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## Fiction, Feminism, and Qualitative Research: An Interview with Dr. Patricia Leavy

### Abstract

In this interview, sociologist Patricia Leavy introduces arts-based research, discusses how qualitative researchers can use fiction, and reviews her own practice of writing feminist novels including her latest release, *Film*.

### Keywords

Arts-Based Research, Fiction, Feminism, Novel, Qualitative Research, Writing, #MeToo, Women's Lives

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## **Fiction, Feminism, and Qualitative Research: An Interview with Dr. Patricia Leavy**

Patricia Leavy  
Independent Scholar

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*In this interview, sociologist Patricia Leavy introduces arts-based research, discusses how qualitative researchers can use fiction, and reviews her own practice of writing feminist novels including her latest release, *Film*. Keywords: Arts-Based Research, Fiction, Feminism, Novel, Qualitative Research, Writing, #MeToo, Women's Lives*

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**For researchers who may not be familiar, what is arts-based research and why did you start doing it?**

[Arts-based research](#) (ABR) involves adapting the tenets of the creative arts in a research project in any discipline. An arts practice may be used during problem formulation, data generation, analysis, interpretation, representation, or multiple phases of a project, or as the entire research act. I turned to ABR out of frustration. I had been collecting in-depth interviews for years, primarily with women, on a range of subjects including self-concept, intimate relationships, sexual identity, and body image. I felt what I was learning was interesting and would be to many. However, the traditional formats and venues available for sharing research are highly limiting. Academic journal articles generally lack the qualities of good and engaging writing, certainly by literary standards. The essence of the stories rarely comes through. They're also loaded with jargon making them inaccessible to most readers. Further, because they circulate in expensive journals housed in university libraries, they're only available to academic peers. They're completely inaccessible to the public. They're actually even poorly read within the academy, with most articles having only a few readers. Conference presentations aimed at small groups of professional peers suffer from the same issues. When I learned about ABR it made sense to me as a way to make my research engaging and accessible to relevant stakeholders both inside and outside of the academy.

**You specifically turned to fiction, writing novels and short stories grounded in qualitative research. What does fiction afford scholars?**

As a writer, there's so much you can do with fiction that you can't do with nonfiction. One of the biggest advantages is the ability to portray interiority—what a person is thinking. This offers scholars enormous potential to make micro-macro links by showing what a person is doing or saying versus what they're thinking and feeling. Fiction allows us to show the gap. Fiction also allows us to portray people's vulnerabilities in compelling ways, and those are the things that connect us to each other. It's also about how we can reach people through fiction. It's about how readers approach and process fiction. For starters, most people see reading fiction as a pleasurable, leisure time activity. People's defenses are dialed down. That's a very different frame of mind than when one is reading academic nonfiction or hearing a lecture. Fiction also promotes empathetic engagement and compassion. As we read fiction, we can become immersed in the fictional world, placing ourselves in the characters' shoes. We come to care about the characters. We see the world from the perspective of others. There's tremendous potential to jar people into seeing and thinking differently, to promote critical

consciousness and new learning, to challenge biases, and to suggest how things might be different. There's actually neuroscientific evidence that suggests fiction imprints more deeply on us, with the effects lasting longer, as compared to nonfiction prose.

### **How do you use qualitative data in your novels?**

I've drawn on interviews, ethnographic observations, autoethnographic observations, and insights from literature reviews. For example, in several of my novels I've created composite characters based loosely on interview research. Tash Daniels, the protagonist in *Film*, is an example. She's based on a composite created from years of interview research as well as cumulative insights grounded in years of undergraduate teaching and mentoring. I've included tidbits in my novels such as food items commonly mentioned during body image interviews. So for example in my debut novel, *Low-Fat Love*, the protagonist suffers from body image and low self-esteem issues. When she eats certain foods, she feels badly. Those items were all foods commonly mentioned during interviews. My last novel, *Spark*, was grounded in ethnographic observations made when I was a fellow at the 5-day Salzburg Global Seminar "The Neuroscience of Art."

### **Your novels feature female protagonists and subtexts about issues that predominantly affect women's lives such as sexual harassment, sexual assault, and body image struggles. Is it fair to call them feminist novels?**

It's fair. I'm interested in telling women's stories and showing the context in which women live their lives. So much of popular culture reinforces men's perspectives. When women's stories are told, sometimes it's not done authentically and doesn't represent what people's lives are actually like or how they might be different. I see my creative work as a cultural intervention, offering readers the chance to see the world through the eyes of female characters engaged in authentic identity struggles. Sometimes the stories I tell aren't necessarily gendered, but the prominence of female characters gives us a new perspective. For example, my last novel *Spark* isn't a story that centers around gender in any way. Yet the book has a female protagonist and so we see the story-world through her eyes. The story is for everyone. There's simply a female lead. I mean, imagine *Harry Potter* told through a female character instead. Why couldn't that happen? And how would the story differ? We tend to think of male characters as somehow universal, which itself points to the need both for feminism broadly and for female-driven fiction.

### **Picking up on that, your novels have been, at times, labeled "women's fiction" or "chick-lit." How do you feel about that?**

I personally enjoy and respect the genre of "women's fiction" so in a certain way, I don't mind the categorization. However, it can limit readership and negatively impact how work is regarded, and that troubles me. There are larger issues at play. When a woman writes a novel featuring a female protagonist it's often automatically labeled "women's fiction" or "chick-lit." When male authors write male characters they aren't saddled with "men's fiction" or "dude lit." Moreover, when a woman pens a novel featuring a male protagonist, she escapes the "women's fiction" label. The assumption is clearly that male characters are universal and female characters are not. That's misogyny. In this respect, there's no fairness in how authors have their work labeled. And it's important to consider who is doing the labeling. Is it the author? Is it the agent? Is it the publisher? Is it the critics and reviewers? How does this labeling affect book reviews, awards, grants, and other professional opportunities? How does it affect

readership and sales? How do these issues then snowball impacting an author's future publishing opportunities, including how much they are paid? The publishing industry, like the rest of society, isn't gender neutral. It isn't only authors, who are impacted, but also readers, and the kind of stories they're exposed to and the perspectives they gain access to.

**Let's talk about your latest novel, *Film*, which has been called "a tour de force," "gorgeous," "timely," and "a feminist fist-bump." What's *Film* about?**

Thank you. I absolutely love this book. It's the novel I've always wanted to read and writing it was a joy. *Film* follows three women who moved to Los Angeles to pursue their dreams. Tash Daniels aspires to be a filmmaker. Her short film was rejected from festivals, she has a stack of rejected grant proposals, and she lost her internship at a studio when her boss harassed her, forcing her to take a job as a personal shopper. Lu K is a hot deejay slowly working her way up the club scene, but no one is doing her any favors. Fiercely independent, she's at a loss when she meets Paisley, a woman who captures her heart. Monroe Preston is the glamorous wife of a Hollywood studio head. As a teenager she moved to LA in search of a "big" life, but now she wonders if reality measures up to fantasy. When a man in their circle finds sudden fame, each of these women is catapulted on a journey of self-discovery. As the characters' stories unfold, each is forced to confront how her past has shaped her fears and to choose how she wants to live in the present. *Film* is a novel about the underside of dreams, the struggle to find internal strength, the power of art, and what it truly means to live a "big" life. Frequently shown bathed in the glow of the silver screen, the characters in *Film* show us how the arts can reignite the light within. With a tribute to popular culture, set against the backdrop of Tinseltown, *Film* celebrates how the art we make and experience can shape our stories, scene by scene. In terms of the tone, even though it deals with some tough topics, it's a light, quick, upbeat read.

**How is it informed by sociology?**

Every artist brings her perspective and experiences to bear on the creative process. Our worldviews cannot be separated from our art. Who we are is integral to our art-making, across media. Everything we create comes through our filter. This is true whether you have a fine arts background, a degree in creative writing, a scientific background, or something else. I'm trained as a sociologist and therefore I bring a sociological perspective to every experience—whether it's watching a film, listening to a political debate, or writing a novel. My sociological perspective is simply a lens I bring to bear. It's a part of my blueprint or my filter. It's a tool. In this respect, it's interwoven into the entire novel. Sociology informs how I come to understand identity-building, friendships, romantic relationships, popular culture, and the relationship between our individual lives and the larger institutional and cultural contexts in which we live our lives. Sociology is on every page, whether it's a fun scene of dialogue between friends or a scene dealing with sexual harassment.

**Picking up on the theme of sexual harassment, which underscores the novel, how is feminism woven into the story?**

It's also a perspective I bring to bear on whatever I'm doing, so it influences how I see and thus how I write. In *Film* some of the choices are explicit. I wanted to tell the story of three women who moved to LA to pursue dreams, but really it's a story about the underside of those dreams, and all of the additional obstacles women face as they try to self-actualize. Each of these women's lives has been shaped, in part, by sexual harassment. These are just background

incidents, they're not in the foreground of the book, and that's important. They are simply a part of these women's lives and learning to negotiate these situations is something they have been forced to do, as if it's normal or natural. The plot also involves a male character getting a big break, while the women struggle, and what that looks and feels like. Through a flashback scene we see that Lu, one of the main female characters, came to the conclusion early on that a girl with a dream is on her own in this world. In some ways that's the fulcrum for the story. Yet the novel also suggests that women can empower themselves and each other, and thus not be on their own. That's a feminist message, too. In this regard, while there's a strong #MeToo subtext, I never use that phrase in that way in the book, but rather, I use the phrase "me too" at numerous points in the novel to show positive connections between characters or characters and the art they're passionate about. It's a reclaiming of what "me too" can also mean. These "me toos" signify love.

### **Who's the primary audience?**

I imagine women may be drawn to it, but really, *Film* is a novel for everyone. It's an uplifting book with hopeful messages about what having a "big" life really means, how we can have passionate work and personal lives, and how the art we experience and make can sustain us. Readers can pick it up on their own or for use in a book club. I also envision it being used as a springboard for reflection and discussion in a range of courses in the social sciences, women's studies, and media studies. There's a further engagement section which includes discussion questions as well as creative writing, research, and art activities intended for book club or class use.

### **What's your advice for qualitative researchers who want to try writing fiction?**

Read a lot of fiction. It helps. Begin from where you are. Don't worry about your experience or background. We all have to start from somewhere. It's good to develop a discipline around creative writing so that you work on your craft even when it's hard. Most fiction doesn't come from a bolt of inspiration, but rather sitting down and plugging away. Create a designated time each day or on certain days for creative writing. During that time, no social media or other distractions. Even if you don't like what you're writing, keep going. You can edit later. If you're not sure where to begin, use a writing prompt. You can go online and get loads of writing prompts or create one from the headline of a news story or first sentence in a book. If you want to connect the prompt to your research, take some of your data, such as an interview transcript or entry of ethnographic field notes, and create a prompt. Try writing a few sentences about your topic or use a direct quote. Then take the prompt and free write. Instead of writing from a prompt, you could also create a character profile. Take a few interview transcripts or information garnered from a literature review and develop a composite character based on key themes. Describe their appearance and personality. What is their central motivation? What do they care about?

### **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 nine book series with Oxford University Press and Brill/Sense, including the ground-breaking [Social Fictions](#) series and new *Art Plus* 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/>.

**Film is available here:**

Brill Publishers (TQR readers use discount code **71164** for 30% off):  
<https://brill.com/view/title/56116?rskey=iG4x9d&result=2>

On Amazon: [https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/9004414010?pf\\_rd\\_p=183f5289-9dc0-416f-942e-e8f213ef368b&pf\\_rd\\_r=WF5XHA44FX9FH9SR00J6](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/9004414010?pf_rd_p=183f5289-9dc0-416f-942e-e8f213ef368b&pf_rd_r=WF5XHA44FX9FH9SR00J6)

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