My belief is that ABR and fiction should not be used merely to make academic conference presentations or articles jazzier, but rather, to contribute to knowledge that circulates outside of the academy. There’s absolutely a place for creative textbooks. A work of fiction read only in the academy in order to teach something can be beneficial to students. However, my own goal with my fiction has always been to reach folks both inside and outside of the academy. How on earth could I write a novel about the research process that would have any hope of meeting that goal?

Four years ago I got my answer. I was one of fifty people invited to participate in a seminar on the neuroscience of creativity hosted by the famed Salzburg Global Seminar in Austria. Receiving that invitation was like getting the golden ticket for Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory. It was an extraordinary experience. The seminar occurred at the actual *Sound of Music* house in Salzburg, an incredible castle. The participants included neuroscientists, artists, journalists, and a few others from around the world. I’ll never forget touring the castle and learning about its history. Both honored world leaders and Nazis have slept there. We took the privilege of being there seriously and with that came a responsibility to make the most out of the experience. As the only methodologist, I was constantly thinking through that lens. We were a group of strangers dropped down in a spectacular setting trying

to engage in productive inter- and trans-disciplinary dialogue and I kept thinking this was how to write a novel about the research process. Over the course of the week the idea for *Spark* developed. When the seminar ended, I headed to Vienna for a few days, which is where I wrote the entire outline, including the character sketches. I knew the last words of the novel and how to get to them. I put the outline in a drawer to allow it to stew. When I had met other commitments and felt the time was right, I began writing.

What I had figured out was that the novel would have to work on two levels: one for students and one for general readers. From one perspective reading, *Spark* explores the research process, critical thinking, problem-solving, and interdisciplinarity. Coming into it with a different, more general perspective, it's an adventure story that offers a counter-narrative to all of the divisiveness we see in society and models new ways to look at others and ourselves. It's meant to sensitize students to the possibilities in the knowledge-building process and the principles of interdisciplinarity. It's meant to sensitize general readers to the possibilities in themselves and the power of connecting across differences. It's also meant to reignite the spark in each of us. Over time we can become complacent in our work and lives. We can forget how to tap into possibilities. There's also a subtext about hierarchies, which can be applied to academia (such as how different disciplines and different research paradigms are regarded), or the hierarchies created more broadly in society based on status characteristics and social identities (such as race and gender). In short, it can be read differently by different people. That was the key. Here's the synopsis from the back cover:

Professor Peyton Wilde has an enviable life teaching sociology at an idyllic liberal arts college—yet she is troubled by a sense of fading inspiration. One day an invitation arrives. Peyton has been selected to attend a luxurious all-expense-paid seminar in Iceland, where participants, billed as some of the greatest thinkers in the world, will be charged with answering one perplexing question. Meeting her diverse teammates—two neuroscientists, a philosopher, a dance teacher, a collage artist, and a farmer—Peyton wonders what she could ever have to contribute. The ensuing journey of discovery will transform the characters' work, their biases, and themselves. This suspenseful novel shows that the answers you seek can be found in the most unlikely places.

Spark includes a robust further engagement section for classroom or book club use, featuring discussion and homework questions as well as creative writing and research activities.

While I wanted to write an engaging novel that anyone could read for pleasure, I also very much wanted to illuminate the principles of interdisciplinarity/transdisciplinarity and the research process: problem formulation, literature reviews, concept maps, and more. I also wanted to model and prompt critical thinking. In the contemporary world, critical thinking is a skill that students need more than ever to prepare themselves for the job market and their lives. The “suspenseful” element of *Spark*—the answer to the question the participants are working to determine—mirrors the process of critical thinking while prompting readers to apply those skills to “figure out” the answer along with the characters. In this regard, the novel can be used in a wide range of undergraduate or graduate courses across the disciplines. More than any of my previous works of fiction, I wrote *Spark* to be used in college classrooms. Beyond qualitative inquiry or research methods, *Spark* can be integrated into a range of courses in the social sciences and humanities, including campus-wide reading programs. The experience of the protagonist arriving at the seminar in Iceland bears similarities to students getting acclimated to college: trying to find one's place in an exciting but perhaps intimidating environment, finding one's voice, being exposed to new perspectives, meeting diverse peers, and learning to recognize and value one's own unique talents. I hope that if professors choose

to adopt it, they find it stimulates lively class discussions and gets students excited about the research landscape and how they might be a part of it.

Learn more about *Spark* at Guilford Press (use promo code 7FSPARK for 20% off and free shipping in the US/Canada): <https://www.guilford.com/books/Spark/Patricia-Leavy/9781462538157>

Spark is also available at Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Spark-Patricia-Leavy/dp/1462538150/ref=pd_rhf_dp_p_img_3?encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=9D97SVRMGGENXSP0MAD6

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Author Note

[Patricia Leavy, PhD](#), has published over twenty-five books, earning commercial and critical success in both nonfiction and fiction, and her work has been translated into numerous languages. Her recent nonfiction titles include [Handbook of Arts-Based Research](#), [Research Design, Method Meets Art Second Edition](#), and [The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research](#). She is also series creator and editor for seven book series with Oxford University Press and Brill/Sense, including the ground-breaking [Social Fictions](#) series, and is cofounder and co-editor-in-chief of [Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal](#). In addition to receiving numerous accolades for her books, she has received career awards from the New England Sociological Association, the American Creativity Association, the American Educational Research Association, the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, and the National Art Education Association. In 2018, she was honored by the National Women's Hall of Fame and SUNY-New Paltz established the "Patricia Leavy Award for Art and Social Justice." Her website is <http://www.patricialeavy.com/>.

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