

It's All In the Details

A Social Fiction Style Book Review of "Re/Invention: Methods of Social Fiction" by Patricia Leavy (2023)

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Article abstract

Patricia Leavy's *Re/Invention: Methods of Social Fiction* presents a highly readable how-to guide to writing social fiction as an accessible and impactful form of research inquiry. Providing extensive background information on the development and purposes of the genre and then discussing examples from her own social fiction novels, Leavy not only teaches readers how to go about writing social fiction but also explains why this is a worthwhile thing to do. This book review creatively puts into practice what I have learnt through reading *Re/Invention*. Through a fictional recounting of a book club discussion about Leavy's work, both the form and content of this review illuminate many of the key points, tips, and techniques on offer in this highly recommended primer.

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IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS: A SOCIAL FICTION STYLE BOOK REVIEW OF "RE/INVENTION: METHODS OF SOCIAL FICTION" BY PATRICIA LEAVY (2023)

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Abstract: Patricia Leavy's *Re/Invention: Methods of Social Fiction* presents a highly readable how-to guide to writing social fiction as an accessible and impactful form of research inquiry. Providing extensive background information on the development and purposes of the genre and then discussing examples from her own social fiction novels, Leavy not only teaches readers how to go about writing social fiction but also explains why this is a worthwhile thing to do. This book review creatively puts into practice what I have learnt through reading *Re/Invention*. Through a fictional recounting of a book club discussion about Leavy's work, both the form and content of this review illuminate many of the key points, tips, and techniques on offer in this highly recommended primer

Keywords: social fiction; creative writing; arts-based research; methods primer; research impact

Preface

As a child, I spent many weekends and holidays filling exercise books with stories, often imitating the Enid Blyton books I devoured so voraciously. Somewhere along life's journey, however, academic writing became a priority, and even though my scholarly writing often included short narratives, poems, and creative devices, I have not written a complete fictional story since finishing school. When offered the opportunity to review Patricia Leavy's (2023) how-to guide on writing social fiction, and knowing a creative response was welcome, it seemed the perfect opportunity to put what I had learnt into practice, and write the book review in the form of a social fiction.

This preface does not explain the story that follows, as my aim is to let the fiction do the work required of a book review through both its content *and* its form. Instead, it invites you to read this review with a different set of expectations. As Leavy herself said:

We write fiction differently from how we write nonfiction—with literary tools, attention to aesthetics, and the freedom that comes from imagination. We read it differently too—with our defenses down, with our emotions at the forefront, with a suspension of disbelief, and with the assumption that as a leisure time activity we are just as qualified to read it as anyone else. (p. 2)

So please, make a cup of tea, settle into your favourite chair, and prepare to enter the entirely fictional world of Lucy . . .

The Story

Lucy poked a few grapes into the last empty spaces of the grazing board she was preparing for tonight's book club meeting. It had been a draining day of emails, marking student assignments, Zoom meetings, and planning for tomorrow's lecture, but this act of artfully arranging crackers, cheese, hummus, cabana, salami, quince paste, dried figs, and grapes was slowly igniting her creative spark and shifting her mood in anticipation of the night's discussion. Tonight's book was *Re/Invention: Methods of Social Fiction* by Patricia Leavy (2023), a how-to guide and introduction to writing social fiction as a valid form of qualitative research inquiry. As an arts-based researcher herself, Lucy regarded Leavy as one of her academic heroines and was eager to hear if her book club mates had enjoyed *Re/Invention* as much as she had.

Lucy carefully picked up the now laden wooden chopping board she had rescued during her Mum's recent downsizing to a retirement village unit and carried it into the lounge room of her own tiny, ground-floor apartment. She surveyed the small, neat, living area. *Crikey, if I ever move to a retirement unit from here, I'll probably be upsizing!*

The room was particularly crowded now, with an extra chair brought in from the patio to add to the existing armchair and two-seater couch so that there would be enough seats for tonight's participants. As she put down the grazing board on a low table and dusted some stubborn spider webs off the patio chair, Lucy ran through a mental checklist. *Food, check. Chairs, check. Copy of the book, check. Pinot Grigio chilling in the fridge, check. Glassware, oops.*

Lucy went back to the kitchen, fetching wine glasses for herself and Maya, the hip young sociology lecturer who had moved into the apartment above at the beginning of the year; a beer glass for Jo, Lucy's Science Education colleague, who always arrived with a 4-pack of craft beer and insisted on leaving the two bottles that she didn't drink with whomever was hosting that night, even though none of the others even liked beer; and a water glass for Liz who was currently off alcohol due to the medication she was taking for incessant headaches, probably brought on by the stress of her recent move to a different university to take up a promotion to the role of Associate Professor. Lucy was just carrying these through to the living room when the doorbell rang. "Game time," she murmured to herself, before pasting a grin on her face and opening the door to her guests.

* * *

After the usual greetings, social chit-chat, catching up on family news and venting about work issues and colleagues, conversation eventually turned to the book.

"So, what did we all think about *Re/Invention*?" kicked off Liz as she refilled her water glass and poured a second glass of wine for Maya.

Lucy leaned towards the table to load up another cracker with hummus. "You all know I'm a massive fan of Leavy," she mumbled as she took a bite. "But I'm keen to hear what you all thought about it. Has it shifted your view about social fiction in any way?"

"Well, I appreciated the introductory chapters that gave some background to the development of social fiction as a genre and research approach," piped up Maya. "She draws on the work of a huge range of highly respected novelists and scholars to build a convincing argument in my opinion. I think that will be really useful material to draw on if I ever get the courage to tell my supervisor I want to write a publication in the social fiction genre and claim it as a research publication."

“Hmm, I think I’d find it hard to make social fiction fly in my field of Science Education,” countered Jo. “Most of my colleagues wouldn’t get it at all, and I’m not sure it would get counted as a research output. Not in our faculty at least.”

“Yeah, while I think there’s growing interest in arts-based research approaches beyond just us arts ed. researchers, it’s taking a while for the number counters higher up to catch up,” added Lucy. “What’s the attitude at your new place, Liz?”

“Well, as much as you’ve heard me whinge and complain about many of the processes at my new university, this is one area they are quite ahead in. I went to a seminar the other day with colleagues sharing their NiTROs—that’s what they call Non-traditional Research Outputs, funky name, huh?—and there was a whole range of different ways researchers were sharing the findings of their research. One guy did this amazing slam poem, there were a couple of docudramas, and an incredible tapestry . . . I think a social fiction novel would actually be quite well received, and would definitely be counted in my faculty.”

“Hmm, my arts ed. research group has been fighting for this for years. We are finally gaining some traction, with the new Deputy Dean of Research recently supporting several of us to get our less traditional work reclassified as research when the central Research Office had categorised it on our profiles as ‘other’, even if it had been published in peer-reviewed journals or books. So, it *is* possible Jo, but definitely not easy. What’s the situation like in the Arts Faculty, Maya? You said you would need courage to try and claim something like social fiction?”

“Yeah, it’s certainly possible in my faculty to have things like creative writing, film making, musical performances etc. count, but as an Early Career Researcher there’s still pressure to publish in top journals and create a fairly conservative track record that will get me through probation and promotion.”

“Leavy talked about that too, didn’t she,” added in Jo. “Hang on, I’ll find the quote.” Jo leafed through the fluorescent sticky tabs poking from the pages of her book and located what she was looking for. “Ah, here it is. She points out that many scholars are unfamiliar with social fiction or may not view it as a legitimate method of inquiry, so it can be challenging to convince supervisors that this is a path worth pursuing. She says:

I absolutely understand these pragmatic concerns. The ability to graduate, secure a job, and earn promotion are major goals in a person’s life that carry massive material and other consequences. I in no way wish to diminish that reality. Rather I encourage you to find ways to carve your own path through academia, doing work that is meaningful to you. (p. 39)

And then she lists some practical strategies for tackling these barriers.”

“Yeah, I thought that list was helpful advice,” said Lucy. “I’ve used a couple of those strategies when incorporating less traditional approaches into my research, but there were a few new things I could try too. I definitely feel I’m in a place now where I want to carve my own path and do work that is meaningful to me. Helping Mum with her recent move to the retirement village has really made me reflect on the way we choose to spend our lives and what we produce to show for it. Life’s too short to spend years grinding away at stuff that doesn’t move us, to write articles for stuffy journals that most of the world doesn’t have access to. I want the work I do to reach people beyond academia, to move the minds and hearts of those who actually deal with the issues I’m researching.”

Lucy looked around at her friends, falling silent as she realised her lofty thoughts and dreams had somehow burst through the confines of her tiny, cramped apartment and real-life existence. Feeling embarrassed, she reverted to hostess mode. “More wine, Maya?” but her mind was already drifting back to the disappointing email she had received at the end of her workday.

“No, you are absolutely right Lucy,” piped up Liz, noticing Lucy’s flushed face and abrupt change of subject. She made a mental note to check in on her friend later. Something was definitely rattling her tonight, but for the moment it was perhaps best to keep the conversation focussed on the book. Changing tack, Liz opened a new line of discussion. “You know, there are strategies this book explains and gives a name to that I’ve used in my creative writing for years without even realising. Now that I have a label for these devices, I can use them more deliberately and purposefully.”

“Like what?” asked Jo.

“Like interiority, flashback, and foreshadowing for example. I use those all the time when I am writing narratives, but never in a deliberate or planned way. They just sort of happen. Guess I’ve just picked them up from lots of reading over the years. I just do what sounds right in the moment, but I suppose if you are using social fiction to represent particular findings from your research you would want to be more intentional about the tools you are using and why.”

“Yeah, I agree,” said Maya. “After reading Leavy’s book, I’m more aware of what authors are trying to do in each section of a story. I found myself playing ‘spot the writing technique’ when reading a trashy novel on my flight home from that conference last week. I could pick ‘em all—probably because it was hardly a great literary masterpiece—so, instead of becoming immersed in the story and the lives of the characters, I was more interested in the mechanics of the writing.”

Jo selected a small bunch of grapes from the board, trying not to trigger an avalanche of crackers, dates, and salami. “Geez, we could make this thing into a game of charcuterie-Jenga, Lucy! I guess what Leavy is saying, is that successful social fiction must be well written so that we *do* become immersed in the story and those technical features don’t capture our attention.

“Exactly right,” said Liz, deftly catching a piece of cabana rolling off the board and heading for the floor. “It’s like a beautiful ballet performance. The harder the dancers work, and the more perfect their technique, the more effortless it all appears, so you get carried away by the story they are portraying rather than noticing the physical performance their bodies are producing. The years of practice and skill building are unnoticed in the final performance, but definitely underlie its success. Would you agree, Maya?”

“Yeah, this book made me realise just how much skill and technique goes into good writing. But it also showed how these are things that we all could learn. I liked the textboxes that provide tips and exercises as you go through the book. They all felt like things I could do if I wanted to go down this track. And I reckon they *would* help me improve my writing if I practised them on a regular basis.”

Snapping out of her mind-drift in time to hear the end of Maya’s comment, Lucy rejoined the conversation. “I liked how the exercises came in two versions—‘Skill-building’ if you want to improve your fiction writing without a particular project in mind, and ‘Rethink your research’ if you have an actual research project with data to draw on. It means this book is useful for any writer/researcher contemplating using social fiction, no matter what stage of a project they may be at.”

“Yeah,” agreed Jo. “While I can’t see myself using social fiction in my current research field, I have always had a hankering to write a novel when I retire. Reading *Re/Invention* has encouraged me to work on building my creative writing skills now. Do you write much fiction as part of your arts-based research Lucy?”

“Hmm, I tend to use image and poem creation mostly, but I’ve been thinking for a while about using fiction writing as a form of inquiry too. Leavy explains how she is not just using fiction as representation of data, but also simultaneously as the actual form of inquiry. Some of that process is quite ineffable. I know that’s how I feel about my image making and poetry writing too. It’s not just that I’m using art or poems to represent what I have already worked out from the analysis of my data—the new knowledge actually reveals itself in the process of the art making. I can’t really explain how.”

Leafing back through her fluorescent tabs, Jo interjected, “She does use the word magic quite a bit! That messed with the science-trained part of my brain, but I recognise she is saying that writing is a creative process requiring disciplined work to create opportunities for the unexpected to emerge. That seems kind of cool to me. I mean, you all know I love reading, and I just said I have a hankering to write a novel eventually, so being a science educator and researcher does not preclude a love for literature. I just hadn’t considered bringing the two fields together before. In chapter eight, Leavy goes into more detail about the processes of incorporating data into her writing as both representation and inquiry, which I found helpful. The middle chapters were mostly examples of various fiction writing structures and devices, and I was getting a bit frustrated. Like, where’s the research in these stories? But perhaps that’s the point of social fiction. The reader has to do the interpretative work and find the meaningful connections themselves.”

“Yeah, I was glad she explained a couple of alternative processes she has used too,” said Liz. “It shows there’s no one right way to do this, but also offers some starting points to try with your own research data. I really liked those middle chapters though, where she explains the writing stuff using excerpts from her own novels. I found myself getting quite hooked into the stories and characters. I’ll definitely hunt out the *Celestial Bodies* collection (Leavy, 2022) to find out what happens to Tess and Jack!”

“I know, right! I found myself getting invested in the excerpts too,” agreed Maya. “But then the reflections and discussion after each excerpt also really helped me see inside her writing process and decision making, which is what I was saying before about the skills and techniques. She is not just talking the talk but showing what it looks like in practice. How many of her novels had you read before, Lucy?”

“I’ve read most of the ones that she mentions in this book. Definitely *Low-fat Love* (Leavy, 2021), although I read the original edition, not the 10th anniversary one she uses here. I’ve also read *Blue* (Leavy, 2016), *Spark* (Leavy, 2019), *Film* (Leavy, 2020), and a couple of the early Tess and Jack novels—so clever how she uses stars and other celestial bodies as a running metaphor through that series. So yes, seeing behind the curtain into her deliberate writing decisions was fascinating.”

“So, do you think you’d give social fiction a go as a form of research?” asked Liz.

Lucy blushed again, thinking back to the email at the top of her inbox. She took a deep breath and decided to take a risk. *I mean, if I can’t count on this group of friends for support, who else would I turn to?* “Well, uh, I’ve actually already had a bit of a go, but just today I received a very adamant rejection email from the journal I submitted my story to.”

“Ah, I thought you seemed despondent about something tonight,” said Liz, reaching out to touch Lucy’s arm gently. “Rejection sucks. We’ve all been there.” The others nodded sympathetically. “But Leavy’s final chapter talks about that too. Perhaps that journal wasn’t the right place for your story, or perhaps it needs a little more polishing, or perhaps it’s just going to be one of those pieces that you put down as building your experience with the genre? I’m sure we’d all love to read it and offer you feedback. We could use the list of evaluation questions Leavy provides in the final chapter as a guide. Had you read that chapter before you submitted your work?”

Lucy shook her head. “No, I submitted it months ago, well before I knew about this book. It went to two reviewers, one of whom was cautiously optimistic that it could be salvaged if I wrote an exegesis alongside the story, but the second reviewer was scathing, so the editors’ decision was reject.”

“Good old Reviewer 2, hey,” muttered Liz.

Maya scooped up the final remnants of hummus with a cracker. “Well, the fact the editors sent it out for review means they felt it had some merit. It wasn’t a flat-out desk reject. Maybe using Leavy’s words of wisdom and her evaluation questions will help you see how to rework your story to submit somewhere else.”

“Hmm, I guess so. I mean, as I read *Re/Invention*, particularly her extensive discussion of verisimilitude in chapters one and nine, I realised that there were places where I could have included more little details in my story to build more believability and credibility into the characters and setting. Or maybe I could have used a stronger three-act structure like Leavy demonstrates in chapters four and five. But, because it was still out for review and I was busy with mid-semester marking in amongst my teaching, I haven’t had a chance to revisit it. Maybe once I finish the marking, I’ll have another look and use this new knowledge to make some changes.

“And then, please let us read it and give you some feedback,” pleaded Jo. “We’ll be much kinder than crusty old Reviewer 2!” The four women chuckled together, Reviewer 2’s image all too clear in their minds.

“Thanks girls. You’d think I’d be better at accepting rejection by now. But it still hurts every time, and this one felt more personal because I had really put myself out there by attempting the social fiction genre. My confidence has taken a bit of a battering.”

"I don't think the initial sting of rejection ever gets any easier," said Liz, gathering up the empty glasses and heading toward the kitchen. "But I'm finally at the point where I can see that my published work is better because I've had the benefit of reviewers' comments and the opportunity to revise it."

"Yeah, I guess so," acknowledged Lucy reluctantly.

Maya followed Liz's lead, picking up the almost empty grazing board. "Give yourself a couple of days and then look at it again. Follow Leavy's advice to be brave."

Jo flicked to the last of her fluorescent tabs and started reading from the book, "A final piece of advice. There's only one way to create fiction: write. Just write. As you do so, you will reinvent yourself, reimagine the world and invite others to do the same" (p. 206).

"Sounds like a good note to finish on," agreed Lucy, pushing the half-empty 4-pack box towards Jo. "Please, take them home with you."

"No, no, I insist. You keep them."

* * *

As her guests gathered books and bags and made final small talk on their way to the front door, Lucy realised she was feeling much more cheerful. She gave each one a heartfelt hug and couldn't help but grin as she locked the door after them, imagining the confused expression Jo would have later upon opening her bag and discovering the two leftover bottles of craft beer. It was an old trick Lucy had learnt from observing her Mum surreptitiously sneak leftovers into guests' coat pockets and bags during lingering goodbye hugs, but one she had never been brave enough to try for herself before. She surveyed the now quiet, cramped living room and realised that it really was all she needed. It was big enough to hold her friends and a few lofty dreams and that was all that really mattered.

As she returned the patio chair outside, she stared up at the stars and thought about Leavy's Tess and Jack. *Geez, Lucy. A rejection email is nothing compared to the traumas they faced and dealt with. Get a grip and put your big girl pants on. You've got some reinventing to do.* And with that thought she headed off to bed, ready to face another battle with her lofty dreams tomorrow.

Afterword

While it is up to readers to evaluate the success of my storytelling in building verisimilitude and conveying some of the content and insights Leavy offers in *Re/Invention*, I trust you will have noticed the incorporation of some of the mentioned devices. Like Liz in my story, I have learnt a lot about the technical language of writing by reading this book. This allowed me to be more deliberate about what I was doing and why I was doing it, but there were also times where I just had to let the story unravel itself. I didn't sit down to my writing with all aspects of the story planned out. In fact, I struggled for several days wondering why Lucy had pasted on a grin before opening the door to greet her guests, and I had mentioned the disappointing email long before I realised it would be a rejection notice. While I knew the key points I wanted the dialogue to cover about the book under review; the story aspects of Lucy's life unfolded during the writing, indeed like magic!

I thoroughly recommend *Re/Invention* to scholars interested in finding creative ways of exploring new aspects of their research topic, and particularly to those who are seeking to attract different audiences to their work. Leavy's detailed rationalisation, encouragement, and guidance will help you understand how fiction can be used for powerful social impact, and will also provide you with the tools and inspiration to be brave enough to give social fiction writing a go. May the muse (and the disciplined practice) be with you.

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