

BOOK REVIEW: CANDY FLOSS COLLECTION (3 NOVELS) BY PATRICIA LEAVY IS A TRIUMPHANT WORK OF ART

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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BOOK REVIEW: CANDY FLOSS COLLECTION (3 NOVELS) BY PATRICIA LEAVY IS A TRIUMPHANT WORK OF ART

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Abstract: Leading methodologist and arts-based researcher, Patricia Leavy, pioneered the method of social fiction, fiction-based research, or fiction as a research practice. Her latest release, *Candy Floss Collection*, is a set of three previously published novels, which together form installation art. This definitive and beautifully rendered work is important for several reasons. First, it demonstrates the power of fiction as a research method. Second, it is a beautiful piece of art. Third, it centres on powerful content, telling important and often invisible stories about women's lives, aspirations, relationships, and daily struggles. Finally, this collection is a well-crafted piece of public scholarship that is imminently accessible to audiences inside and outside of academia. Overall, *Candy Floss Collection* is a triumphant piece of art, an exemplar of fiction as research, a highly accessible piece of public scholarship, and an engaging read. This is a significant and even game-changing work and ought to be recognized as such.

Keywords: fiction; fiction-based research; arts-based research; research methods; women's lives

Leading methodologist and arts-based researcher, Patricia Leavy, pioneered the method of social fiction, fiction-based research, or fiction as a research practice, helping legitimize this approach to inquiry. As Leavy notes, fiction is an extension of what qualitative researchers already do as they attempt to achieve verisimilitude, create understanding, reveal social processes, and illuminate human experience (Leavy, 2013, 2015b, 2018). On the strengths of the method, she writes, “Fiction can draw us in, giving us access to new yet familiar worlds in which we might meet strangers or through which we might reflect in our own lives” (Leavy, 2013, p. 20).

Leavy coined the term “social fiction” in 2010 when she created the groundbreaking Social Fictions book series, which is an academic book series that publishes full-length literary works grounded in scholarly research. Scholars Jessica Smartt Gullion and Lisa Schafer explain the method of social fiction as follows: “In writing social fiction projects, researchers bind their fiction with certain sociological rules—and then create characters and scenarios that operate within those rules” (2018, p. 514). Leavy has detailed this methodology in numerous nonfiction books, essays, interviews, and conference presentations. In doing so, she blazed new trails for researchers across the disciplines looking for creative ways to conduct and represent their inquiry. The impact of her work on the academic landscape is profound when one considers the sheer number of scholars who have since engaged with the method of social fiction, graduate students who have followed in her footsteps, conferences and special journal issues that have taken up the topic, and the development of the online zine SoFi—to which Leavy has contributed—all of which cite Leavy’s work. The best among us lead by example and Leavy has done just that with the publication of more than half a dozen novels and a co-authored collection of short stories. It is in this greater context that one can view *Candy Floss Collection* as what sociologist Laurel Richardson, in her endorsement on the back cover, has called Leavy’s “definitive statement”.

Candy Floss Collection is a set of three previously released novels: *Low-Fat Love*, *Blue*, and *Film*, which have each been revised for this anthology. I have read and taught each of these novels on their own. However, together these works create an overarching message and illustrate the full power of fiction as a research method. Leavy does not define this collection as a trilogy, but rather as “installation art” (as she notes in the preface to the collection).

Before reviewing the merits of this collection, it’s important to consider how one evaluates fiction-based research so that we can better appreciate how *Candy Floss Collection* illustrates the power of this methodology. Leading art educators Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (1997, p. 214) noted the following 7 features of arts-based research:

1. The creation of virtual reality

- 2.The presence of ambiguity
- 3.The use of expressive language
- 4.The use of capitalized and vernacular language
- 5.The promotion of empathy
- 6.The personal signature of the researcher
- 7.The presence of aesthetic form

Influenced by Barone and Eisner, Leavy (2013) suggests the distinct capabilities of fiction as a research practice include, “Portraying the complexity of lived experience and illuminating the human experience... [and] promoting empathy and reflection” including self-awareness, social reflection, and disrupting stereotypes or dominant ideologies (p. 52). Leavy went on to create a list of 8 evaluation criteria that serve as the gold standard for assessing fiction-based research. Leavy’s (2013, pp. 80-90) criteria are as follows:

- 1.The creation of a virtual reality
- 2.Sensitive portrayals of people and promotion of empathy and empathetic engagement
- 3.Form, structure, and narrative coherence
- 4.The presence of ambiguity
- 5.Substantive contribution
- 6.Aesthetics
- 7.Personal signature
- 8.Audience

I will now summarize and review each novel. Then I will explain the importance of this larger work both as art and research. During my discussion, I will refer to the preceeding 8 criteria for evaluating fiction-based research, to illustrate how this collection serves as an exemplar. I will conclude with a discussion of how I’ve used these novels in classes and the potential audiences for *Candy Floss Collection* both inside and outside of academia.

Set in New York City, *Low-Fat Love* follows editors Prilly Greene and Janice Goldwyn as each woman is pushed to confront her own image of herself, her insecurities, the stagnation in her life, her attraction to men who withhold their support, and her reasons for having settled for low-fat love. Prilly is an every-woman who struggles with insecurities and “lives between who she is and who she longs to be.” She longs for a “big” life. When she falls in love with Pete, she thinks she is finally living. Yet there is a toxic side to this relationship that ultimately causes her to unravel. Janice, her counterpart, has what looks like a picture-perfect life, but really, it’s an illusion. When her alcoholic father becomes injured in a car accident, she is forced to

face her own dark history and why she has settled in life. There is an eccentric cast of more minor characters that help tell this tale, including Janice's college-age niece, Tash Daniels, who becomes the protagonist of Leavy's later novels. With a subtext about commercial pop culture, and particularly media aimed at women, *Low-Fat Love* questions the cultural landscape against which we live our stories.

When I first read *Low-Fat Love*, more than anything I thought it proves the astonishing talent that Leavy possesses as both a writer and social commentator. Anyone can read this book for fun, and yet, there's a feminist subtext that pushes readers to reflect on their own lives, and how their lives are shaped by the larger context in which they live. This novel manages to synthesize years of research without ever feeling like research and teaches so much without the reader feeling as if they are being educated. It manages to be a short, "can't put it down" book, while still inspiring the sort of reflection usually reserved for self-help books and sociology tomes. I have adopted this book as required reading in numerous undergraduate history courses, to discuss the American dream, among other topics. My students always respond in highly engaged ways. I have said many times, every student should read this book.

Given my experience as a reader and professor using *Low-Fat Love*, I was excited to read *Blue*. It did not disappoint.

Also set in New York City, taking place a few years later, *Blue* follows three roommates as they navigate life and love in their post-college years. Tash Daniels has put her aspirations on hold and is working two retail jobs to pay the bills, something many college grads can relate to. She falls for deejay, Aidan, and through their relationship she is forced to confront her life choices. Jason Woo is a model living the high life. He falls for a man nothing like what he expects and as a result, he is changed. Penelope Brown is a quiet, library-loving graduate student. Compared to the big personalities of Tash and Jason, she slips under the radar in her apartment but has a secret no one could guess. Over the course of the novel each character is forced to confront their life choices or complacency and choose which version of themselves they want to be. The bonds between these characters model what friendship and positive masculinity might look like. *Blue* is a novel about identity, friendship, and figuring out who we are. The novel shines a spotlight on the friends and lovers who become our families, and the search for people who "get us." Flexing her sociology muscles, Leavy writes in a way that the characters show how our interactions with people often brush up against backstage struggles of which we are unaware. As with *Low-Fat Love*, popular culture plays an important role in the novel, but this is a different story about popular culture. While the pop culture in *Low-Fat Love* is largely a negative force, *Blue* celebrates how pop culture helps people build their identities and make sense of their lives.

Once again, in reading *Blue* I was struck by Leavy's talent as both a writer and social commentator. I also appreciated the juxtaposition she created tonally when comparing the two books. While *Low-Fat Love* has a lonely feel, *Blue* is just the opposite. In the end, the novel is meant to inspire readers to realize that they are possibilities. That's a hopeful message and one that anyone can benefit from, especially college-age readers. I adopted *Blue* in courses as required reading. It resonated deeply with students, perhaps in part because it follows twenty-somethings. While they used it to reflect on a range of course topics from gender to the American dream, many also clearly used it to reflect on their own lives. I look forward to using it again in my classes.

The final novel in the collection is *Film* which takes place a few years after *Blue* and follows three women who moved to Los Angeles to pursue their dreams. Tash Daniels aspires to be a filmmaker and has found the courage to chase her dream. However, things are not going well. She has stacks of rejections and she lost her internship at a studio when her boss sexually harassed her, forcing her to take a job as a personal shopper. Her best friend in LA, Lu K, is a deejay working on the club scene. Everything changes for her when she meets Paisley, a woman who captures her heart. Tash works for Monroe Preston, the glamorous wife of a Hollywood studio head, who moved to LA as a teenager in search of a "big" life and is now consumed by haunting memories of the past. When a man in their circle finds sudden fame, each of these women is catapulted on a journey of self-discovery. As the novel progresses, each woman 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. As with Leavy's previous novels, there is an important subtext about popular culture. In *Film*, the characters show how the art we make or experience can give meaning to our lives. Leavy's commitment to feminism shines through on every page. *Film* is perhaps her bravest novel, dealing with issues sparked by the #MeToo Movement, in a sensitive yet direct way that will resonate with any reader. What does the American dream look like for women? What does the pursuit of happiness look like for women? How can women truly support one another? These questions are all explored. The ending is also deeply empowering, and even more so now that I know it is the end of a three-part installation.

I loved *Film* at least as much as the earlier novels. It is the novel I had no idea I was waiting for until I started to read it. We are immersed in a world tailor-made for any audience, one which offers an insightful glimpse into life after college and those confusing years of our twenties. The idea of a "big" life comes through. I found myself asking: At what point do we choose our "big" life or learn to accept that "big" means happiness and not wealth? When do we leave behind our unrealistic expectations of

easily attained success and embrace our true passions, even if they are hard and don't immediately offer a path to material prosperity? How do we get in our own way? How do unaddressed past traumas leak into our present and prevent us from moving forward? There are so many elements that demonstrate Leavy's expertise in explicitly and implicitly drawing out the truths at the heart of humanity in today's world in ways we can all relate to, while creating a story that feels incredibly intimate. *Film* provides an even more nuanced look into a phase of life already murky in some imaginations, yet one we can recognize from whatever point of life's journey we are on. It is another novel ideal for classroom use. Leavy's diverse range of characters helps students see versions of themselves while developing empathy for the complexities of difference. Her characters help us all realize that we only really see shades of people, tips of icebergs that often hide deep wells of pain.

Each of these novels has received rave reviews from acclaimed scholars including Norman Denzin, Jean Kilbourne, Sut Jhally, Laurel Richardson, and many others. It isn't difficult to see why. Leavy is a gifted scholar and talented novelist. Now in reading them as a collection, I feel this work warrants even more attention.

Candy Floss Collection encapsulates a decade of Leavy's pioneering work as a scholar turned novelist. This collection is important in four primary ways.

First, it demonstrates the power of fiction as a research method. It shows that research can in fact be creatively rendered. Returning to the evaluation criteria outlined earlier, Leavy has achieved verisimilitude or the creation of a virtual reality. Through detailed descriptions of apartments, dance clubs, and various work environments, how they look, sound and feel, readers can clearly imagine the settings in which scenes occur. Moreover, the dialogue and interior monologues, which move the plots forward, ring true. The dialogue is real, relatable, and resonant. In creating believable characters who interact with each other in relatable ways, Leavy has also achieved the sensitive portrayal of people and the promotion of empathy. For example, interiority is repeatedly used throughout this collection to represent what a character is thinking and feeling. Leavy's skilful use of this literary tool allows readers access to characters' innermost thoughts and through this type of engagement, empathy is established. The characters in this collection are in many ways profoundly and wonderfully ordinary, and this is no accident. They could be any of us. That is where Leavy's sociological prowess takes hold. In reading this collection we come to care about ordinary people. In doing so, we learn to care about other people we encounter day to day, and even ourselves. It is an act of empathy. You will root for these characters even when they do not root for themselves. Again, empathetic engagement is achieved.

Second, it is a beautiful piece of art. When judging arts-based research, this matters. Attention to literary detail does not take a back seat to the messages, rather, it reinforces them. Leavy is particularly skilled at dialogue, interiority, flashbacks, and balancing heavy scenes with humour. In this regard, the collection reaches its aesthetic potential by being well-written, using language skilfully, providing specificity and details, and using literary tools such as metaphor. For example, in *Low-Fat Love*, Prilly settles in life and love because she does not believe she deserves more, and she tries to fool herself into believing she is satisfied with what she has. In one scene, Prilly buys two items from home shopping, neither of which she likes. She tries to pretend the items are better than they are, a metaphor for her approach to relationships. In addition to aesthetics, Leavy has paid attention to form, structure, and coherence. The plots flow well, each scene carefully leading to the next, ultimately bringing readers to satisfying conclusions that suggest the possibilities for our lives exist in our own hands. Like all quality arts-based research, Leavy has also developed her own style or personal signature through the way she uses melancholy, humour, and joy in her writing as well as her balancing of scenes and narrative, allowing her to both show and provide commentary.

Third, this is powerful content that makes a substantive contribution to our knowledge landscape. This collection tells important and often invisible stories about women's lives, aspirations, relationships, and daily struggles. Leavy doesn't shy away from difficult topics. Sexual assault, sexual harassment, depression, body image, homophobia, homelessness, and low self-esteem are among the topics covered. The overall message shines through in the larger collection. As Leavy would say, "we are possibilities." In this collection, she goes further to show how this is the case. Furthermore, the way in which readers engage with these novels also stimulates reflection. Leavy has created gaps in the narratives, allowing for ambiguity, which fosters critical thinking. Readers must use their imaginations. I have seen this kind of reflection first-hand in my history courses as students unravel notions of the American dream and their relationship to it.

Finally, this collection is a well-crafted piece of public scholarship. Leavy's greatest talent is writing stories for varied audiences that can be read at multiple levels, from consuming them in an afternoon on the beach to doing a deep analysis in the classroom. When evaluating fiction-based research one must consider the audience. First, the novel format and style of writing are appropriate for the audience she aims to reach. Second, I found great personal enjoyment reading these books and my students have as well. I've used her novels in class many times because they resonate with the students in ways general historical material cannot, feeling accessible and thus understandable. They challenge students' taken for granted assumptions about American culture and femininity. In doing so, these novels have inspired both self and

social reflection in my courses. I could write a thousand pages of reasons to consume this collection on a lazy afternoon, since once you start you will not be able to put it down. I could also write a long list of reasons to use this book in your Contemporary History, Social Work, Communication, Film, Research Methods, Women's and Gender Studies, Sociology, and Capstone courses. Leavy has provided discussion questions and writing activities for book club or classroom use. The fact that such varied audiences can read this work, speaks volumes.

Although Leavy has provided the research community with a list of evaluation criteria for fiction as research, all of which are illustrated in this collection and which I have drawn on in my analysis, she suggests that at the end of the day the most important questions one should ask when reading research rendered as fiction are as follows (2013, p. 91):

- Did you enjoy reading the book?
- Did it engage you?
- Did you learn something?
- Is it well crafted?
- Is it well written?
- Did it stick with you?

To all of these questions, my answer is a resounding: yes. Based on my undergraduate students' responses, I believe they would concur.

In summing up, *Candy Floss Collection* is a triumphant piece of art, an exemplar of fiction as research, a highly accessible piece of public scholarship, and an engaging read. It is a significant and even game-changing work and ought to be recognized as such. I highly recommend *Candy Floss Collection* to arts-based researchers, general readers, and professors wishing to stimulate reflection and lively discussion.

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