

A REVIEW OF INTO THE SEA

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Fiction as Research – Writing Beyond the Boundary Lines

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Résumé de l'article

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A REVIEW OF *INTO THE SEA*

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Jessica Smartt Gullion is the Associate Dean of Research for the College of Arts and Sciences and Associate Professor of Sociology at Texas Woman's University. Her own social fiction novel is called *October Birds: A Novel about Pandemic Influenza, Infection Control, and First Responders*. It is eerily similar to the COVID-19 pandemic and gives the perspective of health workers going through such a scenario.

Abstract: In this article, I review the social fiction novel, *Into the Sea*, by Ash Watson, and discuss the ways in which Watson uses fiction as sociological theory.

Keywords: social fiction; sociological imagination; C. Wright Mills; public sociology; review

As highlighted throughout this issue of *Art/Research International*, social fiction is an emergent method in which a growing number of scholars are engaging. Ash Watson's recent (2020) novel, *Into the Sea*, part of the award-winning Brill/Sense Social Fiction Series that is edited and curated by Patricia Leavy, is a prime example of how social scientists can use fiction as method. The books in this series are all informed by social research, yet written as fiction, including novels, plays, and short story collections. Watson's novel stands out for its commitment to social theory in particular.

In the novel, Watson draws on the theories of C. Wright Mills (1959), who argued that sociologists should study the intersection of history (contextually, what is happening in the world around us) and biography (our individual stories). The neoliberal cult of individuality denies that we are deeply embedded in the social and denies that who we are and the choices we make are results of social interaction. Watson skillfully demonstrates this is a fallacy, and throughout the novel we see Mills' intersection at play.

The story follows Taylah Brown, a character who is arguably on the cusp of having the "perfect life." She's a recent college graduate and has a job as a teacher. She has family and friends who love her. The book opens on New Year's Day, with flashbacks to the night before, when Taylah and her friends watched a TV show that highlighted important cultural events from the past year. One of her friends remarks about the show: "Same shit, different year" (Watson 2020, 7). As the year progresses, we can see that this has become Taylah's dilemma. Will she spend her life repeating the "same shit" ad nauseum because that is what society tells her she is supposed to do? Conversely, how much agency does an individual in society actually have?

The next day they make resolutions for the coming year, resolutions that are for the most part so generic they could have been pulled straight out of a magazine: Lose weight. Smile more. Run a marathon. Save money. Go fishing. Watson writes, "We try to become new people in January. That's the psychic reorganization the New Year brings. It feels shallow but it can run deep. If nothing else it gives us something to do, and someone to be" (Watson 2020, 17).

Throughout the novel, we see Taylah struggle with who she wants to be. Even with world events and tragedy swirling around her, with people seeming robotic in their behavior, she finds herself caught up in the machine of trying to achieve what society has deemed the dream life. With this dilemma, the book also opens up room for the reader to also critique what living a good life means.

The book is theory in action, ethnographic in style. The story documents life as a sociologist would, using fiction as a literary form to push the boundaries of what sociology can be, what sociology can do. We see Watson document both the mundane, day to day life of the characters (biography) and the interruptions (history) that disturb and shape a life.

Watson also employs a technique that many social fiction writers (and ethnographers) use – there is no real beginning or real ending to their tales (2016). Rather, they start somewhere in the middle of people's stories, and do not wrap up the book with a tidy ending. To do so would be counter to people's lived experiences – real life is messy and complex, and we don't get to live happily ever after.

Known for pushing back against the hegemony of academic publishing, Watson is the editor of the SoFi Zine (www.sofi.com), an independent journal that publishes sociological fiction, poetry, visual art, and other creative works. The journal has featured editorials by such figures as Les Back, Howard Becker, Michael Burawoy, Raewyn Connell, Patricia Leavy, Deborah Lupton, and Nirmal Puwar. An advocate for public sociology, Watson's body of work strives towards a sociology that is accessible and inclusive.

In Watson's article, "Directions for Public Sociology: Novel Writing as a Creative Approach," (2016) we can get an understanding of Watson's approach to writing fiction. She argues that "novel writing presents sociologists with a process and medium through which they can expand their work for a more public, engaging, affective, and panoramic sociology" (431). Fiction is one way of presenting sociological theory and research to a broader audience than such work traditionally receives. As has been noted by many scholars, academic writing is typically inaccessible to the public at large, because it requires a specific intellectual tradition to be understood, and because it is kept behind the firewalls of academic libraries and journal publishers.

In keeping with Mills, Watson (2016) notes the ways in which sociological fiction allows both the author and the reader to use their sociological imaginations, to consider how the personal and the social influence each other. In social fiction, the author takes an ethnographic approach, and draws on their own research to craft their tale. This differs from reading a novel in a sociology course and asking students to identify sociological themes. The social fiction novel is research, it is theory, it is, as Watson states, sociological work. "Sociologist-novelists have the ability to take the immediate and everyday experience of a public and hold it under a microscope: question values, challenge social processes, and create a dissonance within the public's image of itself by employing a range of stylistic literary techniques in conjunction with sociological analysis," Watson (2016, 436) writes.

Reading *Into the Sea* as an American, in the midst of the turmoil and death rates America is seeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, created a lot of cognitive dissonance for me. For months, my usual mundane life has been interrupted by this ongoing disaster, giving me a very different type of mundane life, one that is not representative at all of the socially constructed "good life." Like Taylah, I had my pre-COVID routines, my lunches with friends, my gatherings with family, my job and colleagues – yet that reality of what is supposed to be "the good life" has been torn to shreds, leaving me to wonder if my future has

permanently changed. I think this made Watson's book even more poignant, and even more relevant to today's world. For at the heart of the novel there is a question: What is a good life? What does it mean to have a good life? And who decides?

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