Merging Historical Feminist Fiction-Based Research With the Craft of Fiction Writing: Engaging Readers in Complex Academic Topics Through Story

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Abstract

Drawing from the literature and the historical fiction-based feminist antimilitarist research I conducted in writing my debut novel, *A Sea of Spectres*, this article discusses the what and why of fiction-based research. I detail how to: (a) move from inspiration to fiction-based research; (b) frame the research; (c) develop research questions; (d) and embed theory and data in the story through applying the craft of fiction writing. My aim with fiction-based research is to create compelling characters situated in historical and contemporary settings in order to draw readers into engaging and accessible stories that help them learn about themselves, their understandings of others, and their relationships to society. I conclude with recommendations for conducting fiction-based research; delve into the methodology of fiction-based research; study the craft of writing fiction; read in related genre(s); abide by the ethics of fiction and fiction-based research; and learn about the fiction publishing process.

Keywords: adult education, fiction, feminist antimilitarism, fiction-based research, methodology, historical novels

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Introduction

Since the 1700s, fiction and social science have been interconnected by "both seeking to describe and to explain social behavior in new ways" (Berger, 1977, p. 6). Novels use fictional characters and events to comment on social life—and often to critique it—while social scientists conduct "systematic inquiry" through "evidence, theories, hypotheses, deductions, and experiments" (Berger, 1977, p. 218). But the two forms are also connected through their use of story (Banks & Banks, 1998a).

Social science scholars—as well as those from brain science, education, and the humanities—have long explored how humans understand and make meaning of the world narratively (e.g., Banks & Banks, 1998a; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cron, 2012, 2016; Czarniawska, 2004; Ellis, 2004; Febos, 2022; Frank, 2000; Leavy, 2015; Leggo & Sameshima, 2014; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016; Riessman, 1993). Story, as Cron (2016) argues, is educational. Methodologies that use storied forms of data collection and/or dissemination include autoethnography, biography, ethnography, life history, narrative, and oral history, with various foci on the self, social, and experiences of participants (Leavy, 2015; Nayebzadah, 2016). While academic research can draw on narrative forms of writing, fiction is different in how it uses aesthetic literary tools, aims to create empathy, and leaves room for ambiguity.

As a researcher, I have conducted autoethnography, life history, and narrative to understand the lives of my participants, particularly with respect to women's learning experiences in the Canadian military, grounded in feminist antimilitarist theory. Feminist antimilitarism (Enloe, 2016) problematizes the ways in which patriarchy, colonialism, militarism, and racism intersect in civilian and military life, with a valuation of obedience, discipline, hierarchy, and uniformity, and associated binary thinking that privileges masculine over feminine, protectors over protected, and friend over foe. As a fiction reader, I have delved into novels to learn about the worlds of characters, typically those that demonstrate the complexity of women's lives as related to war and violence, with a particular penchant for historical fiction that includes fantastical elements.

Recently, I have paired my academic research with my love of fiction to conduct fiction-based research, in which I fictionalize data (i.e., from academic theories, archival texts, contemporary documents, field notes, folklore, participant interviews, and visual analysis of museum exhibits) into flash fiction, short stories, and novels by focusing on the literary elements of character, plot, and setting. As an adult education scholar, I am intrigued by the ways in which readers can learn from fiction. For instance, Jarvis (2020) explores "fiction as feminist pedagogy" in her discussion of how "specific fiction uses literary and rhetorical strategies as part of an educative process" (p. 118). She has used fiction with research participants (Jarvis, 2006), asking them to read novels and write short fiction in order to engage critically with romantic ideals and

gendered identities (see also Jarvis, 1999, 2012). Gouthro and Holloway (2013a) discuss how fiction writing can be used in higher education to connect teacher education and adult education from the perspective of critical multiliteracies (see also Gouthro & Holloway, 2013b).

I am interested in fiction as a form of research methodology and dissemination for its potential to "cultivate understanding or critical consciousness, problematize dominant ideologies, and unsettle[e] stereotypes" (Leavy, 2013, p. 24). As readers become immersed in fictional narratives, they are assisted in connecting individual lives to larger contexts (Leavy, 2013). The general public is more likely to read a short story or novel than an academic journal article (Frank, 2000; Leavy, 2015, 2019), so fiction is an ideal way to broaden the audience of my research, which engages with complex academic topics such as feminist antimilitarist theory in the context of war and militaries.

Drawing from the literature and the historical feminist fiction-based research I conducted in writing my debut novel, *A Sea of Spectres* (Taber, in press), this article discusses the what and why of fiction-based research. I detail how to: move from inspiration to fiction-based research; frame the research; develop research questions; and embed theory and data in stories through applying the craft of fiction writing. My aim with fiction-based research is to create compelling characters situated in historical and contemporary settings in order to draw readers into engaging and accessible stories that help them learn about themselves, their understandings of others, and their relationships to society. I conclude with recommendations for conducting fiction-based research: delve into the methodology of fiction-based research; study the craft of writing fiction; read in related genre(s); abide by the ethics of fiction and fiction-based research; and learn about the fiction publishing process.

The What and Why of Fiction-Based Research

Leavy (2013) and Truby (2008) explain that fiction authors typically aim to entertain readers, engage their imaginations, and inform their understandings of the human condition. Fiction and fiction-based research are therefore interconnected. The difference between the two is based in methodological transparency. While fiction authors often include a brief summary of any research they conducted in the writing of their novel in a section at the back of their books and sometimes present or write articles about their research process, it is neither required nor expected that they do so. Their work can stand firmly in the realm of fiction.

Fiction-based research, however, has direct connections to academia and scholarship. Academics conducting fiction-based research make clear the ways in which their research is connected to their fiction, typically in the form of an introduction to or a section at the end of their short stories, anthologies, or novels (e.g., Conrad & Wiebe, 2022; Frank, 2000; Leavy, 2011). Furthermore, fiction-based researchers—typically trained in social science and

qualitative research methodologies—often publish their work in literary magazines and as novels, as well as detail their related methodology for those publications in academic books, book chapters, and/or journal articles (e.g., Leavy, 2015). In doing so, they demonstrate the direct connections between the methodology of fiction-based research and their fiction. This article, written in an academic style for an academic audience, adds to that body of literature. Using academic language, style, and citations, I discuss the methodological implications of my use of historical fiction-based research to engage readers in complex topics, which is of a different form than that used in the writing of my novel. The two forms—this journal article and my novel—have differing aims and audiences.

Fiction-based research is a creative practice that is aligned with arts-based research, a set of methodologies that gives research "new 'shapes'" in order to "make one's research relevant and accessible to the public" (Leavy, 2015, pp. 33-34; see also Banks & Banks, 1998b; Frank, 2000). Fiction-based research engages readers by "portraying the complexity of lived experience… promoting empathy and self-reflection… [and] disrupting dominant ideologies or stereotypes" (Leavy, 2013, p. 38). The fictional storied form gives "entry into what is otherwise inaccessible" with "access to imaginary or possible worlds," which allows readers "to re-examine the worlds… [they] live in, and to enter into the psychological processes that motivate people and the social worlds that shape them" (Leavy, 2013, pp. 190-191). It "creates innumerable possibilities," allowing readers to "bear witness" (Nayebzadah, 2016, p. 55) to specific situations. An acutely powerful aspect of fiction is that it immerses readers in the interiority of point-of-view (protagonist) characters (Leavy, 2015, 2019), meaning that readers have direct access to their minds. Readers can put themselves into the "interpretative gaps" (Leavy, 2015) of the protagonist's thoughts, feelings, and actions in order to not only better understand the protagonist through immediacy and emotion (Frank, 2000), but also to imagine how they themselves might act in similar situations. Cron (2016) explains, when readers are immersed in a story, their "brain activity isn't that of an observer, but of a participant" (p. 13).

Examples of fiction-based research include novels informed by sociological research into love and relationships (Leavy, 2020); an anthology about educational research in the genre of speculative fiction (Conrad & Wiebe, 2022); and a short story about sex workers in strip clubs based on cultural anthropological research (Frank, 2000). These pieces of fiction are the result of interviews, curriculum theorizing, and participant observation. While each of these types of fiction-based research draws on other forms of qualitative research that include a societal critique, the ways in which they are assessed necessarily differ.

A key aspect of assessing qualitative research is credibility, which requires that researchers transparently detail their research steps, justify methodological decisions, and make clear connections between research elements. Fiction-based research, however, is indivisible from

the craft of writing fiction, of which a contemporary central element is "show, don't tell" (Cron, 2012, 2016). In other words, fiction authors embed the research that informs their work in the background instead of foregrounding it (an info dump is anathema); provide ambiguity in the narrative to allow readers to imaginatively engage with the story (so readers can fill in the "interpretive gaps"); and do not spell out authorial intent, conceptual/theoretical grounding, or themes (the story belongs to the characters and the readers, not the author).

Therefore, fiction-based research is assessed by the following, as described by Leavy (2013):

- Resonance—the story is viewed as possible in its own context.
- Aesthetics—the appropriate use of literary tools such as plot, dialogue, scenes, visuals, character development, and interiority.
- Narrative congruence—a strong story structure.
- Empathetic engagement—the use of emotion so readers connect to characters.
- Ambiguity—the provision of space for readers to make their own meaning from the narrative.
- Verisimilitude—the story comes authentically alive for readers in its specific details.
- Authorial voice—the author has a unique tone/way of telling the story.

Additionally, in fiction-based research, literary artfulness must be in balance with social usefulness (Leavy, 2013), in that an engaging story must also have societal meaning. Social usefulness, while often present in fiction (Berger, 1977; Leavy, 2013; Turby, 2008), is not a requirement of it. There is a continual "interplay between fiction and nonfiction" (Leavy, 2018, p. 191), with a "symbiotic relationship between the real world and the mirror of fiction" (Crummey, 2019, p. 10). Leavy (2015) argues that stories which blur "'the real' and 'the imaginary'… are no less truthful in communicating human experience" (pp. 39–40); in fact, they often "ring true" (p. 58) more than the presentation of facts. "Imagining" through fiction "is an integral part of the process of learning" (Leavy, 2015, p. 28). Banks and Banks (1998b) likewise decry the ways in which fact and fiction are often positioned as in contradiction with one another, explaining that "the opposite of fact isn't fiction but something like error" (p. 13).

Fiction offers the opportunity for readers to become immersed in complicated lives that differ from their own, often resulting in increased empathy and understanding. Frank's (2000) scholarship is a telling example; in writing short stories about her research in strip clubs, she aims to problematize stereotypes by "elucidating the complexity of power relations and human interactions" (p. 483). Her stories provide imaginative space to support readers in creating their own "alternative interpretations" (Frank, p. 482) from the research. As such, the findings—in the form of fiction—do not taper down to one set of conclusions but open up to multiple meanings.

A Sea of Spectres: How to…

In this section, I describe the process I followed for my fiction-based research that resulted in my debut novel, *A Sea of Spectres*. Although each of the elements outlined below are separated out for the purpose of explanation, they are intersecting and iterative. As I researched and wrote, my inquiry variously narrowed, deepened, and widened again. The writing of the novel itself was also part of the research, which Leavy (2013) calls writing as inquiry. As I developed character and narrative arcs, the story came alive for me, assisting me in learning more about the related historical and contemporary contexts; lived experiences of people in those eras and locations; and implications for my narrative. So, while the description below detailing my inspiration, framing, and research questions, as well as my use of theory and data, is straightforward and linear; it was in reality a messy (and productive) process.

Several years ago, as I was working on an early draft of my novel, I published an article that positioned my research for this novel at the intersection of autoethnography, public pedagogies, and historical fiction, due to its connection to my own familial history, my research in museums and heritage sites, and my choice to publish in the genre of historical fiction (Taber, 2018). Since then, I have learned much more about fiction-based research and about the craft of writing fiction. I attended fiction workshops on how to create plots, develop characters, increase tension, and heighten emotion, applying what I had learned to my novel. I also continued to read books on the craft of writing fiction (e.g., Brody, 2018; Burroway & Stuckey-French, 2007; Cron, 2012, 2016; King, 2000; Lamott, 1995; Nelson, 2012; Prose, 2006). Based on this learning as well as feedback from beta readers, critique partners, instructors, an editor, and (much later) my literary agent and my publisher's editor, I rewrote (several times) my novel in a more intentional and methodical way.

For context, the logline of my novel, *A Sea of Spectres*, is:

> A multi-timeline novel, inspired by Acadian folklore, in which an ocean-phobic detective evades the deadly lure of a phantom ship on the choppy coastline of Prince Edward Island by delving into her family's history and harnessing her matrilineal powers of premonition.

Using my novel as an example, I discuss how to frame the story, draft research questions, and embed theory and data in the story.

How to Frame the Story

The qualitative research process often starts before specific research questions are drafted, as researchers identify a topic based on their interest, expertise, and (sometimes) passion (Agee, 2009). Fiction-based research is similar. For me, a story idea usually springs from a wild fact about a woman's life with unique potential.

When my mother sent me a magazine article about one of my ancestors, Madeleine Doiron, who lived through the Acadian expulsion[1] in the 1700s, with her experiences eclipsed by those of her husband, Alexis, I wanted to know more about her. It not only seemed wrong that her life had been overshadowed by Alexis', but learning about her would help me learn more about my family's ancestry. As Madeleine's historical record was thin (mainly dates of birth, marriage, and expulsion to France, as well as the time frame of her eventual return), I turned to fiction-based research to learn more about her life, making her one of my protagonists. During this time frame, my father mentioned a contest to win a Prince Edward Island (PEI) almanac focused on 1864. I won a copy and read about a Charlottetown bank cleaner who was accused of stealing bank notes. There was little other information about the alleged theft, so I decided to base another protagonist (Celeste) in that context, positioning her as a descendant of Madeleine. In deciding on these characters and contexts, I intuitively answered Leavy's (2013) first question that frames fiction-based research, "What is the story you want to tell?" (p. 55), in that I was inspired by real events and two specific women whose lives were largely lost to history.

The second question Leavy (2013) uses for framing, which was a more conscious one for me, is: "What are the issues, experiences, themes, and/or micro-macro connections you want to explore?" (p. 55). My research program as a whole centres on the intersection of gender, learning, and militarism, so I drew on this thematic expertise to inform my novel, particularly with respect to the experiences of women in relation to war, militarism, and violence. I also wanted to connect historical and contemporary contexts, demonstrating how the ways in which women live in the present are informed by and extend from how they lived in the past. As Truby (2008) explains, historical fiction authors "use the past as a pair of glasses through which the audience can see itself more closely today" (p. 184). This concept helped me create my third protagonist, Raina, a PEI police detective (and a descendant of Madeleine and Celeste), grounded in my research about Canadian military women, as police and military forces are similar in the ways in which their environments are gendered and masculinized.

As fiction-based research blends academic research with the craft of writing fiction, I have also drawn on guides that focus on how to develop characters within compelling narrative arcs that keep readers immersed. Cron's (2012, 2016) work has been particularly helpful with her discussion of how humans learn about and understand the world through narrative. Indeed, she calls fiction writers "among the most powerful people in the world" because they "transport readers to places they've never been, catapult them into situations they've only dreamed of, and reveal subtle universal truths that just might alter their entire perception of reality" (Cron,

[1] The Acadians were descendants of French settlers in Acadia, which is now New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and parts of Quebec, Canada as well as Maine, USA. They were expelled by the English from 1755-1764. Many were transported to France and Britain. Some hid from the English, others later returned to Canada, and some migrated to places such as Louisiana, USA, and the Caribbean.

2012, p. 2). Cron (2016) outlines four steps to consider before beginning a novel. I have nested them within Leavy's (2013) two questions to demonstrate how fiction-based methodology can work when combined with the craft of writing fiction:

- "What is the story you want to tell?" (Leavy, 2013, p. 55)
  - Describe "that first pinprick" that is the inspiration for the story (Cron, 2016, p. 46).
- "What are the issues, experiences, themes, and/or micro-macro connections you want to explore?" (Leavy, 2013, p. 55).
  - "Why do you care?" (Cron, 2016, p. 48).
  - "What is your point?" (Cron, 2016, p. 49).
  - "Draf[t] your what if" by writing "something specific, with context, conflict, and a hint of a surprise… that will make your point" (Cron, 2016, p. 52). The response to "what if" forms the basis of the story's premise.

In answer to Cron's questions, I cared about the story because of the real women who inspired it. My point was an exploration of women's lives as connected to war and (para)military contexts in historical and contemporary times. I asked myself (in what became my specific research question as discussed below): What if the lives of Madeleine, Celeste, and Raina intersected with each other and with Acadian folklore?

Cron (2016) further explains the importance of connecting everything in a story to the "third rail," which is "the protagonist's internal struggle," and the "novel's live wire," which she likens to "the electrified rail [on a subway train] that supplies the juice that drives the car forward" (p. 3). For my novel, this meant determining the heart of each protagonist's emotional journey. What did each of them want? What did they need to learn? What could readers learn along with them? Answering these general questions helped me frame specific research questions.

How to Draft Research Questions

Guided by the methodology of fiction-based research, including my responses to Leavy and Cron's questions as detailed above, I immersed myself in nonfiction books and journal articles about the Acadian expulsion, Acadian women, Acadian folklore, PEI itself (Île St. Jean in Madeleine's time), and the Seven Years War; visited museums and heritage sites that focused on the expulsion and the history of PEI; searched through documents at the Public Archives and Records Office; and continued my research on women's experiences in the contemporary Canadian military. I amassed pages of notes and files of photographs, which informed my understanding of historical and contemporary contexts and gave me background from which to develop my characters. This research became the basis for the story.

Eventually, I developed one overarching research question: How do the lives of three generations of Acadian women, with matrilineal powers of premonition based on Acadian

folklore, intersect across time and place, as connected to wars and (para)military organizations? I also created a research question for each protagonist in their respective time periods, connected through that overarching research question:

- How would an 18th century young mother (Madeleine) help her family survive during the Acadian expulsion?
- Why would a 19th century bank cleaner (Celeste) consider stealing bank notes?
- How would a 21st century police detective (Raina) navigate the rational and the fantastical in her work and her family life?

These questions framed my writing as I fictionalized my data (research notes, photographs, archival searches, and museum and heritage site visits) into my novel's plot, characters, and settings. My writing itself also became a source of data and a form of inquiry, as I learned about my protagonists through creating their interactions with themselves (their emotional journeys), others (the characters they had connections to and conflict with), and their societal setting (their geographic, temporal, organizational, and political contexts). My research was at the centre of my creative process as a fiction author, as it informed my decision-making (what happened in each scene; how characters felt, thought, acted, and spoke; how the plot advanced; and how setting was described) but, in the final draft, it was not forefronted. Doing so would be to commit the fiction writer's sin of info-dumping, including details that do not serve the story (a balancing act I will discuss in the next section).

How to Embed Theory and Data in Story

As one of the purposes of fiction-based research is to reach a non-academic audience (Frank, 2000; Leavy, 2015), then the academic aspect of the resulting fiction must be threaded through the work in a way that makes the story both accessible and engaging. By drawing on feminist antimilitarist theory and the ways in which Acadian and PEI women were affected by war, militaries, and violence, I aimed to "express complex layers of meaning" with "reflexive engagement" (p. 61) by "link[ing] the micro and macro" (Leavy, 2015, p. 64). Historical fiction is fascinating to me because of the ways in which it often exhibits how past and contemporary power relations intersect. As Leggo and Sameshima (2014) discuss, fiction can "hold [facts of] the past in a certain light in order to interpret" the present (p. 540). Additionally, historical fiction can demonstrate how women—regardless of time period or geographical location—have complex agentic identities; they are not passive victims of patriarchy but work within their contexts to live within, adapt to, resist, and/or contest marginalization and oppression.

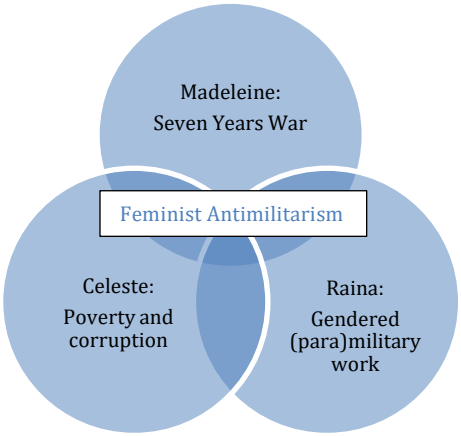
Readers would not be able to define feminist antimilitarism by reading my novel, but my hope is that they understand its underpinnings through, as Frank (2000) discusses, the "portray[al of] a complexity of lived experience in fiction that might not always come across in a theoretical

explication" (p. 483). Gouthro (2019) argues for the importance of theory in adult education research, teaching, and practice as it assists academics and students in understanding and critiquing structural forms of injustice. Theory, however, is "usually dense, challenging, and laden with jargon—specific technical terms or phrases that are not used in everyday language, and therefore often difficult to comprehend" (p. 67). She nonetheless calls for the continued need for adult education scholars, professors, and students to engage with theory. I quite agree, and I propose an additional means to do so through fiction (Leavy, 2015).

Feminist antimilitarist theory (Enloe, 2016) problematizes the ways in which women are often represented as passive victims who are either peace-loving and/or need to be protected by men; demonstrates how women live complex lives that include moral acts, questionable judgment, reverberating mistakes, and redemption; illuminates how individual lives intersect with organizational and societal relations of power; and focuses on the interconnections among war, violence, militaries, and society. Keeping these theoretical points in mind assisted me in creating complicated characters who defied stereotypes and questioned the negative ways their lives were affected by wars and militaries. Figure 1 illustrates how I embedded my research and use of feminist antimilitarist theory into my fiction.

Figure 1

The Intersection of Characters, Context/Themes, and Theory



In my novel, while Madeleine has little choice but to leave her home in PEI and board a ship to France due to the Seven Years War, she actively works to protect her family through her healing skills, capacity to foster joy, and ability to connect with others. She bemoans how her family's life is pulled into the war between France and England by kings who have never stepped foot on her island's shores. Celeste lives in poverty, so she moves with her sister to the city to find work. When the bank cheats her, she considers stealing and avoiding police forces to help survive, mulling over the ethics of her decisions. Raina is an independent and successful police

detective with much control over her own life, but she still experiences discrimination as a woman in a male-dominated, masculine occupation and struggles to gain recognition for her work. My protagonists' lives are tied together not only through family but also through the social structures of (para)military forces across the centuries, which feminist antimilitarist theory assisted me in illuminating by embedding it in the lives of my protagonists.

My research about the Seven Years War, poverty and corruption, and para(military) work is likewise not spelled out in the novel, but readers get an embodied sense of living within these contexts through my use of, as Burroway and Stuckey-French (2007) explain, "specific, definite, concrete, particular details… [which] are the life of fiction" (p. 26). For instance, with Madeleine, instead of including a description of why the Acadians were expelled from parts of what are now Canada and the United States (as I did in a footnote above for readers of this article), I showed how the war affected her life. She would have known little about the large-scale politics at the time, but she experienced (and with her, the reader) the difficulties of being torn from her home and locked into the hold of a ship for a 12-week crossing by enemy soldiers and sailors who spoke a language she did not understand. For Celeste, I described the long and cold winters she and her family suffered through, not by detailing weather patterns and cabin construction, but by having the narration include a description of how they cut their long underwear off with the arrival of spring, "separating it from the flesh and hair that'd grown through the cloth." For Raina, I did not include a discussion of how women are marginalized in gendered organizations but wrote a scene in which a senior officer admonishes her for "not being a team player," in other words, not conforming to male norms. Febos (2022) explains that "specificity reveals some larger truth" (p. 4). So, by focusing on a few particular details of my protagonists, I can help my readers understand their lives (and how the personal and the political, micro and macro intersect) in an immersive way.

Recommendations

Turning to fiction-based research has reinvigorated my approach to my scholarship as well as provided opportunities for me to learn about the craft of fiction, engage creatively with theory and data, and gain new insight into my research contexts. I offer the following recommendations for those considering the possibility of conducting fiction-based research: delve into the methodology of fiction-based research; study the craft of writing fiction; read in related genre(s); abide by the ethics of fiction and fiction-based research; and learn about the fiction publishing process.

Delve Into the Methodology of Fiction-Based Research

This might seem obvious, but making methodological arguments for this type of research is even more important than for more common forms of qualitative methodologies. While the

research aspect of fiction-based research should be invisible in the fiction itself, researchers should make the methodology clear in other writings, such as journal articles, academic chapters, and author notes. In this way, researchers can argue for why their fiction writing is indeed research (this might be more or less important for academics, depending on their discipline, university policies, and collective agreements, as well as whether they are tenured) and assist others in understanding and conducting fiction-based research.

In the academic works I have referenced in this article, there is a wide variety in how fiction-based research was undertaken and how it is described methodologically. For instance, Leavy (2013, 2015, 2018) tends to focus more on the what and the why than the how. Leavy's (2013) *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels*, which I highly recommend, has three parts: the first discusses how fiction-based research relates to other forms of narrative writing and why one should conduct fiction-based research, with chapters on designing and evaluating fiction-based research; the second includes examples of short stories, a novella, and novels that emerged from fiction-based research; and the third describes how to use fiction pedagogically. Frank (2000) begins her article with a short story, immersing the reader in the narrative about her research context, and then describes the methodological implications. My aim in this article is to add to understandings of fiction-based research as well as outline the methodological "how." By reading a variety of these sources, scholars wanting to conduct fiction-based research will gain comprehension in both breadth and depth. Additionally, these methodological discussions demonstrate the ways in which fiction-based research can be undertaken in various fields with related theories, such as cultural anthropology (Frank, 2000), education (Conrad & Wiebe, 2022), feminist adult education (Taber, 2018, 2020, 2022b, 2022c, 2023), and sociology and gender studies (Leavy, 2013).

Study the Craft of Writing Fiction

Cron (2012) argues that while humans recognize and understand the world through story innately, their ability to tell stories is not so intrinsic, which is precisely why learning to write fiction can be so difficult. However, there are several useful and productive ways to do so: read books about the craft of writing fiction, join critique groups, and take fiction writing workshops. There is a plethora of fiction craft books, each of which have assisted me (e.g., Brody, 2018; Burroway & Stuckey-French, 2007; Cron, 2012, 2016; King, 2000; Lamott, 1995; Nelson, 2012; Prose, 2006). I now plot my novels using processes described in two books: Cron's (2016) *Story Genius* and Brody's (2018) *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*. The former ensures I have the third rail (the thread that holds the character and narrative arcs together) and the latter gives my novel the structure it needs.

Cron's pinprick often arrives unexpectedly for me. In my debut novel, it was the article about Madeleine and almanac newspaper snippet about a bank cleaner. In my short story, *Bombshell*

Beauties (Taber, 2022a), the pinprick was a photograph in a museum exhibit book about a Miss War Worker pageant that took place in Toronto, Ontario during World War II. These pinpricks inform the story I want to tell (Leavy, 2013). I then answer Cron's (2016) questions, in a few paragraphs each—Why do I care? What's my point? What if [premise]? which helps me outline "the issues, experiences, themes, and/or micro-macro connections" (Leavy, 2013, p. 55) I want to explore, and keeps the narrative centred on the third rail. I then research the time, context, conflicts, and people that will inform my story. This assists me with drafting my research questions. I write a blurb (similar to what a reader might see on the back of a book) that outlines the main character(s), their goal, and their stakes. After that, I turn to Brody's Save the Cat structure, plotting out narrative and character arcs in three acts, from opening image (beginning of the story) to final image (end of the story). I then revise my blurb and send it to my agent, asking if she is interested in and thinks there is a market for the novel. Then, I begin writing, which often sends me in unexpected directions, requiring ongoing research. Once I have a full draft, I edit it for the overall story (developmental edit) and word choice (line edit). I send the manuscript to my critique partner, and edit again, repeating until I think it is ready to send to my agent, for her feedback. Finally, once a publisher acquires the novel, I complete additional of revisions with my editor.

Read in Related Genre(s)

In the same way as academics familiarize themselves with scholarly journals and academic publishers in their area of expertise in order to situate their work within current debates and decide what venue is best suited to publish it, I suggest a familiarization with fiction genres, publishers, literary journals, and magazines. Truby (2022) describes stories and genres as the way humans philosophically understand the world: "Each of the various genres—Detective, Love, Fantasy, and the like—is a unique window onto how a particular aspect of the world works and how best to confront it" (p. 8). Each fiction genre has its own set of tropes, reader expectations, and related story structures. For instance, romance requires a happily-ever-after ending or at least, happy-for-now; mysteries need a resolution (who did it and why); science fiction sits on a continuum of hard science with technical details and speculative elements that may be less explained; fantasy takes place in magical worlds; paranormal treats demons and vampires as accepted parts of worlds that are otherwise close to the one readers live in; and historical includes not only a past setting but uses also the time period as an inextricable element of the narrative. Women's fiction (which is a debated term due to its gendered focus) centres on the emotional journey of the protagonist.

By reading in and therefore understanding the genre researchers intend on writing, they can become familiar with how fiction authors craft their stories, with what stories readers are interested in, and what stories publishers will buy and circulate in what forms and venues

(Truby, 2022). My interest in writing historical fiction with fantastical elements that focus on untold/hidden/invisible stories of strong and complex women is a result of my interest in reading these types of novels. Although my bookshelves teem with books in that genre, I also read outside my genre due to my interest in historical, contemporary, and speculative fiction. This reading is not only for my own enjoyment but also to help me learn what I can from other genres with respect to the writing craft. Depending on the type of research one conducts with related themes, audiences, and plots, certain genres may align better than others (Leavy, 2013). For instance, Leavy (2020) and Frank (2000) can be considered women's fiction, Conrad and Wiebe (2022) speculative fiction, and my own work as historical.

Abide by the Ethics of Fiction Writing and Fiction-Based Research

While all authors have a responsibility of creating characters that are multidimensional and believable within their respective contexts, fiction-based researchers must ensure their characters are "sensitively, compassionately, and responsibly portray[ed]" (Leavy, 2013, p. 66), so that they reflect the research findings. If the research uses human participants (i.e., with interviews or observation) then ethical approval must be sought in accordance with postsecondary, organizational, and/or national bodies. For instance, in Canada, all such research must abide by the Tri-Council policy statement: *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Panel on Research Ethics, 2022).

A key aspect of research ethics is protecting the confidentiality of participants by ensuring no identifying data is published about them, which is a strength of fiction-based research. Researchers can create composite or aggregate characters that reflect what has been learned from participants while blending their experiences into fictional contexts with other characters (Leavy, 2013). Readers understand that a short story or novel is a construction, not a non-fiction account, and therefore expect that the creative fictional process will change details in order to fit the narrative.

In this contemporary moment, there has been much discussion about the ethics of cultural appropriation of marginalized voices and experiences. While some state that there should be no limits on what and who anyone writes about, others argue that writing from the point of view of someone outside one's own culture and context can be harmful (Khan, 2021). The novel *Yellowface*, by R. F. Kuang (2023), explores this issue of when a white author writes from an Asian perspective and is rewarded for it by a publishing system rooted in white privilege. *Yellowface* demonstrates that appropriation problematically centres the voices of white authors, exacerbates the historical inaccessibility of publishing for authors of colour, and too often misrepresents the cultures and experiences of those outside one's own background. Khan's (2021) *Guide to Writing Cultural Diversity in Fiction* recommends that authors writing from a background other than their own reflect on why they are doing so and the resulting implications

for marginalized voices, consider alternatives, do their research, engage sensitive readers, and treat their characters with empathy.

Learn About the Fiction Publication Process

Publishing fiction differs in significant ways from publishing scholarly work. In the academic peer-review process, journal article, chapter, and book submissions are returned to authors (usually) within a specified amount of time with a decision (accept, accept with minor revisions, accept on the condition major revisions are satisfactory, or reject), including detailed feedback that an author can use to revise and improve the work. For short stories and flash fiction, authors submit to literary journals, magazines, or online venues. Typically, the only feedback an author receives is a decision to accept or reject. This decision—with no accompanying reasoning—is not helpful to an author, with its lack of direction for possible improvement of the work. For novels, although some publishing houses accept un-agented submissions, most require agents. Getting an agent, due to the volume of submissions agents receive, can take an inordinately long time. Fiction writers also have to learn how to draft query letters (in essence, the cover letter sent with sample pages of the novel that aims to entice the agent to read the pages), which is an art all of its own, typically with no feedback from agents on what might have been good in the letter and what could be improved. I greatly benefited from joining a social learning group run by an industry professional with access to top-name agents and editors. It was in this group that I learned about, and how to sign with, my agent. When my agent submitted my debut novel to publishers, some of the rejections were vague (did not connect with the characters), but a few were specific enough (even if short) to enable us to make revisions to the novel that resulted in its eventual sale.

There are also other avenues for fiction publication, such as with academic presses and self-publishing, which each have their own benefits. However, I chose to go the traditional route with an agent for three reasons in this case: it gave me credibility as a fiction author (which was important to me as an academic), it provided the opportunity for industry professionals to provide valuable feedback on how to revise my novel (which improved it greatly), and it allowed for great reach with respect to readership (which was my aim in writing fiction, to have my stories accessible to everyday readers).

Conclusion

Over several years, I have learned much about the methodology of fiction-based research, the craft of fiction writing, and the process of publishing fiction. It is my aim that this article gives others a window into these areas of fiction-based research by building on the resources I have found useful and adding my own journey as an example. I am most drawn to fiction-based research as it is a creative practice and form of knowledge dissemination that allows for the

exploration of characters in all their complexity in their respective contexts. When I write fiction, I am able to give readers access to the interiority of protagonists, as readers sit inside their minds and participate in the protagonists' emotions, thoughts, decision-making, and actions. Readers can learn from experiences not their own by imaginatively engaging with characters, plots, and settings that are based in research and brought to life through fiction.

As inspiration, I end with the most satisfying aspect of my fiction-based research: when a (non-academic) reader says they learned something new about women and war from my stories, helping them look at power relations in a critically different way, which is my purpose in continuing with this work.

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