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Spark: A Book Review

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Abstract

Spark, a social research novel by Patricia Leavy, innovatively explores the complexities of doing collaborative, complex research. The story follows Sociology Professor Peyton Wilde during a week-long research seminar in Iceland with, as her invitation reads, "some of the greatest thinkers of our time." With an intriguing setup, swift plotline and lively characters, Leavy reaches to the heart of key concerns in interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research. Such concerns are well-discussed in the wider scholarly literature; Leavy uniquely handles and examines these concerns in fiction in a way that will be valuable to teachers and students alike. *Spark* makes an impressive contribution to fiction-based inquiry.

Keywords

Arts-Based Research, Creativity, Methodological Design, Social Fiction, Sociological Fiction

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Spark: A Book Review

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Spark, a social research novel by Patricia Leavy, innovatively explores the complexities of doing collaborative, complex research. The story follows Sociology Professor Peyton Wilde during a week-long research seminar in Iceland with, as her invitation reads, “some of the greatest thinkers of our time.” With an intriguing setup, swift plotline and lively characters, Leavy reaches to the heart of key concerns in interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research. Such concerns are well-discussed in the wider scholarly literature; Leavy uniquely handles and examines these concerns in fiction in a way that will be valuable to teachers and students alike. Spark makes an impressive contribution to fiction-based inquiry. Keywords: Arts-Based Research, Creativity, Methodological Design, Social Fiction, Sociological Fiction

Spark, by Patricia Leavy, is a buoyant social research novel about collaboration and creativity. Set in picturesque Iceland, it follows Sociology Professor Peyton Wilde during a week-long seminar with, as her mysterious invitation states, “some of the greatest thinkers of our time.” Inspired seminars, nature excursions, lavish buffets and fiery interpersonal arguments abound. With a compact plot and clever cast of characters, *Spark* creatively reaches to the heart of paradigm debates that are of key concern in interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research. This novel will be of interest to those working with fiction in social science and a valuable addition to any research methods curriculum.

Leavy is an internationally-recognised leader in arts-based research and methodological design, and *Spark* is her fourth social research novel. In *Spark*, Leavy’s broad body of work on research methodologies grounds the setup and shapes the trajectory of the narrative. Her intent with this novel is (it seems) to not only illustrate the complexities and complications that arise when doing mixed method or inter- and multidisciplinary work; *Spark* serves to newly explore and consider the implications and realities of doing research *with*, rather than *on*, others. Leavy’s vision of this space and its potential is clearly articulated through her characters—not overtly in individual dialogue, though they do explicitly discuss academic research concerns, but more implicitly through how these characters dynamically mesh, mould, resist, and collaboratively ignite.

Crucially, the novel’s setup works. The hook—beyond the seminar invitation itself—takes the shape of a critical question that arrives in Chapter 2. Satisfyingly irritating and professionally realistic personal conflicts result. This inspires intrigue that elevates the plot and saves it from being straightforwardly didactic in scope and tone. The international cast of central characters includes artists, philosophers, hard scientists, and a farmer. We see most of the novel from Peyton’s point of view, though we do get insight into other characters as well. This is clever on Leavy’s part; we mostly see the novel through a fellow social researcher’s eyes, but other points of view work to highlight the limited vision Peyton has, both personally and professionally as a researcher who predominantly works with qualitative methods, and widen the perspective of the reader in a literary and research sense.

Peyton has exactly the right disposition for the primary audience of this book—she’s quiet and polite, hesitant but not withdrawn or standoffish, and eager to be engaged in rich conversation and activities that get her out of her own head. Leavy cleverly emphasises Peyton’s penchant for people watching so, from Chapter 1, we are with her because she is

astutely observant in the way sociologists and bookish people tend to be. Peyton *is* a sociology Professor, so this kind of characterisation is to be expected. It works so well however that Peyton doesn't feel predictable or clichéd, or like a hollow stand-in for any and all sociology professors. She's been written, more than anything else, with honesty, and this brings life and clarity to the story as a whole. Brief but rich dives into other key characters also bring significant depth. This engaged interiority is a hallmark of Leavy's fiction, and sociological fiction writers can learn much from how Leavy uses this technique in her characterisation.

Friction and the "spark" work well as motifs to highlight key ideas about collaboration, synergy and creativity. These motifs recur throughout most of the novel in well-paced scenes and illustrative metaphors; the party ping-pong game is a good example. Through the use of these motifs, what stands out is how Leavy illuminates the dual creativity and structure of the analytic process, which crosses disciplinary boundaries and, importantly, is not the exclusive property of academics. Via the key conflicts and events in the plot, Leavy interrogates how we contemporarily demarcate such internal and externalising boundaries on an individual and a more structural scale. This insight is built up throughout the novel and culminates most poetically in Chapter 13; the end of this chapter is where a meaningful sense of the contribution that this novel makes to how we do—and potentially can—conceptualise methodological tensions is best realised in literary form. Towards the end of the novel, each motif is heavily stressed and more visibly handled than in the rest of the story—the rooftop dialogue and the summative style of the email in the last two chapters strike a tone that makes the novel particularly suited for students. This, plus the additional pages of questions and activities at the end of the book, make *Spark* "teaching ready."

Spark is an innovative work of social fiction that offers attentive and relatable insights into the motivations for and challenges of designing and doing research. This novel opens up the complexities of undertaking mixed method, participatory, and interdisciplinary research through key characters' motivations, expertise, and points of view. *Spark* will help teachers to engage and challenge their students in the classroom to actively consider the nuances of epistemological tensions and paradigm debates. For those interested in engaging fiction in their research, through writing or literary analysis, *Spark* is an excellent example of how to bring social research and fiction together in a creative, lively and poetic way. Leavy skilfully exercises literary devices, most notably characterisation and the use of recurrent motifs, to progress what social fiction can achieve as its own developed form of sociological analysis. *Spark* contributes to the development of social fiction and fiction-based inquiry as more than a novel tool for illustrating the results of "real" research.

References

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Author Note

Dr. Ashleigh Watson is a Resident Adjunct Research Fellow with the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University, Australia. She is the Fiction Editor of *The Sociological Review*, and the creator and editor of *So Fi Zine* (<https://sofizine.com/>). Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: a.watson@griffith.edu.au.

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