



A REVIEW OF PATRICIA LEAVY'S "SPARK"

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Rachael Dwyer is an arts-based researcher and lecturer in the School of Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Rachael's work focuses on the ways in which teachers' values and beliefs are effectively leveraged for social change through arts-based research methods and pedagogies. Her research interests include teacher education, music and arts education, decolonisation of education, women/mothers in academia and narrative inquiry.

Abstract: Patricia Leavy's latest novel, *Spark*, takes us on a journey to the wild landscapes of Iceland, alongside a diverse group of characters described as some of the world's greatest thinkers. Through their discussions, debates, conversations over shared meals and sightseeing adventures, we explore some of the most pressing issues facing humanity, by considering what it means to think, question and research. *Spark* presents academic ideas at their most accessible, and Leavy's artful writing shows us how fiction can not only communicate research ideas, but also has the power to change hearts and minds.

Keywords: fiction-based research; research methods; academic fiction; arts-based research

a spark exists
within, between, among
and within that spark,
entire worlds of possibility
(Leavy, 2019, p. 1)

Spark by award-winning sociologist and novelist, Patricia Leavy, tells the story of a group of the world's leading thinkers who are invited to a five-day seminar in an idyllic manor in Iceland, tasked with answering a single question: *What is the answer?* Much of the story is told through the eyes of Professor Peyton Wilde, a sociologist, who is given the task of reporting on the response developed by her group of seven characters whose knowledge, world-views and personalities could not be more different. We join them as they wrestle with how to approach the question, explore the Icelandic wilderness, and get to know one another along the way. At the same time, the reader's attention is drawn towards pondering some of the most important issues facing humanity.

Leavy's beautifully written novel expertly guides us through questions of epistemology and ontology, highlighting the way disciplinary processes provide us with the tools for solving problems; while also shining a light on the way our judgements and preconceptions limit our capacity to learn, to explore ideas creatively, to see things from new perspectives. Peyton's initial assessment of Liev, a neuroscientist, as arrogant and sexist, soon begins to fade as she learns more about him, and he begins to let his guard down.

We see the tensions inherent in contemporary academic life emerge in different ways: Peyton's imposter syndrome; the pressure Liev places on himself and those who seek to understand his work; the obstacles faced by Ariana, a young woman of colour navigating a white, male, scientist's world; the shy, bookish, philosopher Dietrich, who fights for his way of thinking to be valued in a data-driven world.

We watch as their interrogation of the question, and their informal interactions, show us there is no one right way, that all knowledge has value. We see Milton, a third-generation farmer who has never before left the United States, solve the mystery of what is making Ronnie, a visual artist with Coeliac Disease, sick.

Most importantly, Leavy shows us that there is room for us to be kind to those we disagree with, and that kindness can lead to understanding, a richer experience of the world. We see Harper, a dance teacher, draw Dietrich out of his shell as their attraction turns to romance. With Liev's unlikely support, Peyton faces her fear of heights and uncertainty and

takes a leap. They all remain committed to their values, but are all enriched by the experience of the time they spent together. Minds more open, lives changed forever.

The revelations in the final chapter serve as a reminder that our lives represent but one small moment in the history of human existence. As we feel the weight of the world on our shoulders, the pressure to succeed in our endeavors, we need to take the time to consider the bigger picture.

Through her ground-breaking work in fiction-based research, Leavy shows just how much common ground there is between social research and fiction:

Social research is aimed at generating meanings, creating understanding, and illuminating that which may be concealed in everyday life. Perhaps more than anything else, researchers try to portray lives, complete with nuance and context. As we attempt to interrogate social reality or some aspect of it and share what we have learned with others, we need to use all available tools. Fiction is a wonderful tool for getting at the complexity of lived experience and helping others to learn and feel. (Leavy, 2013, p. 37)

Leavy's championing of fiction-based research is, rather paradoxically, consistent with neo-liberal ideas around research impact. This is research that will actually be read, that will be learned from, that will change minds, that will make a difference. Leavy's writing and advocacy has completely changed the publishing landscape for those who do this work.

Spark presents academic ideas at their most accessible: a book that anyone who has a propensity for thinking might enjoy, while drawing attention to some of the crucial issues of our time, for academia and for the world.

REFERENCES

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