

## Preface

I've loved creative writing since I was a little girl. When I was about 10 years old, I had a wonderful English teacher, Miss Mercer. She encouraged my writing. With her support, I actually tried to write a novel—an epic love story about people who help each other heal. Because I was 10, it didn't pan out. However, my passion for writing never lessened, and decades later that book would be written. There was much I loved about creating fictional worlds—finding refuge, escape, and solace; feeling less lonely; meeting new people, caring for them, and learning about their lives; making connections that had previously been invisible; figuring things out I wouldn't otherwise understand; acknowledging the unfair and painful dimensions of life; imagining how things might be different; and more.

From the time I was very young, I wanted to be a writer, a novelist. The truth is I was too afraid to pursue my passion. Making a career in the arts is tough. There's so much rejection and critique. It takes courage and vulnerability, both of which I lacked. Fearing I couldn't handle it, I chose another path, earned a doctorate degree in sociology, and became a professor. As a result, I started publishing nonfiction academic work. I look back now and laugh because my first journal articles, published when I was in graduate school, were deeply grounded in the arts and creative writing. There was nothing traditional about them. They were artistic and experimental. Somehow, as I continued down the academic path, my writing became less creative and increasingly conventional. My work also started to feel like *work*. Soon after I realized that if I didn't enjoy what I was writing, why would anyone enjoy reading it? People often talk about going down a dark spiral, but this realization did the opposite for me; it sent me down a spiral of lightness. I began to look seriously at the nature of academic research and reporting. Does anyone read this stuff? Is it any good? Does it affect people outside of the academy? Yes, my spiral

was one of awareness. It was a reality check, a gut check. Life is too short to waste our time and other resources conducting research that does little more than serve as a line on our CV. Through this process of reflection on the nature of academic publishing and my own work, I found my courage and turned to the arts. For me this wasn't so much a turn, but a re/turn. After spending several years immersed in arts-based research, I wrote my first novel and soon thereafter quit my tenured teaching gig. More than a dozen novels later, I've never looked back.

## Arts-Based Research

Arts-based research (ABR) draws on the creative arts as a legitimate way of knowing. ABR involves researchers in any discipline adapting the tenets of the creative arts in their research projects in order to address research problems in holistic ways. The arts practice may be used during any phase of the research—data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation—or it may be used as the entire method of inquiry. Arts-based practices may draw on any art form: literary, performative, or visual. ABR opens up new ways of thinking and seeing, allows us to ask and answer new questions or address old questions in new ways, and can illuminate that which would otherwise remain in darkness. While researchers have long been using fiction as a way of knowing, as reviewed in Chapter 2, the method of “social fiction,” a term I coined in 2010, developed within the context of the emergent ABR paradigm.

## Why This Book Is Needed

I wrote this book as an in-depth introduction to social fiction. During the dozen years I've been publishing novels and other works of fiction, I've also been documenting this methodology in the hopes of providing a road map for others, one that I've largely had to figure out on my own. Even though many scholars have long been writing fiction, others have not provided methods texts for those still wishing to learn this approach to inquiry. In addition to my own writing, I also created and served as editor for the *Social Fictions* book series, the first and only book series published by an academic press that produces full-length literary works written by scholars. During my decade-long tenure as editor, over 40 books were published and I reviewed countless submissions. This was

also a tremendous learning experience and one that showed me that the field has grown enormously. There's other evidence of the rise in social fiction as well, including numerous sessions at national and international conferences across the disciplines, the development of SoFi, an online zine created by sociologist Ash Watson, and increased journal publications (recently *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal [ARI]* had a special issue on "Fiction as Research" guest edited by Ash Watson and Jessica Smartt Gullion). Personal encounters have also fueled my desire to write this book. I've had many experiences on the road after delivering keynotes, lectures, and workshops at universities about social fiction. Likewise, I regularly join classes virtually to talk about my novels and fiction as a research practice. Based on all these interactions, it has become clear to me that a contemporary book on this method is needed. Those informal conversations have guided my thinking as I developed a structure for this book. I hope to show you that social fiction is a valid and exciting method of inquiry and to encourage you to develop your own practice, so that you can create the story-worlds and characters that inhabit them that could not come from anyone else.

## Organization of This Book

This book includes in-depth introductory chapters as well as excerpts from my published works of social fiction accompanied by original reflections on those excerpts. The pairing of the introductory review chapters with published social fiction provides a context for understanding fiction as a research practice as well as examples of its use. Chapters 1–3 provide background on writing as inquiry, the historical and contemporary context for social fiction, and detailed instruction on how to write social fiction. Chapters 4–8 are divided into the different structures fiction writers use. The structures covered are traditional three-act structures, sequels, series, open form structures, alternative structures, and short stories. Each of these chapters includes an introduction explaining the literary structure, a reprinted extract from one of my works of fiction (the set-up is provided), and a reflection on each extract that highlights techniques reviewed in Chapter 3, so you can see them in action. I was inspired to include examples of my own work with original reflections after reading *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work* by Carolyn Ellis, in which she uses a similar format. Using my own work, as Ellis did, allowed me to include personal details about the source of

my inspiration, the writing process, and my intent. Finally, Chapter 9 offers practical advice on publishing fiction as well as evaluation criteria.

In addition to including in-depth introductory chapters, examples of published social fiction, and reflections on the writing process, each chapter in this book includes “tip bubbles” with additional hints for those wanting to write social fiction. There are also two types of exercises at the end of every chapter. Skill-building exercises are meant for students learning about this method and are intended to help you begin to develop a writing practice using the strategies and techniques in this book. Rethink-your-research exercises are meant for researchers already engaged in research. They are intended to help you reimagine your research as fiction—whether you decide to use the method for your current project or to develop ideas and skills for future projects. There is also an appendix with suggested readings.

## Alternative Ways of Reading This Book

Although this book can be read in order from beginning to end, it need not be. Each introductory chapter can be read on its own; so too can the reprinted works of fiction. Therefore, readers interested in particular fictional formats can read just those pertinent chapters. It’s also important to note that many of the extracted works of fiction serve dual purposes. For example, the excerpts from my novels *Blue* and *Film* are reprinted in Chapter 5, which focuses on sequels. However, they are also examples of using a traditional three-act structure. Furthermore, they include examples of techniques, such as interiority, dialogue, and flashbacks. So even if you have no interest in writing a sequel, the exemplars may still be of use. Likewise, the excerpts from the Tess Lee and Jack Miller novels reprinted in Chapter 6 are both examples of writing a series and using an open form structure. Even if you don’t intend to write a series, most fiction writers find it useful to learn how to write in open form.

## Audience for This Book

This book is accessibly written for diverse audiences, including undergraduates, graduates, researchers, scholars, writers, and practitioners interested in social fiction. In terms of teaching, this book can be used in courses in communications, creative arts therapy, creative writing,

cultural studies, education, expressive therapies, health studies, social work, sociology, psychology, theatre arts, and women's, gender, and sexuality studies. It can be used in methodology courses, such as ABR, qualitative research, survey of research methods, emergent research practices, narrative inquiry, and critical approaches to research.

Rest assured, this book is not intended only for those who already have training in writing fiction. I appreciate that sometimes, for all sorts of reasons, it can be scary to work with new approaches, especially in artistic forms that require a certain level of vulnerability and bravery. I encourage you to go ahead and try anyway. Begin from where you are. Candidly, when I wrote my first novel, *Low-Fat Love*, I knew nothing about what I was doing. What I had was a desire to try to do it—to get my insights and the stories of those I interviewed out in a new, more engaging, and accessible way. The rewards have been well beyond anything I could have imagined. My work and life have never been the same. I had a new path forward. I hope this book provides the same for you.

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