

Book Review

Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels

Patricia Leavy

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Reviewed by: Frances Kalu
University of Calgary

Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels introduces the reader to fiction-based research. In the first section, Patricia Leavy explores the genre by explaining its background and possibilities and goes on to describe how to conduct and evaluate fiction-based research. In the second section of the book, she presents and evaluates examples of fiction-based research in different forms including short stories and excerpts from novellas and novels written by different authors. The third and final section explains how fiction and fiction-based research can be used in teaching. Leavy clearly differentiates the term fiction-based research from arts-based research in order to project the emergent field in a clear light of its own. Babbie (2001) explains that just as qualitative research practice emerged as a means of explaining phenomena that could not be captured by quantitative scientific research, social research attempts to study and understand everyday life experiences. Within social research, arts-based research tries to represent phenomena studied aesthetically through various forms of art (Barone & Eisner, 2012). As a form of arts-based research, Leavy describes fiction-based research as a great way to explore “topics that can be difficult to approach” through fiction (p. 20). Topics include the intricacies of interactions in everyday life, race relations, and socio-economic class and its effects on human life.

In carving its niche in social research, Leavy explains that fiction-based research seeks to create a deeper understanding of experiences in a language that is more accessible to people than research published in academic publications. Using fiction creates an opportunity for the writer to simulate the environment, sights, sounds, and smells of reality virtually, which captivates the reader’s imagination. The writer is able to either create new knowledge for the reader or “disrupt dominant ideologies or stereotypes” (p. 38). As traditional qualitative researchers, fiction writers engage in intensive research to ensure that they have clear representations of the phenomenon they are presenting. These representations are evident in the realistic scenarios and characters that are portrayed in fiction writing, allowing the reader to be absorbed in the reality of the book. This reality or verisimilitude is the key to effective fiction-based research and traditional qualitative research because both methods try to portray the experiences as true as possible.

In describing how one conducts fiction-based research, Leavy compares tenets of qualitative research to those of fiction-based research. She points out that anticipated data is a key consideration in most qualitative research methods but how data is collected, where it is

collected from, and how it is interpreted and used might differ. For instance, in both qualitative and fiction-based research methods, data can be collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. However, in fiction-based research, data can also be collected from literature reviews. In terms of how data is used in qualitative research, data collected is coded and emerging themes are used to arrive at results through analysis, and the end product is usually a research report containing details on how results were arrived at. While conducting fiction-based research, Leavy advocates that data should be seen as existing on a continuum with emerging themes arising from qualitative collection methods. These themes could be collated, analyzed, and interpreted, and the result, written as a story, thus creates a “fictional narrative” (p. 54).

At the other end of the continuum in fiction-based research, the process of writing can be the research act, as the writer incorporates data collected from his or her experiences, prior research, and knowledge. Leavy misses an opportunity here to explain this concept of the research act in her own words, which could have created a clearer understanding of how a writer could use writing as a research act. She relies on Elizabeth de Freitas’ (p. 54) explanation of herself as a writer where de Freitas describes herself as constantly writing and does not need to analyze data to create meaning. Rather, she relies on her personal experiences and imagination to create research.

Discussing the use of theoretical frameworks in fiction-based research, Leavy posits that fiction-based researchers can base their writing on certain beliefs or paradigms, a view that Babbie (2001) supports because “theories provide logical explanations” (p. 55). However, fiction-based researchers do not need to put their theoretical assumptions forward in their writing as academic writers do because academic writers rely on theoretical assumptions to answer questions raised in their research programs.

Leavy makes it clear that it is not possible to evaluate fiction-based research in the same way as traditional research. Each piece of fiction should be evaluated individually. She tries to explain how some evaluative tools in qualitative research can be applied to fiction-based research. For example, validity and trustworthiness in qualitative research can be seen as resonance in fiction-based research, rigor as aesthetics, congruence as structure, thoroughness as ambiguity, authenticity as verisimilitude, and reflexivity as a writer’s personal signature. Equating validity to resonance might be a difficult concept for a qualitative researcher to accept. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) note that validity has been a contention between quantitative and qualitative researchers as qualitative research examines social issues and it is not always easy to prove the logic through the analysis of social issues. To strengthen the logic in qualitative research, various strategies are employed for validation including triangulation or use of different data sources to provide evidence (Patton, 2002). A researcher using fiction-based research would use resonance as a measure of validity, which might be hard to prove, as a work of fiction would resonate differently with different readers, raising questions on the validity of the work. Resonance as a measure of validity might be difficult for a traditional researcher to accept and would always raise questions in fiction-based research. Leavy prompts researchers who use fiction-based research as a method to “make peace” with their work and “let it go” (p. 91) regardless of who challenges it. This is a great advice should questions on validity arise.

Leavy uses two short stories, *The Scrub Club* (pp. 95-145) and *Visual Music* (pp. 147-193), as well as excerpts from a novella, *The Wrong Shoe* (pp. 195-210), and two novels, *Waiting Room* (pp. 211-231) and *Low-Fat Love* (pp. 233-256), to illustrate features of fiction-based research, which she describes in the first section of the book. She also attempts to evaluate all of the

examples of fiction that she uses at the end of each story to show how they can fit the evaluative criteria of resonance, aesthetics, structure, thoroughness, trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and the writer's personal style of writing. In the first short story, *The Scrub Club*, the author, Bloom, explains that this story came out of her experiences as a teacher of a class of students who had been held back a year. This story shows how the school system treats students from poor backgrounds. In telling the story using first-person narration, Bloom shows a clear example of how social justice issues can be brought to the forefront in a way that captures the reader's imagination. Theoretically, Bloom leans toward a Freirean approach, which is emancipatory for the underprivileged. Throughout the story, she builds a compelling case for the main character, Mercedes, which helps the reader understand why the school system failed her. A poignant example from the story is when Mercedes shares, in her own words, an experience that she had with her friend Crystal at the school library.

[W]e got a project we need to do for Spanish and so the teacher [their homeroom teacher] gotta write us a pass. She tell us to go in quietly and get to work so we don't get in no trouble. That library teacher kick us out though before we even sit down. She say, 'you girls don't belong here.' (p. 104)

The librarian asked the girls to leave because of their "bad reputation" (p. 104), although they did nothing wrong in the library on that day. In the story, we read about Mercedes' experience in the library through the process of her thoughts as Bloom tries to explain to the reader how Mercedes met her friend Crystal and the bond they shared. Bloom allows the reader to see into Mercedes' thoughts, which helps the reader empathize with her and her situation as a marginalized student in an unsupportive school system.

This story supports Leavy's belief that the writer can create an even deeper understanding of the characters in a story through the use of interiority, portraying "interior dialogue" (p. 81), by putting a character's thoughts in writing. Interiority gives the reader an insight into the mental process of what the character is feeling or thinking while engaging in an action or dialogue with others. However, the concept of interiority raises further questions about the reliability of fiction-based research. Bloom employs the strategy of interiority to help the reader understand Mercedes' struggles as a young girl with absent parents, who is physically punished by her grandmother if she complains, and a school system that fails to help and serve her. Interiority is used in this story to help the reader understand why Mercedes decided to support her friend Crystal in a fight, even though she had been expelled from her previous school for a fight and almost removed from her home. Interiority used here, lets the reader understand the reasons behind Mercedes' taking the decision to support Crystal. "I'm thinking I'm probably going to help [Crystal in a fight]? Why? ... I got to back up Crystal cause she my best friend" (p. 121). Through Mercedes' story, the reader can see that Crystal provided Mercedes with the support that she needed and did not get from most adults in her life. This support from Crystal, led Mercedes feeling that she always had to be there for Crystal even if it meant getting into trouble.

Leavy concludes by demonstrating how fiction and fiction-based research can be used in teaching and learning to foster "critical thinking, consciousness raising, forging micro-macro connections and problem solving" (p. 259). In fields such as sociology and psychology, novels are being used to achieve these objectives so that students can connect and engage more easily with fictional works. An example she gives involves students reading and analyzing a novel instead of case studies. As in a case study, the novel has a storyline but is different because the storyline is fictional. However, the novel, which is longer, gives students an opportunity to

become immersed in the story, create connections between various events, and draw conclusions based on a deeper understanding that is gained through more information contained in the novel.

Overall, *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels* serves as a great introduction to fiction-based research. Leavy does a great job of explaining how the emergent research method of fiction-based research can be conducted, evaluated, and used. She does not address critiques of fiction-based research as this is clearly not the objective of the book, but this omission can leave the reader with further questions that might not be easily answered since fiction-based research is still an emergent method.

References

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Frances Kalu is a PhD Candidate, specializing in curriculum and learning at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.