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A CHAT WITH PATRICIA LEAVY ON "RE/INVENTION: METHODS OF SOCIAL FICTION" BY PATRICIA LEAVY (2023)

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Christina Flemming Managing Editor of *Art/Research International***,** is a lifelong storyteller, poet, writer, and lover of music. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD in Educational Studies through Mount Saint Vincent University. She also holds a Bachelor of Journalism Degree from the University of King's College and a Master of Arts in English Literature and Creative Writing through Concordia University. She loves rosemary bagels, her partner Rose, and her daughter Matilda.

Abstract: Within this conversation, Patricia Leavy discusses her new book *Re/ Invention: Methods of Social Fiction.* As a leading artful scholar, Leavy shines a light on the slippage between fiction and nonfiction, and the long history of merging scholarship with the literary arts. Within the paradigm of arts-based research, Leavy views social fiction as a method. She speaks about how crafting academic fiction allows for research to become both an act of discovery and a pathway toward personal healing. Christina Flemming is delighted to hear more about Leavy's daily writing practice, her thoughts on writing as rewriting, and the metaphorical blender that is required to take one's lived experiences and transform them into academic fiction. You can learn more about *Re/ Invention: Methods of Social Fiction* via the Guilford Press website. To read more about Patricia Leavy, visit her website: https://patricialeavy.com/

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Christina: As you note in *Re/Invention* (2022), researchers have been using fiction as a research practice for many years. How do we differentiate fiction as research from, say, a fictional novel in a bookstore? Does the difference ultimately lie in the goal of the work?

Patricia: Yes, I think it's about the author's intent and expertise which they infuse into the work. Social fiction has a purpose beyond existing as a piece of art. That said, it should stand as a strong literary work. The best social fiction novel could be available right alongside traditional novels in a bookstore, and someone could read it simply for pleasure, escape, and entertainment, and yet, they may get something more out of it.

Christina: Where does the "social" in social fiction come from?

Patricia: I wanted to create a term to house all the fictional work that scholars do, that distinguishes the practice from traditional fiction. Social is a nod to the social sciences, the purpose of contributing to social research, and the idea of doing work aimed at helping us understand or reimagine society.

Christina: Is social fiction a paradigm rather than a methodology?

Patricia: I view arts-based research as a paradigm that's rich with methodological diversity and social fiction as a method within that paradigm. Of course, there are many different approaches to the method.

Christina: As a writer myself, I find that meaning often emerges during the writing process. Creative writing is often exploratory. Yet, for example, a doctoral student undertaking a dissertation must defend her proposal in advance of the writing. How can we defend, say, a fictional dissertation in advance of writing when we know that meaning making occurs as part of the writing process itself?

Patricia: Yes, I totally agree that meaning emerges during the writing process. I think when students defend a dissertation proposal, they're always defending their literature review, method, purpose, and questions. They aren't defending their findings, or what any of it might mean. For example, if a student is conducting an in-depth interview study, they haven't carried out data generation, analysis, and interpretation. So, they have no idea what meanings will emerge. Sometimes with traditional research practices, we think we know the answers in advance, but we don't, and we shouldn't. All research is an act of discovery, and we don't know what it means until we're done. So, to the student who wants to use social fiction for her dissertation, she'll need to be able to defend the method of social fiction as a

legitimate method of inquiry. Honestly, that's one of the reasons I wrote this book: to make it easier for students and researchers to do so.

Christina: In *Re/Invention* you describe how inspiration for your own writing can arise from an array of artistic forms and genres. In other words, you could find inspiration listening to a song, or through engaging with an installation in a museum, or via some other encounter with a work of art. Others might find it difficult to make an imaginative leap from one artistic form into a fictional world of their own, is that ever difficult for you?

Patricia: Sometimes it's difficult for me to take a seed of inspiration and know how to turn it into a complete work. So, a piece of art or something else may spark an idea—it could be a character, a theme, a part of a story—but I don't necessarily know the whole story. Or, what tends to happen to me more frequently is that I may see the whole story play in my mind like a film, but even though I know the story, I haven't a clue as to how to write it. Even when I have a fully formed idea, that doesn't mean I know how to translate it. For example, my novel *Spark* (2019) followed a group of seven characters. I had never written a novel with so many characters in conversation. It took time to figure it out. I even changed the narrator point of view I was originally using, because it just didn't work. I ended up scrapping two or three chapters. But it's important to remember that work is never lost. It teaches you and gets you where you need to go. I have a novel I'm working on right now that follows a narrative structure I've never used before. Even though I know the entire story, I'm not sure how to write it. I've been doing a lot of experimenting to see what does and does not work. I look at these kinds of writing challenges as opportunities to get better at the craft and develop more skills.

Christina: Researchers who draw upon their own lived experience naturally face ethical complications. One story intersects with the stories of many others. Fiction, therefore, can serve to lessen the ethical complications for researchers who draw upon their own lives, but in what ways does turning lived experience into fiction present challenges?

Patricia: Well, it's interesting because we tend to think of fiction and nonfiction as totally distinct but, really, there's slippage. These categories overlap. All fiction is in some ways based on something real. Fiction is supposed to be imaginative or made up, but the reality is much more complicated. Everything we write comes through our filter—the filter of our experiences, perspectives, and expertise. So, how do we take real experiences and fictionalize them? How much comes from our experience, whether that's personal experience or observations of others, and how much is purely imaginative? When we do fictionalize our own experiences or those of people

we may know, others are still implicated; how far do we have to go to create something different than the origins? There aren't easy answers.

Creating composite characters is one method. For example, when I've loosely based a novel on insights developed from my interview research, I've created composite characters that have traces of many, and yet aren't exactly like any. When I create characters that have some of my own DNA, I use my imagination to make them noticeably different as well. For example, I wrote my latest novel *Hollyland* (2023) during the lockdown. My elderly father had a serious case of COVID, prior to the vaccines. We are very close, and I didn't know if I would ever get to see him again. I wrote *Hollyland* as a sort of love letter to him. The story is entirely fictional, but the protagonist is an arts researcher. While she and I have very different personalities and life experiences, with respect to our love of art, there is much we have in common. There are also nods to my father, his family, and our relationship sprinkled throughout the book, but all through fictional characters. Few people outside of our immediate family would recognize them. Thankfully, my dad survived.

Overall, when thinking about some of the ethical issues around fiction, I think it's about protecting others. A story world should be its own universe—its own creation born from your imagination. When you borrow from real people, you need to take what's real and put it in a metaphorical blender, mixing it up with a healthy dose of imagination. When you take from your own life, you need to do an honest gut check to make sure you're comfortable. Although you're creating fiction, it may be quite personal. Consider how you'll feel if people criticize the book or don't like a certain character. Readers have strong and emotional responses to fiction and will often share those reactions in online reviews and the like. You need to be emotionally prepared.

Christina: Why did you decide to title the book *Re/Invention*?

Patricia: I think it's important to acknowledge the long history of merging the literary arts with scholarship. I very much feel like my work is a part of something much larger. Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Zora Neale Hurston, and W. E. B. Dubois wrote novels, novellas, short stories, and plays espousing their scholarly ideas. These are just a few examples of those who became celebrated. There are countless others who have worked in this tradition. So, the premise of the book is that social fiction is not a new invention. It is a re/invention.

Christina: Ever since childhood you have been interested in writing creatively. I often find, though, that researchers come to embrace artistic processes, like writing poetry, even without having any prior background in creative writing. What is it about

the process of undertaking scholarly research that encourages this kind of exploration, even for those with, say, a science background?

Patricia: I think people who are drawn to scholarship are naturally curious. Science and art are often polarized, but really, scientific and artistic processes bear many similarities. They're both processes of discovery and exploration that require creativity and innovation. They both aim to illuminate something about the social or natural world. They both involve asking questions, following hunches, using intuition, experimenting, and trying things out.

Christina: You have published extensively. I have learned, over the years, that setting a writing schedule is unique to each writer. Yet, I am curious about what your daily writing routine looks like.

Patricia: I write every day. A typical weekday for me starts with a walk on my treadmill, then checking my email while I have breakfast, and then writing. Often, I'll read and edit what I worked on the prior day, to get myself into the mindset. I'll write all day, stopping for breaks for scrolling on social media, food, and television. Now, when I say I write all day, that doesn't necessarily mean I produce new text. I may be editing, revising, or doing research. Some days I designate more to getting new words down, and other days to these other dimensions of writing. I also write on weekends, holidays, vacations, whenever—although generally only in the morning unless I'm inspired. I do have a rule that I only work on fiction on weekends and vacations, because it's joyful for me. I'm not suggesting that anyone else writes every day, only that it works for me. It's a life choice that I've made because I love it so much. Whatever schedule someone comes up with, I'm a big believer that writing takes discipline. Of course, it's wonderful when you feel inspired and it's just flowing, but you can't wait around for that. Sometimes it's really hard; the writing stinks, and it's grueling just to string a few words together. It's important to write even in those difficult times. The trick is that the more you write out of discipline, the more magical moments you'll start to have.

Christina: *Hollyland,* as you mentioned, features an arts researcher as the protagonist. Who do you envision as your readership for this work? In what ways could the novel be instructive for new arts researchers?

Patricia: It's intended for anyone looking for some escape, joy, or maybe a little inspiration. It's a celebrity romance that merges love story, suspense, humor, and some heartfelt moments. So, it's a light, feel-good read for everyone. That said, my fondest hope is that artists, art educators, and arts researchers will read it. The protagonist, Dee Schwartz, is an arts researcher, arts advocate, and creative writer.

More importantly, she has a deep passion for the arts. I wondered what would happen if you took a character whose love for the arts is pure, and put her in Hollywood, surrounded by industry folks. How might Dee help the others to see art anew? How might she help them to see Hollywood as Hollyland? So, while on the surface the book is a fun celebrity romance, there's a narrative about the arts woven into the story. It runs through the entire book, raising questions about the value we do or do not place on art, distinctions between art and entertainment, what the arts bring to our lives, the role of art criticism in society, the role of the artist in society, the nature of controversial art, the relationship between art and science, and the joy to be found experiencing or making art. I took both my personal love for the arts and the decades of research I've done and wove it into this little tale. My hope is that art practitioners and researchers see value in the book and find some joy reading it. I also think it could help sensitize arts researchers to some of what we may take for granted but perhaps can benefit from seeing slightly anew, like the characters in the book.

Christina: I once had a writing instructor who said that writing is rewriting. In his view, the editing process is where it all comes together. Would you agree with that?

Patricia: Oh yes. Writing is rewriting. A first draft is important because it's where you get your ideas down. There's a purity to that, but it's just the beginning. Once you have a draft, there are many, many rounds of rewriting to help the piece achieve its potential. It's during cycles of revising that ideas and themes coalesce. Revising is also how we achieve elegance with our writing. Choosing words with specificity. Weeding out repetition. Using repetition purposefully. Changing up sentence structures. Moving around ideas. Editing makes writing sparkle. I think of it like molding a piece of clay. You have to keep working on it, shaping it, smoothing it.

Christina: It seems to me that my best writing happens when I'm upset. Writing, for me, is therapeutic as well as scholarly. In taking the messiness of my own life and shaping it into story, I can reclaim my own experience. Yet, when I attempt to translate my painful experiences into fiction (for the purpose of research), it feels as if I lose the therapeutic nature of the process because I am not directly depicting what happened to me. Do you think writing fiction can be as therapeutic as, say, taking an autoethnographic approach wherein one writes the truth of what happened from one's own perspective?

Patricia: For me, writing fiction can be cathartic. The details of the characters' experiences don't have to be the same as mine, rather, the feelings. I've had this experience since my first novel, which was about toxic relationships and self-esteem struggles. While the inspiration for the novel was multi-faceted, I did draw on my

feelings about a very significant personal relationship. Getting it out, even in a totally fictionalized form, helped me to let go.

The most cathartic experience I've ever had in my life was writing my novel collection *Celestial Bodies: The Tess Lee and Jack Miller Novels* (2022). The protagonist, Tess Lee, was a childhood sexual abuse survivor, which played a central role in her life experience and the novels. I, too, survived this kind of abuse. Writing about the lifelong process of healing from that kind of trauma, especially through a group of characters who were kind and loving, was profoundly cathartic and healing. The collection explored learning to balance darkness and light in our lives so that we can live in full color. Writing it helped me on that journey. To be clear, the books in *Celestial Bodies* are totally fictional. The entire story world came from my imagination—every character, including Tess Lee. So, the story did not need to be based on my experience to be therapeutic. Rather, just getting the feelings out was cathartic. It's probably not a coincidence that *Celestial Bodies* is my favorite thing I have ever written. I think when we're able to take the seeds of something deeply personal and meaningful to us, and translate that into something fictional that many people can connect with in different ways, there's the potential to create a special piece of art.

Christina: In *Re/Invention* you talk about the push toward public scholarship. You suggest that social fiction can make research more accessible because people can understand works of fiction more easily than academic jargon. I have been thinking lately that activities such as leisure reading are often less accessible to people than we realize. How can social fiction be accessible to everyone, even those who might not have the ability or time required for reading a book?

Patricia: Well, I think when we talk about accessibility, we also need to compare fiction to traditional scholarship outcomes, like monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles. Those forms are not accessible to the public at all. Fiction is far more accessible. More people have access to it and the ability to read it. If it's a question of time, it's also about making time. Many people say they can't find time to exercise. It's important for our health though, and that includes our mental health and thus happiness. Reading is like a workout for our brains, and there's plenty of science to support that. It's important. People can find ways to build reading time into their schedules. The average American spends three to four hours a day watching television. We often have more time than we realize. Don't think about reading a whole book. Start small. Maybe a chapter once a week on your day off. Or maybe just a single page, once a day, as a part of your morning or evening ritual. Or maybe, just ten minutes every night or every morning. If someone struggles with their reading ability, the best way to get better is, like with anything else, practice. I don't

say this naively. I have a learning disorder and used to struggle enormously with reading. I read very slowly for much of my life. I read faster now because I practiced. I also began with books at a lower level than my age. Later I transitioned to plays. The spacing on the pages was easier for me than novels. Select books at a manageable level. For example, there's no reason an adult can't read young adult fiction. Also, select genres you're interested in. When reading is enjoyable, it becomes easier. Audio books are another option. They can be listened to while doing something else, such as commuting or exercising, and they eliminate the issue of reading ability.

Christina: I once facilitated a writing activity with my doctoral cohort. I asked them to write a piece of flash fiction during our methodology course. Each student was to write a fictional piece comprised of fifty-five words about any aspect of the research process. As it turned out, pretty much everyone, including our professor, wrote pieces that depicted their own experience. When I asked them if they found writing fiction freeing—thinking perhaps it could provide them with another research tool—someone said, "But we didn't write fiction!" Would you say that it's harder to write fictionally from the point of view of a researcher? Why or why not?

Patricia: That's a really interesting experience. Students often minimize their own creativity. I can't say which is harder. I think it's different for different writers and that it even varies across projects. I've written some novels where the first draft flowed out of me, and others where I've had to fight for every word. For new writers, it may be connected to their comfort level. Are they excited about writing fiction? Are they nervous? Do they have an idea they want to explore? Are they forcing it? Do they believe they can write fiction, or do they think the task is beyond them? I think it also has to do with how they view the relationship between the research and the fictional rendering. Is the research a jumping off point and thus a source of inspiration? Does the research give them useful guidelines for marks to hit in their writing? Or is the research a cage that they feel beholden to, thereby limiting their imagination? Some writers benefit from more structure and clear marks to hit, while others require more openness. I believe that social fiction exists on a continuum, with some much more directly grounded in data garnered from other methods, and some that's more imaginative and inspired by cumulative insights. I don't see any of this as better or worse. They're different approaches based on your goals, and how you're most comfortable working.

Christina: In terms of my own teaching, I find that students are very keen on guidelines. I tend to create assignments that encourage playfulness. Oftentimes students will fight this type of openness. They want to know what structure to follow,

and I want them to create their own structure. How do you encourage playfulness for those who may be unfamiliar with the messiness of the artistic process?

Patricia: I absolutely relate! I've had this experience with students, at conferences, and even with readers of my methods texts who will basically say they just want me to tell them *the* way to do something. All I can say is that the artistic process is messy and unpredictable. Therein lies the potential for magic. The best moments in my novels weren't planned. They came from me trying things out and, in that process, stumbling on the right words, discovering a metaphor or symbolism, or distilling an idea to its core. The best moments always surprise me. It's why I'm still in love with writing. Play, experiment, and have fun with it. Get creative. There is no failure. There's also no success without a willingness to try things out.

Christina: Writing is hard. What do you tell yourself when you really don't feel like sitting down and writing?

Patricia: Bad writing is better than no writing. You can edit later. You can't edit a blank page. If you push through the tough bits, you may find magic is just around the corner.

Christina's Final Thoughts

Ever since this chat, I have been thinking about Leavy's personal rule that she writes everyday, but, on weekends and holidays—only fiction—because it brings her joy. I find it difficult to use the word "joy" in conjunction with my own writing process. For me, the joy arises when I share what I have written with others and they, in turn, share their own stories with me. I find writing to be a healing process. I have a songwriter friend who directs his emotions into what he calls "healing songs." He says that every time he sings a healing song, the sting that went into each song lessens. I find that with the sharing of my own stories too. Someone asked me yesterday whether I write about my life for research, or whether I write for therapeutic reasons. The answer is both. In either case, I know little about where the story will go when I sit down to write. As Leavy said during our chat: *All research is an act of discovery, and we don't know what it means until we're done.*

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